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## THE “BIG SOCIETY” IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: PRIVATISATION OR DEMOCRATISATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES

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### Abstract

The Big Society was one of three priorities of Prime Minister David Cameron after his election in 2010. Rarely had a Western government given such a high profile to the community or to the civil society sphere. The article traces the evolution of an opaque and ultimately doomed public policy. Special attention is paid to the role of the Community Organisers Programme, one of the defining, if ambiguous, strands of the Big Society vision. The article presents a critical consideration of the effectiveness to date of the Big Society in its declared objective of achieving sustainable, long term community empowerment by giving a greater role to civil society.

### Keywords

Big Society, community organising, empowerment, social market

### Résumé

— *Le projet de Big Society au Royaume-Uni : privatisation ou démocratisation des services publics ? — Le projet de Big Society a été l'une des trois priorités du Premier ministre David Cameron après son élection en 2010. Rarement un gouvernement n'avait donné une telle importance à la société civile et aux communautés locales. L'article retrace l'évolution de cette politique publique opaque et finalement abandonnée. Une attention particulière est accordée au rôle du Community Organisers Programme, l'un des volets les plus abouti, mais tout aussi ambigu, au sein du projet de Big Society. L'article présente une analyse critique de l'efficacité atteinte par ce projet en particulier quant à son objectif déclaré d'assurer un renforcement durable de la participation des citoyens à la gouvernance locale en accordant un rôle plus important à la société civile.*

### Mots-clés

Participation citoyenne, privatisation, politiques sociales.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHEN ASSOCIATIONS REPLACE THE STATE

« The Big Society is about a huge culture change (...) where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace (...) don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face (...) but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities »<sup>1</sup>. David Cameron announcing the « Big Society » at his 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2009 speech calling for alternatives to « Big Government ».

Between 2010 and 2012, a handful of small programmes sought to embed this hands-off approach of the Big Society. 'The Big Lunch' encouraged people to open up their houses to their neighbours to share a meal and thus build a sense of community. The 'Big Local' programme gave around £1million to 150 local areas for residents to identify local issues they wanted to tackle. But the Big Society grand ambitions was mainly narrowed to the running of two relatively important programmes: the Community Organisers Programme (COP) and the National Citizen Service. The COP was a national training programme in community organising, seeking to train 5,000 people by 2015 whilst the National Citizen Service focused exclusively on young people aged between 16 and 17, enabling them to undertake social action projects during the Spring, Summer and Autumn months.

The rise and fall of the 'Big Society' in UK social policy was unusually swift and savage. Its stated aim was « to create a climate that empowered local people and communities, building a "big society" that would take power away from politicians and give it to people ». A couple of years after the Tory and liberal democrats Coalition government was elected, civil servants quietly stopped using the term. Yet the manner in which it commanded headlines was unprecedented.

The Big Society narrative and debated outcomes fed the growing debate in the UK, as in France, on the role Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can play in both delivering social services and also deepening civic life at national and local levels, beyond top down party politics and state-led neoliberal policies. Whilst CSOs (equivalent of French « *associations* » and more informal, not registered, collectives) have not replaced the state since then, they have gained an ascendancy in the realm of UK policy, which aims for a less directive, arms-length state. If the state is frowned upon and viewed as inefficient by the political and economical elites of the last decades, the market and community sector are the alternative and preferred chosen means to deliver many of its administrative functions, including employment, health, housing, education and criminal justice services.

Given the exhortation of social action outside of the state and market through the Big Society, via volunteering and community organising, it is also important to locate the role of local authorities. The assertion that all politics is local indicates the centrality of local government. In the UK however, local councils are significantly weaker than in most of Europe, Scandinavia and America, where principles of federalism and subsidiarity ensure a far stronger local state. In the Thatcher era local government was seen as a bastion of municipal socialism leading to legislation to further curtail its role. Hence power, control and money flowed from the center. As money became constrained, following

1. Prime Minister's Office, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/big-society-speech>

the global banking crisis of 2007-2008 the Coalition government (2010-2015) embraced austerity politics and funding to local authorities fell by a third, with cuts to public services (Hastings *et al.*, 2015). Under the Big Society policy framework, followed by the Localism Act 2011, the shortfall in funds and activity would be picked up by a newly discovered and invigorated civil society, allied to greater role for private sector delivery. The Big Society can be seen as replacing much of the role of local government as set out in the Local Government Act 2006 which stated that ‘community empowerment’ was the main business of local government<sup>2</sup>.

