FAITH BASED
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NETWORKuk

# Faiths, Social Action and Big Society

Report from the Faith Based Regeneration Network UK
National Conference held on 19th October 2010

# Quotes

'We need a national network of faith based regeneration networking in the way FbRN does.'

Neil Jameson: Executive Director, Citizens UK

'There is no doubt that, not just this year or this decade or even this century, faith based groups have made, and continue to make, a tremendous contribution to civil society.'

Andrew Stunell: Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Communities and Local Government

'The Big Society is about building the capacity, the imagination and the innovative skills to make sure that every community in the country has the opportunity to develop and thrive.'

Andrew Stunell

'Religion always has been a very significant part of our civic culture and our inheritance and I hope very much that it will continue to be so.'

Andrew Stunell

'Big society wouldn't work at all if faith groups were not fulfilling their objectives.'

Bharti Tailor: Secretary General, Hindu Forum of Britain

'From different religious perspectives, human flourishing and well-being is crucial.'

Richard Farnell: Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University

'We only flourish in family, community and wider society if we are valued and are convinced that we matter.'

Richard Farnell

'My understanding of the Big Society is one where support and infrastructure is not clear or available, capacity is limited and people have to be self dependent.'

Participant

'Big Society may be a political slogan but it is not a bad thing at all. It will make people talk, exchange, listen, communicate with each other and may lead to social action and justice.'

Participant

'The faith communities share a fundamental belief in the connectedness of all humanity which is the spiritual heart of any real Big Society, so faith based groups would want cohesion to be at the heart of any society however big or small.'

Participant

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# Introduction

Big Society has been a phrase high on the government agenda since the Coalition Government was formed in May 2010. While there had been a lot of debate and printed matter on what Big Society might mean there had been little thought about its implications for faith communities. Faith communities are present in every community, whether geographic communities or communities of interest. They are often to the fore in tackling issues of local deprivation, and making life better in some of the most disadvantaged communities in the UK.

Faith communities offer a unique role because: they are rooted in the communities, living alongside neighbours sharing the same joys and struggles; they are motivated by principles of faith that seek the well-being of all people regardless of personal belief; they hold a range of skills, knowledge and expertise which equips them to identify and meet local needs, championing causes of justice, equality and fairness; they have national structures which offer support, some resources, and entrée into sustainable partnerships.

In short Big Society needs faith communities if it is to succeed.

The conference drew over 100 participants from a wide variety of faith traditions. The coverage included all regions of England, and there were representatives from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The majority of conference participants were local faith based social action practitioners. There was also representation from the regional faith forums, national faith bodies, national partner organisations such as Inter Faith Network, Community Matters and Community Development Foundation, as well as from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

# Section 1 Speakers and Project Presentations

## Organising for a Change

**Neil Jameson: Executive Director for Citizens UK.**

The idea of community organising, but not the term, dates back to before 1945. It is a very simple idea of getting ordinary people organised, educated and agitated for change with the result that people grow and develop themselves, as well as achieve the change they want to see.

John Stuart Mill said 'that which people get for themselves is more important than that which they are given.' This has been a guiding principle for Community Organising.

We are people of faith, and frankly, faith means we get out and do the business. Faith means we raise our own money. Some of us have become too dependent on government handouts.

Community Organising has roots in faith. It is a political movement for change. Community Organising in its current form was established some 25 years ago through an alliance with faith organisations and trade unions focused on civil society. Faith organisations were chosen because their membership held strong values and were well organised, so that people would pay to be part of a movement. In London, Community Organising has always been through a multifaith organisation (TELCO). London Citizens, which grew from TELCO is the largest civil society organisation in the UK.

Community Organisers aim:

- to develop the capacity of people to participate in public life
- to strengthen their institutions and the process of associational life

There are no individual members because we are better in a collective than as individuals alone.

Community Organising is about faith in action. Being a Community Organiser is a vocation not just a job. Every holy book says we are judged by **what we do** not by what we say. Therefore we need agitators in religious institutions who ask: **'How are we doing social justice?'**

Faith is under considerable pressure and we need to demonstrate our strength in organising for social action. The adversary is the market and the pressure the market puts people under. We don't want to destroy the market, we need to humanise the market, and remind the state that it has a role to work for our interests, not the interest of the market. You need power to make things change. Civil society is the least powerful of the three sectors so we need to learn from the other sectors.

