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# Taking action on poverty

Does civil society hold the answer?

in association with

Webb Memorial Trust

# Business and Poverty

Over the next year, the Webb Memorial Trust, working with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, will undertake a scoping study to investigate the potential for business to reduce poverty. Currently, there is low understanding of the role that businesses can play in reducing poverty and this initiative will aim to fill this gap.

The aim is to publish a high profile report setting out the key issues with a series of recommendations for employers, policy makers and others.

## The desired outcomes from the study are:

1. An increased understanding of how business practices can reduce poverty, including through wages, conditions of employment, purchasing policy, sub-contracting, advertising, marketing, employee engagement and corporate social responsibility policies
2. Identification of factors that would help or hinder the role that businesses might play in reducing poverty

## The study will be used to:

1. Bring together parliamentarians, business leaders and civil society about the key issues and good practices
2. Develop a cadre of business leaders who wish to address this issue systematically
3. Galvanise and support action by business leaders
4. Develop measures that governments can take to enhance business practices to reduce poverty
5. Form the basis for a Business and Poverty Supplement in the New Statesman in 2015

If you are interested to take part in this work as a participant or as a consultant, please get in touch with **Mike Clark** at [webb@cranehouse.eu](mailto:webb@cranehouse.eu) **before Friday 23 May.**

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# Civil society and poverty

It has become clear that approaches that once worked to reduce poverty are unlikely to work in the future. The world is shifting under our feet, and it is probably unrealistic to expect the state to mount a serious effort to combat it. Beatrice Webb's model of change, which relies on top-down planning using

state resources, no longer seems a viable option.

At the same time, there is little demand for progress from the bottom of society, and the debate has been blown off course by a focus on benefit "scroungers", which masks the real issues and overlooks the fact that in-work poverty is the fastest-growing problem.

So, where is positive change going to come from? One source of salvation could be civil society. Given that there is all-party agreement that the state cannot do all the heavy lifting in reducing poverty, there is an important role for the voluntary and community sector, and a recognition that it must retain its vibrancy and independence to fulfil this. |

This supplement, and other policy reports, can be downloaded from the NS website at [newstatesman.com/pages/supplements](http://newstatesman.com/pages/supplements)

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# Climbing the ladder

By Barry Knight

If civil society is to play a role in combating poverty, we need a vibrant, independent voluntary and community sector

A central question for this supplement is: what is the role of civil society and voluntary action in developing a good society without poverty?

According to research conducted by YouGov for the Webb Memorial Trust, the idea of charity is closely associated in the popular mind with a good society. Moreover, in his contribution, Richard Fries, a former chief charity commissioner, points out that for most people “charity” means the reduction of poverty. Given the austerity now faced by our public services, is there a new opportunity opening up for an independent voluntary and community sector to give us a direction for what a good society without poverty might look like?

At present, much of the voluntary sector is in “survivalist” mode, worrying where the next grant or contract is coming from. If the sector can rise above this, and find the energy of purpose exemplified by organisations such as Citizens UK, then it can perhaps help our society find its way out of the maze of declining incomes and growing inequality.

In this task, we can find guidance in the work of Beatrice and Sidney Webb. In their definition of a good society, they distinguished between meeting basic needs, association and participation. Association and participation are the very stuff of voluntary action. Taken together in the public realm they constitute active citizenship or civil society, which is important in order to counterbalance the role of the state on the one hand and the private sector on the other.

In their book, *The Prevention of Destitution*, Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1916 set out a role for the voluntary sector that allows us to assess its added value. In the book, they distinguished between two

models of voluntary action – the parallel bars model and the extension ladder.

The parallel bars model involves state action and voluntary action working side by side to reduce poverty. This was the prevalent model during the first decade of the 20th century when there was a great awakening about the importance of social conditions.

The extension-ladder model distinguishes different roles for the state and for voluntary action. Under this, the role of the state is to secure a national minimum of civilised life open to all alike, of both sexes and all classes – by which was

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Civil society should not substitute for the state, but add to its efforts

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meant “sufficient nourishment and training when young, a living wage when able-bodied, treatment when sick, and modest but secure livelihood when disabled or aged”. Voluntary action should provide an extension ladder that is placed “firmly on the foundation of an enforced minimum” raising standards of life “to finer shades of physical and moral and spiritual perfection”. Voluntary action and civil society should not substitute for the state, but be additional to it.

In the 30 years following the publication of the Webbs’ book, the extension-ladder model of voluntary action gained the upper hand. The turning point was the domestic policy of the wartime coalition government, in which politicians of all parties recognised that the state needed to be responsible for the welfare of its citizens. The Beveridge report was a reflection of this process, and its framing

set the terms for the postwar settlement.

Following the war, the state was clearly in the driving seat and much of what had been thought of as voluntary action went into decline or was nationalised. Beveridge himself was furious about this process and wrote a book in 1948 called *Voluntary Action* in which he complained about the damage that the welfare state was doing to what people do for themselves. He suggested that the government should “encourage voluntary action of all kinds” and “remove difficulties in the way of friendly societies and other forms of mutuality”.

Beveridge was ignored, and voluntary action went into decline for a generation. Then came the 1960s, which saw a rebirth of new and radical organisations based on the freedom of the age in which the cracks in the welfare state had become all too evident and citizens were no longer willing to be cast in passive roles. Principles of association and participation were much to the fore here.

Gradually, the voluntary sector rebuilt its influence. The relationship between the state and the voluntary sector was still based on the extension-ladder model. The essence of this relationship was set out in a pamphlet written by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in 1981 called *Working Together*. This suggested that the state and the voluntary sector had different but complementary goals. The state would provide money for voluntary organisations to work on the objectives that the voluntary sector set for itself. As a quid pro quo, the voluntary sector would not take on work that properly should be undertaken by the state.

This all changed in the 1980s. In 1986, the Home Office wrote to the NCVO to

say that government would only fund voluntary bodies that met government objectives. Such an approach had been prefigured by the work of the Manpower Services Commission, which used the voluntary sector to deliver its temporary employment programmes. In this relationship, the voluntary sector was merely a means and had no part in setting the objectives of the schemes.

Subsequent years have been marked by an ever-contracting relationship in the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector. The Labour governments from 1997 offered support to strengthen the capacity of the voluntary sector, but this raised concerns that state subsidy for voluntary action was distorting the basic ethos of the sector and threatening its independence. Much of the support was given so that the voluntary sector could deliver government services, rather than acting on its own agenda.

However, studies I worked on in 2006 discovered that the voluntary sector was more independent than expected. There was no wholesale takeover by the state, though there were many signs of encroachment into objectives, mission drift and a sense of becoming risk averse. The research revealed five characteristics that give voluntary an advantage over other kinds of organisations. They are passionate and risk-taking, so can speak out and challenge the system. They are knowledgeable, with levels of “cultural competence”, so can help the hardest to reach people. Their holistic, person-centred approach allows them to deliver more effective services. They are able to turn service-users into agents of social change. They are uniquely placed to work between different government agencies.

At the same time, commonly occurring weaknesses were identified. Many organisations appeared to be fragile and be living hand to mouth. Their approach to work was often reactive, with organisations tending to follow money, rather than mission. Evaluation was a big issue, as was communication, so that organisations sometimes struggled to explain what they were doing and what they had achieved without lapsing into jargon.

These findings were undertaken at a time when there was a good supply of finance for the voluntary sector, together with a range of officially sponsored measures to build capacity. Now, the climate has changed.



William Beveridge suggested the government should “encourage voluntary action of all kinds”

Austerity has meant tough times for many organisations, with redundancies, reduced budgets, or even closure, but there are opportunities too. There is now widespread agreement that the state will have to rely more on what people do for themselves, and this offers a way for voluntary organisations to reconfigure themselves to play a significant role in creating an active society, rather than playing second fiddle.

The “big society” may have fallen way down the political agenda (more on this on page 12), but nevertheless there is much scope for citizens to step forward to become more active and to take more control of their lives. Given the spectre of continued public-sector cutbacks, there may be little choice.

What matters is how this is done. An active society needs to have moral principles behind it. These include inclusion, democracy, equality, dignity, and respect. Additionally, to fulfil its potential, the voluntary sector needs strong leadership.

Such a vision must encompass three main practical actions. The first is that we have to recognise that ordinary people, including those on low incomes, are competent to run their own affairs.

The second condition is that there is significant reallocation of resources to community organisations, rather than professional organisations that act on behalf of people or treat them as clients. Over the past 50 years, government pro-

grammes fostering community involvement have been run by agencies and structures that are impenetrable for local people. The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, for example, which ran from 2001 to 2007 and was designed to close the gap between the poorest places and the rest, set up complex partnerships of professional agencies with tokenistic participation of people from the community. Similarly, much of the voluntary sector contributes little to civil society because it is highly professionalised, possessing few connections to local people other than through the delivery of services. Resources should instead go to organisations such as London Citizens, which is composed of citizens themselves and enables them to build their own power. We can also learn from international organisations like the Global Fund for Community Foundations, which helps citizens’ groups to build their own asset base so they can be free from the persistent “projects” demanded by official aid agencies.

