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Ten Big Questions about the Big Society

and ten ways to make the best of it

Ten big questions about the Big Society

The Coalition Government wants to build a 'Big Society'.[1] The Prime Minister says 'we are all in this together'[2] and building it is the responsibility of every citizen as well as every Government department. **nef** (the new economics foundation) welcomes the broad vision but recognises that everything depends on how the vision is translated into policy and practice. We offer these questions and proposals to help fill in some of the gaps and bring out the best in the idea of a big society.

1. What's the 'Big' idea?

The government says it wants to make society stronger by getting more people working together to run their own affairs locally. It 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.

2. What's good about it?

When people are given the chance and treated as if they are capable, they tend to find they know what is best for them, and can work out how to fix any problems they have and realise their dreams. Bringing local knowledge based on everyday experience to bear on planning and decision-making usually leads to better results. 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 well-being improves. When individuals and groups get together in their neighbourhoods, get to know each other, work together and help each other, there are usually lasting benefits for everyone involved: networks and groups grow stronger, so that people who belong to them tend to feel less isolated, more secure, more powerful and happier. It serves the well-established principle of subsidiarity: that matters should be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralised competent authority.

3. What are the problems it is supposed to fix?

The Government hopes the 'Big Society' will help to replace 'big government'[3], to mend 'our broken society'[4] and help to cut the size of the public deficit. Getting people at local level to take more responsibility and do more to help themselves and their neighbours is seen as an alternative to action taken by state institutions and public services. Poverty, unemployment and inequalities are signs of social breakdown and these, according to the Prime Minister, are best addressed by shifting power, control and responsibility from the central state to families and

communities. Increasing the volume of voluntary action is seen as a way to cut public spending. But that's as far as the 'Big Society' vision goes 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.

4. Are we all up to the challenge?

Understanding that people have assets, not just problems, is a good start. But not everyone has the same capacity to help themselves and others. How much capacity we have depends on a range of factors. These include 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. A combination of social and economic forces, working across and between generations, result in some having much more and others much less. While these inequalities persist, people who have least will benefit least from the transfer of power and responsibility, while those with higher stocks of social and economic resources will be better placed to seize the new opportunities. Many of those who are currently poorest and least powerful are at risk of being systematically excluded from any benefits that arise, in spite of the Prime Minister's declared intention that no-one should be 'left behind'.[5]

5. Can everyone participate?

Families, networks, groups, neighbourhoods and communities all have boundaries. These are determined, variously, by blood, law, friendship, duty, obligation, tradition, geography, politics, wealth, status and class. Inevitably, they include some and exclude others; indeed some build their strength on exclusivity. Resources are already shared unequally between these organisations. The Prime Minister says the 'Big Society' is 'about enabling and encouraging people to come together to solve their problems', but 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.

6. Do people have enough time?

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. People with low-paid jobs and big family responsibilities – especially lone parents – tend to be poor in discretionary time as well as in money. Unemployed people who are not caring for children or elderly relatives may have plenty of free time, but of course unemployment traps people in

poverty, and one of the Government's main aims is to get them into paid work. Committing time to unpaid local activity would put many at risk of losing benefits that depend on actively seeking full-time employment. Part-time workers may have more time for civic engagement, but seldom earn enough to feed a family. Some people have to work all hours to make ends meet, or have no choice about when they start and finish each day. In short, long hours and low wages undermine a key premise of the 'Big Society', which is that social and financial gains will come from replacing paid with unpaid labour.

7. Can communities mend themselves?

There are examples of troubled communities making marked improvements in their physical environment, levels of civic participation, opportunities, well-being and quality of life. But these are not commonplace. 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.[6] Resilience – the ability to deal with life's problems – is an important component of individual well-being, but promoting it is not an alternative to removing the systemic barriers that produce those disadvantages. What is more, if change is created at the local level only, it will not survive in a system where inequality is endemic. 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. That means sharing responsibility across income groups. Communities will not be 'mended' unless we build a broader economy.

8. Will a smaller state make society bigger?

That depends how small the state becomes and what it does. 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.[7] 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 (e.g. for health and autonomy, education, a fair living income, care, housing, and security). 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.

9. What's the biggest problem?

The Big Society idea is strong on empowerment but weak on equality. By equality, we mean everyone having an equal chance in life so that, regardless of background or circumstance, they can contribute to society, fulfil their potential and live a satisfying life. This matters for ethical and practical reasons. 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 that more equal societies are better for everyone, not just the poor, with lower levels of crime and disorder, and better health and well-being.[8] Societies with strong traditions of social solidarity and low levels of inequality are better able to cope with shared risks such as climate change[9]. 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.