Community Organising organises people to deal with the big issues which for people of faith is based in a fight for justice. It works with self-interest; people can continue to attend places of worship. It works to understand levels of power so programmes to bring about change are realistic and achievable: **change the things you can.**

## Keynote address: The Role of Faith in Big Society

**Andrew Stunell: Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Communities and Local Government**

The first thing to say is that there is no doubt that, not just this year or this decade or even this century, faith based groups have made, and continue to make, a tremendous contribution to civil society. In fact, the cynic might say, quite a lot bigger than government itself. There is an instinctive tradition of civic participation by very many faith based groups. Sometimes that is expressed in participation in democratic institutions. It is also about society at large and I think that every faith without exception has a strong thread in its knowledge, writings, and practice, of charitable giving and charitable support. So from that point of view I think faith will have an understanding of what the government is trying to do with the Big Society.

The Big Society is about building the capacity, the imagination and the innovative skills to make sure that every community in the country has the opportunity to develop and thrive. The government is setting out on a bold course to try to make sure that we help communities and individuals to do exactly that. We think there are three big areas where government has a part to play.

One of those is in **public sector reform**. What is it that the state and public bodies can do and should do for communities and individuals? I prefer to say that what we are trying to do is turn the power structures upside down so that instead of everything being decided and controlled from the top it's decided and controlled from the bottom. Instead of top down, bottom up.

The second strand is **community empowerment**. How we can work with others to achieve what we want to do. We've developed a position in this country where almost nobody will do anything unless they've been told it's all right to do. There is a sense in which we have got to a point where everything is either compulsory or prohibited. There's nothing, or not enough, in the middle, and community empowerment is about leaving enough space between compulsory and prohibited, for civic action and individuals to thrive. That means making sure we've got the capacity, imagination and the motivation to succeed.

The third thread is **philanthropic action** – what we can do for other people. Of course the faith groups that we represent were doing this long before the state was, and may well be there long after the state has gone. What we are trying to do is discover, rediscover and encourage something that has always been there, which is people helping other people.

What's the government going to do to make some of this happen? We need to ensure people have the knowledge, information and understanding, which allow them to take informed and sensible decisions. We are doing this by **making government more transparent at every level**.

We are making sure, as far as we can in very difficult financial times, that there is going to be some **social finance** available to kick start and to oil the wheels of this process. There will be a Big Society bank launched next year, which is planned to be a wholesale bank that will help retail banks be more pro voluntary sector.

There is a shortage of capacity, and we think the route to build capacity is a **radical decentralisation**, so from now on you decide; we are not going to tell you. I am sure that's going to be a challenge to organisations and civic groups of all sorts.

The department will publish, in November, a **new localism bill** which is going to give a lot of extra powers and a lot of extra initiative to local authorities and through them local communities. I think that could produce the first step on a very enabling transformation of the relationships between the top the middle and the bottom, such that in ten years time we will see them as three important and necessary parts of the same thing: building up communities, building up society, right across the country.

I'll draw your attention to three things in the Bill that I think may be of particular interest.

- A community right to buy assets that are considered necessary to be kept open for civic use. A right for the community to step in and say we think we can do that, we can manage that, we can provide, for our local community, what is needed.

- A right to challenge to run state services to local authority or for that matter national government, to say to the public sector, we think our community could get a better service if we took part, and let that happen; so a right to challenge to run parts of the service delivery locally.

- Thirdly, the community right to build.

Three things where we are changing the way that the third sector, faith communities and communities themselves will relate to the public sector and specifically to local government.

There will be a challenge to see how we can do more with less money. My experience of my faith group is that we have always tried to do more with less. We're used to it, we're good at it.

Government needs to find new ways of linking up services which are currently organised in separate silos and unlock the cash for new innovations. We are looking for something that goes beyond a little bit of this and a little bit of that to something that is fundamentally and completely different. **Where do faith groups fit in? You are already at the heart of the project, already at the heart of local communities, you are part of the solution and I hope that you will be enthusiastic participants in the framework that we are setting out.**

Now, I said something about the silos between government departments. There are silos in the faith communities as well. There are some silo edges and silo walls between ourselves as well as between the different levels and just as, as a Government Minister, I want to see the state work in a more creative and joined up fashion, can I dare to suggest perhaps you could as well?

It's about people from different backgrounds working together to tackle shared social problems. We want to encourage faith groups to open up the work they do in communities where it's appropriate, to those who don't share their views and of course there are many excellent examples of that from many different faiths already. There are good, very good examples of faith based providers who are already thinking flexibly and reaching out beyond their own natural constituencies whether that is of faith or location. When it comes to the participation of faith based groups it is absolutely the case that this Government wants to make sure that is wholeheartedly encouraged and endorsed by both central and local government and I hope by you as well. We don't have any truck with any of the sillier, what we might call 'jobs worth', kind of discussions that there have been in some cases between local authorities and faith groups about service delivery.