Whilst recognising that the policy fallen short as an ideological branding exercise (Scott, 2011), we should consider whether it fulfilled both its stated and implicit objectives ; the stated objective being to enable a more empowered citizenship and revivification of social action undertaken primarily by volunteers outside of the state ; the implicit objective being to oversee the scaling back of the state without precipitating social breakdown. On the one hand, Big Society can be understood as a neoliberal policy. Neoliberal capitalism leads to the disinvestment of the government from economic and social development programmes which are then delegated in a decentralized manner to individuals and communities, understood as local CSOs, and, as a matter of fact, to big companies. On the other hand, one can see the Big Society’s agenda as a ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ form of localism and therefore leading to more democratic and creative outcomes (Wills, 2016; Balazard and Fisher, 2015). That the « turn to community » actually began as progressive initiatives to improve democratic processes and challenge economic and political inequities (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shrage, 2010).

The article asks the question of the impact of the Big Society on citizens empowerment and on the way the State is mobilising CSOs for implementing its policies. It makes the argument that the Big Society policy has mainly covered a swap from big government to big companies instead of supporting local CSOs and overall empowerment. It will first come back to one specific programme of the Big Society to illustrate the ambivalent nature of this policy. The Community Organisers Programme was one of the defining strands of the Big Society vision. Despite its mixed review, this programme led to some radical experimentation, going closer to the Big Society narrative of citizens’ empowerment. It will then explore however how we mainly observe a shift from big government to big companies, rather than « society », and how already existing CSOs, especially the small and informal ones, have been the absent player of the Big Society project.

## **BETWEEN NEOLIBERALISM AND RADICAL EMPOWERMENT, THE CASE OF THE COMMUNITY ORGANISERS PROGRAMME**

Beyond the explicitly labeled « Big Society » initiatives, the Coalition government promoted different ways of delivering social services by civil society organisations, which included planning and housing policies. The Localism Act 2011<sup>3</sup> delivered a range of community rights including the right to challenge, bid and build. This right related to services and development (which community associations were largely unable to understand

2. For a contextual approach of the profit sector in UK sector, see Édith Archambault, “Associations et pouvoirs publics vers une convergence des modèles” among other European non profit, this issue.

3. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted>.

or access given the relative complexity of the processes involved). Neighbourhood planning, whereby community associations worked together to influence local planning grew over the decade as a policy but again, due to the complexity of planning legislation was rarely a force for community mobilization, although since 2015, more support has been given for local groups to grapple with proposed changes to their built environment and engage with private sector developers.

The exception to the general avoidance of support for forms of community mobilization was the Community Organisers Programme. This programme illustrated the clear motives but also this ambiguity of the Big Society narrative, between neoliberalism, community empowerment and radical politics. Overall, the financial, human and organisational means granted to achieve the political ambitions of the Big Society, and in this case the COP, were inadequate. But on the other hand, the administrative flexibility of the COP has also enabled the development of radical forms of community organizing.

The COP provided for the training of community organisers. Big Society organisers would be there to « facilitate local action and give support to groups looking to come together to tackle identified problems. »<sup>4</sup> The model explicitly supported the social action/conflict models of Saul Alinsky (1972), Citizens UK<sup>5</sup> and Paulo Freire (1972). It featured several principles stemming from the golden rule of community organising: « never do for others what they can do for themselves ». COP promoted a neoliberal interpretation of community organising supporting the retreat from public service delivery, as well as providing an alternative opportunity for the development of Alinsky-style community organising<sup>6</sup> amidst budgetary cuts and austerity.

Set up between 2011 and 2015, it outlived its Big Society parent. The organisation *Locality* successfully submitted for the government funded 15 million pounds contract enabled the COP to recruit and a partner organisation, *RE:generate*, to train 543 community organisers across 14 different cohorts. These organisers participated in approximately 300 different organisations in England and claimed to have supported and trained 5 703 volunteer residents. Organisers were initially hired on one year contracts. Each class would get together throughout the year for specific training modules which represented the core of their training.

