Rethinking Poverty

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Who does what to produce a good society?

Chapter Three suggested that the key to producing a good society without poverty is the pursuit of five principles through a process in which everyone is involved. To recap, these principles are:

1. We all have a decent basic standard of living.
2. So we are secure and free to choose how to lead our lives.
3. Developing our potential and flourishing materially and emotionally.
4. Participating, contributing and treating all with care and respect.
5. And building a fair and sustainable future for the next generations.

This chapter considers the question of ‘who does what?’ to achieve these principles. While it cannot prescribe what people do, various pointers are suggested emerging from the research that will take things forward and develop a better balance in our society over the long term.

Who will take responsibility?

Chapter Three found that asking people how to reduce poverty tends to divide them along the lines of social structure versus personal agency.
Asking ‘who is responsible?’ is more promising. One of the questions asked in the population research with YouGov was: ‘Thinking about reducing poverty, how much, if any, responsibility do you think each of the following groups should have to achieve this?’ Answer options included: ‘a great deal of responsibility’, ‘a fair amount of responsibility’, ‘not a lot of responsibility’, ‘no responsibility at all’ and ‘don’t know’. The proportion of the 10,112 adults who answered ‘a great deal’ is shown in Figure 5.1.

Clearly, respondents felt that many agencies have a role to play in reducing poverty. In fact, they would typically see a configuration of agencies playing a part. Poverty, it would seem, is everyone’s business.

How might this work in concrete terms? This section draws on the work that Michael Orton conducted for the Trust on consensus building. He points out that employers could pay the living wage, invest in training and facilitate progression for staff. Government could and does control benefit levels, taxation and legislation in a wide range of relevant fields. Philanthropists could spend their money tackling poverty. Local action could and does build relationships between people. However, not all of us are motivated by a desire to reduce poverty. The risk is that, while we all acknowledge our responsibility, we simply pay lip service to it. As Orton points out, it is important to identify the agents.1

As seen in Chapter One, the poverty lobby sees the government as the main agent of change, and this explains the common pattern where think tanks say that ‘the results demonstrate a challenge to government’. Yet, as previous chapters have demonstrated, government itself is commonly at a loss what to do. A corollary of the way the ‘who?’ question is being answered is that everyone who wants to see change takes responsibility for making it happen, rather than preaching to others to do so.

From what basis should we work? This book has suggested five principles for a good society that, while not comprehensive, prevent the pitfalls of starting from scratch, working within the confines of narrow organisational goals producing policy shopping lists or yet another individual manifesto. These five principles are a useful starting
Figure 5.1: Views on which groups have responsibility for reducing poverty (10,112 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage who answered 'a great deal'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>62.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big business</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals and their families</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>19.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade unions</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organisations</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charities</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small businesses</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

point to build consensus. Consensus does not imply full agreement. The ‘tyranny of perfection’, which means that everyone must agree with every word, is a considerable handicap in producing something of value. The need for compromise has emerged as a core principle in the Trust’s work, and could be said to be the foundation of a democratic society.

However, there should be broad agreement on principles. In developing and implementing the philosophy of neoliberalism, the 450 US think tanks that developed the five core messages (free markets, small state, low tax, individual liberty and big defence) campaigned with a shared vision on these general principles rather than detailed policy objectives and methods.

One of the first steps should be cooperation rather than competition between those involved in combating poverty. As Orton notes: ‘instead of working together, poverty is a contest between competing ideas, arguments and interests, something that is fought over, albeit in non-violent ways’. For example, in the space of one week in September 2016 three leading organisations launched separate reports on poverty and inequality without reference to each other. Behind this is the larger problem that the 160,000 organisations that share overlapping values such as equality, democracy and social justice have no coherence; their messages are splintered in thousands of reports and millions of tweets without making serious progress as a clear force for change. A critical question is ‘how do we join up the efforts of different groups and people who desire the principles behind the society we want?’

How do we create change?