Religion always has been, a very significant part of our civic culture and our inheritance, and I hope very much that it will continue to be so. We've got a practical example of course in Inter Faith Week. From the government's point of view, Inter Faith Week will be an important focus for extending that conversation, and of course it's the case that Inter Faith Week this year is focusing on social action. The government, despite the financial situation, is continuing the Faith In Action schemes for this year, and over 400 projects are up and running.

My challenge to you today is to explore what we can do together to create the conditions in which your spirit of adventure, of service and social justice is affirmed and can flourish without hindrance, and in tough economic times. We will need to focus on real solutions rather than simply identifying problems, of which there are many. We've got to find the solutions, work together to achieve those solutions and I am looking forward very much to doing that.

Big Society isn't about following a code of practice. It isn't about listening carefully to what the Minister says and then going home and doing it. It's about empowering communities, empowering societies and letting them get on with it.

## A reflection on the learning from the morning session.

**Richard Farnell: Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University**

Richard identified three things that are evident about the way society currently functions:

- we live in a society driven by market and consumerism
- we have become a society of individualism, believing we can make choices and sort things out on our own
- we lack community relationships

He went on to say that while we need the activists we also need more voices off stage arguing for wider concepts of human flourishing and human well-being. We only flourish in family, community, wider society if we are valued and are convinced that we matter. To know we matter, we require human relationships that are positive, creative and allow us to be generous.

From all different religious perspectives, human flourishing and well-being is a crucial theme and needs to be in the focus of our discussions.

He gave the conference a question to consider:
How do we understand the contribution we do make to local communities?

## Faiths and Big Society

**Bharti Tailor: Secretary General, Hindu Forum of Britain**

Big Society is the government giving communities a chance to tackle issues that matter to them. There is no clear definition; the concept is not fleshed out. Each community is free to put its own interpretation on it.

Big society is more about looking after one another rather than expecting the state to do it. Most faiths talk about looking after each other and being good neighbours so they already 'do' Big Society. But in this new scenario the voluntary and community sector are expected to do more including picking up what government stops doing.

Many people of faith volunteer as part of personal and spiritual development giving time to faith and non-faith groups. Globally, in countries without a welfare state, it is the faith organisations that cope with people in need.

Big Society wouldn't work at all if faith groups were not fulfilling their objectives. Established faith groups in Britain have structures to provide systematic and sustained welfare to the needy. So what is new in the concept of the Big Society?

We need to recognise an important difference because Britain now hosts many faith communities who do not work in the same manner as established faiths, for example with no hierarchical structure. Newer faiths need national structures to help build capacity, so they can deliver Big Society locally. How are we to do that without funding from national bodies? We need some direction from central government to enable local government and communities to act, so that some newer faith communities that are struggling can set up national structures, which will provide the guidance we need.

How does a migrant community get a fair share of welfare and Big Society? To proceed without them will increase inequality. If the effect of the Big Society were every man/ community/town for itself the danger would be that we could end up with a disjointed society. Faiths and government have a major role to ensure this doesn't happen. Stronger faith structures must not leave behind the newer weaker structures. They must not expect the minority 'other' to conform to the majority/established way of thinking.

We flourish when we know we matter – what happens to those in communities who are not linked to faith or voluntary groups? How do we meet the needs of those people who do not know that they matter?

## Examples of Faith Based Social Action

### 1 **Gurmel Singh**: Sikh Community Youth Services, Nottingham

The charity was established in 1988 by a group of parents with young children. They had three principles and those three principles were as true in 1988 as they are today:

- We are independent
- We are going to be self reliant
- We are responsible for the quality of our experiences and the quality of our lives.

These principles have become our guiding principles because we do believe that without them we will become dependent and we will become reliant on others.

In 2001 we took a very conscious decision that a number of areas of our work needed to be much more outward looking so there are four themes where all our work is very much outward looking:

- Improving relationships with other communities
- Outward reaching to the lives of others i.e. non-Sikhs
- Bringing people together
- Community cohesion.

In terms of **improving relationships** the bulk of our work is bound with agencies and with schools in areas of how people can better understand the Sikh community, the Sikh culture the Sikh heritage. We regularly visit schools; our volunteers will go to a school, take assembly, take a PSE session; we will host students on placements; we will host groups at Gurdwaras. We regularly input into the diversity training of police, army and fire service. Most importantly, we have set up a national Sikh museum in Derby and this museum is funded one hundred percent by voluntary effort, the whole building. It actually cost a mere £50,000 to set it up and it is staffed by volunteers. It proved to be very popular in terms of sharing with the wider community. This has brought a number of agencies, particularly the armed forces, very close to the Sikh community.