The third condition is that it is imperative to develop a new social contract. It is clear the “big society”, plus austerity, plus cuts to public services does not add up to a good society. What is needed is clear agreement on the role of the state and the role of civil society. On the extension-ladder model, civil society should not substitute for the state, but be additional to it. | *Barry Knight is principal adviser to the Webb Memorial Trust*

# Inequality: an issue for us all

By *Kenny Imafidon*

Poverty is at the root of many of the difficulties, particularly violent crime and gang culture, facing the UK. But without strong role models and communities, the problems will wear down our collective society

Poverty is indiscriminate. It has no boundaries and affects everyone – directly or indirectly. Despite advocacy groups and government campaigns to eradicate poverty, almost 13 million people in the UK live in poverty, including almost 30 per cent of our children – a statistic that gives the UK one of the worst rates of child poverty in the developed world. Poverty, too, affects those of us who may not actually experience it; child poverty alone costs the taxpayer around £29bn a year, a burden that would be more catastrophic if it weren't for the efforts of charities and government. Society as a whole has a social and moral responsibility to eradicate poverty.

Poverty dictates the basic choices people make on a daily basis, from what they eat to how they heat their homes. It detrimentally affects people's health and reduces their life expectancy. For example, research published by the End Child Poverty Campaign revealed that a boy in Manchester can expect to live seven years less than a boy in Barnet. A girl in Manchester can expect to live six years less than a girl in Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster. Children who grow up in poverty on average tend to get lower academic grades than their wealthier peers.

It is sheer ignorance for those of us who do not live in poverty to stereotype victims of poverty as someone without a job, someone with a drug problem, someone who does not know how to manage money, who lives on benefits and is a single parent. This is far from the case. Research produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foun-

dation last year shows that two-thirds of UK children growing up in poverty live in a family where at least one parent works.

I remember myself growing up seeing my own mum hustle, morning and night, to put a roof over our heads and keep up with the rent. Annual holidays or a family dinner at a nice restaurant when it was not my birthday were luxuries we could not afford. It is only now that I understand that we were actually living in a deprived environment, despite my mum working overtime.

Growing up in a deprived area, it was easy for me to see first hand how poverty can lead to crime and violence. The lack of employment opportunities, coupled with

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We need role models not just in schools, but in homes and communities

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the lack of positive role models other than the local drug dealer and/or gang leader, meant that if you wanted to eat good food, wear nice clothes and take the pressure off your mother, you got involved in the local "business". The pressure to engage was unrelenting.

When people talk about role models, they think in terms of professionals giving talks at assemblies and in classrooms. While this can be positive, it has its limitations, either because these "role models" are viewed by students as someone who might as well be from another planet, or because the people in greatest

need have often already been excluded from school. In communities like the one I come from, we need role models in the home and in the community, too.

In London and other cities, poverty often looks black in colour, as too does street and gang crime. Much has been written about the racial inequality that results in discrimination, ethnic profiling, exclusions from school, poor access to mental health support and a lack of positive representation in the media.

A greater commitment on the part of successful black men and women to spend more time being visible in poor communities could offer a much needed solution. For example, many of my friends would be alive today if they had had someone to look out for them, who was stable, who they could speak to in the evenings and weekends when they really needed a listening ear.

It is having constant support that has had the most profound impact on my life. My coach, mentor and sponsor has driven me and reprimanded me in equal measure. His presence in my life is not time-limited, but is conditional on my commitment to helping others in the same way that he has helped and supported me.

Poverty is at the root of many of the more apparent and dire problems we face in this country. One significant issue is crime. A study by the Institute for Economics and Peace highlights how poverty, combined with other socioeconomic factors such as inequality, low education outcomes, lack of employment opportunities and limited access to basic services,



Poverty and poor community services are part of what sparked the 2011 London riots

causes violent crime in our communities. Its research showed how poverty has a stronger association with violence than income. “The disparity between income levels (the Gini coefficient), while still significant, has a much weaker correlation with peace than poverty,” wrote the authors of the report. This is because, below a certain level of income, individuals and families struggle to meet day-to-day needs. This, in turn, affects health, decreases human capital and increases the chance of living in violent communities with antisocial behaviour.

In 2012, my first *Kenny Report* was published. Supported by the social consultancy Coreplan, and entitled *How Do Politics and Economics Affect Gangs and Serious Youth Violence Across the UK?*, my report stated how violent crime affects many communities, in particular those which are disproportionately influenced by poverty, poor employment opportunities, inadequate social services and are home to a significant segment of the country’s minorities.

Of those I interviewed who were involved in gang activity, many indicated that the biggest barrier they faced in their communities was poverty. Indeed, when examining the link between poverty and crime, the marriage between the two is evident. Clearly not all people living in

poverty are violent, nor are they criminals. Far from it. However, it is not surprising to find that areas such as Lambeth or Lewisham, which have been identified as the two most unsafe and violent areas in the country, have some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK. Violent crime in these two boroughs is three times higher than the national average: over the period of 2005-2013, there were 116 people killed here due to violent crime. This is com-

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Those involved in gang  
crime said poverty was  
their biggest barrier

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pared to nine deaths in the most affluent areas in the capital (Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston-upon-Thames and Richmond-upon-Thames) combined.

The Ending Gangs and Serious Youth Violence Team was formed by the Home Secretary to find out what had caused the 2011 riots, and the extent to which gang culture and youth violence is taking hold in the poorest communities across the country. After carrying out comprehensive reviews across 34 local authorities nationally, the team concluded in its report that cuts to services and the economic downturn were indeed contribut-

ing to increased gang-related and youth-specific violence. Equally, they found that poor co-ordination of existing services and a failure to address the needs of repeat offenders returning to the community after completing their sentence were also contributing to the lack of safety experienced by the poorest communities.

This two-year review, which engaged with nearly 10,000 professionals and community members, was fed into other associated reviews and resulted in the decision to transform the criminal justice system. This process began with the introduction of Transformation of Rehabilitation Strategy 2013: a nationwide programme to ensure that repeat offenders serving under one year have a resettlement package in place when they return to the community. In addition, much greater emphasis is now being placed on community resilience through social action, and community-led networks and consortia that are able to deliver services locally and more effectively.

The importance of focusing on vulnerable families was also re-emphasised as a result of the Home Office reviews, as too was the need to clarify exactly what these families need. By far the biggest gap identified was within genuine community-based leadership. The lack of moral authority, coupled with the overwhelming poverty and resulting despair, created the seedbed for unrest and a culture of abuse that continues to play out both in the home and on the streets.

This is not just an issue for the people who live within these deprived communities. It affects us all. The study by the Institute for Economics and Peace reported that violent crime costs the taxpayer an astounding £12.4bn per year. If we break that figure down, it is estimated that violent crime costs every household in the UK £4,700. If we were to reduce violence and crime by just 9 per cent, it would save the same as the total cost of the London Olympic Games. If we spent more public money to prevent poverty in our country, through simple measures such as providing credible leadership and effective role models, we could save millions, which could be spent elsewhere. On top of that, we would have a much safer Britain, which we would all love. |

*Kenny Imafidon is a government adviser on youth policy, a Coreplan partner and trustee at the British Youth Council*

# Creating positive change to reduce inequality

*Paul Bunyan and John Diamond*

Given that there is all-party agreement that the state cannot do all the heavy lifting in tackling poverty and inequality, who should we turn to for help? Perhaps the answer lies in civil society

Civil society is best understood as encompassing three interrelated dimensions or perspectives, according to Michael Edwards, a leading writer and authority on the subject. First, civil society as the world of associational life; second, civil society as the good society; and third, civil society as the public sphere. We have drawn upon Edwards' three-fold model to help frame our study and analysis of civil society approaches to reducing poverty in the UK. Using case studies as examples of ways in which civil society works to alleviate poverty, we conclude that its capacity depends upon the extent to which initiatives and strategies are employed that encompass each of the dimensions identified by Edwards.

## **Civil society as associational life**

Civil society understood as associational life is the orthodox and most common view of civil society. Here, civil society is understood as the myriad of groups and institutions within society, which are distinct from the state and market and founded on the basis of voluntary association. They include faith groups, commu-

nity organisations, sports clubs, NGOs, charities and unions.

In addressing poverty, civil society as associational life encompasses the countless ways in which individuals, groups and local institutions respond directly to need. Among other things, they include:

- | Individual acts of kindness, generosity and charitable giving;
- | The work of volunteers in charities up and down the country, for example the numerous food banks set up by local groups in recent years as a response to austerity and food poverty;
- | The work of third-sector organisations that provide advice on welfare, benefits and debt to people in poverty;
- | The work of faith groups such as the Salvation Army, the Catholic Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) and Muslim Aid which provide assistance to the poor and disadvantaged.

While many of these works and acts of charity might represent short-term alleviations rather than longer-term solutions, they nevertheless represent an important part of the picture of how people individually and collectively in their

localities and institutions respond directly to poverty and seek to make a difference to the world around them.

## **Civil society as the good society**

Civil society understood as the good society encompasses the realm of ideas and competing narratives about the nature of a good society and how it might be achieved. Issues of poverty and inequality lie at the heart of debate about what a good society might look like and civil society organisations contribute to and inform such debate in a number of ways. For example, charitable trusts and foundations provide an important source of ideas and analysis aimed at establishing a fairer and more just society; faith groups too, provide strong countercultural narratives which challenge stereotypes of people in poverty and promote social justice. Examples include:

- | The Webb Memorial Trust, which, following on from last year's *New Statesman* supplement entitled *Busting the Poverty Myths*, has commissioned this study looking at civil society initiatives;
- | The Joseph Rowntree Foundation



The Salvation Army offers practical and emotional support to people who are vulnerable and marginalised

which has investigated causes of and solutions to poverty for more than a century and is currently undertaking a major research programme aimed at understanding the impact of current welfare reforms on people and places in poverty;

l The Equality Trust, set up in 2009 to raise awareness of and develop the potential for a campaign based on the analysis of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone*;

l Church Action on Poverty, for example, in the report entitled *The Blame Game Must Stop*, published in 2013, which challenged the stigmatisation of people living in poverty.