How do we create change? As Paul Mason puts it in Postcapitalism:

If you believe that there is a better system than capitalism, then the past twenty-five years have felt like being – as Alexander Bognadov put it – ‘a Martian stranded on Earth’. You have a clear view of what society should be like, but no means of getting there.
What drives change, suggests Mason, is the network – a group of interrelated individuals and organisations that can see better futures and act together in loose affiliation. This is an important view and one supported by history. Arnold Toynbee suggests that civilisations develop in different ways because of their different environments and different approaches to the challenges they face. Critical to development are ‘creative minorities’. These are the people who find solutions to the challenges, which others then follow. In an earlier generation, Samuel Taylor Coleridge stressed the importance of what he termed the ‘clerisy’ in society. Today, we might call this group ‘thought leaders’ or ‘intelligentsia’. Their importance is that they recognise the best in the national cultural heritage and raise the standard of intellectual life. In doing this, they enable society to remain stable while making progress.

At various times in the past, networks have been responsible for creating societal change. Take, for example, the Bloomsbury Group. This was an influential group of English writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists who lived, worked and studied together near Bloomsbury, London, during the first half of the 20th century. This loose collective of friends and relatives included Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster and Lytton Strachey. Their works and outlook deeply influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism and economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism and sexuality. Similarly, the group around the Webbs was highly influential in developing the platform for the coming of the welfare state.

We need a group like this to emerge out of the mass of civil society to move society on to a more progressive platform based on the five principles set out in Chapter Three. Central to how a small network makes progress are two vital ideas: creativity and leadership. Taking ‘creativity’ first, this has been defined as ‘the process of bringing something new into being’. Creativity requires ‘passion and commitment’ and brings ‘to our awareness what was previously hidden and points to new life’. The notion of using creativity in social advancement is central to John Paul Lederach’s idea of the moral imagination, mentioned in Chapter Three. Art and culture – and the creativity that underlies them – are vital ingredients of change in a
complex non-linear world where the logical framework is only good for the technocratic aspects of development. They can help us replace a materialist account of the universe with one in which we are in touch with higher elements of ourselves.

A critical question is how to bring creativity into the public domain. Research by Fisher and Williams suggests that there are four main conditions that foster creativity in learning situations: motivation, inspiration, gestation and collaboration. The last of these overlaps with the analysis of how networks bring progressive change and therefore has special importance. Creative collaborations can occur spontaneously but leadership is required if they are to survive and to sustain changes in the world. Indeed, leadership is an essential quality if creativity is to be adapted into a means of social advance.

Such leadership needs to be appropriate for the situation. A top-down, command-and-control style of leadership, which may be appropriate in the military or in mass production manufacturing, is not appropriate for managing creativity in networks. A different model of power is needed. In top-down leadership, relations are transactional, whereas in collaborative situations, relationships are participative. It is this latter type of leadership that is most apt in most situations requiring social advance – because power is shared. The architect of this approach is Mary Parker Follett, an early 20th-century feminist writer on management. Writing in the 1920s, she explained that ‘power is not a pre-existing thing which can be handed out to someone, or wrenched from someone’. Coining the term ‘transformational leadership’, she stressed the importance of ‘power with’ as opposed to ‘power over’ in producing positive change. A ‘power with’ model sees power as a self-developing capacity rather than a fixed asset or possession that can be divided, shared, transferred or conferred. This means that power is something developed between people rather than the possession of an individual. In this model, power is constantly reconstructed in the relationships between people. Such a sharing perspective overrides much of the damage done in social development by what 13th-century poet Rumi called the ‘thieves of the heart’ – greed, ego, anger and insecurity.
Building a constituency

Through holding events, both public and private, to discuss the emerging findings from its work, the Webb Memorial Trust has aimed to build a constituency for that work. People who received grants have been invited to take part in shaping the agenda for the Trust. A key vehicle for discussions has been the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty. This has allowed a range of conflicting views to be discussed with the goal of taking the best ideas forward regardless of their political provenance.

In pursuing the work, it would be useful to conduct what Kurt Lewin called a ‘forcefield analysis’ in which stakeholders of change are analysed according to their relationship with any desired change. This divides people and organisations into four categories: those who will make the change, those who will encourage it, those who will let it happen, and those who will stop it. A key feature of this approach is to get beyond stereotypes and look for ‘counterintuitive allies’ in the change process. This entails remaining open about who fits into which category and thinking about how to shift people into a more positive role.