*Locality* is a charitable company which arose from the merger of two charities in 2011, the *Development Trust & BASSAC* (the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centers). *RE:generate* is a charitable organisation whose stated goal is to « reduce poverty by encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit and leadership amongst communities ». Both organisations were instructed by government as part of the terms of the COP contract that they could not collaborate with wider CSOs. Thus claims of representing a wider grassroots movement are not credible.

In concrete terms, organisers had to, for a year, « listen » to 500 people, recruit and train 9 volunteers and help 3 projects come about even if they stayed at the level of an idea. The projects mainly depended upon a few training sessions offered to residents. The training sessions focused on the creation of social network bonds, neglecting the importance of creating organized groups and actions for social justice.

Though COP ended in September 2015, four years after its launch, the two service providers, *Locality* and *RE:generate*, expressed a strong will to continue. Initially

4. Big Society - Frequently Asked Questions [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/85850/Big\\_Society\\_FAQs.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85850/Big_Society_FAQs.pdf).

5. See Balazard (2015) for a French account of this UK community organization.

6. See Balazard and Talpin (2016) for a genealogy of the different styles and forms of “community organising”

they created a legacy organisation, the Company of Community Organisers (COLtd), and trained organisers were encouraged to join. It was clear from the title of this new effort that they were under a great deal of pressure to sound and act like a community organiser corporation, seeking business partners and private funding. Most recently in March, 2017 the heir to the COP received a £4.2 million contract from the post-Cameron conservative administration's Office of Civil Society to continue training community organisers, a proposed 10,000 by 2020<sup>7</sup>.

Paradoxically, in terms of COP outcomes, one can see subversive elements that could justify the increased role given to civil society as a better vehicle to deepen civic life and citizen participation. Though a large number of organisers have indeed focused on community building methods (listening, building relationships, recreating a sense of community and using existing assets), others, a minority, have been successful in using direct action to help groups of residents to organise and voice demands to improve their living conditions. Amongst these later initiatives, one can find the Sheffield group of resident which managed to pressure local authorities to save a bus line and the development of an ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) branch in Bristol, taking actions for more economic and social justice, especially around housing issues. With some influence now in France in such groups as Alliance Citoyenne in Grenoble and Aubervilliers as well as the UK, prior to 2009 ACORN was the largest and most successful neo-Alinsky grassroots organisation of low-income people in the United States (Fisher, 2009). Indeed the lack of a political vision for this programme and the loose and random management in each organisation hosting organising trainees gave the organisers a significant degree of independence. Young people who were seeking means to change society (the ideals which had pushed them to apply for this job) were introduced, through the training sessions, to community organising methods, and for example Alinsky's ideas and writings (1972). Some organisers used their relative independence to implement action-oriented community organising.

Furthermore, as organisers were part of the same cohort, being and reading together fostered the grounds for emulation, for voicing critiques of the programme and for building alternative visions of what CSOs role should be. The two service providers, but even more so some of the organisers in the field, found themselves relatively free and able to produce impacts beyond those planned in the first place. The organisers from the programme could be critical of the Cameron government as well as very grateful to have been given this opportunity. Often being unemployed when they were hired, they were paid and trained (however limited) to make social change happen. Half of the organisers from the first year kept their positions for a second, and many stayed on through the end of the program in 2015 and even continue with the successor organisation. This way, one could see the effectiveness of devolving power to civil society in terms of improving democratic control and living conditions. Nevertheless, the examples where organisers wanted and have been able to pursue radical community organising remain the minority.