The second thing is **contributing to the life of others**. In particular we wanted to make sure that Sikh young people were actually taking active steps to contribute to the lives of other people at the global level. For the past twelve years Sikh young people have been fundraising for Children in Need. Whenever there is a global disaster we expect our young people to be mobilised, to fundraise for the benefit of other people. We have several performing arts groups of young people, we invest in them and they perform in any multicultural civic types of events and that is their way of giving back to the community. Blood donating sessions are proving to be very popular and very regular. These are some of the ways we try to contribute to the lives of other people.

The third area is **bringing people together** and we have to do this very actively. We now have over 100 women from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities who regularly meet, share their festivals, discuss their religious beliefs, and they regularly socialise. We changed our all-Sikh football team. We said from now on if football teams are to be fair you really must have people from other communities in the teams. Later on this year the young people are organising Inter Faith events with other young people and this for us is really good news because we find that young people are crossing barriers of tradition.

The last thing is **community cohesion** and I can share quite an interesting story with you, which is based on some of the comments that other speakers have made. We are based in an old primary school and the facility is shared by eight different community organisations and they come in all colours shapes and sizes. They have been together for nearly 20 years in a single complex. The community between them has brought £500,000 of capital investment into a council facility.

Just before the elections the council decided to serve us all notice, they were going to sell the building, so what did we do? We organised, we educated and we agitated. The campaign was hard because of the back drop of all the local authority cuts, people were really saying to us, "you've got no chance", but, when you saw the Sikh drummers with the African-Caribbean steel drummers, on the same streets, holding hands, I can tell you it focused the media and it also focused the local politicians. There was a challenge for us as well because these eight different community organisations and different communities have had to learn how to work together. The view from the council was 'show us that you are capable of coming together and organising yourselves to be able to run this complex'.

That's what we've done and now sessions are taking place with the council to finalise the details of the transfer of a council asset back to the communities for the communities to manage. So I think it can be done. I do appreciate we are going through a recession, but we must have faith, because isn't that what faith communities are about?

## 2 Janet Johnstone, Karen Andrew: Faiths4Change, Liverpool

### Have faith in the Big Society

This project highlighted what faith groups offer to their local communities and potential partners:

- Local knowledge
- Networks of support
- Volunteers
- Facilities
- Faith solution to mend broken Britain
- Togetherness through inter faith networks.

They asked 'Why does the model work?' and had three answers to offer:

- Faith groups bring people together to discuss and then plan for the changes that need to happen
- All the Holy Books tell us we need to work together and look after the environment
- Faith groups empower people through training and develop sustainable projects to bring resolution to local issues.

## 3 Jewish Volunteering Network

The conference saw part of a video created by the Jewish Volunteering Network to promote the breadth and depth of volunteering opportunities within the Jewish community. The film featured an interview with Zalman Finn (Zalmi) and the Chairman of the Network Susan Winton. Zalmi described why he volunteers with the charity Camp Simcha which provides a range of care for children with terminal or life threatening illnesses. Zalmi acts as a 'Big Brother' to the child he supports, making regular weekly contact as well as taking the child out and visiting the home so the parents can go out. Many charities provide similar care, but the Jewish values of Camp Simcha make it a popular choice for Jewish families, ensuring that faith values are at the heart of voluntary care.

The video featured award winners from a wide range of volunteering categories. Zalmi won the youth category. He demonstrated in the video his passion for his volunteering role, which stemmed from his personal faith values and the values of the Jewish community.

## Share it forward – a proposal to develop volunteering among young people of faith.

**Phil Henry: Director of the Multi Faith Centre at the University of Derby**

Volunteering fits in a framework of community development and regeneration. The impact of volunteering in faith communities was assessed through research commissioned by Volunteering England carried out by De Montfort University in 2008. It was found that the main motivations for volunteering are:

- Giving something back to community
- Helping others in expressing solidarity
- Meeting needs
- Seeking change
- Speaking up for oppressed groups
- Gaining skills
- Enhancing personal profile

The idea of 'Share it forward' came about following a number of pilot projects (part two of research) and focused on volunteering among young people in different faith communities.

'Share it forward' is a simple idea drawn from the American concept of Pay it Forward. The learning from one volunteering experience is shared with another group or with individual young volunteers to enable them to develop volunteering in their own community.

It will include:

- Facilitating other faith infrastructure organisations with their work
- Providing leadership training to young people
- Learning workshops
- Developing Share it forward plans initiated by the original pilot projects
- Providing initiative and incentive where there is already a will to develop
- Use social networking as a campaigning tool with interactive webpage

The project is currently in the formation stage and is being created by the Multi Faith Centre at the University of Derby, and Volunteering England.

Contact Phil Henry for more details mfc@derby.ac.uk

# Section 2 Key Learning from the Café Style Discussions

The café style discussion sessions formed the main focus of the conference and centred around key questions:

- What does Big Society mean?
- Can Big Society help address the needs of communities?
- Are faith based groups part of Big Society?
- What can faith based groups offer to Big Society?
- What help do faith based groups need to participate more fully in Big Society?