Such organisations play an important role in addressing poverty and inequality in two main ways. First, they raise awareness of and generate narratives about the causes of poverty and ideas about potential solutions. Second, they provide an important source of funding and resources to grass-roots civil society organisations which enable them to work independently from government or corporate influence and funding.

### Civil society as the public sphere

Civil society understood as the public sphere takes us into the political realm, raising important questions about the nature of social and political change and ways in which civil-society organisations develop the power and legitimacy to engage in the public sphere. In recent

decades, social and political change has tended to be understood as being largely consensus-based, framed in terms of increased co-operation and collaboration between the state, market and civil society. For example, “partnership” under New Labour and the “big society” under the Conservative-led coalition +

### Food banks: the Trussell Trust

The growth in the number of food banks across the country has become symbolic of a growing sense that poverty has increased significantly in the UK in recent years. The Trussell Trust has been at the forefront of developing food banks, working with churches and communities to open up new projects – there are now almost 400 food banks across the country. The Trust cites a 76 per cent increase in the number of food banks launched since April 2012 and a 170 per cent increase in numbers of people given emergency food.

While food banks provide support at a basic level within localities, the direct contact with people in poverty can lead to other forms of intervention beyond the local. For example, the recent criticism of government welfare reforms by church leaders, including the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, was in part attributable to the fact that the bishops could draw on the testimonies of people in their churches who run food banks and listen to the stories of people in poverty who look to them for support. Such stories and testimonies provide an important counterbalance both to statistics quoted by government about the benefits of current welfare reforms and to media portrayal of poverty, which is often couched in terms of so-called scroungers living off the state or of narratives that blame the poor themselves for their predicament. l

→ both envisaged an ever greater role for civil society and implied a shift in power away from the market and state towards civil society. In reality, the opposite has largely been the case, as neoliberal hegemony, actively promulgated through what one author has referred to as the state-market nexus, has remained firmly entrenched. Through the employment of “managerial technologies” and private-sector practices, such as contracting and commissioning, the practices of civil society and third-sector organisations have been significantly impacted upon, involving, among other things, a shift towards service delivery at the expense of other forms of engagement such as advocacy and campaigning.

Examples of civil-society organisations which adopt an overtly political approach in contesting the effects of neoliberalism within the context of the public sphere include the following:

- ▮ Citizens UK, which uses community organising to harness the power of local associational and institutional life to engage politically in the public sphere;

- ▮ Unions, including Unison, Unite and the GMB, which reduce inequality by, among other things, challenging and negotiating with employers for better pay and conditions for low-paid workers;

- ▮ Organisations, such as the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) and the web-based National Community Activist Network (NATCAN) that represent civil society initiatives, which actively dissent from the neoliberal orthodoxy which has prevailed in recent times.

### Reducing poverty: the challenge for civil society in the UK

So how are we to assess the effectiveness of civil society in addressing poverty and inequality in the UK? As we have seen, civil society works in many different ways to alleviate poverty. But on the basis of the conceptual framework, weaknesses in current approaches and ways in which civil society organisations might be more effective in the future can be identified.

First, the capacity for civil society effectively to address poverty has been weakened to the extent that the dimensions of civil society are seen in isolation from each other. For example, a strategy that focuses solely on individual agency and charitable giving, but pays little attention

### The Spirit Level and the Equality Trust

*The Spirit Level* was first published in 2009 and has since become an international bestseller. The book has generated a great deal of debate about the nature of societal divide, positing that societies with a bigger gap between rich and poor are bad for everyone in them, including the well off. The Equality Trust was set up to campaign and raise awareness around issues of inequality raised in the book. Stated simply, the vision of the good society promoted by Wilkinson and Pickett and the Equality Trust is that societies do better when they are more equal and worse when they are more unequal. Among western European countries, Britain is identified as one of the most unequal countries and this accounts for the UK having some of the highest rates in Europe for things such as child obesity, mental illness, drug abuse, teenage birth rates and imprisonment. The great challenge to be undertaken in realising the good society, according to the Trust, lies in closing the gap in incomes between the richest and poorest in society.

*The Spirit Level* inspired the creation of the first Fairness Commission in Islington in 2010, which was co-chaired by Professor Wilkinson. Over the past three years other Fairness Commissions, supported by the Equality Trust have been set up in a number of cities and areas across the UK including Liverpool, York, Newcastle, Sheffield, Blackpool and Tower Hamlets. |

to the structural nature of poverty and the need for engagement in the political and public sphere is less likely to lead to sustainable and long-term solutions. Similarly, a coherent and rational argument about how best to tackle poverty, or a vision of the good society divorced from a political strategy or local institutional support, will lack roots and legitimacy

### The Living Wage campaign represents one of the most successful initiatives

and likely fail to materialise. Put in more positive terms, poverty is most effectively addressed when strategies are employed which encompass more than one, and ideally all, of the dimensions of civil

society we have highlighted. The food banks case study on page nine and the public debate generated by the criticism of government policy by church leaders provides an example of how local initiatives can inform wider public debate. However, the challenge for civil society is ensure such debate is not fleeting but sustained over time through, for example, providing a means for people in their localities, most importantly poor people themselves, to play a more active role collectively and politically in addressing their circumstances.

Second, civil society needs to remain at arms length from electoral party politics and be wary of government narratives, such as “partnership” and the “big society”, which prescribe the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state and market. Politics involves more than electoral politics and while electoral democracy represents an important prerequisite for a more civil and just society, it is no guarantee of it. The challenge for civil society, therefore, is continually to push the boundaries of civility, by developing the power and political capacity of grass-roots civil society organisations to engage more effectively with and contest state and market practices which diminish human dignity. Charitable trusts and foundations, in particular, have a vitally important role to play in building this political capacity and therefore it is important that they too remain at arms length from party politics and focus their energies and resources on helping to build



The Living Wage campaign could be scaled up

new forms of civil-society-led politics.

Third, and following on from the previous points, civil society needs to become more radical in the approaches and strategies it adopts in tackling poverty and inequality in the UK – particularly so in light of the austerity measures and the impact this has had on the most vulnerable in society. To this end, the impact of neoliberalism and the shift more towards service delivery by many third-sector and civil-society organisations needs to be augmented by a greater emphasis upon political engagement and campaigning. The Living Wage campaign represents one of the most successful civil society-led initiatives to reduce poverty in the UK in recent years and provides an excellent example of a strategy which has managed to encompass Edwards’s three dimensions of civil society.

Civil-society organisations are at the forefront of tackling poverty and inequality in the UK, but more can be done. On the basis of this study, we highlight the following as potential areas that could help to encompass more effectively the different dimensions of civil society and increase the capacity of its organisations to reduce poverty and inequality in the UK:

**1. A UK civil society poverty alliance:** Scotland has a successful poverty alliance

### National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA)

The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) brings together individuals and organisations to promote independent voluntary and community action in order to engage in and contest the public sphere. The impact of neoliberalism upon the practices of voluntary and community organisations, for example the effects of privatisation, cuts, the “big society” and localism, have been a particular focus and concern for the organisation.

In 2012, NCIA carried out an inquiry into local activism across the UK, culminating in a report published in March 2013 entitled *Here We Stand: Inquiry Into Local Activism and Dissent*. The notion of dissent is central to the philosophy of NCIA and, in contradistinction to consensus-based notions of social change, is seen as being vital to a vibrant and healthy democracy – this is illustrated in the following quote from the report:

“Activism without the capacity for dissent will not have sufficient force. Without this capacity, the democratic role of voluntary action (or civil society) is fundamentally undermined. This is already the case for many voluntary and community services co-opted by funding regimes and marketisation. The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and well-being.”<sup>1</sup>

network. A UK-wide network could help to co-ordinate efforts and bring together the different dimensions of civil society to more effectively address poverty and inequality.

**2. The 2015 general election:** There is an opportunity going into the next general election over the next 12 months for civil-society organisations to come together to put poverty and inequality at the top of the political agenda. Institutions across an area or city could organise public accountability assemblies to hold those seeking elected office to account for progress made on poverty and in-

equality and get undertakings about what they would do going forward if they were to be elected.

**3. The Living Wage:** There is a great deal of potential for the Living Wage campaign to be scaled up significantly. Civil-society organisations in cities and areas across the country could take the lead in lobbying public, private and other civil-society organisations to become accredited Living Wage employers.

**4. Other co-ordinated national campaigns on poverty and inequality:** In addition to the Living Wage, there is also scope for other high-profile campaigns to keep poverty and inequality at the forefront of political and public debate. For example, action on payday lending has been particularly successful over the past year, leading to growing pressure for government to take action on irresponsible lending and put a cap on loans. There is also potential for action to be taken on lowering the ratio of pay differentials between the highest and lowest paid employees within organisations. This is more easily done within public or third-sector bodies, but there is scope, for instance through shareholder action, for private companies to be encouraged to publish pay differentials and work towards lowering the ratio between the highest- and lowest-paid employees, including contracted workers.<sup>1</sup>

*Paul Bunyan and John Diamond are based at Edge Hill University. Their study on the role of civil society in reducing poverty will be published by the Webb Memorial Trust on 6 May and can be found at: [webbmemorialtrust.org.uk](http://webbmemorialtrust.org.uk)*

### Citizens UK and the Living Wage campaign

The Living Wage campaign was started in 2001 by Citizens UK and its main affiliate London Citizens. In terms of Edwards’s three dimensions of civil society, a number of factors can be identified which have contributed to the effectiveness and success of the Living Wage campaign and the community-organising approach employed by the organisation.