The COP was one of the few programmes to enjoy support. It is also one of the few aspects of the Big Society that had US dimensions. The UK has long borrowed from North American social policy. The transition from state programming to a community-based, contracted, dramatically expanded civil society sector is widely evident in the U.S. since the late 1970s. What is called the « voluntary » or « independent » sector provides critical social services but without an organising or economic justice mission. Where the COP

7. <http://www.corganisers.org.uk/news/massive-expansion-community-organisers-programme>.

truly differs from the U.S. and where it offers a potentially positive and innovative initiative is in both (1) its use of state funds to hire and train community workers to advance local participation and democratic engagement and (2) its delimiting of state bureaucratic load which helps free up groups or organisations to focus on organising instead of red tape and use funding for core needs, such as hiring community organisers and expanding the initiative, rather than being heavily directed as in the U.S. by the latest Request for Proposal (RFP) which demands narrow focus on very specific models and interventions.

But the scope of the progressive democratic outcomes in the COP is too small to have a real impact on the way political power is balanced between public bodies, private companies and CSOs, especially small ones and informal organisations which are in the majority and which suffer a lack of support and recognition leading to missed opportunities to sustain genuine grass root engagement and civic renewal as the following section will unveil.

## THE BIG SOCIETY OR THE BIG COMPANIES?

The shift from a characterisation of ‘big government’ under the New Labour era, as stultifying, wasteful (Craig, 2008) and unaffordable to a leaner more equitable administration under the ‘Big Society’ is more accurately understood as a retrenchment into Big Companies (Sloccock, 2015, 29). There is no evidence that volunteering or social action or public services have been transformed (Brindle, 2015). However under the guise of a smaller state and exhortation for citizens to take power back there has existed a far greater business opportunity for large corporate bodies to bid and run contracts targeting acuter social need and formerly run by statutory bodies, including central and local government (NCIA, 2011, Mount 2012).

And in the absence of empowered local government both power and money become monopolised elsewhere, specifically in the U.K. by central government and larger public / private contractors.

### Private companies for public services

The compulsory competitive tendering regimes embedded by the Thatcher government, updated by New Labour (Jenkins, 2006) as ‘best value’ meant that the majority of public services faced a commissioning process rather than automatically being run by government. In this process, bids<sup>8</sup> were invited from the private, voluntary and community sectors but in practice the vast majority of services delivered outside of the state were won by the private sector (Joy et Hedley, 2012). This was because of the use of a ‘prime model’ of commissioning which privileged cheapest cost and size of operation when awarding contracts. Large scale private sector bodies invariably were able to offer lower costs due to economies of scale and also were able to demonstrate a track record of comparable delivery. The majority of voluntary and community organisations turnover and workforce were invariably far smaller (Crowe *et al.*, 2014). Thus if we follow the money, the flow of resource appears to have boosted private sector organisations in

8. It is difficult to calculate the amount of the bids because their definition and accountings are so broad that the result would not be reliable.

comparison with citizen-led community organisations. While viewing public services as a social market, the state actually grew under both the Thatcher and Blair governments along with the private sectors increased role in both regeneration and service delivery. However after the 2007-2008 banking crisis such expansion gave way to austerity and a commitment to shrink the state, hence the big society is intrinsically linked to the desire for a smaller state.

Properly understood, the Big Society should be seen as the latest iteration of the market state, a fusion between public and private spheres, which began with the break from the post war consensus (1945-1975) between the two main parties (Labour and Conservative) where both agreed on the central role of government to intervene in resource allocation and the running of the economy. The market state as a neoliberal hybrid (Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993) has constantly evoked the virtues of a small state, the importance of community, devolution of power (localism) and the autonomy of the citizen (choice) as its rationale. Yet the tendency towards monopoly is not easily broken. The small battalions of community associations evoked by the philosopher Edmund Burke as emblematic of civil society (Burke, 1986) have yet to command the field of operations. Instead there is a straightforward transfer from the public to private realm. The outsourcing of services to companies sees responsibility move from one large organisation (government) to private limited companies. The service user may not even notice a change has occurred given the ubiquitous regimes that drive the market state, though there are some examples of systemic failure notably in the probation service (Travis, 2016) and adult social care (Parkinson et Cummins, 2016).