We firstly summarise the key learning points from the sessions and then, below, provide a fuller account of each discussion.

Please note: the opinions and views represented here are those expressed by the conference participants, as far as possible in the words they themselves used. They do not necessarily represent the FbRN view. On some points there was a difference of opinion expressed by different participants; these have been reported as they were expressed.

# Summary of key learning points from the discussion sessions

## Government

1. There is still a lot of confusion and uncertainty about what Big Society means.
2. Government will contribute to Big Society through public sector reform, community empowerment and philanthropic action. However there is concern that the Big Society and Community Organising are imported American concepts
3. There is a need for the government to listen to faith groups and positively promote the contribution faith makes to civil society
4. We recognise the market not the government as the adversary. Consumerism has led to individualism and fragmentation of community, which needs to be rebuilt.
5. There is concern about increasing inequality within communities.

## Faith communities

1. Faith based organisations are involved in both local social action and political action for change. Faith based organisations need to organise, educate agitate for positive change to the benefit of the local community. An independence from government is important to be able to stand with the marginalised, critique policy, and campaign for change.
2. All the Holy books teach the importance and necessity of social action as a demonstration of faith. We are people of faith, which means we get on and do it because of our faith. A lot of current welfare provision originated in faith action including community organising. Faith groups have been doing faith based social action for a very long time. They are trusted by local people and local agencies because they know what works and how to engage locally.
3. Faith based social action takes time because changing culture takes time. People cannot just 'help themselves' there are a lot of reasons why people find themselves in hard situations; there is a need for understanding and respect. Faith based organisations offer people respect and value, these are essential to bring about change.
4. Faith communities generate large numbers of volunteers. There is a concern about the numbers of volunteers, their ability to commit over time, the support they receive and the accountability structures. The reduction of finance and support is a real concern, faith based organisations cannot run on nothing, volunteers are not free. We require sound governance structures and accountability. We need training to deliver professional services. There is a whole range of practical questions about cost, permission giving, accountability, support, legislation and professionalisation, which need answers.
5. We all need to understand the structures and ways of working of minority faith groups. Big Society can be seen as a western, Christian, public school middle class concept.
6. Faith based organisations need confidence to act out of their faith values. They need to develop more shared faith based social action and to create stronger partnerships with other agencies.

# Learning from the café style discussions

## What does Big Society mean?

### 1 It is a vision or philosophy

- Big Society is top down ideologically led. It is an imported concept from the USA. Big Society as a standalone philosophy is not the same as Big Society in the context of spending review. Its aim is for individuals or communities to do things for themselves, this needs a strong ideology to motivate and energise people. Questions were raised about a vision for a good society where hope and reality meet.
- There were concerns about whose vision would be implemented and where the checks and balances lie, which are essential for sustainability. It is questionable. If it is a value system we share, we need its assumptions challenged and to test if the general public is particularly concerned.
- And a word of caution: do we ignore our prophetic calling when we embrace governmental or national trends wholesale, however good that trend maybe?

### 2 It is a government agenda

- Big Society is a cover up for dismantling many of the good things that are already happening. It is about minimalising government but not answering questions about statutory responsibilities. It is a way of shifting responsibility and cost from state to the voluntary or faith sector. It is a contradictory idea, for example passing legislation without consultation, while promoting consultation within local government. Many policy areas are being badged under Big Society including such issues of housing and the fear is that the poor will suffer.
- It was felt that Big Society could be a conscious break from 'there's no such thing as society' of Thatcher, or that it can also be seen as affirming it. It can be described as a knee jerk reaction to the alleged nanny state. Questions were asked of government about the meaning of democracy: Does empowerment mean democracy? A massive culture change is proposed which will take time to embed, government need some realism and relativity of the situation.
- Who in national or local government will give up power, and who empowers so that the community gets support to use power wisely and constructively?

### 3 The sharing of scant resources

- It is a great theme but it can't work without financial support and expertise. It should mean people having the capacity and resources to engage in shaping and developing their community. Where will we get the funding for the expertise needed to help vulnerable people to be part of OUR society?
- We have no strategy for implementation. How do we know when it starts? How it works? Who is responsible, especially for its function? Where is the money for its development? It means cuts, not just of money but to planning and research. We need training for volunteers, free help to achieve quality standards, recognition for volunteering, funding for councils for volunteer service. Need training to deliver or educate us for example, who will organise and co-ordinate community organisers? Currently there is no job description for community organisers
- A positive aspect should be encouraging people to do things for themselves and be less reliant on state structures. This will require more interaction between all groups not just faith groups.

