

A Good Society: A Collaborative Conversation

A Good Society, Civil Society and Voices from the Frontline

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ABSTRACT

'A Good society: a Collaborative Conversation' is a starting point for further conversation, reflection and discussion as part of a Webb Memorial Trust funded research project which is being undertaken by Edge Hill University's Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice. The intention is to provide a mid-term 'snap shot' of the conversations, observations and thinking which have been brought together by I4P through a series of organised workshops held across the UK. A draft report with proposed recommendations will be available in the autumn, and then following a further round of dialogue a final report will be published in the spring of 2017.

Executive Summary

Our discussion paper 'A Good Society; a Collaborative Conversation' is a starting point for further conversation, reflection and thinking. We intend to organise a second series of structured conversations between September 2016 and February 2017 with as many of those who took part in this first series as are willing, together with making the autumn preliminary report accessible in different and less formal settings and to those groups, organisations and individuals who may not have had an opportunity to take part earlier this year.

This is a mid-research report designed to summarise our work so far and to encourage further conversation around the concept of a Good Society and how it might be achieved. After the second round of discussions and conversations we will submit our final report to the Webb Memorial Trust in the spring of 2017.

The work presented here draws upon a range of sources including an extensive literature review prepared for the Trust (available at www.edgehill.ac.uk/I4P), interviews with fifteen members of the UK-based Fairness Commissions, and six focus groups with a range of civil society organisations including academic researchers, NGOs and locally based voluntary sector agencies. We have identified the key themes which have emerged and these include the importance of the voluntary and community sector (VCS), the importance of an independent sector in creating a counter narrative to neoliberalism, and the importance of local democracy, collaboration, trust and public love.

Plato in his 'Republic' talks about removing poets. They were not welcome as they were subversives, and may corrupt the Guardian, soldiers of rank from believing fully in the values of the Republic. Without poets, dreamers, see-ers of different alternative ways of being, I think that a society stagnates and ultimately dies. We need these creative innovators at strategic levels to introduce new ideas, new ways of working that can lend to fresh ways of helping people.

I say a society without poets, artists writers dreamers and schemers is a dead society. The platonic way of living seems very cold, full of duty and little else.

Long live the creators of new vision and horizons. A life without dreams is nothing. Visionaries dream of new horizons, better chances for themselves, their imagination is their escape; redemption. Whatever their present reality, their minds can soar above it.

Yasmin Kenyon, Rochdale Community Champion Volunteer

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Introduction

This *Collaborative Conversation* document begins by summarising our existing research before focussing on initial themes and ideas that are emerging from our focus groups with civil society organisations. The themes are briefly introduced before quotes from reflections prepared for each focus group are used to illustrate them. This document is a collaborative conversation, a summary of our work in progress, and it concludes by discussing the next steps in our research plan.

The introductory poem by Yasmin Kenyon, Rochdale Community Champion Volunteer, summarises our approach: we are committed to creative conversations with civil society. With these creative conversations we aim to answer three questions: What does a Good Society look like? How do we achieve it? Who will contribute?

You can find out more about our research with the Webb Memorial Trust, Rochdale Community Champions and West Cheshire Food Bank at edgehill.ac.uk/I4P

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Our Focus Group Partners



We would also like to thank the following for their artistic contributions:

Yasmin Kenyon,
Rochdale Community Champions
rochdale.gov.uk/jobs-and-training/volunteering/Pages/community-champions.aspx

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Literature Review: The response of civil society to poverty and inequality in the UK in recent decades: Using food as a lens

'It's not about the food, that's just the warning light on the indicator.'
(Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014:52)

The literature review was completed in the autumn of 2015 and the references used reflect this. The full review can be found at www.edgehill.ac.uk/I4P. The literature review seeks to consider the response of civil society to poverty and inequality in the UK in recent decades. The literature is examined through the lens of food poverty.

Reason for using food aid as a lens through which we consider notions of the Good Society.

This review has focussed its examination of poverty and civil societies' response to poverty on food poverty and food aid. Food poverty and the response of civil society in offering food aid offers a fast moving, innovative and diverse lens through which to consider what a good society might look like. The response of civil society to food poverty has varied from large scale VCS groups such as The Trussell Trust franchises through to church and community groups operating independent initiatives from delivery vans and garages. The speed and enthusiasm of the response to food poverty, to absolute poverty on your doorstep is an area where civil society is currently rapidly expanding (Lambie-Mumford et al 2014, Cooper et al 2014) and where a good society potentially can be found.