This was in evidence during a Trust workshop with community activists and volunteers in Hull, where two small groups addressed this issue. One group worked on an ‘asset-based approach to development with groups that aren’t like us’. Among the new groups they wanted to contact was business, but not with a view to asking them what companies could give. Rather, they wanted to show them what community groups could contribute, effectively saying to them: ‘we have access to communities that you want’. Another group wanted to challenge ‘fear’ because it is a huge factor and surfaced in so many ways during the meeting – fear of different communities, fear of different ideas, fear of losing what we have. Overcoming fear is a necessary step in breaking out of familiar routines and methods of communication. Their suggested method was to invite some ‘unlikely allies’ to the next meeting. ‘Maybe we will change their mind’, said one, ‘or maybe they’ll change ours.’
Relationship building lies at the heart of building a constituency. This takes time, patience, and personal and social skills. It was striking that during various Hull workshops there was little mention of money: what matters in building a constituency is listening to people, respecting them, investing in them, acknowledging their aspirations and helping provide the means for them to be realised. A meeting of Hull community activists and students held in March 2017 resented the fact that “people and places like Hull are too often defined by a deficit – what they lack – rather than an asset, what they have”. People want, as one person put it at the meeting, “trustworthy and accountable institutions. Erosion of faith in some public services is replaced with community solidarity”. Practical solutions include: “Make people more aware of their rights and power and replicate this activity with young people to build empathy.” Central to the thinking is using ‘power with’ as an extensible resource which grows with use.

The central purpose of the network is to create energy within a supportive ecosystem that delivers social advance. It is clear from the Trust’s work that if we want to make change, it is important to harness the energies of people who want to do things, not to support those who are merely trying to put things back the way they used to be. The sections that follow set out to identify the sources of energy that will deliver the society we want. This may involve entirely new approaches or revivifying old ones in ways that suit the future and not the past. To explore the possibilities, the Trust commissioned studies on various groups in society, looking specifically at what groups do now and what they might do in the future to use their comparative advantage to build a good society without poverty. The Trust commissioned studies on the role of business, planners, voluntary and community sector, fairness commissions and community activists.

The work is far from comprehensive. There are undoubtedly many important people and initiatives out there that are pursuing new forms of action that can contribute to taking forward the principles behind the society we want. What follows is designed to illustrate possibilities. Most of the groups covered are facing a tough time with low capacity, yet there are signs of energy that could be harnessed so
that people from different spheres of life could come together to build the society we want.

Business

The Trust commissioned Slack Communications to investigate the role of business in addressing poverty. This entailed a programme of interviews and meetings, together with roundtables hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty.

*Why business doesn’t see ‘poverty’ as its business*

The starting point for the discussion was that poverty is everyone’s problem, and everyone has a role to play in creating a society where we can all thrive. When discussion turns towards the contribution business can make to alleviating poverty, the conversation often falters, or stops altogether. Business leaders argue that poverty is not an issue that is core to their corporate objectives; that it is the responsibility of government or charities; and that any poverty reduction measures would involve high costs and further red tape to negotiate. Even if a company is willing to act, it usually takes the form of a donation to a relevant charity rather than changes to its operations.

As John Mills, economist and founder of consumer goods company JML, stated during a roundtable to discuss the role of business in reducing poverty: ‘Most businesses see themselves only to a fairly limited extent as having a role in this issue. Especially around pay, most businesses do not see it as their role to pay more than the market expects.’ At a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, Peter Kenway reported on in-depth interviews with 20 employers in Scotland who are paying the living wage. He suggested that while they are comfortable discussing poverty as something ‘out there’ in the community, to be dealt with through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities such as mentoring in schools, they aren’t comfortable with the idea of links between poverty and their core business activity.
Making the economic case

Kenway found that if you want to talk to employers about poverty, it’s better to use different language, with terms like fairness and staff wellbeing. Employers talk about fairness, but this is not just altruism: they also talk about the wider value to their business. For very small employers starting out, deciding to pay the living wage differentiates them from the low-wage sector and shows they are exercising leadership. It creates a positive image with employees and customers. The living wage is understood and approved of by the public; it is a standard that businesses can sign up to and thereby improve their image. An employer in a remote community will hope that paying the living wage will encourage the workforce to stay. So this is about self-interest with a wider remit – not just cost minimisation.¹²

This encapsulates the main finding from the research undertaken by Slack Communications. To make progress with businesses, it is important to shift the conversation away from businesses addressing poverty because it is a worthy thing to do, and instead to talk about the commercial advantages it might entail.

