

## Andrew Barnett

Andrew Barnett is Director of the UK Branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. He was previously Director of Policy Development and Communications at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and, before that, held various posts including at HSBC Holdings, the Arts Council of England, and the Foyer Federation for Youth, as well as working for the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Homelessness. He is chair of the Novas Scarman Group of social enterprises, chair of DV8 Physical Theatre, and a trustee of Addaction, the UK's largest substance misuse charity, and has served in a voluntary capacity for a number of organisations working in the arts, housing and to address disadvantage.



Trusts and Foundations

# Putting Trusts and Foundations at the Heart of the Big Society

The American broadcaster Edward Murrow said: *“The obscure we eventually see, the completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.”*

The notion of the Big Society is taking time to sink in - possibly because it is, in so many ways, obvious - not least in promoting the myriad of civil society organisations as a platform, in concert with the government, for tackling the many seemingly intractable challenges that the state alone has never been able to solve.

The timing isn't great. Austerity measures are being felt across the country and the pain of readjustment is not to be understated - but this is no reason to reject a concept as relevant in bad times as in good. The call for a Big Society is a notion worthy of a considered response and one which treats society as more than the sum of its parts.

What makes a society is not just the people and the institutions that constitute it but the complex web of connections that link them and the multiplicity of transactions between them. Those connections or relationships generate so much more than the individuals or institutions could produce on their own - and communities suffer when they are not being made. The question, then, is what, as part of civil society, can we do? What is the role of trusts and foundations in supporting this? And what relationship do we therefore need with the state?

The voluntary sector is different, partly because it is not (usually) established by Parliament or by local or central government; its independence is a central characteristic. A voluntary organisation exists because an individual or group perceived a need and set out to meet it. It is - by its very nature - a bottom-up sector. There is no requirement to be involved; people are not participants because they have to be but because of the passion they hold for addressing a cause. That passion, at the heart of the mission of so many organisations, and the closeness to the needs of the beneficiaries, is a major determinant in the quality and effectiveness of the help it provides to those in need.

At first the relationship between voluntary sector and government was one of the lobbyist and the lobbied, usually involving calls for changes in legislation or increased resources. The engagement of the state has certainly allowed for the expansion of good works but it may have led, too, to a change in the nature of the relationship, both for the good and the bad. On the one hand, it has meant that the sector has been taken more seriously; no longer bleating from the side lines but, increasingly, a partner (though not always as equal a partner as we would like) in the

delivery of services. But on the other hand, it has become reliant on rising, and falling, government funding; in some cases, prejudicing its independence and its very survival.

The sector retains - and brings to the table - its understanding of local issues, its sensitivity to demand, and its drive in the best interests of those it serves. But a deeper understanding of the different qualities that both government - whether local or central - and civil society offer is now called for on both sides.

As the voluntary sector becomes a more significant deliverer of public services, the civil service will need to replicate the kind of cross fertilisation of ideas and experience it developed with the private sector, so officials can turn theory into practice and improve the quality of decision-making in government.

The current government has championed the role of philanthropy as part of the Big Society initiative. And, although private donations - whether corporate, by individuals, or from endowed foundations - are never likely to, nor should, replace the proper role of the state, philanthropy, effectively applied, will continue to play an increasingly important part in securing progress and social justice. Philanthropy is both integral and complementary to the role of the voluntary sector - not just by providing the funds without which many projects would never get started, but also because it brings a different set of connections.

So how should we, as trusts and foundations (indeed all donors), respond to the new discourse? For a start, we should assert our independence as bulwarks against short-term political fashion; there should be no knee-jerk reactions from our sector. We should continue to take a long-term view of needs and not subject ourselves to the short-termism so often characteristic of governments and corporates. Our ability to support the unpopular, to highlight important issues, and to give voice to the voiceless is the face of our independence. We have an important role too in providing an overview of sector developments, looking at the bigger picture. We should celebrate the pluralism that diverse forms of philanthropy afford.

But this does not mean we should not be concerned with our effectiveness. More - and better - philanthropy should be the theme around which we can all rally; it should be the overriding aim of our umbrella body. Of course philanthropy takes many forms. Some support the continuance of valuable services to disadvantaged groups, while others take a more strategic approach. Some see themselves as the providers of different forms of social finance. Whichever mode one operates in, we should all be concerned with maximising the beneficial impact the input of our resources can help achieve.

An increasing number of trusts and foundations - the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation included - practice a further mode of support by championing new solutions which can be trialled, adapted and then replicated or scaled. Trusts and foundations like Gulbenkian are active donors; we don't just hand out grants but seek a relationship with those organisations we support, bolstering their ability to take an independent course and providing access to networks and opportunities for those we fund to interact with one another.

And that is where the Big Society comes in. We must use our ability to make connections so that we can help create more than the sum of the existing parts. That means we must be prepared to invest our resources in different ways of working; not only providing seed-corn for innovation, but also supporting campaigns, coalitions and networks as Gulbenkian is doing with Making Every Adult Matter - a coalition of umbrella bodies for organisations dealing, often in silos, with the problems faced by people experiencing homelessness, mental ill-health, contact with the criminal justice system and/or misusing substances. These organisations have come together, with our support, to undertake joint policy work and to pilot new, joined-up service delivery. In another example, the Corston Coalition of 21 charitable trusts and philanthropists has come together to sustain a shift from imprisonment to community sentencing for vulnerable women offenders.

Funders have the ability to work together either with other funders and/or other charities to deliver more than they could on their own. We have the ability to look across sectors, to join up otherwise disparate or sometimes competing interests or even, as Gulbenkian does, to look across national boundaries for solutions to intractable domestic issues that can be identified elsewhere. We can champion causes like the Social Justice Communications Agency which aims to challenge the negative perceptions of migrants to this country. We can spotlight issues as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation does with its informed research. And we can give voice to individuals or organisations as did Gulbenkian's pamphlet and DVD in which beneficiaries, volunteers and front-line workers discuss their perceptions of the Big Society, its challenges and opportunities.

The Gulbenkian Foundation will continue to argue for a closer relationship between the voluntary sector and government and to endorse efforts to bridge the gap through, for instance, the Virtual Institute on Collaboration we are supporting with the London South Bank University.

The Big Society is neither a strategy nor a blueprint. But it is a call to arms based on the notion that we cannot solve our problems except by working in concert. Just as in economics, lots of small transactions together make the whole chain richer, so society can achieve so much more if we work together.

The problems that confront us now are ripe for this approach. The actions of individuals and people - whether from the public or non-governmental sector - working together are at the heart of the solution to our problems, as they have been for generations. Government can be an enabler but it cannot be a driver which is why the voluntary sector, in its many forms, is so crucial. The Big Society initiative provides the voluntary sector with an invaluable opportunity to move the debate on and to achieve a new settlement in the relationship between government and civil society - one in which the vital role of the sector is fully recognised.

There need be no ideological - or party political - divide here. If we act appropriately, guard our independence but don't churlishly reject the concept, charities and voluntary organisations, trusts and charitable foundations can be at the heart of the Big Society and, together, build it in the way that we really need.