The Situation

Food aid has increased significantly since the economic crash, with Trussell Trust food bank franchises expanding across the country and a large number of independent food aid providers offering a variety of services across the UK (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014). The literature review identifies a research gap around the independent food aid providers, with many operating under the radar. The Webbs may have found this independent, civil society response to food aid and poverty both inspiring and frustrating, for their extension ladder vision for civil society has been undermined by the return of civil society to relieving poverty, to responding to basic minimum standards of need. However, this response of independent civil society groups in providing food aid is more nuanced than simply providing food parcels. Many independent providers are offering peer-to-peer support, advice, listening and social support. Others are co-operative projects that are project managed by service users. Social media is being utilised for social justice, with groups operating as not-for-profit companies or social enterprises rather than registered charities (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014).

Viewing the response of civil society to poverty alleviation through the lens of food aid reveals a complex multi-layered picture of formal Trussell Trust franchises, independent organisations and individuals who run food aid from their garages. Food aid is offered alongside formal support projects, under the radar within community services, independently and as community social enterprises. These projects can be considered as parallel bars models but also as extension ladders, offering social support, community spirit and a sense of community action.

Locating a Good Society

Arguably, poverty alleviation cannot be achieved merely by taking remedial measures. There needs to be a multidisciplinary approach and tackling the issue of poverty requires a paradigm shift (Shah 2014). There is a need to be creative in finding solutions to poverty: 'the social science literature is almost wholly descriptive and fanatical about social problems, rather than creative and practical about their solutions' (Knight 2015:10). Indeed, 'a comprehensive and effective poverty reduction strategy will strive to support effective responses to both technical and adaptive development problems, cognizant that concentrating on technical problems alone will not (and indeed cannot) make poverty history' (Woolcock 2009:14). Trends in food aid provision can be identified in terms of the rise of national charities and within the wider context of other independent projects. These trends can be contextualised within the broad socio-economic shifts which have 'impacted on household food security and the relationships with food industry partners' (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014:39). The key task is to 'connect social history and personal biography to imagine better futures' (Knight 2015:11).

Food banks have been described as 'a magnificent response to difficult times' (Cabinet Office Minister Nick Hurd quoted in Downing et al. 2014:11). The government does not provide support to food banks, nor has it given any indication that it will do so (Downing et al. 2014). Lambie-Mumford et al. (2014) state that there is very little evidence available regarding the relative advantages of the varying types of food aid, or indeed on alternative approaches to solving issues of household food security. They suggest that solutions to food security lie with research into the longer term and underlying dimensions of household food insecurity. However, 'civil society which is where most food providers are located can have an important and constructive role to play in terms of advocacy and lobbying, and in giving a voice to those who experience household food insecurity' (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014:XI, Poppendieck 1998, Riches 2002). Lambie-Mumford et al. (2014) identified areas of best practice in food aid provision around the importance of non-food related support and partnership work within and between food aid agencies. The 'Food Plus' model (Lambie-Mumford 2013:51) was an important source of stability and community in the lives of vulnerable people, offering care, support and listening. In more formal building-based services this role was undertaken by support workers; in independent services it was undertaken by volunteers. The 'Food Plus' approach (Lambie-Mumford 2013:51) brings together concerns about the root causes of poverty.

The coupling of food provision with other forms of support builds relationships with other agencies and sources of support that can seek to address some of the deeper causes of an individual or family food crisis. Knight asks:

...so, where is positive change going to come from? How can we think about the roles of civil society, business and government in addressing poverty creatively while being mindful of the background realities and finances that constrain what can be done? (2015:34)

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) suggests a fivefold approach to change: providing access to low cost credit and incentives to build savings; re-designing back to work support for disabled people; preventing a lifetime of exclusion; supporting a dual-earner household model; and boosting social investment and the social wage (Cooke 2015). The fivefold strategies suggested by JRF aim to expand the social wage, protect households from high cost credit and debt, promote dual-earner families, boost the employment rate and prevent young people from being labelled NEET (not in employment, education or training). Taken together the measures aim to ‘address some of the structural drivers of poverty’ (Cooke 2015:14). Essential as economic growth is for poverty reduction (Kraay 2006) ‘it is important to recognise that it is an outcome of complex and interdependent forces, not all of which are amenable to ‘policy’ control’ (Woolcock 2009:11). There is a need to involve those in poverty in creating the solution; ‘the deep-set problems and far reaching consequences of poverty will not be truly tackled until those living this reality are seen as part of the solution – not as part of the problem’ (Lansley and Mack 2015:254).

