

The state has a key role in providing the framework for action and policies to ensure fairness on behalf of all its citizens

Anne Power discusses Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative and says that public spending cuts, which fall disproportionately on more disadvantaged households and communities, may not achieve the goal of pushing citizens towards greater self-reliance or greater equality of opportunity. She acknowledges governments are unable to deliver without the aid of strong communities, however, in disadvantaged and diverse urban areas, citizens are unlikely to manage on their own.



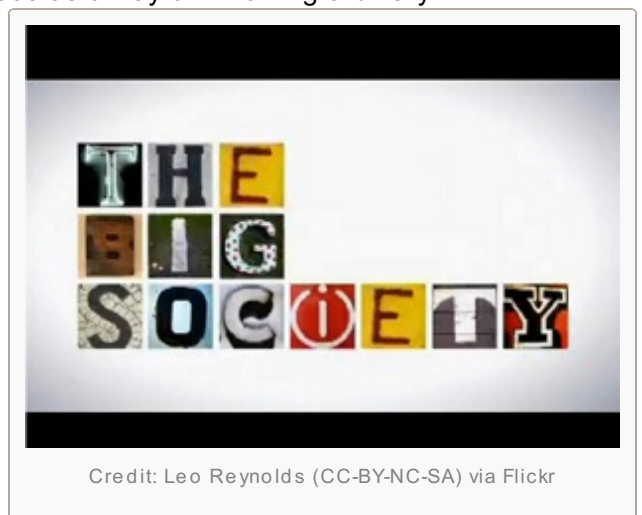
The 'Big Society' was introduced by David Cameron in 2009 as a way of involving ordinary citizens in active communities, to tackle local problems, care for their neighbourhoods, and do things for themselves, rather than relying too much on the state. If it is to help disadvantaged communities, the 'Big Society' relies on an active but light-handed state, which is willing to support community-level action, while accepting responsibility for the overarching framework of activity.

The idea of the 'Big Society' as opposed to the 'big state' is not new. The current concept has its origins in the nineteenth century when co-operatives, friendly societies and mutual aid were essential survival strategies for the poor. Government structures were created to combat the appalling consequences of urbanisation, introducing public health laws, housing standards and sanitation systems. Yet the community-based social protection model was not immediately replaced and the co-operative ideal fuelled social movements in Scandinavia, Germany and other countries. Member-owned, member-run co-operatives offer an enduring model of 'Big Society' activity, based on shared resources, pooled efforts, and fair distribution of benefits. Co-operatives flourish most in countries where legal, regulatory and financial frameworks are firmly in place, such as Scandinavia, Italy and Spain.

The aim today is that voluntary and community-based organisations should help to create stronger communities that can do more to help themselves instead of relying on the state. In order to assess the potential for such a proposition to gain ground, it is important to understand the causes of dependence on state underpinning, and the interdependence that emerged in the nineteenth century and that has prevailed between society and the state.

Social instincts

A shared interest in achieving a common benefit appears to be deeply embedded within human beings, based on a level of social contact which engenders trust. Within complex societies, the state evolves as a broker, enforcer and framer of the very co-operation that small, local groups are best able to deliver. But successful urban communities not only rely on social capital (the personal and group benefits gained from reciprocal co-operative relations) but on an adequate standard of education; neighbourhood-level services; a social safety net which counters the extremities of poverty; and stable social and governance structures to ensure community survival. In other words, urban communities need light-handed, supportive, community-attuned, publicly funded basic services if social capital is to be sustained.



As populations have become more diverse and social problems more complex, so too has community involvement and representation become more vital to government. This mutually reinforcing relationship between state and citizen is seen most clearly in Scandinavian countries, where local activism has been supported by a strongly regulated and well-funded welfare state system. David Cameron has praised this and has drawn lessons from it, as have many other social policy thinkers and politicians.

State vs. Community

Public spending cuts, falling disproportionately on more disadvantaged households and communities, may not achieve the goal of pushing citizens towards more self-reliance or greater equality of opportunity. They may simply unleash pent-up frustration, particularly among young people, unless real gains can be made in already hard-pressed areas – more homes, more child provision, more training, and more jobs. The riots of August 2011 indicate some of the underlying problems.

There are twentieth century precedents for the current moves in Britain to instigate and support greater community involvement. In the 1960s when welfare states were at their zenith, many social movements emerged from the grassroots, opposing or at least challenging both the power and unfairness of state systems – anti-colonial movements, European students' movements, squatter occupations, and racial disturbances. Community movements took much of their inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which in turn derived much of its force from its links with liberation movements in Africa and the Indian sub-continent, which related back to post-colonial Europe. These movements led to more participative “bottom-up” approaches.

An inherent problem with government support for community organising and community-based initiatives is that it can easily end up on a collision course with high-level decision-making, vested interests and overpowering wealth. At the worst extreme, this can generate alienation and violence, as riots in France in 2005 and in England in 2000 and 2011 illustrate. Yet on their own, community-based organisations do not have the power, access or ability, in most cases, to change the way bigger decisions are made or to deliver the scale of intervention that is necessary.

Welfare and dependency

In Britain, we have built a complex welfare state with comprehensive coverage for many basic services due to industrial history. Yet the Government has chosen a path of extreme decentralisation or localism as a way to make financial savings and force local communities to become more self-reliant. While the hope is that community organisers and volunteers, initially aided by government will fill the gap one problem with this approach is that it can unleash oppositional ideas, which is what sealed the fate of the Community Development Projects of the 1970s. The “Occupy” protests in the US and UK, the Stuttgart 21 movement in Germany, the Indignados movement in Spain and the Living Wage Campaign in the UK have in different ways underlined the need for the state to respond and modify its way of working with citizens, while maintaining an active role in ensuring public well-being.

These examples show just how complex modern government has become. In Europe, planned outcomes are increasingly challenged and changed through protests, because communities are integrated within the wider democratic system through comprehensive public services. As Europe is a crowded continent, this forces communities to reach compromises and compels governments to act in the name of cohesion. Housing co-operatives in inner London, Glasgow, and Liverpool grew up when local communities came together to secure public support for housing renewal under local community control in light of the failures of state-driven slum clearance and mass housing.

Complementary framework for community action

The range of community-level organisations, services and structures at work today need relatively inexpensive but critical support in times of funding constraint, as in the 1970s and 1980s, but currently they are losing vital, low-level flows of funds due to local authority cuts under the new powers of localism. So there is little evidence that the ‘Big Society’, as opposed to the ‘big state’, will carry us through future challenges without an overarching public framework which includes steady low-level funding. The ‘Big Society’ can help address threats such as inequality, social breakdown and

environmental limits, through widespread citizen participation, but the state has a key role in providing the framework for action and policies to ensure fairness on behalf of all its citizens.

Three conditions emerge in modern, urban societies to allow strong communities:

- the state is necessary as the over-arching broker of different community interests;
- the state can redeploy public resources in favour of locally responsive services in disadvantaged communities; and
- the state can respond to citizens as they try and tackle complex problems within their communities.

On their own, unaided, in disadvantaged and diverse urban areas, citizens are unlikely to manage. Conversely governments seem increasingly unable to deliver without strong communities. The two are interdependent.

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About the author

Anne Power is Professor of Social Policy and Head of LSE Housing and Communities at the London School of Economics.

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