The legacy of the Big Society may therefore be seen as one of continuity, of neoliberal drift towards ever greater levels of privatisation. In this regard Big Society uses community action as camouflage (Alcock, 2012). As the public sector retreats more and more in the UK, most social benefit programmes are transferred to charities, among other CSOs, and, as a matter of fact, to companies ; they are then granted public and private subsidies to support programmes’ delivery. Thus organisations from the private sector not only competed rather than complemented the civil society sector but also led to their downfall with the consequence that social inequalities in the labour market that might have been challenged by charities and CSOs were not tackled. An example of this is the ‘Work Programme’ introduced in June 2011 which was supposed to help the long term unemployed find work and included support from charities who would in turn receive payment. By 2012, one charity leader described the programme as a ‘walking disaster’ because the work contract was unsustainable and led to many charities having to close (Buchanan 2012). As charities became excluded from delivering the programme, the role of multinational companies, notably G4S (security services), became ever more prominent.

### **The underappreciated scale of UK Civil Society Organizations**

Amidst the ideological ascendancy of the role of the market and the corollary of a limited state, there has been far less attention paid to the role of civil society, as a third sphere of political, economic and social action. In his maiden speech to the House of Lords in 2010, Lord Wei, adviser to David Cameron on the Big Society, was questioned by Bishop Tim Stevens about the need to ensure a balance across society using the metaphor of the

society as a three legged stool, consisting of the state, market and civil society<sup>9</sup>. By drawing attention to an assumed parity between these different legs of the stool, the neoliberal project of reducing the size of the state, relative to the market and civil sphere continues apace. However, if we continue with the metaphor of the stool, unlike the private sector, it would appear that the civil society leg is greatly diminished and scarcely comparable to the other two, with regard to solidity and influence. The overall income of the UK sector amounts to £43.8 billion (NCVO, 2016), less than 3 % of the GDP

Under the Coalition government funding was even drastically reduced to community associations, mirroring and often exceeding the cuts to the public sector precipitated by the 2007-08 banking crisis. The government did not propose to fund or direct community action to any great degree because such intervention was viewed as counter-productive. It was not the role of the state to command and control community associations but to create an environment where they could take the initiative for themselves, thanks for example of the help of the newly trained individual « community organisers ». Compared to the 1997-2010 New Labour government this was a drop in the ocean. New Labour initiated waves of generously funded programmes including the largest ever UK regeneration programme – New Deal for Communities, which typically gave £50million over a ten year period to 38 of the most deprived areas in England, overseen by resident-led boards. Likewise their *ChangeUp programme* (£231 million) supported community associations to access a range of training and support opportunities. Both governments saw the work of community associations as vital in going beyond a narrow state-led delivery of local services but the Coalition government broke with the assumption that work by community associations should be funded directly. It capitalised on the criticism that the money spent had often failed to reach the more local community associations and instead gone to a self-serving elite in the wider charity and government sectors, who acted as intermediaries.

The overarching name for this change of direction, from funded to largely non-funded work by community associations and active citizens within them, was the ‘Big Society’.

Unlike the public and private sector, there is a profound lack of clarity about what the civil society sector even is and a tendency to limit engagement to a minority of more formal organisations, bypassing a much wider proportion of grassroots groups. CSOs are by definition those which are not in the public or private sectors, thus not associated with government or run for profit. However there is a great variance in what might constitute a civil society group which adds confusion to the public and policymakers alike. For example a civil society organisation can include both a Trade Union and a Public School (in the UK this is a term for private education). However the important point with regard to social action is that the overwhelming majority of CSOs are voluntary and community groups, of which only a minority are more formal charities and the bulk being unconstituted and largely unfunded community based groups. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) have published an annual Civil Society almanac which over recent years has calculated that there are between 870,000 to 900,000 UK CSOs. A previous study by Elsdon in 1999 for NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) calculated the figure to be around a million, but both pieces of research are approximations for the simple reason that most CSOs are not formally registered, thus there are no independent variables by which to accurately measure them by. NCVO make

9. *The Guardian*, June 16 2010: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/joepublic/2010/jun/16/lord-nat-wei-first-speech>.

the imaginative estimate of 600,000 or around two thirds of the total number of given CSOs which are informal community associations. The register of charities held by the UK Charity Commission lists around 160,000 formal charities in existence, which contribute to the civil society gross total and these groups, whilst in reality only the tip of the iceberg, are the ones most actively engaged by social policy. Civil society groups become coterminous with a formal charity constituency that is far smaller than the wider civil society constituency, as argued by both the Community Sector Coalition (Scott, 2010) and Third Sector Research Centre Below the Radar research (McCabe *et al*, 2010).