Civil Society: The Good Society?

There is ‘no overall narrative of what a good society without poverty would look like’ (Knight 2015:26); however, food aid and food banks offer a clue or suggestion of how a good society might be built. 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 relatively informal groups operating out of their garages, to churches who are able to draw on networks of supporters and have a physical presence in every community, to delivery vans and buildings; of civil society action organised by independent organisations, small community groups and national VCS franchises. It reveals that the response to need is to meet the minimum standards as critiqued by the Webbs’ parallel bars model. As public trust in politics has been eroded, civil society is gaining global influence. Global civil society has proven to be robust, diverse and creative in responding to the rising levels of frustration, anger and impatience with the injustices people are forced to live with (Carnegie UK Trust 2010:6).

The real wealth offered by food aid is the 'Food Plus' approach (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014): the social support and care that are offered as a side dish to food aid's main course. Here the Webbs' extension ladder is evidenced. Examples of the range of social support and care are illustrated here in a participatory map created by food bank volunteers at West Cheshire Food Bank. It shows the places of welcome, food and support provided by civil society and faith groups within two areas of Chester. This is where the Good Society can potentially be found.



From this initial literature review we began the next phase of the research project: gathering and collating voices from a range of civil society organisations, some of whom are engaged in anti-poverty initiatives and others of whom promote the idea of a 'good society' in their work. We started by going back to the Fairness Commissions to try to understand the steps they had taken through their alliances with public agencies, voluntary sector organisations, local authorities and other civil society organisations to promote anti-poverty initiatives at a local level and to raise awareness of the growing levels of inequality within society.

Voices from the engaged organisations: Fairness Commissions

Our decision to turn to Fairness Commissions was a deliberate attempt to add to the insights and understanding reflected in the 2014 Agency in Austerity Report (Bunyan and Diamond) which had been commissioned by the Webb Memorial Trust. The 2014 report concluded that whilst Fairness Commissions had been very successful in gathering evidence on levels poverty and inequality at a local level, their impact in helping to reduce levels of inequality and poverty had been limited. A companion report in (Bunyan and Diamond 2014b) set out the potential agenda for a more reflective examination of what was possible using the Fairness Commission model.

In June 2015, a New Economics Foundation (NEF) report considered what Fairness Commissions across the country had achieved and what they had done to reduce poverty in their localities. Our work has drawn on all these reports and their respective recommendations as starting points for discussions with members of Fairness Commissions across the UK. The findings and reflections of those interviewed were brought together in an I4P Briefing Paper. In it we drew on the fifteen conversations with twelve Fairness Commissions we completed last autumn. The full version is available at edgehill.ac.uk/I4P

Civil Society, Fairness Commissions and a Good Society

To summarise: we suggest that our findings reflect the uneven nature and status of Fairness Commissions across the UK; there is no one particular model or approach; the majority have been (and are) dependent upon support from public authorities – often through funding of professional support or providing ‘political’ support at the local level; some Commissions have promoted specific forms of intervention locally which is dependent upon support from civil society organisations (breakfast clubs, after school activities); other activities have included seeking to ensure welfare and debt advice services are provided in a context where public agencies are cutting back. On the other hand there are some important and distinctive differences evident too: whilst a majority of Commissions might be described as ‘pragmatic’ – looking to provide services or encourage others to do so in a context of austerity – others might be seen as more ‘philosophical’ – looking to establish consensus on what is meant by ‘fairness’ and seeking to influence local decision making by framing the questions differently or by making the case for explicit criteria for which services are prioritised. This research has identified the diversity of the Fairness Commissions’ approaches. These distinctions are important as the impact of austerity becomes more evident.

The next section summarises the themes emerging from our focus groups.

Voices from across the UK: Focus groups

We brought together **academics, civil society organisations, independent activists, elected members, think tanks and faith groups** to reflect on what a **Good Society meant** to them and to share what is being done by different sectors in terms of poverty alleviation and inequality and to focus on what more can be done.



All of the events have been by invitation only and in each locality we worked with local partners to invite participants to join us. We wanted to keep the numbers at these events small enough so that we could encourage dialogue and listening too. **So far over ninety people have taken part.**

The discussions have centred on reinforcing the need for collaborative action between local state, civil society and business. Focus groups were held in Belfast, Newcastle, Birmingham, Newport, and Bath. These groups complemented the 'Meeting of Minds: What Might a Good Society Look Like?' conference in Manchester. At these focus groups thoughts and opinions were gathered using participatory research methods. **These focus groups form part of an iterative research process that begins a conversation around what is a Good Society, how do we create a good society and who can contribute to the creation of a good society.**

Participants were asked to contribute a reflection on what makes a Good Society and how we create it, that was pre-prepared in advance of the focus group events. Focus groups then generated discussion and reflections on these contributions. Some people brought artwork, others artefacts or written reflections.

