

NCVO – Can Big Philanthropy Build the ‘Big Society?’

As someone who has worked on civil society issues for thirty years or more but lives outside the United Kingdom, I’m often asked what I think about the ‘Big Society.’ And I have to say that - although in many respects it’s an incoherent and misguided project - it’s also quite refreshing, and apparently sincere, since the Coalition could easily have removed itself from the controversy enveloping its ideas if it were seeking only short-term political advantage.

But who will fund the Big Society at a time of budget cuts and large-scale insecurity for the majority of the population? Some place their hopes in ‘big philanthropy’, meaning large donations from billionaires and businesses of the kind that are increasingly popular in the USA, but I think this is unlikely, for two main reasons.

The first reason is that – with a few exceptions like George Soros in the USA and Sigrid Rausing here in Britain – such donors show little interest in the messy and unpredictable processes of strengthening civic participation, or civil society as I like to call it. Instead, they prefer to focus on particular problems and solutions that can deliver short-term, quantifiable gains, such as school reform or workforce development projects. If they are successful at scale (and that’s a very big ‘if’), such projects should have some knock-on effects on civil society of course, but they are unlikely to underpin the wholesale revitalization of our social fabric.

Second, even if the ‘philanthrocapitalists’, as Michael Green calls them, were committed to support for community organizing, advocacy and other aspects of a healthy civic life, the methods they deploy would not be very effective, because their business background emphasizes speed, control and technocracy over the patient and democratic processes of base-building and grassroots participation.

So to whom should we turn? Instead of looking to someone else to rescue civil society, why doesn’t civil society rescue itself by re-capturing the original spirit and practice of *citizen* philanthropy? Throughout history, this is how strong and healthy civic groups have sustained themselves, though of course it’s easier said than done at a time of huge and rising inequality.

What we need is not more ‘big philanthropy’ but more ‘small philanthropy writ large’, meaning lots and lots of donations from the broadest range possible of the population, since this would be both more democratic and more effective in supporting Big Society ideals and objectives – diffuse, diverse and de-centered, accountable downwards to communities, and willing to support the heavy investments in civic infrastructure that are needed for long term success and sustainability.

After all, any civil society worth the name has to be built from the bottom up, otherwise it won’t work, at least in the ways in which civil societies have worked elsewhere in representing ordinary people’s voices, holding business and government accountable for their actions, protecting values of solidarity and service, and giving birth to new social movements.

But hang on I can hear you say, that's impossible for voluntary groups that already depend on government and corporate donations to survive – what about their share of the responsibility? That's a good question, but the answer can't simply be more of the same - in other words, even more dependence and even less self-confidence and popular support.

Instead it requires a new approach that pressurizes government and business to support 'small philanthropy writ large' by guaranteeing high levels of human security and encouraging 'big philanthropists' to channel their resources into common funds and other mechanisms that involve and support the public rather than only to their own special projects. This would be the reverse of the current situation and it would require surrendering control in a way that few philanthrocapitalists would accept, but it is a much better way to build the 'Big Society.'

At a time of rising inequality and corporate power, the destruction of our social safety net, and the penetration of business and the market into every sphere of life, the 'big philanthropy' approach asks us to be grateful for a few more crumbs from the rich man's table instead of revitalizing civil society from our own passions and resources. I know which route I prefer to take.

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