Moreover, Slack Communications found a strong economic case for business to tackle poverty. Research has shown how poverty, and the associated physical, mental and emotional impacts, contributes to reduced productivity and loss of income for businesses. A study by Barclays Wealth and YouGov, for example, found that one in ten people employed in the UK are struggling to make ends meet and using expensive forms of borrowing. Some 20 per cent of respondents felt that their financial troubles affect their productivity at work. Overall, the study found that financial stress hurts bottom lines by about 4 per cent a year. Elsewhere, a report by the University of Cambridge found that sickness caused by stress, anxiety or depression cost the economy around £23.8 billion in 2010. In today’s straitened times, few sensible businesses are actively looking to increase their costs. However, evidence from the Living Wage Foundation suggests that paying the living wage enhances the quality of staff and improves recruitment, retention and absenteeism. Coupled with increased productivity, this adds up to a considerable return on investment.
It isn’t only about higher pay

Slack Communications also found that the response from business to employee hardship doesn’t have to involve higher pay alone. Employers can also provide financial and debt advice and counselling, all aimed at helping their workers to manage their resources more effectively. These lower-cost interventions can help people greatly. One in five of the workers surveyed by Barclays felt they would benefit from such services.

Other options are to offer cheaper travel or childcare vouchers or flexible working that enables staff to fit in work around caring responsibilities. At an All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty meeting, Clare Ludlow of the Timewise Foundation cited a study which found that 46 per cent of the UK workforce wants to work flexibly. This includes people otherwise left out of the labour market – parents, people with disabilities, people returning to work after a gap, and older people. Only 6 per cent of job advertisements paying more than £20,000 full-time equivalent offer flexible or part-time working options, which makes it very hard for a mother or father needing to balance work and children.13

Rainy day savings schemes are another option. This echoes a suggestion made by Kevin Hollinrake MP, also at an All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty meeting, that employers should be more supportive of employees at difficult times. This involves seeing employees as individuals rather than as a group, and identifying what help they need.

There are also advantages to businesses taking steps to tackle poverty within the wider community. Attitudes towards the role of business within society are shifting, and an increasing number of people – particularly millennials – have high expectations that a business will do good as well as make money. From food to fashion, the political and moral viewpoints of many modern consumers have a direct influence on their buying decisions, alongside price and quality. Ethical consumerism is a growing market, worth £32.2 billion and up by 9 per cent between 2012 and 2013, according to the Ethical Consumer
Markets Report from the Co-operative Group. The report also found that roughly 20 per cent of the UK population boycotts specific products or outlets, for a variety of reasons including perceptions around labour standards and tax avoidance. Again, the response to this does not need to be expensive, just creative. A bank could provide free financial advice to people on low incomes; a clothes shop might offer a discounted suit for someone who can prove they have a job interview; a food retailer could work with local businesses to offer discount vouchers for their staff.

**Focusing on productivity and employee wellbeing**

So how can we change the narrative around the role of business in helping to create a good society that is free from poverty? How can we ensure that the private sector both understands and is willing to play its part? Slack Communications suggests that we need a new conversation, one that focuses on measures that improve productivity and employee wellbeing at the centre. One that recognises that ‘business’ is not just one homogeneous group but an eclectic mix of micro, small, medium and large companies, all with their very different needs and challenges.

And one that keeps it simple. Those who contributed to the research suggested that societal challenges shouldn’t be presented as insurmountable while the solutions should be easy and cost-effective to understand and implement. Increases in red tape should be avoided. Importantly, business should be celebrated not denigrated, as sometimes occurs with poverty campaigners. Overall, we need to highlight that by working together with other societal actors, business can be both financially successful and a powerful force for good.

**New models of business**

New models of business fit for the 21st century are also beginning to emerge. *Big Issue* founder John Bird stresses the role of social business, with all profits going back into the business rather than to shareholders. His dream: the complete transformation of business so we have social
Amazons and social Tescos. ‘We can’t leave it to the big guys’, he says. ‘Consumer power could create a new form of business, social business, providing the same services.’ An emerging business model gaining traction around the world is ‘B Corp’. Certified B Corporations look after all stakeholder interests and not just those of the shareholders. They voluntarily meet high standards of transparency, accountability and performance.