In recent government policy<sup>10</sup>, an awareness of the lack of reach to the wider sector has led to a championing of small charities. Yet the definition of a small charity, as having under £100,000 annual income, where most civil society groups operate on almost no income, underlines the disconnection with informal and truly small groups. The implications of this lack of appreciation of the scale of the civil society sector entail its exclusion from most forms of policy making and service delivery. Rather than civil society grass-root groups, under the guise of a Big Society, being able to play a role, a form of isomorphism is at play whereby the minority of more formal groups that are engaged adopt traits that mimic statutory and private sector memes rather than arising from a recognisably independent realm (Slocock, 2015b). An example of this would be a UK based organisation called *Groundwork*, which is a federation of regional charities but with strong ties to central and local government, including trustees with senior private and public sector roles. Notionally a charity, *Groundwork* has the organisational culture and personnel of a government department. Its corresponding success in securing contracts consolidates its position as a ‘prime’ organisation, able to compete on cost and scale at a level that prohibits and excludes community associations. An example of this was the « livability agenda » formulated under Tony Blair’s government which funded environmental projects that were ‘cleaner, safer, greener’ typically focused on parks and public amenities. The funding, whilst in theory could have gone to small local community groups, became closely associated with *Groundwork* who could deliver due to their scale rather than local roots.

Coming back to the metaphor of the stool, CSOs are maybe too large a set to be gathered in one leg. And this third leg is in fact highly dependent from the State in terms of resources. Moreover, given the drift to big companies delivering social contracts, the private sector « leg » is the one that has been reinforced relatively to the other two. And in fact, CSOs are even helping this trend by playing a gateway role for companies to the social market.

### **The role of civil society as a gateway to the social market**

One of the foremost founders of the modern welfare state, William Beveridge, expected in the aftermath of the Second World War that a newly imagined and expanded state would slay the five ‘giants’ of want, disease, squalor, ignorance and idleness but his less well known report into Voluntary Action (Beveridge, 1948) saw a role for voluntary action alongside an active state. However one scholar (Mold, 2009) asks the question: « How would the man who paved the way for the welfare state view today’s charities? Concluding that he would have been most disappointed ‘when the voluntary sector adopts

10. Rob Wilson MP, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/putting-small-charities-at-the-heart-of-public-services>.

a more private sector approach' ». With the rise of the New Right and the break with the political consensus that existed across the main parties, roughly between 1945 and 1975, the more recent neoliberal consensus has seen a rise in the role of civil society groups in policy making and service delivery, as the role and size and scale of the modern welfare state is reduced.

The hospice movement, which had provided care for the elderly in the final stages of life, is one example of innovative practice by a civil society group, that provided inspiration for the UK National Health Service. This role of incubation of services, whereby civil society groups acted as pioneers, and where the state was able to scale up the activity took on a different emphasis towards the end of the twentieth century, where increasingly UK civil society groups were seen as increasingly legitimate deliverers of public services in their own right. Margaret Thatcher's preference for private sector disciplines and delivery reflect a rise in the conceptualisation of public services as social markets (Le Grand & Barlett 1993). In place of a default assumption that central and local government would deliver services, compulsory competitive tendering and later New Labour regimes of best value insisted on services, wherever possible, being open to tender by the private sector and CSOs. In fact most civil society groups did not avail themselves of these opportunities. The rigors and complexity of commissioning allied to the dominance of a prime model which privileged low overall cost and size of operation, mitigated against civil society groups.