First, in terms of civil society as associational life, London Citizens comprises an alliance of civil-society organisations and institutions, now numbering more than 200, which includes faith groups, schools, universities, charities, unions and housing associations. As members of London Citizens, these institutions have driven the Living Wage campaign, connecting to the low paid within their own organisations and localities and providing the support, people and leadership that has sustained the campaign over many years.

Second, the vision of the good society promoted by London Citizens and its approach to community organising is of people in their localities and institutions coming together to act for change and the common good. This idea of relational power and the importance of building power in order to enact values of social justice is central to the community-organising approach employed by the organisation and its vision of the good society.

Third, Citizens UK and London Citizens exist essentially to build the power and capacity of civil-society organisations to engage in the public sphere. In terms of the Living Wage campaign, this has involved member organisations contesting the practices of large public-sector bodies and private-sector corporations, through, among other things, turning out large numbers of people for street actions or large public assemblies holding politicians and other decision-makers to account.<sup>1</sup>

# Is the big society dead?

By Max Wind-Cowie



Thinking big: David Cameron underestimated how powerfully embedded loyalty to the left is in the charity sector

The “big society” embodied the concept of freedom from the state and personal responsibility. The idea offered a chance for the Tories to change their image – could there be life in it yet?

Mention the “big society” to many senior Tories these days and the reaction you will provoke is not dissimilar from what you might expect if you brought up their embarrassing teenage Goth phase. It is not just an idea that has become lost in the frenzy of power. It is an embarrassing, cringe-inducing flashback – like a hazy memory of throwing up in front of your boss at the Christmas party.

Which is sad, frankly. Because the philosophy that underpinned the “big society” was, and remains, the best hope the Tory party has of throwing off the materialism and vulgarity of post-Thatcherite “conservatism”. As an idea, it embodies the best of the hotchpotch

intellectual inheritance of the Conservative idea. Core to it is a kind of communitarian-libertarianism – the idea that liberation from the state is only practical and only desirable if people are enmeshed in other, autonomous institutions. That society matters precisely because it protects us from overarching bureaucracies and the tyranny of jobsworths. That little platoons can and do make a difference, and that sneering at small charities, community groups and social enterprises is a mistake. That it really matters not to the individual jobseeker, patient or pupil if it is the state or a mammoth private company providing their public services – but matters a great deal if we can fashion smaller, more personal and more re-

sponsive agents of delivery. In the “big society”, freedom is emphasised and celebrated – but the individual is not fetishised. All of which is rather complicated to say. None of which works frightfully well on the doorstep. Which is the first reason for the collective cringe of Conservatives when the “big society” is brought up.

Big ideas are important, but they are not going to win over the electorate if they are communicated with the kind of policy-wonk jargon that I have succumbed to above – and elsewhere I am sure. David Cameron understands that. So when the “big society” caught his imagination – evolving as it did from a mish-mash of thinkers including David Willets, Phillip Blond, Oliver Letwin and

Steve Hilton – he knew that he needed a way of explaining what it meant to voters. And he hit upon volunteering. Which was a very grave mistake.

Everyone likes volunteers. Some of us even like volunteering ourselves. But we don't like being told the Conservative Party thinks it invented something that many of us do out of pure altruism. And we don't like – on the whole – the feeling that we are somehow aiding and abetting a programme of cuts to public services by providing the government with a stopgap solution. Talking about the “big society” and volunteering interchangeably made us Conservatives look irredeemably cynical, as though we thought we could trick everyone into thinking they were being invited “to join the Government of Britain” when actually we wanted them to replace the public sector of Britain. Many enthused Tory candidates tried talking about how wonderful the “big society” was, and how volunteering was – like – really, really great, on the doorsteps in 2010. Not many did so more than once. Folk thought we were taking the Mickey.

The second reason for MPs' blushes is that David Cameron underestimated just how powerfully embedded – and deeply ideological – the establishment left is in our charities and our quangos. There is something rather sweet about the optimism with which senior Conservatives tried to engage the third sector and non-governmental departments in the run-up to 2010. But it was a little gauche. I have worked in and out of the charity sector all of my life – and I'm afraid that, on the whole, they really, really hate Tories. If Labour had been in power and was committed to placing real power in the hands of charities and community groups to deliver public services – in other words, if they had enacted David Miliband's “double devolution” – they would have been hailed as liberators by charity chief executives. Because it was the Conservative Party advocating these things, we were treated as an occupying force – to be fought with a scorched earth resistance that was both brutal and effective. It is frustration at this constant, knee-jerk aggression that has led some ministers to now practically refuse any engagement with charities – witness Iain Duncan Smith's rage at the Trussell Trust. It is sad. But it is eminently understandable.

Third, and vitally, the problem is the Conservative Party. There are many great,

optimistic and communitarian thinkers. Jesse Norman, David Willetts, Michael Heseltine and others. Great swaths of our membership instinctively understand and, indeed, live the “big society” – what is the hunt if not a socially diverse community group committed to a shared goal and preserving our shared heritage? But there's also a considerable section of the Conservative Party who are, frankly, spivs. They care only for money – materialistic in a way that Marx would understand – and take an almost teenage delight in pouring scorn on anything sentimental, beautiful and romantic. They are soulless J B Priestley caricatures who are playing at being heartless 19th-century mill owners because they think that makes them “proper” Conservatives. These are the kind of people who would defend a banker if he was caught slaughtering their children in a satanic ritual – because it's only socialists that bash the bankers.

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## We will trust communities to know what's best for them

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This group – boorishly loud for people who've had nothing new to say since 1979 – is the fundamental problem with the Conservative Party trying to rearticulate the kind of social, communitarian conservatism that the “big society” embodies. Every time David Cameron spoke about civil society and its potential to transform how Britain works, there was a schoolboy libertarian sniggering at the back. And people noticed.

So – there's why you won't find many senior Tories to trumpet the “big society” anymore. But what hope, then, for an idea whose time had come but whose packaging was shoddy? Well, in truth, it is happening. Quietly and more humbly than before – but green shoots of communitarian liberation are popping up around us.

Witness Justin Welby. The new(ish) Archbishop of Canterbury is no sop to the Conservatives. But he is the man who is delivering our idea. His Church will not be one left on the sidelines squabbling – it is taking an active role in tackling issues that Christ himself would recognise: usury, misery, hunger and want. Welby and his re-energised Church of England is once again interested in using the huge resources and power at their disposal to

make Britain better. And it is the government that has made his efforts to displace payday lenders possible. Legislation championed by the underpromoted and passionate Guy Opperman MP means new, socially purposed banks can for the first time spring up without being strangled at birth by corporatist regulation.

Welby isn't alone in taking advantage of the government's “big society” reforms to finance. Just outside Manchester, a young man who works for Unite has brought together his union, local government and a small credit union to create the Bank of Salford. Alex Halligan has an uphill struggle to fully establish his exciting, community focused, ethical bank. But it is a struggle that is only possible because of this government's reforms – and those reforms were pushed through, in the face of massive pressure from the big players, with banks like his in mind. I saw Halligan speak at the Conservative Party conference. Despite his unapologetic stance as a Labour-supporting union worker, he was embraced by the shire-Tory audience at his fringe like a long-lost son. “How can I do this in my area” asked one impassioned county councillor at the end – as I say, it is our much derided older and rural membership that really gets the idea and the power of the “big society”.

We shouldn't dump the thing wholesale at the next election – although we perhaps ought to treat the expression “big society” in much the same way as Hogwarts pupils do the name Voldemort. Instead, we should try again with less of the cheese and more of the grit. George Osborne spent much of the Budget talking about “trust” – in the context of allowing pensioners to decide what to do with their money. And we should learn from his economic argument when presenting the case for social reform. We will trust you to live your life well, and will support you when you need us. We will trust public servants to do their jobs, not handcuff them with targets. We will trust communities to know what's best for them, not govern by diktat from Whitehall. We will trust unions, churches and charities to organise, and we won't push them out of the conversation. And you should trust us to promote freedom but never to abandon you. Honest, you should. |

*Max Wind-Cowie is an associate at the think tank Demos and the author of “Civic Streets: the Big Society in Action”*

# Co-operative councils

By Steve Reed

Good things can happen when you give people control over their own lives – as those councils which are adopting facilitative approaches to public services are starting to find out

Councils face a stark choice as they lose more than 50 per cent of their funding: cut services in half or find different ways to provide support that costs less. But it's not just because of the cuts that things need to change. The way we've run public services over recent decades has created huge benefits, but it's also created large numbers of people whose lives are dependent on decisions taken about them by others who don't share their life experience. The people who rely the most on public services are those who are the most socially excluded. Over time, this experience saps their self-confidence and self-reliance, which, in turn, caps their ability to aspire to a better life.

I've met countless council tenants angry that their home repairs service is slow, shoddy and inefficient. I've spoken to parents whose children are getting involved with violent gangs who are desperate for more help to steer them away from crime. And I've listened to older people distraught that the help they need to keep living independently at home is being taken away, leaving their health to deteriorate until they need admission to hospital.