Planners

Why planning has become marginal

Planning and planners are in the doldrums. In a report commissioned by the Trust in 2013, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) reported that planning is marginal and has little relevance to distributional outcomes for people most in need:

The reason for this failure is partly because planning is no longer recognised as a mainstream part of public policy in poverty reduction, and because national planning policy has de-prioritised social justice as an outcome.

This, despite a comment in the same report: ‘Planning has played a “transformational” role in improving the quality of life in all our communities.’

History shows that the development of planning was associated with the major advances that took place in the middle decades of the last century. The roots of the planning movement go way back to the 19th century, finding expression in Sir Ebenezer Howard’s idea of the ‘garden city’ and his forming of the Town and Country Planning Association in 1899. In New Jerusalems, Evan Durbin’s daughter Elizabeth charted the historical evolution of planning in the Labour Party. But it was during the war that the idea found favour as all three major parties planned the peace. Planning was a key instrument in ‘Butskellism’ (a joining together of the names of the Conservative politician R.A. Butler and the Labour politician Hugh Gaitskell). In
land use planning, the key instrument was the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which was a triumph for those who wished to see an orderly and well-regulated environment. By 1949, Evan Durbin famously declared: ‘We are all planners now.’

As seen in Chapter One, the ‘enterprise culture’ of the 1980s swept away restrictions and regulations because it was felt that ‘red tape’ inhibited economic growth. In land use planning, the Localism Act 2011 is the culmination of 30 years of this approach. It focuses on: ‘cutting central targets on councils, easing the burden of inspection, and reducing red tape … breaking down the barriers that stop councils, local charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups getting things done for themselves.’

A positive role for planning

Such an approach, the TCPA believes, places too much emphasis on economic development and too little on social justice. To revivify planning, the organisation developed #Planning4People. This is a coalition of organisations and individuals who share a common belief in the value of place making to achieve a just and sustainable future. The objective is ‘to bring about the rebirth of the creative social town planning which did so much to lay the foundation of a civilized Britain’. The guiding principles are that planning should be democratic and fair, with people at the heart of the process; guided by a powerful definition of sustainable development which emphasises social justice as a key outcome; powerful, so it can regulate change; and responsible so that it meets the basic needs of those who struggle most today, without restricting the ability of future generations to live decent lives.

The goals of the #Planning4People manifesto are very close to the principles for a good society without poverty articulated in Chapter Three. The TCPA is highly active in promoting the idea and more than 100 key people and institutions are registered supporters. It has engaged with hard-to-reach groups to mainstream the ideals of planning through innovative methods such as performing at the Hay
Festival and commissioning a short film of interviews with a range of people talking about why planning is important to their everyday lives. These are encouraging beginnings. The TCPA is building an entirely new relationship with a wide range of stakeholders, encouraging them to cascade support and information through their constituencies. There is more to be done, but the principle behind their work is that unless we come up with an inclusive plan for our society, we will continue to drift into the society we don’t want.

**Voluntary and community sector**

What potential has voluntary and community action for developing a good society and dealing with poverty? In 2014, the Trust published a supplement in the *New Statesman* under the title: *Taking action on poverty: Does civil society hold the answer?* A range of authors showed that austerity has meant tough times for many organisations, with redundancies, reduced budgets, or even closure. There are opportunities too. There is now widespread agreement that the state must 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 to the state.

The main study in this area was led by Paul Bunyan and John Diamond of Edge Hill University. They found that civil society has no coherent strategy to tackle poverty, in part because too much emphasis is placed on charitable giving and too little on the causes of poverty. While continuing to remain at arm’s length from party politics, voluntary organisations could usefully develop the power of grassroots organisations to engage with, and contest, state and market practices that diminish human dignity. This would entail a more radical approach in favour of the most marginalised in our society.