### 4 It questions the use of power and accountability

- We need a process of implementation, for example there is no clarity about mentoring, evaluation, accountability. We need mechanisms to monitor general empowerment. Co-operation not competition needs support and accountability
- Inequality and fragmentation cannot be overcome by funding alone.

### 5 Working differently

- We are doing it already. We deliver a spectrum of activity from small acts of kindness to specialist agencies fragmented from each other. We need local infrastructure organisations to build and bridge networks across barriers for example, more cross sector partnerships; more faith based conferences (4 per year)
- It is forcing me to think whether I have to join the market, and run a business when I could be paid to help my community, so Big Society may challenge vocation and calling to community based social action.
- Faith based workers' relationships with people transform lives and create a large impact in terms of life change in community. Should we continue to tell our own stories with integrity, and focus less on changing the world?

### 6 Communities standing together

- If we are recognised as a sector, we now need our best communicators to interpret our practice showing the connections and implications of our practice to a wider audience. This challenges faith communities to develop more links and networks. We need political operators to connect into power structures Networking is vital and doesn't necessarily cost much.
- Is it empowering for us, an opportunity to evaluate, listen, communicate, and share; to use the strength and interaction we have and encourage clusters of activities, projects, community. It might make us work together and get rid of duplication. We need more co-operation, less competition more participation from those who feel excluded. The other side to this is to ask the question where is community togetherness and co-operation? There may be a hardening of attitude – why should I do something for nothing to help the state. I may have just lost my job because of the recession, which was not of my making. We need to be prepared for dissatisfaction as well as opportunity.
- We'll lose our expertise base if staff go. We can't rely on volunteers to have this expertise. If the state does less we will need more infrastructure support from the voluntary sector.

## 7 Anger about Big Society

- Affirms and reinforces Thatcherite 'no society'. So there is an imperative and challenge to present other models of Big Society. This is a dangerous imparting of assumption and models from USA, a minimal state demanding maximum philanthropy.
- There is scepticism about the idea of shifting of responsibilities recognizing that if things work well then government will easily claim back the initiative because there is no structure. There is concern about issues under the banner such as the removal of regional housing strategies.
- What should it mean? It is setting the question "how do we see society and what sort of society do we want?" And undermining those organisations that have been doing Big Society work for years. What about areas where there are no 'good groups' working. Who will look after these areas and these people? It could be more competitive perhaps divisive in the long term for community groups. Those who shout the loudest may benefit over those silent voices leading to greater inequality.

## 8 Statements

- So what does it mean – no one knows; no great revelation. If you don't do it then it won't happen. If you want it – do it, if it doesn't happen then it is your fault. We can define Big Society to mean what we'd like it to mean, or what it should mean, but that carries the danger of us appearing to endorse something without intending to.
- The Big State can't provide as before. Big Society is a description of society whose government is less directly involved. Targets a free society with fewer restrictions in contrast to Labour's more prescriptive approach.
- Big Society means all sections of communities: articulate and voiceless have the same chance to get involved in civil society decisions. To build the kind of Big Society we all want, our actions and practice need to be underpinned by the values of Community Development's national occupational standards. A big Society needs an equal society not an unequal one.

## Can Big Society help address the needs of communities?

### 1 Yes but:

- Big Society can help address the needs if there is an awareness of real needs and services required. If there is help with boundaries created by regulations and the extra cost entailed. Big Society requires personal, faith group and country acknowledging and taking responsibility for meeting needs.
- We need to deconstruct Big Society and replace it with volunteering so, the question is, 'how does volunteering help address needs, what is needed to make it possible and where are the new volunteers going to come from?' People in work will be working longer and harder and will have no time or energy. Yes, there needs to be promotion of benefits to volunteers, but with realism, volunteers not being paid cannot be relied on 24/7. Where are the checks to ensure that volunteers are suitable for the tasks? You can't do without expertise, support and structures. Volunteers need help otherwise the project will collapse, and then who is accountable?

### 2 No because:

- Citizenship won't be radical enough. Opportunities are available but Big Society is not the answer in the short term, or it needs certain conditions to make it possible. There needs to be a prodding to promote social consciousness. Big Society cannot meet spiritual or emotional needs
- The economic and structural inequalities of society need sorting out first. There is a paradox of the Big Society joined up approach versus completely market driven forces. Tensions arise for people in work having to work harder and longer, versus being able to do more in their community. Where is time for families?
  This could be a recipe for anarchy with the government off-loading its responsibility. What happens when it all falls apart? Who and what picks up the bill? The local government have experience and knowledge that needs to be harnessed. There needs to be accountability.