Themes began to emerge from these focus groups around the importance of having a conversation about a Good Society, ethics and philosophy, education, collaboration and the importance of civil society. These themes are broadly gathered under the three questions that we asked the groups to consider. However, as is naturally the case with conversations, ideas and interactions, the themes and the answers interweave, reflecting the complexity of our research task. With these initial themes we will facilitate further focus groups and continue the conversation.

What is your vision of a Good Society?



Here discussions focussed on definitions of poverty, ensuring grass-roots voices, the power of education and the need for equality and collaboration. The text in *Italics* are direct quotes from focus groups.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

Within many discussions there was a consideration of definitions. As our literature review evidences there is no clear understanding of poverty: poverty and inequality mean different things to different people. A need for common understanding was something mentioned in several focus groups.

As a starting point I think there needs to be an agreed definition of what poverty actually means. This could be a “negative” definition of what absolute or relative poverty means. Or a “positive” definition of what people need in income terms to live a good and satisfying life. The latter could draw on work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or the Living Wage Campaign. That is because if we don’t have a shared understanding of what poverty is, how can we design interventions and align our resources to tackle it? I don’t want to expend too much effort defining poverty. Let’s develop a rough and ready definition which is the starting point for our intervention.

A good society: one where all citizens are helped to flourish. Elimination of inequalities in health, education, wealth, housing and life expectancy. An enfolding of the countryside into the city, spaces for growing fresh fruit and vegetables. An equal distribution of green covering and open spaces. A health service dedicated to increasing health span as well as life span equally. How can I stay healthy, rather than I am broken, mend me.

GRASS-ROOTS VOICES

Engaging the people that are experiencing poverty was brought up across several focus groups. The phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ came up many times. The power and value of genuine community engagement were part of an important discussion within the Birmingham focus group especially. Austerity had highlighted the importance of cross boundary collaborations, and community partnership working was considered an example of how the Good Society might be achieved.

What do we need to do to tackle poverty?

In seeking to tackle poverty, I would endeavour to establish inclusive, trusting relationships where people and organisations are encouraged to work collaboratively in their local communities. Many urban high streets have lived with decline in recent years. Central to those communities are empty shops which stand as places where new life could be generated through the sharing of common tasks. I believe it is essential to take grass-roots approaches to community building which embrace a wider participation. In really listening to the experts who live with poverty, resources could then be re-directed and support provided within communities where neighbours will work together.

COLLABORATION

From discussions of grass-roots working came ideas of collaboration. Concepts of collaboration varied across focus groups, from ideas of co-production, collective ownership and assets-focussed support to organisational partnerships. The Newcastle, Manchester and Belfast groups discussed the role of the private sector in creating a Good society and engaging business in conversations around the making and sustaining of responsible and ethical organisations.

It's about delivery, providing practical support in partnership. As important as evidence is to debunk the mythologies surrounding inequality we need to deliver some changes, however small they may seem. We need to change the politics and the discourse around poverty away from blaming the victim. Poverty is largely connected with structural inequality which is not reducible to the agency of the poor. In recent months we have seen the Labour Party move from acquiescing to the proposed reduction of tax credits to successful opposition. Many other organisations successfully challenged the government narrative around tax credits. What are the lessons from this?

Poverty exists on many levels: financial, material, emotional, social, relational, and spiritual. Families with 'nothing' manage strong bonds, emotional and social capital, resilience. This is not to romanticise but to value what they offer. Families in the same financial situation but with less social, emotional and relational capital struggle and are less resilient. What makes the difference? We need to consider how you encourage the development of all forms of capital whilst recognising that perceptions can be class/culturally biased. We can't impose 'our' solutions – this could become benevolent oppression

A Good City is socially inclusive; networked rather than insular; agentic rather than passive; reflexive and resilient; with the support of an enabling state. Specifically, a Good City should be socially sustainable and resilient, as much as environmentally and economically, and this should be recognised as a shared responsibility between citizens and state, not just a matter for self-help or an invisible hand. A Good City should be welcoming to others, raising similar questions to those Amin poses about citizenship and social inclusion. Notwithstanding the difficulties inherent in setting the boundaries of deliberative democracy, a Good City must ensure that it is deliberately inclusive enabling all to shape and to enjoy urban life. In addition, there must be continual challenge to the exercise of discursive power (including symbolic violence) with necessary ethical and structural foundations. Finally, a Good City will admit multiple meanings of re-enchantment, recognising more than merely elite experiences of joy and wonder of enchanted places, heritage and sociality.