This was borne out by follow-up work commissioned from Katy Goldstraw and John Diamond. They ran 20 workshops with ‘third sector’ voluntary and community organisations in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. They found some examples of excellent
work by the voluntary sector. For example, they studied the role of the voluntary sector in relation to food security:

Examining poverty alleviation through the lens of food aid reveals a complex and multi-faceted picture of civil society at its best: of volunteering, positive action encapsulated in everything from garages, churches, delivery vans and buildings; of civil society, action organised by independent organisations, small community groups and national voluntary and community sector franchises.23

They concluded that people in the voluntary sector are well-meaning and thoughtful about their values, and knowledgeable about what needs to be done in diverse spheres such as economic development, poverty, arts and education. However, they have no overall conceptual frame for their work, which leads to a dissipation of the effort involved. There is a cacophony of voices, which means that there is no coherent message and an overarching tendency to see the government as ‘rescuer’ for our society and the ultimate focus of their work. While many speak of the importance of ‘speaking truth to power’, there are few signs of voluntary organisations gaining much leverage with local or other authorities over and above what is entailed by their role in delivering public services, or of meaningful connections with grassroots groups that would give more legitimacy to their concerns. People from voluntary organisations were aware of these concerns. The Belfast group suggested the following challenges:

‘[We] need to protect civic space, to create a cohesive social justice narrative. [We] need a broader engagement from the public – to help understand what they want it to be for. [We] need a model of leadership based on service framed in love.’

Writing in Third Sector about the crisis in the charitable sector, leading commentator Joe Saxton has pointed out that ‘there is little sign that charities are pulling together for the common good’.24 But
WHO DOES WHAT TO PRODUCE A GOOD SOCIETY?

the voluntary sector could be a considerable force for change, and there is much goodwill and much potential there. If charities and voluntary bodies were to unite around common values and a set of focused principles, we would see a joined-up voice of the voluntary sector that would become much more effective than at present. It is a question of leadership.

Fairness commissions

The research also looked at ‘fairness commissions’. The first such body was set up in Islington in 2010 and was co-chaired by Professor Richard Wilkinson, co-author of *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. This book, an international bestseller, generated much debate, positing that societies with a big gap between rich and poor are bad for everyone in them, including the well-off. The idea took off and fairness commissions spread to other places.25

Fairness commissions take different forms and have different relationships with their local authority; some are close to them and others entirely independent. Most follow a parliamentary select committee model, enquiry based, taking evidence and producing a final report. Evidence and information is gathered in many ways, including public meetings, listening exercises, themed ‘select committee’ style meetings, walkabouts, street surveys, web-based surveys and expert presentations to name but a few. Public participation has been central to the process.

Many of the reports highlight stark inequalities. For example, the Tower Hamlets report *Time to act* says that ‘there is arguably nowhere in the country where inequality is more pronounced’, contrasting the shiny towers of Canary Wharf and the billions generated there to the 49 per cent of children in the borough who live in poverty, the highest proportion in the country. In the Sheffield report inequalities in life expectancy are expressed by reference to the 65-minute journey on the number 83 bus route: at its start at Millhouses in Ecclesall ward, female life expectancy is 86.3 years, but 40 minutes into the journey in the Burngreave ward female life expectancy drops to 76.9 years.26
Katy Goldstraw and John Diamond included fairness commissions in their research. The work was based on interviews with 13 fairness commissions, two roundtable discussions and a survey. Findings are based on what fairness commissions say about themselves. Generally, people interviewed felt that fairness commissions have been an effective and useful framework to address local issues and to tackle the issue of fairness within local authorities in a strategic and collaborative way. At their core is a listening approach and as a result the understanding of their areas’ needs has increased. People interviewed felt that the fairness commissions have been involved in a meaningful listening exercise.

Councillor Andy Hull, one of the co-chairs of the Islington Fairness Commission, highlighted the following benefits for the council in undertaking the fairness commission:

- The fairness commission provided Islington Council with clarity and simplicity of definition – people know what the Council is about and what it stands for.
- The commission put flesh on the bones of the ‘fairness in tough times’ mantra.
- It provided a rationale for the tough decisions the Council has to make.
- The commission enabled the Council to exercise influence outside of its authority.

At the same time, it is difficult to identify positive changes in inequality. While evaluation and capturing the impact was built into the work of some commissions, others did not have the budget to fund this. The result was that some commissions wrote their report and then lacked the funding to manage the implementation. Moreover, fairness commissions have no legal or statutory power to address poverty and inequality. They have raised awareness of the issues and attempted to persuade and influence. Goldstraw and Diamond question whether fairness commissions should be more explicit about what they can achieve (raising awareness) and what they cannot (removing poverty and inequality). The main value of fairness commissions has so far
been in injecting energy into the debate about inequality rather than finding solutions for the issue.

