

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary



What does the Big Society agenda mean to migrant communities?

The impact of the “Big Society” agenda on refugee and migrant communities (MRCOs), and the neighbourhoods in which they live is a timely and pivotal issue.

There are possibilities for the sector; but there are also concerns regarding the impact of public expenditure cuts on funding for the voluntary sector and MRCOs, and the potential for increased homelessness, worklessness, exploitation, vulnerability and destitution, and an increase in community tension. This briefing will seek to understand the concept of the Big Society, how individual refugees and migrants and MRCOs relate within it, opportunities and threats within the Big Society agenda, and possible responses.

What is the Big Society?

The Big Society concept quite rightly focuses on the importance of activities within communities which contribute to overall well-being (or happiness). Big Society is about rebalancing the relationship between government and Civil Society. In Conservative thinking, Civil Society comprises, enterprises, associations which create and represent common association and inspire common allegiance. Besides religious and community organisations, civil society incorporates enterprises, the institutions of law, civil liberties as well as less obvious forms of associations such as marriage. The Big Society agenda, including the economic and welfare strategies, encourages autonomy, and motivates participation whilst militating aggressively against dependency, passivity and the activities of a centralising government.

The Big Society is a counter to managerial styles of government as part of a radical agenda of economic and social reform. The approach to the economy and the social fabric are inter-related. Economic policy has a distinct social agenda and is intrinsic to the Big Society concept, shifting responsibility from the state to the individual and the community.

Individual refugees and migrants and MRCOs within Civil Society

Refugees, migrants and the sector which seeks to address their concerns and amplify their voice are no strangers to Civil Society. Few refugees or migrants expect the UK government to provide for them. The evidence shows that individuals work hard, often in poor conditions, and many are entrepreneurial. Literature on MRCOs describes them as myriad, often small scale, many dependent upon volunteers and funnelling social capital. They are significant bridges to the wider community, producing leaders who not only give voice to refugee and migrant concerns but also progress into other leadership functions in commerce, public sector and third sector and civic leadership.¹

Opportunities and threats within the Big Society agenda

The Big Society is a high risk strategy. While we are moving away from a top-down approach, bottom-up refugee and migrant communities are being disempowered by the speed of the changes and the bluntness of governmental instruments.

The renewed understanding and emphasis on Civil Society represents the major opportunity for the sector. In theory, the Big Society agenda is one which should be very encouraging to the refugee and migrant sector. The Big Society militates against the traditional NGO approach which identifies needs and barriers and presses government to solve them through direct service provision, funding or policy change. Civil Society will have to find solutions of its own, independent of government. Some will be able to do that and some will not.

¹ Source: Sue Lukes, Vaughan Jones and Yesenia San Juan (2009) The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; David Griffiths, Nando Sigona and Roger Zetter (2005). Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, Resources and Social Capital, Policy Press; Geraldine Blake et al (2008) Community engagement and community cohesion, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; A McCabe and J Phillimore (2009) Exploring below the radar: issues of theme and focus, Third Sector Research Centre; Jane Foot (2009) Citizen involvement in local governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; J Perry and A Azim El-Hassan (2008) More responsive public services? A Guide to commissioning migrant and refugee community organisations, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The government's localism programme gives scope for communities to shape local priorities, service delivery and determine who provides services.

However; the mechanisms for doing this are unclear at a time when public services are reduced, budgets are very tight and many public bodies are downsizing. Evidence shows that refugees and migrants already find it hard to negotiate especially where there are power imbalances between local residents.

The biggest threat to refugee and migrant communities comes from the impact of the economic strategy. It is widely recognised that economic policies will have a disproportionate impact on the poorest including many refugees and migrants. The expenditure cuts are seen as permanent not temporary. Can the combined forces of volunteering, community organising, social entrepreneurship and philanthropy overcome entrenched and persistent poverty and the differential disadvantage which migrants and refugees experience?

The abandonment of the socio-economic dimension of the Equalities Act suggests that our mutual prosperity is the responsibility of individuals and Civil Society and not government. Ultimately, it is socio-economic improvement which migrant and refugee communities need most of all and to which the sector is mutually committed.

The Big Society requires the effective functioning of the institutions of society with limited government interference. An essential glue of Civil Society is advocacy for those who are discriminated against or who because of their vulnerability are unable to access their civil liberties, human rights or function with dignity in society. The reduction in advice services, legal aid, English language courses, and entitlements to health care undermine the effective operation of a connected societal approach. These aspects of Civil Society perhaps more than any other require state assistance – and their withdrawal raises issues of legitimacy and democracy.

The Big Society agenda is not a new package of funding. There are some resources on offer; including: 5,000 professional community organisers, Big Society Bank providing loan finance, neighbourhood grants, community service by civil servants, an annual Big Society Day and funding for social entrepreneurs. This will not amount to the resources to support the refugee and migrant sector in its current form.

Opportunities for future funding may lie in outsourced public services, for example in the areas of health inequalities or the Work Programme. However; the best of these opportunities will be taken up by private companies or quasi not-for-profits.

The pace of change is fast. The lack of a planned transition means many Big Society type organisations, including MRCOs, may not survive the move.

Questions for the sector

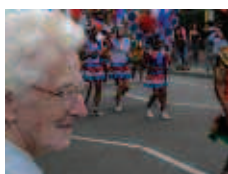
The Big Society agenda highlights some tension points: within the voluntary sector; between larger providers of public services and smaller community based organisations; community development work and community organising, and social enterprise and charity. Can the sector be creative in refocusing in response to a rapidly changing operating environment? Can the sector retain its core elements: social bridging activities, community development, direct services and voice? Can we take the opportunity to build a new agenda of protection against impoverishment, denial of rights and exploitation which recognises the weak starting point of many refugees and migrants?

The growing pressure on public services at local level places a responsibility on the refugee and migrant sector to play its full part in local mechanisms. Whilst MRCOs cannot claim to be the solution, they should not exclude themselves from relevant partnerships or from initiating them.

Conclusion

The Big Society is asking a great deal of individuals and communities. This is a new social contract which requires active rather than passive recipients of governmental planning and policies. Refugee and migrant communities are survivors and creative and the sector can adapt to the new environment. However; we must be fearful for the vulnerable if the demand on refugee and migrant communities is too great and resources too few.

Vaughan Jones is the Chief Executive of Praxis. He was involved in its formation and has worked for the entire 25 years of its history. He came to Praxis with a youth work background and was the Director of New Horizon Youth Centre for young homeless in Central London. He has also worked for Barnardos and as a teacher. Until recently he was the Chair of Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants. He has served on many Tower Hamlets committees relating to homelessness and race equality as well as participating fully in the strategic partnerships, especially Tower Hamlets Homelessness Partnership, the Refugee Forum and the Living Well CPAG.



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