EQUALITY:

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES; RACE, CLASS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

In all focus groups, discussions emerged around difference and equality, the removal of inequality and the importance of supporting all people in Britain, including British citizens, refugees and asylum seekers. A particularly engaged conversation was held in the Newport focus group, where issues of race, migration and gender were discussed using video links brought as a pre-prepared reflection by participants. The promotion of inequality and the removal of inequalities were discussed at length by all focus groups.

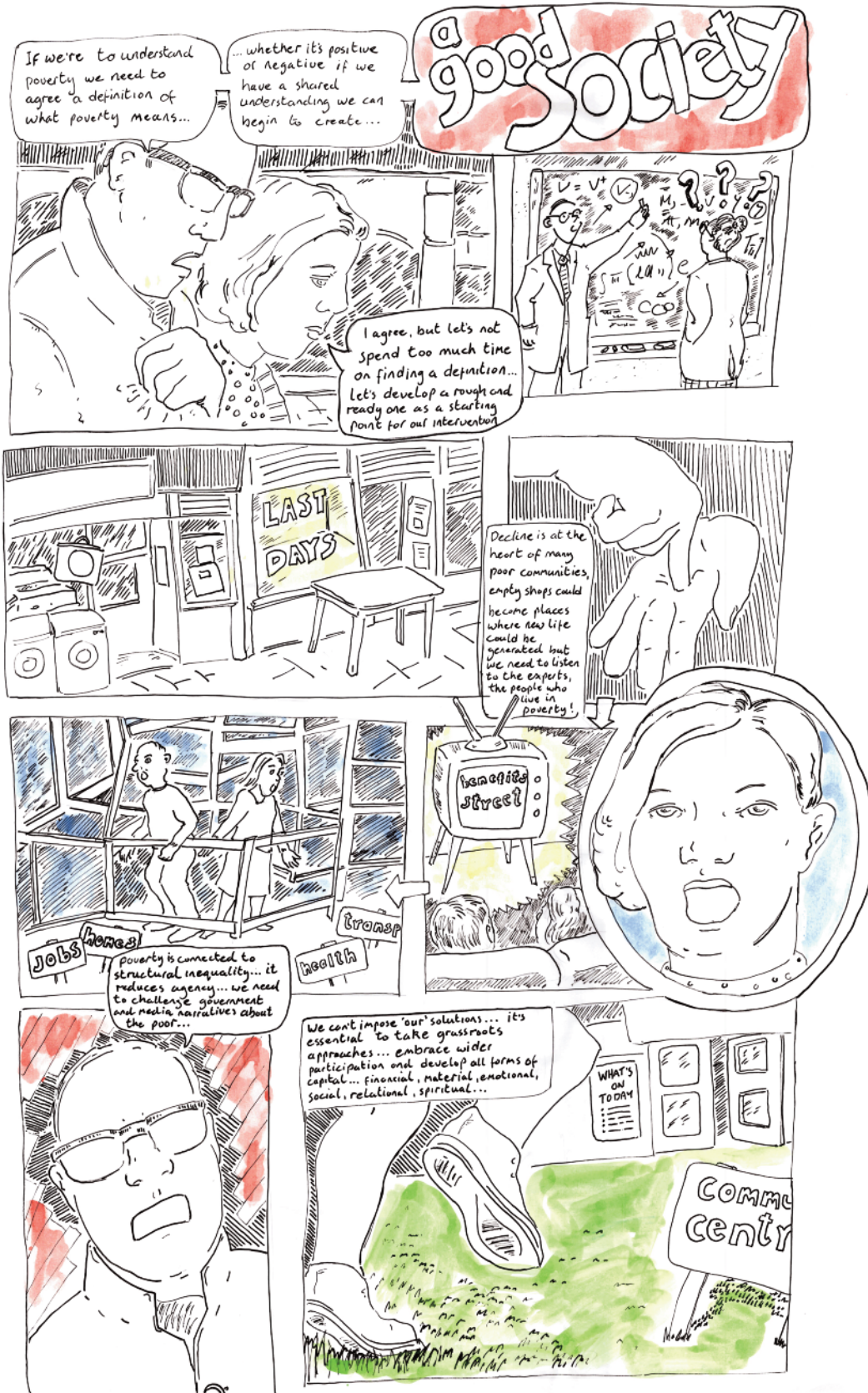
Individual liberty, pursuit of knowledge, cultivation of pleasures that do no harm to others, satisfaction of art, personal relationships and sense of belonging to other human communities. What is good? The considered life-force, creative, informal and chosen, a life of achievement and fulfilment of pleasure and understanding of love and friendship. In short, the best human life, in a human world, humanely lived. A good society would be one which supported women who have experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse through a criminal and social justice system which made available free, accessible legal advice and representation at all stages of a complaint and investigation. Established a range of social housing options other than hostel accommodation for both single women and those with dependants. Provided (without time limits) counselling and therapeutic support for women and, where appropriate, children to develop emotional resilience. How do we get there? Women to be guaranteed access to community legal advice services (funded by central government) and representation at court throughout each stage of the court process. Social housing providers to make available units of accommodation for a period of up to twelve months. A national network of counselling services for women to be established and funded through a 'victim surcharge' imposed by all courts and collected by government.