Although cuts have made these problems worse, they all began long before. It is unacceptable that many council-house tenants have to put up with a repairs service that no homeowner would tolerate. I've witnessed too many cases of double invoicing, ill-fitting kitchen doors and mouldy bathrooms for these to be isolated failings. This endemic underperformance happens because public services are not directly accountable to the people who use them. The way to fix the problem is put service users in charge.

Blenheim Gardens, a once run-down estate in Brixton, transformed itself after tenants took control. Once a year, tenants

elect a board that meets monthly to oversee the housing managers who report directly to them rather than town-hall managers. The improvement has been dramatic. The estate is one of the cleanest in the borough and beats the borough average on rent collection rates, the standard of repairs, the time taken to relet empty homes, and overall resident satisfaction.

Empowering public service users works, and not just on housing estates. Older and disabled people have more control over their lives when they're helped to choose what care services they receive within an allocated spending limit, rather than be told what they're getting. This becomes even more powerful when individuals pool their funding so their combined purchasing power buys even more of what they really want. Lambeth's new youth services trust, the Young Lambeth Co-operative, gives communities a bigger say

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Empowering public service users works – not only on housing estates

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over the support available to stop young people joining gangs in neighbourhoods where that is a problem. The views of parents, neighbours, young people, victims and ex-offenders are taken into account in selecting interventions and service providers that steer young lives back on track.

These examples show the power of handing people more control. Labour councils such as Lambeth, Oldham and Sunderland, part of the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN), are exploring how to transform their services by sharing power with service users. They're experimenting with collective

ownership, community-led decision-making, and are developing the support that people need to participate. This isn't about setting up co-operatives to run everything, although they may have a role to play. It's about finding ways to enable more co-operation between providers and users. This lets us harness communities' own insights, creativity and leadership to find new ways to do better for less.

The founders of the welfare state never meant public ownership to mean only state control. Councils and politicians must become facilitative rather than directional, and should focus on outcomes not processes and on preventing problems rather than dealing with them afterwards. It's an approach that can extend far beyond councils across all public services. Sharing power has to be done in ways that suit service users; there are more creative ways to tap into people's views than expecting them to attend meetings.

In his recent Hugo Young memorial lecture, Ed Miliband opened the door to a people-powered revolution in public services and pointed to the pioneering work of many Labour councils. Our party can draw on deep-rooted traditions of co-operation and social solidarity to reshape public services around people. The next Labour government won't have more money to spend, but if we're bold enough to seize the opportunity for change, we can offer people a better quality of life and restore trust in politics by showing that we trust people to take their own decisions. The key to it all is an idea our party was founded on: power to the people. It's an idea whose time has come again. |

*Steve Reed is the Labour and Co-operative MP for Croydon North, shadow minister for crime prevention and patron of the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network*

# New vision and voice

By Colin Rochester

The voluntary sector needs to reimagine itself for the 21st century. Rather than being an arm of government, it should see itself pathfinding new solutions for society

The proliferation of food banks is eloquent testimony to the continuing ability of voluntary action to respond rapidly and flexibly to the immediate needs of those whom the state welfare system has failed. Historically, however, voluntary organisations have done far more than simply provide first aid. They have highlighted deficiencies in state provision; put pressure on politicians to improve welfare provision; and challenged the view that the poor are undeserving.

But the sector's response to the coalition's attack on the victims of poverty has been muted. Its leaders have made little contribution to documenting the consequences of government actions and exposing the culture of blame that underpins them. This vital role has been played instead by the bishops of the Church of England and the leader of Britain's Catholics. This silence has been attributed to the growing dependence on statutory funding that makes organisations reluctant to criticise their paymasters. But the roots of their inertia are deeper and more complex.

Many voluntary organisations were disarmed and co-opted by the New Labour administrations. They were encouraged to see themselves as partners of a government which shared the aspirations of its new friends. And, given Labour had adopted ambitious targets for reducing child poverty, this offered a major opportunity for voluntary organisations to pursue their aims. The consequences of this partnership, however, were grave. Freedom to criticise was undermined and the sector was influenced by the neoliberalism that underpinned Labour's policies.

The erosion of this sector as an independent force was the product of three overlapping trends: growing dependence on the state; the adoption of market values;

and loss of faith in its own organisational forms. Rather than devising their own ways of meeting social need, voluntary organisations saw their role as helping to implement government policies.

In order to fit themselves for the role of service providers, voluntary organisations have adopted the culture and methods of business and the values of the market. They have developed strategies to increase their "market share" by maximising their appeal to the "customers" that commission their services at the expense of the beneficiaries of their activities. And they have looked to business for their organisational model – a top-down centralised bureaucracy with authority located in the hands of a Napoleonic chief executive. The result was an efficient machine for delivering the services required by commissioners, but one that was ill-fitted

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Some organisations have resisted the pressure to abandon their values

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for expressing the needs of the people it served and for campaigning for policies that would meet them. Small wonder, then, that many were reluctant to defend their constituencies against welfare "reforms" and lacked the means of doing so.

Does this mean voluntary action has lost the will and ability to offer an alternative to the toxic culture that blames the victims of poverty and to argue for policies that will address inequalities of wealth and power? The picture is not totally gloomy. A number of organisations have resisted the pressures to abandon their values, distinctive practices and independence. Many more will be facing life

or death decisions about their future as they discover only a minority will access the gold at the end of the commissioner's rainbow. Those who haven't completed the transformation into non-profit businesses may still be able to return to their roots. In the process, they will need to focus again on what they are for, rather than how they do things. And they will be joined by increasing numbers of new initiatives, as voluntary action renews itself.

Given that the "leaders" of the voluntary sector have been enthusiastic champions of the Faustian pact with government, we are not likely to see change of this kind happening from the top down. Instead, we need to build from the bottom up. Is it too much to expect that a handful of committed individuals could identify the organisations in their locality that have a mission to relieve poverty and challenge them to contribute to a local alliance that expresses their opposition to the current attack on the poor. Emerging networks of this kind could make a claim on the resources of agencies such as settlements and councils of voluntary service to support their work. And they could develop a profile and presence in the local media and political arena.

But, while voluntary action begins at local level, it should not end there. We have access to social media that offer a low-cost means of sharing information and developing solidarity between local activists. In the longer run, this kind of networking activity has the potential to develop a new focus – and a voice – for those who believe voluntary organisations need to make themselves heard in the fight against poverty and the battle for social justice. |

Colin Rochester is the author of *"Rediscovering Voluntary Action: the Beat of a Different Drum"*

# The power of social movements

Voluntary action can create lasting, transformational change. Here, representatives from across civil society give their views on what makes a successful social movement

## Creating inclusive participatory engagement

*Ruth Lister*

Ed Miliband's Hugo Young Lecture developed two main themes: the need to devolve power to public service users and (less prominently) the centrality of the principle of equality to his politics. He linked the two through the observation that "we need to hear the voices of people from all walks of life not just the rich and powerful".

For Compass, the principles of equality and democracy are intertwined. In his Fabian pamphlet *Letting Go: How Labour Can Learn to Stop Worrying and Trust the People*, Jon Wilson argued that "equality depends on participation, because equality is participation". But conversely, genuine participation also depends on equality because at present the obstacles to marginalised groups participating effectively are just too great. This was one of the main messages of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, half of whose members had direct experience of poverty and on which I was privileged to sit.

Judging on the basis of my experience on the commission and a review of the participation literature, there are certain factors required to ensure a genuinely

inclusive participatory engagement, such as effective support and capacity-building, including for officials and professionals; and the need to reach out to people where they are now rather than expect them to be familiar with traditional ways of doing things.

Equally, overcoming institutional barriers requires more inclusive organisational cultures and structures. This can take time and can't be rushed. Venue, meeting style and modes of communication are all important factors; as too is the right not to participate – it shouldn't be another obligation placed upon marginalised groups. One consequence is the need to create better links of accountability between those who do participate and other members of their group or community.

Finally, participation must be genuine and involve open agendas and feedback.

This brings us back to the relationship between participation and equality, which, as Ed recognised, involves power. We need to redress power imbalances where possible and make transparent those that remain.

In conclusion, if we want to create a genuinely participatory state, we must pay attention to the particular needs of those for whom the obstacles to participation are greatest; otherwise, we risk simply reinforcing rather than challenging inequality in its various forms. |

*Ruth Lister is the chair of the management committee at Compass, a Labour peer and emeritus professor of social policy at Loughborough University*

## Helping poverty campaigners be more effective

*David Babbs*

Good campaigning changes events, policies and lives. It doesn't matter whether it happens on the internet or on the streets. In the future, most successful campaigns will involve a bit of both. As with many other areas of our lives – shopping, dating, chatting with friends – using the internet feels increasingly natural. But it's hard to imagine digital channels ever entirely replacing the need for good old-fashioned face-to-face interaction.

It's no longer meaningful to describe 38 Degrees as an "online campaigning organisation". Partly this is because our members will take part in well over 1,000 "offline" events this year. More importantly, distinctions between on and offline are themselves breaking down. Many people now carry the internet in their pockets. If a member uses their phone to send tweets from a public meeting with their local MP, does that count as online or offline campaigning?

The internet lowers the barriers to involving many more people. Even the tiniest and most skint of groups now has at its disposal tools previously available only to governments and major corporations. It's cheap, easy and fast to co-ordinate

actions, and pool resources. Plans can be hatched without bureaucracy. Ideas can be shared without having to depend on the press.

