

Civil Society Futures

Consultation Response

Summary

The Independent Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society was launched in April 2017 with the aim of investigating how to maximise the positive effects of civic action and provide a guide to how to release its potential to drive positive change. This paper presents Church Urban Fund's responses to questions posed by the Inquiry about the purpose of civil society, how it is changing, and how it can contribute to human flourishing.

Drawing upon our engagement in communities across England – much of which is orientated towards building up civil society at the local level – we suggest that a key task for civil society is to articulate and model an alternative vision of human flourishing which is not based narrowly on the accumulation of wealth, or on the construction of individual identity through consumption, but which emphasises the importance of relationships, equality and freedom.

We believe there is the potential for civil society to play a pivotal role in rebalancing or 'rehumanising' aspects of society in which market-based drivers have been afforded excessive power. Revitalising civil society and building social cohesion will require us to rebalance a proper sense of individual agency, creativity and responsibility, with a renewed sense of mutuality, reciprocity and inter-dependence in relationship with others.

Note: The [final reports of the Civil Society Futures Inquiry](#) can now be found on their website, and you can read Church Urban Fund's response to its findings [here](#).

Introduction

This paper presents Church Urban Fund's responses to a series of questions posed by the Civil Society Futures Inquiry about the purpose of civil society, how it is changing, and how it can contribute to human flourishing. Much of our work is oriented towards strengthening civil society and building up associational life at the grassroots and we therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

About Church Urban Fund

Our vision is to see people and communities across England flourish and enjoy life in all its fullness. We believe that communities flourish when people have:

- **Agency** – the ability to make and follow through on choices about the direction of their own lives, and that of the communities and society in which they live.
- **Relationships of equality** – within households, communities and society more widely, in which they feel safe to belong, interdependence is acknowledged, and all have opportunities to give and receive.
- **Just access to resources** – sufficient to provide for their wellbeing in a sustainable and dignified way and to participate fully socially, politically and economically.

We work relationally, inclusively, and effectively to bring about change through three programmes:

- **Together Network:** growing the capacity of churches and community groups to collaborate, build community, and respond to social issues. In 2017 we supported more than 680 community and social action projects, including work with refugees and asylum seekers, people experiencing homelessness, loneliness, and food poverty.
- **Near Neighbours:** bringing people together across faith and ethnic groups to build a cohesive civil society that reflects and celebrates our diversity. Over 90,000 people got involved in their communities through Near Neighbours in 2017, including through local social action, community events and leadership training.
- **Just Finance Foundation:** increasing the supply of fair and affordable finance and financial services, particularly for low-income households; building people's motivation, expertise, and access to financial services; and equipping future generations to manage money wisely.



The Purpose of Civil Society

What purpose does civil society fulfil now? What purpose will civil society need to fulfil in the future?

Civil society represents an intermediate – and therefore a connecting – space between the state and the people that make up society, and between the people and the market. What happens in that space can have a substantial influence on which voices are heard in public debate; who feels that they belong; who shapes local and national decision making; and, in turn, whether individuals and communities perceive themselves to be of worth to wider society. The power of civil society to effect this kind of influence has diminished in line with the pervasiveness of market and consumption based ideologies across spheres such as the media personal lifestyle choices, and public services

However, we would argue such developments increase the importance of **‘Civil society has an increasingly important role in ensuring that those with less access to markets can participate and be heard in conversations that shape decision making’** and in helping to effect a rebalancing of the state and market sectors by modelling and advocating for forms of decision making and action that reflect more fully the humanity of their ‘subjects’ and ‘participants’.

Some of the purposes of civil society are well-rehearsed and include:

- Fostering cohesive communities in which people can belong, connect and contribute.
- Building citizenship skills, and the motivation and confidence to use them.
- Maintaining a healthy democracy by giving expression and representation to diverse views, beliefs, and experiences, including through political participation.
- Bringing events, activities and projects into being in communities, for community benefit.
- Providing a foundation of trust upon which markets and the state can function.

We anticipate that these will continue to be important roles for civil society in the future. Much of our work through the **Together Network** and the **Near Neighbours** programme seeks to activate and strengthen associational life in local communities, bringing people together to build trust, identify shared hopes and challenges, and enabling people to learn about their potential to make a difference together by having a go at it.