EDUCATION

Education was a theme discussed within all focus groups. The Newcastle and Bath focus groups spent a lot of time on this theme, with slightly different approaches to their conversations. Bath focussed on the importance of education as a facilitator for change and empowerment. Opening up education to all for longer periods of the day, inviting families to join school children for a hot evening meal, and engaging children from age two in nursery education were discussed as having powerful emancipatory and community benefits. Newcastle discussed the power of education in opening up philosophical and ethical debates. Whilst citizenship is taught within the curriculum, it was felt that opening up citizenship into broader philosophical and ethical arenas would be a powerful tool for creating a more open, ethical and philosophical society.

My vision of a Good Society is one which recognises that we are all individuals with very varied motives, opinions and perceptions, so it allows us freedom to express ourselves. However, we are also social animals and, in a good society, we have to live together harmoniously. A good society needs good governance which treats individuals fairly and gives equal opportunity for a happy and fulfilling life. Good government is law-based so that it does not serve the selfish interests of elites or rest on powers at the rulers' disposal. Good law requires unselfish behaviour from its citizens which enables all to live well (at the basic level, it requires telling the truth, not stealing, not killing people or interfering with their freedom). A good society requires a strong education system that teaches people to think rationally and objectively, to consider and evaluate alternative viewpoints, and reach fair and balanced decisions. A good society rewards hard work, enterprise and innovation but enables everyone to have a living wage. It protects the most vulnerable groups in society from poverty and economic deprivation, and takes action against growing inequality and greed. In brief, we need: changes in the priorities of politicians and political parties; changes among the most wealthy and influential businesses in Britain if the growing inequality in wealth is to be stopped; changes in education to encourage more support for the 'good society', and better understanding of it philosophically and of the institutions which might help achieve it; and a reformed media which is more representative of liberal views, takes more responsibility for its power to influence opinion, and is less closely tied to a handful of wealthy individuals/families.

What types of change are needed to realise this vision?



THE IMPORTANCE OF A COUNTER NARRATIVE TO NEOLIBERALISM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Within many focus groups there was a discussion around the importance of providing a counter narrative to neoliberalism. A range of counter narratives were suggested, including collaborative or participatory democracy. Focus groups commented that sometimes we speak back to the 'system' as if it were somehow an accident. Sections of the VCS are profoundly 'neoliberal' in their service delivery functions. Our current political situation is, as the focus groups discussed, arguably not an accident. A strong independent civil society might be able to offer a counter narrative to those organisations or dimensions of the VCS which appear to have taken on the values of neoliberalism, as it can too to the public and private sectors.

The importance of local democracy was reinforced in many focus groups, their discussions often having a national, Wales or Northern Ireland context or reflecting the English regions around the cities of: Newcastle, Bath, Manchester, and Birmingham. Focus groups discussed the need to protect civic space and the importance of civic space to create a socially just narrative. This civic space, it was felt, needs broader engagement from the public and a model of leadership based around service framed at its core.

In order to create a counter narrative to the dominant narrative, the Belfast focus group considered the most powerful way to promote the counter narrative. They reinforced the centrality of trust, both between individuals and communities, and within and between those that have leadership roles.