This opens up exciting possibilities, but it brings problems, too. MPs have complained that it's become too easy for constituents to get in touch with them, placing intolerable strain on their inboxes. Yet surely MPs should be welcoming developments that make it easier for citizens to get involved?

The biggest barrier to MPs effectively using the internet to engage with their voters is probably that most of them don't want to. But in an institution as old as the UK parliament, there are many technical and practical barriers too, and MPs need our support in tackling these.

There's also an obvious risk that the internet also lowers barriers to wrong-headed or nasty campaigns. And old, pre-internet forms of power will seek to adapt to cement their own positions – witness the *Daily Mail's* forays into online petitioning. The internet offers us new means of fighting back, but it doesn't mean our opponents are going to go away.

So, I hope we can move on from the debate about "online" and focus instead on a much more important question: how do all of us who are campaigning against poverty and injustice become more effective? The answer is bound to involve full and creative use of the internet – but it will involve many other ingredients of successful campaigns too, like strategy, mobilisation, inspiration, and luck. |

*David Babbs is the director of 38 Degrees*

## Build for power that is reciprocal

*Neil Jameson*

Civil society has to take some responsibility for the limitations of the political classes because we have allowed our society to fragment, and disorganised communities don't have the power to challenge. We must wake up to our obligations as citizens, park our differences and work together for the common good – a concept we can all share.

The threads that once connected the individual to the family, the family to their community and the community to the wider society are fraying and in dan-



Citizens UK's 2010 General Election Assembly let people question the main party leaders

ger of breaking altogether. These strands, connections and alliances are vital for a healthy democracy and should be the building blocks of any vibrant civil society. We believe in building for power which is fundamentally reciprocal, where both parties are influenced by each other and mutual respect develops. The power and influence we seek is tempered by our religious teachings and moral values and is exercised in a fluid and ever-changing relationship with our fellow leaders, allies and adversaries. UK public life should be occupied not just by celebrities, commentators and politicians – but also by the "organised" people themselves demanding part of the action.

Just as the political parties are building their manifestos for next year's election, Citizens UK's new "Council" has been planning a *Manifesto for Civil Society*. As in 2009-2010, we are following a process of local discernment, listening, debating, voting, assemblies and mobilisation. From July 2014, Citizens members will take the agenda to their local parliamentary candidates and the market places, streets and school gates in their local areas; and ultimately to the polling stations next May. At a national level, we have already invited the three leading candidates for the post of Prime Minister to join us for a repeat of the historic Fourth Debate we organised in 2010. Taking place in May 2015, this debate will be organised by, paid for by and chaired by Citizens.

This process will see local groups progressing their concerns and creating solutions, while engaging with the fundamentals of politics and governance – compromise, negotiation, oratory, leadership and seeing what the common good looks and feels like. |

*Neil Jameson is the CEO of Citizens UK*

## We need structural change focused on black women

*Umme Imam*

In 1993, a network of black community workers and activists from Newcastle came together to respond to a demand from local women for a safe and supportive environment in which to develop the skills and confidence needed to lift themselves and their children out of poverty.

(We use the term black in a political sense to refer to people who have shared experiences of discrimination and oppression due to skin colour as well as those of solidarity and strength.)

This Newcastle-based initiative was to be known as the Angelou Centre, and central to its ethos was the recognition that gender, racial and economic inequality had a severely detrimental effect on the lives of black women, which further +



Despite attacks from government, trade unions have survived – and lifted millions out of poverty

→ impeded their economic engagement. Consequently, the centre took a black feminist and holistic approach, one that strove for removal of social barriers that limited progression in women's lives.

The Angelou Centre has continuously demonstrated success in engaging so-called “hard to reach” excluded women through the development of projects and services that facilitate black women's economic activity and social inclusion. This has included a number of projects, developed in consultation with service users, to address the multilayered and multi-levelled nature of discrimination, poverty and deprivation. For example, exploring and addressing barriers in the workplace; training, skills and enterprise support provision; maternal poverty; specialist domestic abuse provision including children and young survivors; and social and cultural activities for carers and older women. This has enabled women from diverse black communities to overcome isolation and exclusion, participate, volunteer and develop social networks.

In 2014, the Angelou Centre is more vital than ever, with more than 150 women and children a week receiving advocacy support, training, or domestic abuse and therapeutic services from a small staff team. However, despite the Centre's success in skilling up and improving the qualifications, confidence and safety of several thousand women, the situation overall remains bleak. This is due to the recession, austerity measures, political targeting of

immigrant communities and their disproportionate impact on economically deprived women (including those living in absolute poverty with no access to public funds). The Centre recognises that structural change, a specific policy focus on black women, as well as political action is needed – now more than ever – if women are not to be locked into destitution and even greater numbers made vulnerable to poverty. |

*Umme Imam is executive director of the Angelou Centre*

## Unions are rethinking their strategies

*Dave Spooner*

Since their emergence in the 19th century, the industrial and political strength of trade unions has lifted millions of workers and their communities out of poverty. Collective bargaining, where necessary backed up by industrial action, gained huge improvements in livelihoods and conditions. Their political power delivered the welfare state, state pensions, health and safety and equalities legislation, and a wide range of other forms of social protection for the poor.

Despite continuous attack from governments and employers in the post-

Thatcher era, unions have survived. The nature of work is rapidly changing, increasingly dominated by low-paid precarious work. To organise and represent these workers, unions are radically rethinking their strategies. Unite, for example, invests substantial resources into its Community Membership programme, campaigning on issues such as debt and the bedroom tax. A growing number of unions have adopted community-based organising techniques, backing new movements of cleaners, domestic and care workers and others. Unions are at the forefront of campaigns for a living wage, defending public services, and against the use of zero hours contracts to cut wages and other benefits essential to alleviating poverty.

Unions are also rethinking their role as political representatives of working people. The relationship between unions and the Labour Party is under increasing strain over continued privatisation, corporate greed, rising inequality and the failure of market forces to deliver basic services and social protection. It is increasingly evident to many that, while there may be little to gain from cutting the link with Labour, it is the trade union movement itself that has the main responsibility to argue the alternatives. |

*Dave Spooner is co-director of the Global Labour Institute*

## Charities are failing the poor

*Penny Waterhouse*

Charities exist to support and defend the interests of their beneficiaries – poor, ill, disabled, excluded and dispossessed people and communities. So, one would assume that they would be at the forefront of resistance to increases in inequality. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Over time, and with increasing speed, charities have morphed into becoming subcontractors to the state. As public services are privatised to the likes of Capita, G4S and Serco, many charities also line up to do the bidding of these private-sector behemoths. Instead of challenging policies that cut services and entitlements, most keep their head down, with their eyes on the next contract and a seat at the table. Front-line staff continue valiantly to work with those hit by poverty,

while facing staff and wage cuts, and increasingly told to button their lip when they demand a more robust response. Managers are torn between fighting for the next contract and fighting for people's rights. Too many are making the wrong choice and end up in a marketplace where survival and self-interested competition become the only options. The culture of faux professionalism has neutered principle, stripped out the politics, silenced workplace democracy and put distance between these "service providers" and the anger within the communities in which they work.

Such is the compliance with government that, in 2012, charity leaders felt able to tell ministers that the voluntary sector "stands ready" to implement government plans for privatisation, encourage volunteering as a substitute for public services and help those suffering increased poverty accept their circumstances.

The NCIA inquiry into the future of voluntary services is documenting this dismal picture. Thankfully, voluntary action is made up of more than the supine search for funding. Our previous inquiry into local activism and dissent, *Here We Stand*, revealed acts of resistance, which continue to multiply: a local Council for Voluntary Services formally aligned itself with local anti-cuts group; two charities in Liverpool withdrew from contracts; Lewisham Hospital campaigners exposed Jeremy Hunt's unlawful manoeuvring. The list goes on. What is needed is action on a scale that opposes public service privatisation, including the use of voluntary services for mainstream public service delivery, and the sub-contracting of charities to corporations. Beyond that, there is a need to forge working links between charities, campaigners, unions and others who are involved in the fight to stop cuts in living standards, rights and entitlements. |

*Penny Waterhouse is the director of the National Coalition for Independent Action*

## Why Occupy lost its steam

*Alasdair Roberts*

It's been three years since the magazine *Adbusters* sent out the tweet that triggered the Occupy movement: "On 17 Sept, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents,

kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street." By late 2011, many Occupiers were convinced they would change the world. Some called it "one of the most significant and hopeful events of our lifetimes". Today, however, optimism has faded. Why did it lose steam so quickly?

One important consideration was the internal logic of the movement itself. Occupy had an organising philosophy that seemed to be well-suited to the internet age. Hierarchy was passé: power was fully decentralised, so any Occupier had (in theory) the right to veto the statements or plans of his or her encampment. This made it hard for Occupy to build on early successes. Occupiers could not produce coherent statements about their goals. They could not negotiate alliances with others. And they could not control fringe elements whose behaviour undermined public sympathy.

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### Occupiers couldn't offer coherent statements about their goals

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Occupy was also constrained because of changes in police capabilities. Since the 1990s, major urban police forces have invested heavily in crowd-control equipment and training. The goal is containment and minimisation of disruption. Because of this, big-city mayors had complete discretion to shut down the protests when public support began to wear out.

Today's globalised economy is also hypersensitive to disruption. When Occupiers briefly obstructed American ports, for example, the business community reacted fiercely. Meanwhile, Londoners and New Yorkers worried that protests would tarnish their city's "urban brand".

