

Building the REALLY Big Society

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What might the 'Big Society' mean in a Progressio context and how can we glimpse it? Well, different societies are different because of historical, cultural, demographic, topographic distinctions: there's no one-size-fits all. Having said that, surely there are some defining characteristics or aspirations that people are working towards, regardless of where they live in the world.

Progressio works in a whole range of different societies, from Yemen to Zimbabwe, and from Haiti to Peru. They're all very diverse. And we know people around the world trying to build society in extremely demanding circumstances: money is scarce, the rule of law can't be taken for granted, climate is changing, rights are abused. So what, here in our moneyed, benign, stable country, can we possibly learn from these communities? Progressio knows that we in this country have got plenty to learn from our experiences supporting communities around the world.

And I'm nervous about engaging with the Big Society on its own terms; I think there are some problems with it. Partly that's about how it's defined and partly that's about who gets to define it. But inside its limitations are the kernels of our answers, I think.

Shouldn't it be a bit broader?

For me there's a paradox at the heart of the Big Society – it's a UK-based idea, its borders are our borders. Its shape is the familiar shape of the UK. But the implications of the Big Society go far beyond the white cliffs of Dover. The Big Society, if we're to really take it seriously, can only be global.

We talk about the 'Global Village' these days; that new communication tools can overcome the 'tyranny of distance'. Our back yard extends around the world thanks to communications technologies. Another consequence of that is that we've come to a realisation that we're all profoundly linked in deeper ways.

What happens in one place has an impact in another. Every action has an impact somewhere else. And there's nothing more clear about the action/impact relationship than climate change. Years of fossil fuel use has led to a very clear rise in global temperature and climate is changing around the world.

Our own Catholic teaching on this tells us that we are all one Human Race, part of the intricate ballet of God's Creation. And this makes sense to us at a deep level. From that, as Catholic social teaching tells us, we must have solidarity; that we have a responsibility towards one another. And Pope Benedict XVI says, "The human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side." We're a single global family.

What about inclusion, fairness, justice and sustainability?

I'm not sure what the 'Big' part of the Big Society really means. But maybe we'd agree that we'd definitely like to work towards a society in which everyone can be involved, a society in which everyone has a part to play. We'd like to be part of a society that celebrates diversity. Diversity is really vital for a well-functioning society.

Participation is also vital to a well-functioning society. Involving people is important. When you include lots of people in decision-making processes and give them a bit of support, you get better – and fairer – decisions. That's because people have an interest and people will pitch in for what they need. This gives people options, choices, some power over what happens to them.

And a sense of security is important. Partly, you get that by being involved in the first place. But you also get it from a sense of joint commitment to an endeavour. If people come from a position of investment and security, if people feel a bit more involved, a bit more invested in their community, and a bit more like they're in it for the long-haul, they'll try new things.

So society needs diversity, participation and a sense of individual and community investment. Maybe Big Society isn't quite enough of a description. I'd be more comfortable with something like the Inclusive, Fair,

Just and Sustainable Society. If the Big Society was renamed the Inclusive, Fair, Just and Sustainable Society, I think we'd all be up for it. Let's stay with fair and green, maybe.

Who gets to define the Big Society?

The Big Society concept is defined from the centre, or another way: from the top of the political pile. That immediately gives it another set of quite arbitrary boundaries – not just geographical boundaries, but the boundaries of state responsibility. That's why Big Society conversation has been about public service provision and who can and should get involved in it.

From a Catholic social teaching perspective we would recognise this process as subsidiarity, of decision-making happening at the lowest level possible, of power being pushed down. And that's the kind of community involvement we might expect from these kinds of institutions.

But power that is given can just as easily be taken away. Claiming power, of citizens acting together to demand something or making it happen themselves, is much stronger. Being invited into the Big Society isn't quite as great as turning up and making it happen.

At Progressio, we're all about claiming power. Our tag line is People Powered Development. We know that development by invitation is development of the few by the few. But people powered development, of people becoming, as Paul VI put it, "artisans of their own destiny" is a development of the people, for the people. That's a development that will always strive to be responsive, and will always be best placed to put the poor at its centre.

We're an organisation that works through amazing people called Development Workers who have skills and knowledge that local communities need to do things for themselves. Behind every empowered community is one amazing development worker.

So claiming power is about taking responsibility in a lot of different ways. And it doesn't stop at the border. 'Another world is possible', says the slogan of the World Social Forum. Never a truer word said. So the Big Society can't just be my A&E, my Free School, my parish, it has to be our planet, our climate, and our global community. The Big Society can't be like pitching a tent and inviting people inside, it has to be more than that.

Conclusion

For me, I think the Big Society discourse focuses on WHO and HOW – it's a technocratic set of questions. Who's responsibility is it and how should things be done? But I think that misses out on the other important words: WHAT and WHY. If we take the Big Society to its logical extreme it can be transformative. I think that's something that really excites me.

Society is 'always becoming' – that's a metaphor for the Kingdom too. It's a story in the making that we're invited to participate in and retell. Maybe there's another paradox at the heart of the Big Society – it'll work, and I mean really work, if we throw ourselves into it. And it won't work at all if we're reticent. If we see it as a political project, with all the limitations that suggests, it's automatically limited.

After all, Jesus didn't say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and build the Big Society", he told us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

I think the limitations and the possibilities of the Big Society become very clear if we take a global viewpoint. From where we're looking as Progressio it's clear. We know in our hearts what that means and it's clear to each of us, I think. Benedict XVI says that "Development is impossible without upright men and women ... whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good." That's you and me.

Next steps

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