There are some specific purposes that we believe will become particularly pressing tasks or opportunities for civil society over the coming years. These are:

- Persuasively **restating and reasserting the value, dignity, agency and relational inter-dependency of human individuals**, outside of (or beyond) the metrics, mechanisms and reward (or punishment) systems of the market, and advocating for ways in which this can be better reflected in practice, across all spheres of society.
- **Offering an alternative to individual consumption and competition as the means by which identity is constructed**, by creating and sustaining spaces – physically, virtually and conceptually – in which individuals are treated as intrinsically and equally valuable and important, regardless of their economic participation and performance, consumption practices, life experience, behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality or other characteristics.



- **Countering a lack of social integration by promoting interaction in ways that strengthen our ability to ‘live together well’** in a society and in local communities characterised by both commonalities and differences in backgrounds, circumstances, beliefs, values and culture. This includes providing spaces in which alternative narratives and perspectives about what it means for us to ‘live together well’ emerge, are formulated, and are shared and diffused locally and nationally.
- **Helping foster conversations (inter-personally and in public debate) that allow for the safe discussion of difficult issues** such as those associated with gender, allocation of resources, crime, trust, and the role of religion in public life, in ways that get beyond stereotypes and dualisms (such as ‘tradition’ versus ‘progress’, and ‘conservative’ versus ‘liberal’) and enable people to relate the basis of their views from personal experience and other sources important to them.

Civil society needs to be a space in which freedom and equality are championed, practiced, upheld and protected. Importantly though, we should not claim a monopoly on being ‘values-based’ or seek to create a ‘safe’ space that is isolated from the market, state and informal sectors, but rather one which affords the possibility to influence – as well as learn from – each of these.

We believe it is also important that civil society does not become a domain characterised primarily by service delivery. This is not to say that providing services is not an important part of civil society’s work, nor that civil society groups bring comparative advantages to certain kinds of service provision, but rather that this should not become dominant, for three reasons:

1. The state has the potential to resource and organise the provision of many services for human wellbeing in a way that is fairer and more evenly geographically distributed than does civil society.
2. An important characteristic of civil society is its multi-functionality. If civil society becomes over-burdened with service delivery, other important functions, such as advocacy, innovation, expression, and community-building are likely to suffer. These other functions are vital for healthy communities and a healthy democracy.
3. Service delivery often invokes a strong ‘them and us’ dynamic, which can inhibit the agency and flourishing of those on the receiving end. Where possible, we seek a shift towards an asset-based approach, strengthening the capacity of communities and individuals to identify and act on issues of importance to them.



Civil Society: Challenge and Change

What is driving or inhibiting change in civil society? How will different forms of civil society respond to social, political, economic, environmental and technological change over the future?

Instrumental individualism

The construction of personal identity through achievement and consumption have become dominant cultural currents within our society. Individualism per se is not without its strengths, but these currents inevitably exclude, marginalise and disempower those who are less able to consume, and who do not achieve highly in the particular ways that society has come to value economically.

We are now seeing the unravelling of the illusion of the sufficiency of this individualistic narrative. Revitalising civil society and building social cohesion will require us to rebalance a proper sense of individual agency, creativity and responsibility with a renewed sense of mutuality, reciprocity and inter-dependence in relationship with others.

Much of our work at Church Urban Fund is oriented towards strengthening civil society and specifically associational life in local communities. Our Together Network, for example, grows the capacity of churches and grassroots groups to collaborate locally to build community and respond to social issues at a local level. This work is informed by an asset-based approach, which encourages people to see and develop the strengths within their communities. At the same time, the Together Network provides support with areas such as governance, fundraising and identifying possibilities for collaboration, including with other civil society organisations, statutory partners and businesses.

Economic pressures

In a very practical sense, economic pressures on households can reduce the time, resources and even emotional capacity for participation in civil society by their members. Working hours, working conditions, housing costs, wage levels and, for many, the financial imperative to be a dual-income household, all have a bearing on people's availability to get actively involved in civil society, particularly amongst younger adults.

These conditions call upon civil society to simultaneously build people's resilience in very challenging circumstances, whilst also responding to the structural injustices and cultural norms that have given rise to them. Effecting substantial and sustainable change in these matters requires widespread and cross-sectoral collaboration. Together with other partners, our Just Finance Foundation is engaging actively with financial institutions at a local and national level about the provision of fairer financial products and services, whilst also working to build financial capability amongst adults and children in community contexts, such as through our LifeSavers schools programme.