### 3 It is a government concept

- Big Society is small government. Small government is about an economy of delivery through philanthropy, volunteering, community service delivery. Swapping central government for local government is still government. There is a fundamental conflict of policy between devolution of local authority (Tory) and empowering local communities (Lib Dem). The issue of local democracy remains unresolved, what is the role of locally elected representatives? Much of this is driven by the producer interest with the public interest, not community interest.
- The horizons of government ministers are limited to the rich and secure. So are they even interested in community needs? Big Society is modelled on public school, Christian, middle class way of doing things, it is patronising and causes problems for others. It is a cultural way of doing things. Eastern and Southern philosophies treat society from different standpoints. We need to challenge the restrictive regulations and bureaucracy. Is it possible to gain a balance in our communities between too much intervention and not enough or appropriate styles of intervention?

### 4 Government needs to listen

- Only if government listens even when a slightly different language is being spoken. The needs of communities need to be listened to in the way those communities express them and see them.
- How are government ministers listening and learning? Work of voluntary faith based organisations needs to be valued and understood by government and council so lessons are learned.

### 5 What about legislation?

- Who will regulate Big Society? Big Society can help by reducing regulations. Who deals with insurance, liabilities and sustainability? Who will oversee the brokering of partnerships between faith and other groups? Transfer of assets to community groups, creates capacity skills issues, is this really about transfer of liabilities. There is a need for intermediary bodies (see Development Trust Assoc. Website http://www.dta.org.uk/ for idea). Legislation has implications for how we function as faith organisations for example, are local communities being represented just by the church? There is a need to be more entrepreneurial (fleet of foot) willing to partner with others.
- If there is no organisation or eloquent group of people to organise/ affirm/ bring together people then some communities will get lost with their needs. Consider anti-discrimination legislation, will this happen in Big Society. We (government and society) need a strategy to deal with the inevitable anarchy as a result of the cuts to keep the Big Society viable. There are examples of cross sector action that have successfully changed legislation; but will this be true for the small groups facing closures? For example youth service used to be a statutory responsibility now it is not. Who is responsible for young people now and who will support faith based youth activities? It is not all negative but does need thinking through.

### 6 Inequalities still remain

- Big Society will suit middle class areas with capacity but what about other areas and cultures. It will encourage a gated culture. There is a big danger that minority communities may be marginalised by Big Society. We need to get into other people's cultural shoes and see things from their perspective, and understand what is important in their lives. My understanding of the Big Society is one where support and infrastructure is not clear or available, capacity is limited and people have to be self-dependent. It will meet the needs of the rich, the influential, the represented, i.e. all those who can make the right connections.
- Inequality is the biggest issue in the country. Inequality happens when we ignore each other's basic human needs. The billionaire pop star has the same isolation problem as a poor homeless person. Who will address the inequalities that will evolve? There is more inequality, fragmentation and poverty now than there ever has been in spite of state intervention and public expenditure. More self-help is needed than state help and provision. Big Society and faith based groups should work to make public services more equitable. Poorer and more deprived communities are most dependent on public services. Big Society can help as it seeks to take away dependency on grants, but it does not address consumerism and individualism, which undermine the community and create inequalities. Many communities will be too weak to benefit.

### 7 Resources are required

- There was agreement with the ideological framework but questions raised about how it is going to be resourced and the processes of implementation, evaluation and monitoring. Faith groups need resources, financial and material, for capacity building and help. For example there is a lack of funds to build social capital, so how can you attract new volunteers if time restraints are heavy? Where will the expertise and training come from; who will provide it; who will pay for it? Big Society will not address the needs if no resources are forthcoming. Big Society itself cannot meet the needs of communities unless it facilitates or empowers some people/bodies/organisations to take the place of staff as well as resourcing small scale local action that transforms life experiences.

### 8 Needs have to be discerned and addressed

- With no framework, who decides which needs are to be prioritised? There needs to be a differentiation of community needs, some are amenable to service provision by 'civil society' but many are not. For example prevention is better than only addressing crisis needs. Creating healthier communities is better than fixing broken lives. We need to understand the causes of family breakdown, isolation etc. As needs increase, will faith communities be able to respond, e.g. welcome for asylum seekers and refugees? Faith groups are glue and a constant voice raising community needs and campaigning on moral, ethical and equality values.
- Need common themes to bring people together and transcend personalised needs or needs of community. Who starts it, a community organiser? Who decides what the local needs are? We can only address all our needs when we acknowledge each other and know one another and then decide to serve one another.