A final reason why Occupy failed: the emergency measures taken by the Federal Reserve and the Bank of England. If the British and American economies had continued to decline, the protest movement would have had more strength. But central bankers stepped in with experiments such as quantitative easing. In the end, therefore, the politics of the economic crisis might have been shaped more by technocrats and police forces, than by movements such as Occupy. |

*Alasdair Roberts is the author of "The End of Protest: How Free-Market Capitalism Learned to Control Dissent"*

## The value of networks should not be forgotten

*Hilary Cottam*

Relationships are the key to a good old age, finding jobs, managing health conditions and to coping if you're in crisis. We intuitively understand that having a good relationship with the people we encounter makes life run more smoothly. This is something William Beveridge himself suspected, but most modern welfare institutions overlook.

At the end of his life, Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, wrote that he had made a mistake: he had both missed and limited citizen power. While he continued to argue that the state must do more than it had in the past, he felt that "room, opportunity and encouragement for voluntary action in seeking new ways of social advance" and "services of a kind which often money cannot buy" were critical. He feared the way his institutions were designed forced citizens to become passive while others handed out welfare.

Instead of attempting to meet needs from the top down, we need to shift to fostering capabilities within individuals and their communities. For example, if you've signed on at the Jobcentre, you spend much of your time there talking to staff. But even the best advice can't do for you what a social network can – how else will you find unadvertised posts? Let's connect jobseekers to each other, as well as others who run small businesses, or want to collaborate on freelance work. Connecting with new people opens your eyes to wider possibilities and offers the opportunity to develop new skills, reconsider aspirations and help others. There's still plenty of scope for the state to be involved, facilitating these interactions and providing front-line workers who can offer practical support where needed.

Designing a relational response to our current challenges does not mean asking citizens to contribute their time to 1950s services as the state withdraws. It means designing services that combine resources in new ways and that value the relationships between people in every element of their response. |

*Hilary Cottam is the founder of Participle*

# Voluntary action is not a cost-cutting policy

By *Richard Fries*

A vibrant society is one in which people can come together for their own purposes. But to do this they need an environment that is well-resourced, accountable and independent

Poverty and charity belong together. Most people think of charity as helping the poor and needy. That we should still need charity to help tackle poverty may seem a condemnation of our society. Actually, charity is a necessary part of a good society. The language may seem archaic; the reality needs to be fit for the modern world, not abolished. Effective measures for tackling poverty must include charity; but it must be charity that is properly understood and made fit for the 21st century.

Charity has a technical legal meaning. As well as relieving need, charity rightly embraces contributing to social wellbeing, fostering culture and heritage. (Here is not the place to enter the controversy aroused over charity providing for the well-to-do.) The law gives everyday acts of charity legal and institutional security. Being common law, based on centuries of practice and precedent, charity law is diffuse, not easily accessible for the non-lawyer. But the legal principle that charity is independent, private action for the public good is easily accepted.

The participation of ordinary citizens in developing ways of meeting need and enriching society has always been an important test of a good society, whether under the label of charity or philanthropy, or under fashionable labels such as civil society or the “big society”. The duty of the wealthy to devote a good part of their wealth to philanthropy was claimed as part of a good market society. Encouraging and enabling “ordinary” people with a passion to improve society is likewise

important. The “active citizen” has been part of the appeal to Victorian values – and the example of driven philanthropists such as Octavia Hill and Thomas Barnardo remains inspiring.

In the last century, charity became unpopular as a capricious, even cold, alibi for state neglect. But the welfare state did not do away with philanthropy. Quite apart from issues the state did not, or could not, tackle, the contribution of charity continued at least in innovative and supplementary roles. And the need for an independent voice became obvious, with the inability of the state to meet, or even to recognise, changing needs. Homelessness and the charity Shelter is perhaps the best-known example from the 1960s – still very relevant to poverty.

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Collective action can be divisive, the clash of conflicting aims

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What do we need now from voluntary action? What can individuals and voluntary bodies provide which the state cannot? Partly it’s the mindset: people “taking control of their lives”. Local groups tackling local issues are important; but organisation is needed, and that in turn needs resource security. Charity should provide the institutional basis for that.

The public and charitable sectors are natural partners. The guiding principle of both is the public good. Seeking a good society free of poverty ought to be a fun-

damental goal of government. And that is the basic test of what it is to be a charity. It is therefore important to develop a framework under which state and citizen can cooperate in working towards this goal. Not that society should be homogenised.

A vibrant society is one in which people can come together for their own purposes without having to rely on, or indeed get the permission of, the state. Diversity is good in itself. A multiplicity of initiatives trying to crack intractable social problems is desirable – healthy competition is good in charity as well as in the market. But collective action can be divisive, the clash of conflicting aims. An enduring value of the concept of charity is that it is rooted in what is good for society at large, not sectional interest. This highlights the other aspect of citizen participation – its potential for contributing to the public good.

Increasingly since the 1970s, governments have pursued an active policy of supporting voluntary action and encouraging giving and volunteering. Public expenditure constraints have raised the question of government motives – promoting citizen engagement as good in itself or saving money?

Government sensitivity towards voluntary bodies that criticise government policies highlights the ambiguity. Attempts to curb the “political” engagement of the voluntary sector have been a regular feature of the “partnership”. Yet people who are passionately committed to tackling a social evil want to raise their voices as well as take action – they do not want to be merely mute “active citizens”.

One role of voluntary action is clearly to meet need. Food banks make a material difference to the well-being of the needy. Contributing ideas is equally important. The experience of charities can make a difference to understanding social problems. They have the credibility to highlight issues. Public policy would be the poorer if that expertise was inhibited. This rightly involves participating in debate on public policy.

A flourishing civil society needs an enabling framework which guarantees institutional security; adequate sources of funding; proportionate accountability to maintain public confidence; and independence of voice and action.

One reason why charity has remained at the heart of the voluntary sector is that the concept enshrines the two key elements: public benefit and independence. The core of charity law rests on the concept of trust. It enshrines the altruism expected of charity – for the public good not for personal benefit. And its premise is independence: trustees must act in the best interests of their charity, not on behalf of any other interest or authority. This thus distinguishes charities absolutely from the new style of bodies operating at arms-length from government but under government’s guidance. Of course, this is fine in theory, but not easy to ensure. Funders, public, private or charitable, will expect a proper account of the use of their money. And public bodies will seek the realisation of their policies. Ensuring that a genuine partnership of equals is maintained is the challenge. Proper accountability is necessary.

The right to free expression belongs as clearly to organisations as to individuals. Charities’ exercise of this right is qualified. The legal basis for this is questionable. The public expect charities to be non-political bodies; but the law defines political not just in terms of party-political engagement, but extends to aiming to change the law or government policy (this being the prerogative of parliament). That public confidence in charities resting on their not being political may seem to justify this principle; but the contribution of charities to the development of the law and policy depends on their raising their voice on the basis of experience. The legal compromise is that, while charities cannot have a political purpose, they can engage in “political” activities so long as this



Trussell Trust volunteers preparing packages for food-bank users

contributes to their “non-political” aims.

This raises the vexed question of the regulation of charities. But this already tilts away from independence. If trustees must exercise absolute responsibility over how their charity seeks to fulfil its purposes, to submit them to regulation is at best a misleading notion. Charities are not public utilities. It would be a fundamental breach of the basic constitutional principle to subject them to regulatory oversight, with the substantive second guessing expected of utility regulators.

### Investment in voluntary bodies produces better, not cheaper, policies

The “regulation” of charities should be enabling: upholding the ethos and integrity of charity, for sure – the “conscience” of the sector – but working with charities to enable volunteer trustees to provide effective governance. Good management, integrity and public confidence require that charities are properly “accountable”. But this is a slippery term, covering enforceable accountability and accountability that demonstrates aims and achievements – transparency, in other words.

Much of the controversy which the Charity Commission is currently attracting misses this point. Deliberate abuse needs strong intervention, often involving the police and the tax authorities. But the vast majority of trustees are seeking to do something public-spirited. They need guidance not regulation.

The Charities Act 2011 consolidates recent reforms and sets out what charity covers in the present day. Thus far, it provides a modern definition. But it leaves the crucial test of what counts as public benefit to the traditional processes of the common law. The enhanced regulatory role of the Charity Commission has been undermined by budget cuts of 30 per cent. The austerity programme has also hit the sector through the impact of cuts.

We are back to the ambiguity of government motives. The “big society” will do as a label for the engagement of people seeking to tackle social need. Vibrant communities are an essential part of the response to that challenge. But it needs money. Encouraging charitable giving is important, but it does not suffice. Voluntary action is not a cost-cutting policy. Investment in voluntary bodies produces better, not cheaper, policies. |

*Richard Fries is a Webb Memorial trustee and former chief charity commissioner*

# Solidarity marches on

By Jane Streater

The people of north-east England are building a new model of power that aims to unite people for confident, tactical and effective action

Most economic and social policies are determined nationally with differential outcomes (winners and losers) for groups and regions; our political institutions, such as parties, trade unions, local government and civil society organisations are institutionalised. It seems however that “the times they are a changing”. There appears to be a growing appetite for citizens to organise to take power to tackle seemingly intractable problems such as poverty, inequality and regional prosperity.