10. What could make it work?

This is the biggest question! There are no simple answers: below we set out briefly some proposals for filling in the gaps and making the best of the idea.

Ten ways to make the best of the Big Society

1. Make social justice the main goal

We shall need a robust social justice framework to make sure this idea is not just big, but fair and sustainable. By 'social justice' we mean the fair and equitable distribution of social, environmental and economic resources between people, places and generations. By 'framework' we 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.

2. Build a broader economy

Poverty, unemployment and inequality are not problems that communities can solve on their own. Responsibility must be shared across social groups, and based on a clear understanding of how social and economic forces interact with each other to perpetuate disadvantage. 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 a '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. For example, the banking system should be overhauled to give everyone, but especially those on lower incomes, ready access to credit and finance.[10] But that is just a start. 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. Without this, action to realise the vision of a 'Big Society' will be thwarted at every turn.

3. Build a bigger democracy

The state has a key role to play in ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to contribute to and benefit from the 'Big Society'. The aim must be to transform rather than obliterate the state, changing the way it works and strengthening its connections with citizens, so that powers devolved to local groups and communities are used to promote social justice as well as self help and mutual aid. The state, after all, belongs to the people, but it doesn't always feel that way. So instead of 'big government' we want a smaller but more strategic state to plan long-term for a sustainable future. And we want 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.

4. Make sure everyone can participate

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. The same goes for all the small local groups and voluntary organisations that struggle to keep going at the best of times, and may find it well-nigh impossible to take on new responsibilities. 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, communications media and premises) that enable them to take action and stay in business. Without adequate and consistent support for local organisations, the 'Big Society' will add to the pressures on those who have least and widen inequalities. Making sure this kind of support is in place is a matter of shared responsibility, to be exercised through a strategic state within a 'bigger democracy'.

5. Make co-production the standard way of getting things done

Co-production[11] is an idea whose time has come. 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 well-being 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'.

6. Transform the role of professionals and other 'providers'

Professionals and others who provide services, whether directly in public sector organisations or in independent bodies, will need to change how they think about themselves, how they understand others and how they themselves operate on a day-to-day basis. They must learn to work in partnership[12] with those at the receiving end of services, to value and respect them, and to help them do more to help themselves and each other. They 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. This requires an understanding that what people do in their professional capacity is just one piece of the jigsaw: what's needed is a whole-systems approach to the whole person, not just targeted solutions to specific problems or needs. Without this kind of

thorough-going transformation, implementing plans for the 'Big Society' could simply shunt the prevailing doing-to culture of public services from the state to business and the third sector.

7. Redistribute paid and unpaid time

Because the 'Big Society' implies a big demand for unpaid time, and because some people have so much more control over their time than others, we propose a slow but steady move towards a much shorter paid working week, with an ultimate goal of reaching 21 hours as the standard.[13] 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. An obvious objection is that shorter hours in paid work would reduce earnings and hit low-income groups the hardest. But a gradual transition, over a decade, should allow time to put compensating measures in place. 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. Redistributing paid and unpaid time will be especially important for redressing inequalities between women and men.

8. Make it sustainable

There's no point building a 'Big Society' unless it is viable in the long term. It must be sustainable[14] in environmental, social and economic terms. For the environment, all its activities and transactions must be geared to protecting the natural resources on which all human health and life ultimately depend. Cutting carbon emissions and reducing society's ecological footprint must be integral to the 'Big Society', shaping the way homes, institutions and neighbourhoods are designed and managed, as well as how people and organisations use energy, travel, shop, eat and manage water and waste. For society to flourish, it must plan for future generations and have their interests at heart. It must give priority to preventing illness and other kinds of risk, so that fewer people have problems that need fixing. It must help to loosen our attachment to carbon intensive consumption and give greater value to relationships, pastimes, and places that absorb less money and carbon. For the economy, it will be important to ensure that public funding to support local action is adequate and 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[15] with potentially catastrophic consequences for the environment.[16]

9. Measure what matters

As plans for the 'Big Society' are put into practice, there are bound to be calls to measure how well its different elements have performed. It matters a lot how new ways of working are assessed.[17] What should count are not just 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 well-being), that shape judgements about success and failure, and about future planning and investment.

10. Make it part of a Great Transition

The economic, social and environmental challenges that we face mean that radical change is needed. We need a bigger society, a broader economy and a bigger democracy. Nothing short of a Great Transition to a new economy will do.[18] We need to shift from our current unsustainable path, to a system where everyone is able to survive and thrive on equal terms, without over-stretching the earth's resources. This means changing how we live and work, relate to each other, organize our economy and society, and safeguard our environment. It's a route towards good lives for all, now and in the future. It needs a growing movement of individuals and organizations that recognize that a different world is possible, working together to make it happen. 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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