



David Cameron describes his plans for a 'Big Society' as 'the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power' from state to individuals. But how can we ensure that the best of the vision is realised and the poor and powerless are not left behind, asks **ANNA COOTE**

# Big enough for everyone?



**T**he coalition government wants to build a 'Big Society'. The Prime Minister says 'we are all in this together' and building it is the responsibility of every citizen as well as every government department. The broad vision is welcome, but everything depends on how the vision is translated into policy and practice.

The government aims to put more power and responsibility into the hands of families, groups, networks, neighbourhoods and locally based communities, and to generate more community organisers, neighbourhood groups, volunteers, mutuals, co-operatives, charities, social enterprises and small businesses. The idea is that all of these will take more action at a local level, with more freedom to do things the way they want – and that this

will help to tackle poverty and inequality.

Evidence shows that, when people feel they have control over what happens to them and can take action on their own behalf, their physical and mental wellbeing improves. But the Big Society vision does little to address the economic causes of poverty and inequality. It pays no attention to forces within modern capitalism that lead to accumulations of wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of others. Nor does it recognise that the current structure of the UK economy selectively restricts the ability of citizens to participate.

How much capacity we have depends on education and income, family circumstances and environment, knowledge, confidence and a sense of self-efficacy, available time

and energy, and access to the places where decisions are taken and things get done. All are distributed unequally among individuals, groups and localities. Families, networks, groups, neighbourhoods and communities have boundaries that are determined, variously, by blood, law, friendship, duty, obligation, tradition, geography, politics, wealth, status and class. Inevitably, they include some and exclude others, and resources are already shared unequally between them. There is nothing in the government's plans to encourage the inclusion of outsiders, to break down barriers created by wealth and privilege, to promote collaboration rather than competition between local organisations, or to prevent those that are already better off and more dominant from flourishing at the expense of others.

Building this Big Society depends crucially on people having enough time to engage in local action. Everyone has the same amount of time, of course, but some have a lot more control over their time than others. Long hours and low wages threaten to undermine a key premise of the Big Society, which is that social and financial gains will come from replacing paid with unpaid labour.

### **Poor communities**

Over several decades, efforts to breathe new life into poor or 'broken' neighbourhoods have all had the same point of departure: poverty is a problem for poor communities, which are 'vulnerable' to social ills and therefore must be helped to build up 'resilience' so that they are better able to cope. None of these efforts has had a substantial impact on social inequalities or on cycles of deprivation that afflict successive generations. The lesson is that responsibility for tackling poverty and inequality cannot be left solely to those who are disadvantaged and disempowered. There need to be structural changes to the economy, to prevent the concentration of wealth and power in a few hands, leaving others with little or none.

We don't want an overbearing state that depletes our capacity to help ourselves. But we do need a strategic state that is democratically controlled, and that becomes an effective facilitator, broker, enabler, mediator and protector of our shared interests. Without a properly functioning state, society collapses. Democratic government is the only effective vehicle for ensuring that resources are fairly distributed, both across the population and between individuals and groups at local levels. It can and must ensure that fundamental rights and capabilities of all citizens are protected from incursions by powerful interest groups.

The state must provide practical support, information and access to resources for local organisations, so that people with different levels of capacity can have an equal chance of getting together and acting effectively. And, last but not least, the state must ensure that services are in place to meet people's essential

needs regardless of their means (for example, for health and autonomy, education, a fair living income, care and housing). Action by businesses or third-sector organisations can supplement but cannot replace these functions, not least because they usually serve sectoral or specialised interests, rather than those of the nation as a whole. If the state is pruned so drastically that it is neither big enough nor strong enough to carry them out, the effect will be a more troubled and diminished society, not a bigger one.

The Big Society idea is strong on empowerment but weak on equality. On ethical grounds, which are hardly controversial, no-one should be held back by circumstances beyond their control, or suffer unfair discrimination. On practical grounds, there is a growing body of evidence – some of it collected in Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* – that more equal societies are better for everyone, not just the poor, with lower levels of crime and disorder, and better health and wellbeing. Societies with strong traditions of social solidarity and low levels of inequality are better able to cope with shared risks such as climate change. So equality matters a great deal and the implications for the Big Society are profound. It is weak on equality because it is weak on the structural links between economy and society. If the aim is to tackle poverty and inequality, as the Prime Minister maintains, then success depends on how economic as well as social resources are distributed between groups and communities, enabling them to do what, for whom and how.