Up and down the country, discussions about a “fair society” and “a good society” are coming to the fore. There are Fairness Commissions, forums to implement inclusion policies and in Newcastle, where I am a Labour councillor, the local authority is working with churches, the voluntary sector and business leaders to develop “A Good City”. It is evident that not only on the left, but also across civil society organisations, faith groups, academics, business leaders and citizens, there is disappointment and anger about the failure of conventional politics to deliver social justice; not surprisingly, complementary action to politics as we know it, appeals. What is emerging is the view that people in localities need to organise and take power to shape their own destinies. There is no quick fix, but the journey that a small group of citizens in the north-east of England set out on two years ago appears to lead in a promising direction.

*Busting the Poverty Myths*, the previous supplement supported by the Webb Memorial Trust (22-28 March 2013), outlined action taken by seven concerned citizens acting independently of any organisation to spark discussions about what

can be done in the north-east of England to make it better and fairer. The January Declaration (2012) was launched, focusing on growing poverty and inequality, the stigmatisation of poor people and the economic challenges facing the region. This was endorsed by 350 people (including Archbishop Justin Welby, as well as local political leaders from all three main parties) and 13 discussion sessions were held with a focus on what we in the north-east could do. A January Manifesto (2013) outlined a plan embracing self-help, community strengthening and mutual ownership which would build on the principles of social solidarity, social justice, and a Living Wage. Contrary to the myth of a “whingeing north”, we are, in the words of the think tank IPPR North, “leading not pleading” for the betterment of our region.

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We aim to develop  
a people-centred social  
action movement

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Although people feel very positive about the north-east, a new political dynamic is felt to be needed to counter the power of London-based decision making which does not act in our interests (or heed our messages) and to speak up for people in our region. Citizen action could be an extra political force, not by undermining the conventional political process, but by questioning, informing campaigning with solutions for a fairer north-east. Challenge, we believe, is integral to a mature democracy.

One year after the January Manifesto, a

January conference, *Developing a Stronger Voice* (2014), tested the appetite for organising. Jointly funded by the Webb Memorial Trust and three north-east charitable foundations, we asked: “Can we co-ordinate our efforts to combat poverty and inequality in the north-east and can we develop a North East Citizens Assembly to implement our conclusions?” The underlying premise was that citizen action is necessary to develop a new north-east, so we aim to develop a movement of people-centred social action based on consensus and co-operation transcending ideology and party politics.

Inspired by Citizens UK about the need to take power to determine the quality of our lives, there was overwhelming support for establishing Tyne Citizens. The watchword for going forward is “solidarity”, which is hardly ever used these days by the political class, but it chimes well with north-east culture. We know about the issues, we have the ethical and economic arguments, but we now need to learn to build a local model of power, with skills, that unites people for confident, tactical and effective action. Oldies recall Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*, the handbook for community action, but for some lacking resources, it is not easy to see how communities challenging power could be effective. Citizens UK will kick-start some training at the local level and a meeting to establish an Alliance is scheduled. Local funders will be invited to travel with us to begin to build citizen power for a better north-east. |

*Jane Streater is one of seven who initiated the January Declaration 2012. She is also a deputy cabinet member (child poverty) at Newcastle City Council*

# The Database

The world is changing. Measures taken by the UK government to boost the economy have done little to help the poorer members of our society. Inequality is rising and organisations working to support those in poverty are finding it hard to make progress.

## Percentage of UK households lacking three or more necessities

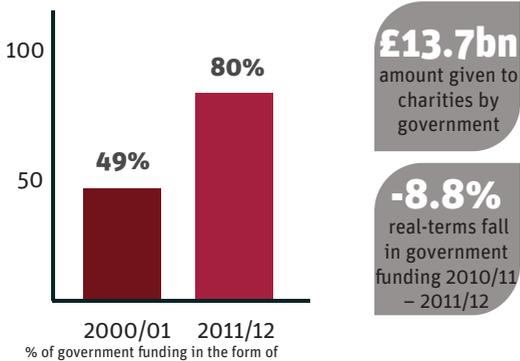


This rise in the proportions of multiply deprived households is all the more significant because:

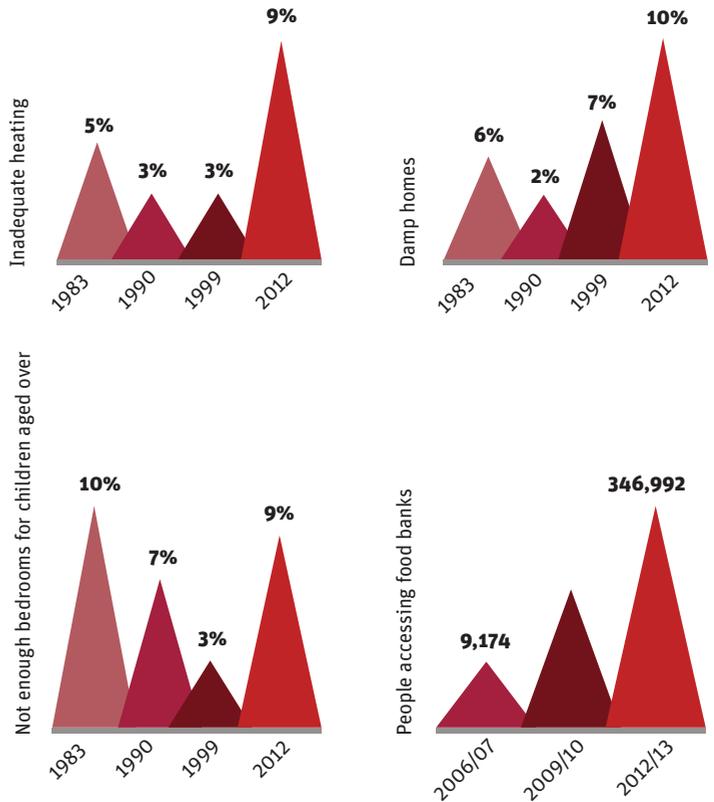
- 1983 was a year of recession, with more than three million people unemployed
- The size of the economy has doubled over the past 30 years

## Statutory funding

Government has increasingly turned to charities to deliver public services. Yet the funding required is no longer as freely available, and what is on offer comes with many strings attached.



## Household deprivation is rising

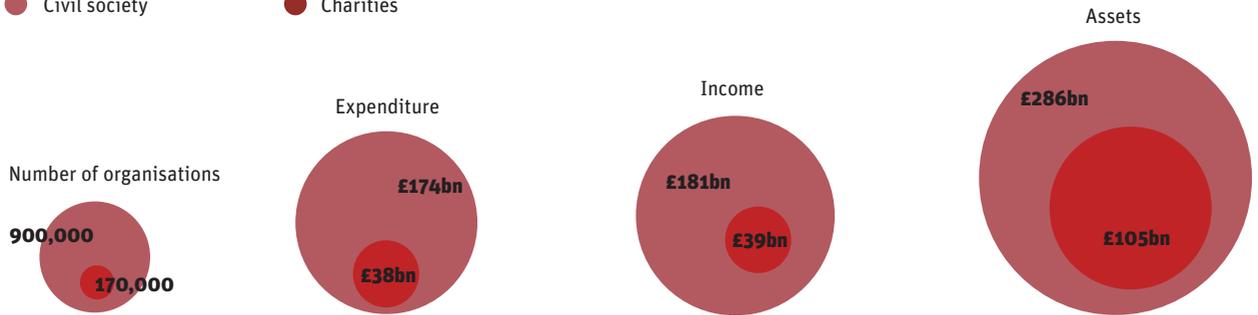


## Size of civil society

Civil society organisations have an annual combined income of £181bn. Charities make up the largest part of this in financial terms, accounting for the largest share of income, assets and expenditure.

Civil society

Charities



**27,879**  
The number of registered charities working to prevent or relieve

Total income, March 2014:  
**£13.4bn**

Sources: Poverty and Social Exclusion Project UK; Trussell Trust; Charity Trends; NCVQ; Michael Edwards



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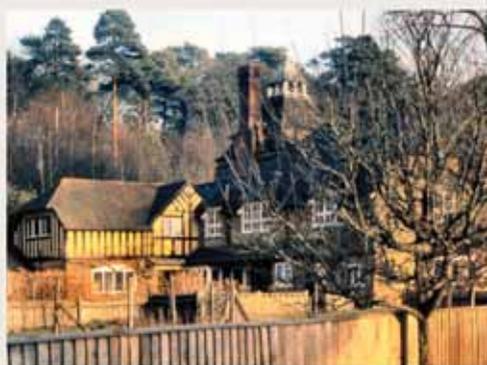
“POVERTY IS NOT DUE TO A WEAKNESS OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER, BUT IS A PROBLEM OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT”

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These words are as relevant today as they were in 1909 when Beatrice Webb included them as part of her submission to the Minority Report.

Beatrice Webb had a plan of what a good society free from poverty would look like. It took 30 years for her views to be accepted, but they became the basis for Britain's welfare state, and in the 30 years following the Second World War, British society made good progress on poverty as a result.

Since 1944, the Webb Memorial Trust has worked to advance education and learning with respect to the history and problems of government and social policy. Initially delivered via debates and discussions at Beatrice Webb House in Surrey, in 1987 we refocused our efforts to concentrate on funding research



*Beatrice Webb House*

and conferences that aim to provide practical solutions to poverty and inequality.

Never has this work been more important.

Tough economic conditions, rising unemployment and changes to the welfare state mean more people are living in, or are at risk of, poverty than they have been for the last 20 years.

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**To find out how the Webb Memorial Trust aims to tackle poverty and inequality in the UK, and to learn more about the achievements of Beatrice Webb, visit [www.webbmemorialtrust.org.uk](http://www.webbmemorialtrust.org.uk)**

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