**Community action**

This section looks at the question of local people doing things for themselves. While mutual aid was the bedrock of working class society until the 1940s, it went into steep decline after that. In the last of his trilogy on the welfare state, William Beveridge urged the new apparatus of the welfare state to capitalise on people’s capacity for mutual aid, but he was ignored. Continued decline has meant that we now live in a more selfish society in which people tend to care less about those outside their friends and immediate family circle, particularly if they are poorer or in some way different from themselves. The culture of citizenship has been weakened by the top-down nature of the institutions of the welfare state, where people are classed as clients, and by the materialist culture of capitalism, where people are classed as consumers. The infrastructure supporting community development has declined, with support organisations such as Community Matters and the Community Development Foundation going out of business in recent years.

However, there are signs of change and increasing calls for community development to be revived. In Hull, for example, there is a growing band of community activists looking for the #hullwewant. Given that neither the economy nor the public sector can deliver the kind of society that Hull people want, a group of local people and organisations have come together to build a network of mutual aid using shared resources. This tackles one of the characteristic weaknesses of the voluntary and community sector, which is its tendency to pursue narrow organisational interests competing for resources and so failing to build a powerful local civil society. The Hull activists see that a powerful local civil society involves fostering cooperation and mutuality to build a culture of sharing between people and collective use of resources.
The activists realise that their ability to do things in traditional ways has been depleted in recent years. Given that many voluntary projects have disappeared and the local authority has half the money it had six years ago, they need to find different ways of doing things, ‘looking for a fresh perspective beyond fire-fighting and funding bids’. A key question is ‘how can we use what we have to get what we need?’ A local community worker explained how they plan to do this:

‘The method is mutual aid. Using Timebank, in which people give an hour and get an hour, and Hull Coin, which enables people to trade good deeds for discounts in local stores, we harness the power of local people. This makes the vision a reality where money is the last option rather than the first. This stops things getting stuck when we have a lack of money!’

Community activists organised a ‘feastival’ in Hull. This was a collective action around food organised within a few weeks. It was designed to be fun and based on generosity. It wasn’t owned by any one organisation but built on a sense of trust that already existed. There was no individual or organisational ego involved, and anyone could take part. The experience of collective organising feeds back into that sense of trust and increases it. A virtuous circle is created. As one of those involved pointed out, ‘It’s not a box-ticking exercise. Everyone can have this and everyone can contribute.’

The group now has 63 youth work and community development students on placements across the city of Hull based on a joint venture to produce the #hullwewant. Taking forward the agenda does not depend on a fixed plan: it draws on resources that already exist to take the ‘I’ and make it ‘we’. The plan is to work across communities with an emphasis on people – not people as funders or representing organisations or political parties, but people who might cooperate with each other based on feelings of solidarity. The community activists in Hull have decided that resources won’t stop them from creating the #hullwewant. A meeting of 25 activists devised seven principles to guide their actions:
WHO DOES WHAT TO PRODUCE A GOOD SOCIETY?

1. ‘We have what we need already. Grow it. Grow networks in Hull for the society we want.’
2. ‘Find hidden allies and target gatekeepers.’
3. ‘New “pinking”. We will change the world.’
4. ‘Spark conversations that cascade a vision of Hull people want.’
5. ‘Reimagining better futures with young people.’
6. ‘Seek a different approach to create positive change and new opportunities.’
7. ‘Choose someone to have a conversation with who you wouldn’t normally talk to.’

In the final group session, groups were invited to pick one element of a new narrative they would work on, one thing they would do together, and one resource they needed to do it. Here is their answer:

‘We have what we need. Let’s harvest what we have.’

This chapter has shown the importance of answering the question ‘who does what to develop a good society without poverty?’ and given some preliminary answers. The question left hanging in the air at the end of this chapter is ‘how do we organise it?’ This is the topic of the next chapter.

Notes


See the resources on creativity at: www.creativityatwork.com/2014/02/17/what-is-creativity


Communities and Local Government (2011) ‘A plain English guide to the Localism Act’, November, Department of Communities and Local
WHO DOES WHAT TO PRODUCE A GOOD SOCIETY?


The #Planning4People Manifesto has been developed by the Town and Country Planning Association and is available at: https://www.tcpa.org.uk/planning4people