### Social justice

We shall need a robust social justice framework to make sure this idea is not just big, but fair and sustainable. By 'social justice' I mean the fair and equitable distribution of social, environmental and economic resources between people, places and generations. By 'framework' I mean a shared understanding of how plans for the Big Society will help to achieve social justice, with rules of engagement that make sure these goals are consistently pursued.

Poverty, unemployment and inequality are not problems that communities can solve on their own. If we are to make a lasting difference, we shall need to change systems as well as behaviours, and find fair and effective ways to distribute resources as well as opportunities. The central principle underpinning the vision for the Big Society – that power should be decentralised and people enabled run their own affairs locally – should be extended to the economy, giving people more power to influence the way markets work and their impact on social justice. We need a much more open, accessible economy, with stronger democratic control to ensure that it works in the interests of society and the environment. And we need a state that is transformed by a 'bigger democracy', with widespread engagement and participation by citizens in

all social groups, in government decision-making at national and local levels.

If there's a shift towards more direct action by citizens and locally-based organisations, then it is vital that groups and individuals who are currently marginalised are able and willing to participate. Those with less capacity need help to build up knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as the material means (such as access to information, training, IT and premises) that enable them to take action and stay in business.

Co-production should be at the heart of the Big Society. The term describes a particular way of getting things done, where the people who are currently described as 'providers' and 'users' work together in an equal and reciprocal partnership, pooling different kinds of knowledge and skill. Co-production taps into an abundance of human resources and encourages people to join forces and make common cause. It builds local networks and strengthens the capacity of local groups. It draws upon the direct wisdom and experience that people have about what they need and what they can contribute, which helps to improve wellbeing and prevent needs arising in the first place. By changing the way we think about and act upon 'needs' and 'services', this approach promises more resources, better outcomes and a diminishing volume of need. It is as relevant to third-sector bodies as to government institutions and public authorities. Applied across the board and properly supported, it can help to realise the best ambitions of the Big Society.

Professionals and others who provide services, whether directly in public-sector organisations or in independent bodies, must learn to facilitate action by other people and to broker relationships between them – working *with* people, rather than doing things *to* or *for* them. The New Economics Foundation also proposes a slow but steady move towards a much shorter paid working week, with an ultimate goal of reaching 21 hours as the standard. In a time of rising unemployment, this will help to spread opportunities for paid employment. And people who currently have jobs that demand long hours will get more time for unpaid activities, as parents, carers, friends, neighbours and citizens. A gradual transition, over a decade or more, should allow time to put measures in place to offset the negative effects on low earners. These would include trading wage increments for shorter hours year-on-year, giving employers incentives to take on more staff, limiting paid overtime, training to fill skills gaps, raising the minimum wage, more progressive taxation, and arrangements for flexible working to suit the different needs of employees – such as

job sharing, school term shifts, care leave and learning sabbaticals.

There's no point building a Big Society unless it is viable in the long term. A strong focus on prevention will help to make the Big Society sustainable by reducing demand for services and so constraining future costs. And a shift of values will help to shape an economic order that does not depend on infinite growth with potentially catastrophic consequences for the environment.

### Longer-term impacts

It matters a lot how new ways of working are assessed. What should count are not just

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short-term financial effects, but the wider and longer-term impacts on individuals and groups, on the quality of their relationships and material circumstances, on the environment and on prospects for future generations. It is also important to notice and take account of the unintended consequences of different actions: these are often overlooked or swept under the carpet, but they can have substantial impacts in the longer term. The best way to arrive at criteria for evaluating local activities is to work with those directly involved, especially those who are supposed to benefit from them, finding out what matters most to them, what they hope to achieve and (later) whether they think that things have turned out as they hoped. It should be this kind of in-depth understanding which informs the design of quantitative research findings (to measure, for example, income, health and experienced wellbeing), that shape judgements about success and failure, and about future planning and investment.

The economic, social and environmental challenges that we face mean that radical change is in order. We need a bigger society, a broader economy and a bigger democracy. We need to shift from our current unsustainable path, to a system where everyone is able to survive and thrive on equal terms, without over-stretching the earth's resources. Only with a transition on this scale can the best elements of the Big Society vision be realised and sustained over time.

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