A Good Society will be one that is newly conscious of the ways in which the great economic, materialist and industrial narratives have colonised and compromised our bodies, institutions and languages. A key element is the influence of the Cartesian paradigm: 'a breach of faith of all things' (profound separation that is more than philosophical, more than material, and profoundly ethical). We need to popularise our awareness of these subterranean discourses on our lives alongside understanding of their relationships to questions of power, distribution, equality and societal wellbeing. For this reason the good society and wellbeing are profoundly democratic questions. Our democracies are broken and due to the influence of money and the roots of our parties in industrial/redundant paradigms: they no longer speak to our post-modern condition (ecological).

The Good Society will be profoundly ecological and literate around the operation of power, and will integrate the global, the political and the personal (a spiritual and systems vision). One of the most helpful movements and discourses is the restoration of 'the commons' (the relational; the move away from property; hyper-individualism): the commons as a way of seeing and relating (common-ing). Work and volunteering: civil society must be reanimated ...Engage in new conversations that are more than local, more than city bound, both global and ecological, and embedded in the questions posed by the Anthropocene (the new axial moment in our civilisation) that is both hopeful and profoundly challenging.

My background is in international development and human development was one of the central concepts when I was studying. It is a powerful and valuable alternative to the dominant GDP-led approach that was prevalent at the time and that we in the western world are only now beginning to move away from.

But it always alarmed me that some of those countries near the top of the human development index also had some disturbing negative indicators, such as high suicide rates. Clearly human development is missing something fundamental about what makes a good or happy society. This piqued my interest and has led to a longstanding interest in the importance of participation, engagement, empowerment and democracy.

This goes to the core of the problem with the western/capitalist consumer-driven model of development – more wealth is crucial for quality of life at the bottom end of society, but it can only take us so far in terms of human happiness and the good society. It is the immaterial/intangible factors that are crucial, alongside a basic level of material wealth and health.

Concepts like wellbeing – as used by the OECD, Carnegie Trust, etc. – have begun to take this challenge on by including concepts like civic engagement, sense of community and democracy. A deeper, more participatory democracy is for me one key way to attain a better society. This is both a means to an end (public services will perform better as they become more rooted in what people need) and an end in itself, where people have a real sense of influence over decisions that affect them and so a greater sense of ownership of society and solidarity with one another.

However, in my view a more participatory democracy cannot be achieved through electoral reform, or even a move to more direct democracy, as per the Swiss model. Participatory democracy is about the informal spaces, the non-institutionalised bits of democracy and using creative means of engagement.

This is where civil society is absolutely fundamental as both a facilitator of democracy and a check and balance on political institutions. My favoured definition of civil society is "the arena between the market and the state where citizens organise to pursue common interests" (don't know source!). So civil society means both the formalised third sector and informal groups of citizens, social movements, churches, etc.

In Northern Ireland we have a big voluntary sector but it has become dominated by large service delivery organisations whose independence has been compromised through co-option into the delivery of public services. This may be necessary and legitimate but it has been to the detriment of the democratic function of the voluntary sector (and civil society) as an independent intermediary between citizens and the state and a facilitator of democratic dialogue.

1. What types of change are needed? *Leadership – we need good people working for the common good. Ditch the myth of leader as hero; rather leader as the servant of the greater whole, and leadership distributed to others.*

a. Challenge our mental models *We need to be prepared to be wrong. If things aren't working and we are part of the system then it is inevitable that we are part of the problem. We must be prepared to challenge our own mental models and basic assumptions. And it follows that we must be prepared to let go of pre-set goals and agendas – put simply, we must be prepared to approach things with genuinely open minds.*

b. Cultivate the ability to see the larger system *In any complex setting, people typically focus their attention on the parts of the system most visible from their own vantage point. This usually results in arguments about who has the right perspective on the problem. Helping people see the larger system is essential to building a shared understanding of complex problems. Getting different people from different points of view from different parts of the system in the room together enables them collectively to start to see something that individually none of them can see.*

c. Shift the focus from problem solving to co-creating the future *Traditionally we identify a problem and then marshal our resources in order to find a solution. That works for the specific problem but does nothing for the gaps between the problems; indeed, the focus on problem solving restricts our focus to the negatives rather than the potential of the positives. A focus on vision and a leadership approach that helps people articulate their deeper aspirations, as a process of co-creating the future, can unlock the creativity needed to inspire truly new approaches.*

2. How can my work contribute? *We cannot change human nature or even people's minds. Rather we can behave according to intrinsic values of co-operation and trust rather than extrinsic ones of competition and acquisition of power and wealth. This is especially important in third and public sectors where neoliberal values are increasingly influencing behaviour.*

How can your work/volunteering contribute to achieving a 'Good Society'?