Socio-economic divergence

Recent political events in the UK and elsewhere have demonstrated the way in which diversity and disagreement are very readily rendered dualistic and divisive, both in mainstream and social media. Whilst technology has a part to play in the creation of the so-called 'echo-chambers' that facilitate this, so too does the increasing divergence between those who are doing well out of the economic status quo, and those who it has left behind. Earlier this year the Social Mobility Commission reported that new divides have opened up geographically, across income groups, and inter-generationally, and that these are likely to widen. Here again, there is a role for civil society, not only in seeking to narrow gaps in prosperity and opportunities, but also in facilitating encounters and greater understanding of lived experiences within and between different social groups.

Heterogeneity of beliefs and culture

Our society is increasingly characterised by a heterogeneity of beliefs, ideologies and ontologies, but very limited literacy and understanding of these is brought to bear in public or political life. We believe diversity is to be celebrated. It brings a richness and creativity to our workplaces, communities and national life that can benefit us all. However, where the lives of individuals or groups are shaped by divergent traditions, beliefs or life experiences, it can take considerable time, effort and commitment for a sense of safety, mutual understanding and partnership to be built. Experiences of prejudice, discrimination, abuse, misunderstanding, or harm – or fear that these may happen in future – can prevent participation in wider civil society, particularly for religious, ethnic or other minority groups. **Secularity has an important part to play in holding the public sphere open for all to participate , but a lack of genuine engagement with alternative meta-narratives, can compound segregation and close down opportunities for greater mutual understanding and inclusion.**

Furthermore, religious faiths also offer valuable conceptual resources that can be drawn upon in seeking to understand and articulate what constitutes human wellbeing, both at an individual and societal level. Demographic change, coupled with the changing landscape of religion in the UK, mean that civil society will need to play a part in ensuring that people of faith feel included in public life, and that informed and accessible conversations about the varying influences of religion within public and personal life can take place both within communities and in national level conversations.



The Future of Civil Society

What new forms of civil society do you see emerging now and why? Given the right circumstances, what might their impact be in the future?

One of the trends we would expect to strengthen over coming years is an emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration: this will be essential in effecting macro-level social change, in view of the distribution of political and economic power. Relatedly, there is a need for decision-making bodies at local and national level to better reflect the genuine diversity of contemporary society. Here, civil society can play a key part in developing leadership and influencing skills amongst groups (e.g. ethnic, religious, or socio-economic) who are currently underrepresented. One way in which we are responding to this is through Catalyst, our leadership development programme which equips young people to engage as influencers and leaders in their own communities and in wider society. The programme engages directly with the opportunities and challenges arising from diversity, and has 80% BME participants.

Recent political events have brought strong divisions in experience and opinion to the fore: looking ahead, there is an important role for civil society to play in providing spaces in which such issues can be aired, and in which relationships across difference can be built, with a view to re-articulating or re-formulating a shared basis for a cohesive society in which all can flourish. Brexit, terrorism, and most recently the Grenfell Tower tragedy, have opened up new questions and challenges which have given rise to an unsettling of assumptions about the sufficiency of the political and economic status quo. In spite of difficult economic circumstances and the challenges these pose for civil society organisations in terms of rising demand for services and pressures on resources, these circumstances may have created an opportunity for civil society to make a major contribution to society's collective efforts to find new ways of living together well and ensuring that all can flourish.

In this, there is the potential for **civil society to play a pivotal role in** rebalancing or 'rehumanising' sectors in which market-based drivers have been afforded excessive power. Our hope is that just as isomorphism has seen market values increasingly brought to bear in the statutory and voluntary sectors over the past forty years, the next forty years might see civil society modelling and collaboratively diffusing an approach to people and communities that is equally transformative, and helps put the flourishing of people and communities at the heart of economic, social and political activity.



Civil Society, Democracy and Human Flourishing

How and in what ways can civil society enable human flourishing now and in the future? In what ways is civil society important for a healthy democracy?

Freedom and equality are fundamental conditions for human flourishing. These are brought into being through relationships, which also provide the contexts for their negotiation and the channels through which they are expressed and enjoyed (or not). The acknowledgement of our inter-dependence on one another for our wellbeing as human beings is key to our ability as a society to arrange social policy and civil society activity in a way that acknowledges the agency, dignity and potential of all people. Mobilising people in communities to get involved in volunteering or developing projects that benefit their own communities is one way of helping people realise something of their own agency, building their confidence, and opening up other avenues for civic participation. In addition to practical work in communities, however, an important means by which civil society can contribute to human flourishing at this particular point in time is by articulating an alternative vision of human flourishing, one which is not based narrowly on the accumulation of wealth, but which emphasises the importance of relationships, equality and freedom, whilst not ignoring the impact of huge disparities in material resources on wellbeing, both personal and societal.

Notes

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