Whilst the majority of CSOs rarely accessed contracts from the social market, there was greater opportunity to amplify their voice in consultation processes, pin pointing issues and acting as gateways for local intelligence. Voluntary and community groups are indeed working with and supporting the most marginalised communities and individuals. They can often reach the people larger organisations can't, because of local knowledge and longstanding relationships of trust. Inevitably larger organisations that could operate on a scale to be able to win contracts found that they needed to work through these smaller groups to meet their targets. As larger private and public sector organisations invariably delivered services, CSOs featured as part of an ecosystem of communication, signposting and on occasion as subcontractors. Nikolas Rose noted this trend in his seminal article 'the death of the social' (Rose, 1996) which took on a more pessimistic Foucauldian view of community as simply a sphere of government intervention. The rhetoric of a smaller or more enabling state belied the fact that state agendas were being pursued by actors outside of civil society. Civil society groups took on a purely instrumental role, a transmission mechanism for government services, as well as a gateway for private companies to obtain contracts.

Under the Big Society, the role of civil society groups in delivery of services, where they feature at all, has been as minor players in a supply chain, acting as a conduit and antennae to private providers. For example, this might involve opening up a community center for a larger prime contractor to run advice clinics, using community capital inaccessible to outsiders without commanding the fees generated in delivering a service. The numerous civil society groups enable private and public sector providers ample opportunity to reach new markets with a minimum investment of time and expense because the relationships with prospective 'clients' have been already generated within the community. The value can be extracted and retained by the commissioning body by using civil society groups as a feeder chain. Some larger voluntary organisations can also operate in this way, overseeing contracts and cascading work and payment across a range of local groups, but the majority of interactions originate outside of the local community by public and private sector actors, hence at odds with a strict understanding of the Big Society,

which seeks to locate agency within the community. The COP itself can be seen in this light, with the government sponsored lead organization for instance (*Locality*) commanding a contract, drawing management costs and in effect subcontracting a residual sum to local community organisers. The COP was one of several government procured pieces of work *Locality* won, as work on advice services, community economic development, community ownership and management of assets, neighbourhood planning and the community right to build. It has enabled the organisation to expand at a time when similar CSOs folded. Thus the COP could be seen as an exercise in contract raising as much as being inspired by Freirean ideals (1972) of consciousness raising.

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However the Big Society policy was presented on far grander terms than simple administration, it has mainly accompanied the continuous swap from big government for big companies or charities. The dilemmas for citizens seeking to take control of their lives are merely dealt with. The Big Society wanted citizens and community to be able to come together and to take responsibility on common interests, which could involve self-organisation as much as dealing with public authorities. But, as Jane Wills (2016) makes it clear in her recent book analysing the impact of the localism agenda, without structures to represent the diversity of local people, to identify shared issues and concerns, to articulate and mobilise around these and to negotiate with other power brokers, community empowerment could not be sustained. Yet, alongside local authorities such structures lie especially in small, often informal, CSOs and the network between them. In justifying the on-going narrowing local authorities and supporting the development of companies or large scale charities to undertake public service work, the overall Big Society agenda has not deepened democracy. Moreover, the CSOs are increasingly in competition and in the position of commercial providers for public powers instead of being vectors of expressions and citizen mobilisations. This mechanism is also exposing the uneven map of social norms and existing civic capacity. In this respect the shrinking of the welfare state is going with a shifting of responsibilities onto poorer communities and citizens. The Brexit outcome can partly be explained by this analysis<sup>11</sup>.

The Big Society vision illustrates the tensions that arose in seeking to galvanise social action, simultaneously from the top down, as an ideological project, whilst seeking initiative from local grassroots communities. While the policy was unable to promote sustainable community empowerment, it has especially well illustrated the ongoing tendency of changing the ways of working between public authorities, citizens, CSOs and the private sector beyond the welfare state on one side and the free market on the other. The democratic and social benefits of developing these new ways of working are strongly depending on the presence of pre-existing and sustainable local civil-society organisations. Hence, in order to galvanise civil society and citizens' capacity to deal with public and private sectors on an equal basis, one of the main issue, alongside mobilisation and organisation, is the funding of civil society groups in their diversity and informality. On its margins, the Community Organisers Programme was a small but noteworthy step toward this direction. In France, the last campaign by the organisation « Pas sans nous »

11. Cf. a recent article by John Harris <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2017/jan/05/the-uks-left-liberal-fightback-must-start-with-communities>.

to create an autonomous Citizen Initiative Fund, financed with 5 % of the funding of representative democracy, is quite creative in this respect.

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