These discussions were themed around ideas of citizenship and power, the role of business and the markets within civic space and the capacity for love and care.



The Belfast focus group focussed on the importance of trust and love to create a Good Society. Here the Belfast group discussed the need for creativity and openness: our ability to change and evolve in the way that we identify ourselves. Systemic change is needed and flexibility within the system can be used to create a Good Society. Wellbeing models can be used to introduce this systemic change. These systemic changes require trust and public love. Creativity is needed to develop a good society. That involves taking risks, using loving approaches. **You cannot be creative and take risks towards a Good society without trust.**

The notions of love and trust, which link to value driven approaches to civil society and to discussions around ethics, nurture a strong independent civil society. **A strong independent civil society is necessary to bring about change. A strong independent civil society offers an alternative voice to the narratives of existing public institutions and challenges neoliberal ideals.** A strong independent voluntary sector is not one that operates under a service delivery model, although focus groups recognised the value of this sub-sector of the VCS. **A strong independent voluntary sector is of fundamental importance in creating independent civil institutions.** A Good Society is not about re-building state institutions but is about creating strong independent civic organisations that can act as powerful counterbalances to a society fragmented by welfare reform, economic change and a lack of civic engagement.

Here issues of timescales and scalability of initiatives arose. A Good Society cannot be created overnight and many initiatives that are catalysts for Good Societies are space or time based.

Summarising the concepts of a Good Society

These quotes are a representation of the themes emerging so far. Our themes and discussions about civil society have been in some instances practical, for example regarding education measures, in some sense political, for example in critiques of austerity. In other instances the themes have been highly philosophical visions of a Good Society.

We represent these themes here as catalyst for conversation. The next step is to take the conceptual debate about a Good Society on to a consideration of how this might be created and how civil society might offer the facilitative stepping stones to a Good or Better Society.

Next steps...

Our research is iterative. We have produced this document for **Collaborative Conversation**. This collaborative conversation has been prepared for the event 'Concepts of a Good Society: The Response of Civil Society to Food Poverty', followed by a Meeting of Fairness Commissions on 28 June 2016, House of Commons, London. **The document is not a final report but a mid-research collaborative conversation, designed to summarise our research so far and to initiate further conversation around the concepts of a Good Society and how we might achieve a Good Society.** The document summarises our research to date: our literature review, semi-structured interviews with Fairness Commissions and focus groups across Britain.

Our work identifies the agency or agencies that will deliver a good society as part of a collaborative process. In actively engaging participants from civil society groups in the creation of the recommendations for our final report, the civil society groups that we work with will identify the agencies that can deliver a good society.

As part of this dissemination stage of our work, we will be running dissemination events around the UK. These events will be themed around key issues such as food poverty, migration and rural poverty. The dissemination events will be held in arts centres and public spaces, where we will invite community responses to the recommendations as well as offer facilitated workshops and other 'listening ' events. The aim of these events will be to create a truly collaborative piece of research with recommendations created by research participants.

Our work is collaborative and is based on interwoven networks and partnerships with civil society organisations. As part of the dissemination process we will ask the civil society groups that we work with to suggest mechanisms to deliver a good society.

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Dr Katy Goldstraw works as a research assistant within the Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice at Edge Hill University. Her PhD focussed on voluntary sector responses to austerity. She has worked in higher education and the voluntary sector throughout her career, writing on VCS assets, feminist responses to austerity and sustainable livelihoods. She also owns The Volunteer Training Company, a research and training organisation that supports voluntary sector capacity building.

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Professor John Diamond is the Director of the Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice at Edge Hill University. In 2014 he contributed to the Voluntary Sector North West Report – Devolution, Our Devolution. He also worked with Paul Bunyan on the Webb Memorial Trust funded project on Fairness Commissions. John has worked with the North West Regional Youth Work Unit on a number of different initiatives, from compiling a dictionary of new terms and language for working across agencies to their Youth Parliament project and their recent report into youth employment – Simple Truths (2014). In 2015 he was invited to give the Annual Keib Thomas Memorial Lecture in London.

He is currently the national chair of a charitable organisation, the Association for Research with Voluntary and Community Organisations (ARVAC).

The Webb Memorial Trust

The Webb Memorial Trust has pursued the intellectual legacy of Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), who, together with her husband Sydney (1859–1947), embarked on a vigorous programme of social reform. Beatrice Webb had a plan of what a good society free from poverty would look like. It took 30 years for her views to be accepted, but they became the basis for Britain's welfare state, and in the 30 years following the Second World War, British society made good progress on poverty as a result.

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