## 9 Questions remain

- How inclusive and embracing is Big Society? We need a concept of right relationship. Some community organisations including faith groups within a community are more powerful and have more time, money and capacity to address the needs of that community, so other small organisations and faith groups will get left behind but want to contribute. How are these needs defined? What communities are we talking about?
- We can't buy into a concept without knowing the detailed strategy. Is the concept of philanthropy an outmoded economic model for a new idea? Is Big Society many small individuals joined together thinking in the same way for similar outcomes? Big Society is a distraction from recession, especially if all intermediary infrastructure is being eroded. More positively it could get people talking. What model of society is pre-supposed: It seems to be yet another example of an American model being central.
- Big Society may be a political slogan but it is not a bad thing at all. It will make people talk, exchange, listen, communicate with each other and may lead to social action and justice. The question really should be 'what has the government to do, especially in a time of crisis, to ensure that the needs of communities are met?' It is not enough to rely on faith groups and others to meet all the needs.

## Are faith based groups part of Big Society?

### 1 Government needs to listen to faith based groups

- Is government listening to what has been achieved? FBOs need to be brought together to talk to government so that government can realise that faith based groups' values inform positive practice
- Is government hi-jacking what faith communities do and calling it Big Society?

### 2 Government safety net

- There is a healthy scepticism about Big Society. If government withdraws from society will faith based communities find themselves doing more in a context of no safety nets?
- What is government here to do but let people get on with things? Small government is supposed to free organisations and volunteering to deliver locally. What say do FBOs have in Big Society; will this be equal to other community-based organisations?

### 3 Values

- Everyone should be part of whatever the Big Society is, including faith groups. Faith is a core that makes a community. It has a level of commitment to society that can't be replicated. Faith communities continue to model value based, long term presence within communities and remain open to change. Faith based groups should argue their value to the Big Society through their core activities (spiritual activities) and informal pastoral care. They provide ethical and moral values to society. Hence they are part of Big Society.
- The Big Society lacks vision, Faith based society has a vision. Faith groups need to be more confident about their vision and values.

### 4 Share faith understandings

- Awareness and understanding within faith communities vary which means a cohesive voice from the faith communities is not yet clear. Need to broaden the concept of faith beyond that of personal belief, encompass culture as well. There is a fear of meeting with other faiths, of being overpowered, so newly arrived groups lacking confidence and awareness need special help. They cannot participate in Big Society. Faith groups are part of Big Society but there is ignorance about cultures and beliefs of non-Abrahamic religions in NHS, local authorities, government and statutory organisations. To be successful it is essential to have basic religious literacy in institutions and government. Where are the education programmes within the faith communities? Can these be shared through knowledge transfer? Education and values need to start as soon as possible at school level. Sharing of Holy texts which speak of community engagement
- Faith communities must remain independent, at the same time they can be initiators of dialogue 'shapers' of what the Big Society becomes; being 'critical friends'. Their leaders should educate on the value of serving the community regardless of resources.

## 5 Evidence that faith groups are part of Big Society

- Faith based groups are part of the Big Society, no doubt, because they always have been and will always be an integral part of local society. They provide (and have done for centuries) moral framework and spiritual dimension to neighbourhood. In the current climate there may be the need to demonstrate evidence more strongly, based on good practice. Should we be swayed by the Big Society trend, should we set our own agendas, for example how professional do we need to be?
- It depends from which angle you look at it. Faith communities may feel separated. Big Society is not new and the risk of thinking it new is that of losing expertise, local knowledge and devaluing current work. Faith based groups come in many different shapes and sizes and can seek to serve the community in ways appropriate for them depending on who they are, how long they have been, and how confident they feel in, sharing their faith/culture with others. For example faith based groups encourage their members to serve the community as individuals, not just as groups, as part of their social action.

## 6 Need to do things differently

- How do we get equality (power in the middle) without the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction? For example will some projects and services which are needed and good go to the wall in the rush to bring on the new initiatives
- Policy, rules and regulation are needed for community groups to act as part of Big Society. Consortiums between different faiths to increase capacity to do good work, The nature of and support for FBOs will change and they will require a strong infrastructure. Where will the super capacity come from?

## 7 Volunteering

- Need to make it easier to volunteer. For example men, whether leaders of their own families, schools, mosques etc need to encourage members, including women, to be involved. Volunteering does not equal free. It costs a lot to engage volunteers, no money is forthcoming. Note there may be less volunteering in faith communities because of redundancies and people seeking work.
- Empowering community groups will lead to inequality as some will be better resourced and more articulate. Either the state has to address this (i.e. create a level playing field) or, possibly, faith groups can help to do this by strengthening the weak.

## 8 Money

- Big Society is talk and no resources, better talk about small society. If there is no money where is the billions of pounds bankers' bonus coming from? Rich list – where are the philanthropists of the 21st Century?
- Faith groups are transformative they can achieve a lot with a small amount of money in the area of Inter Faith and faith based social action. Support requires some money too, so how do we connect with 'pots of money' particularly if there is less money from faith benefactors to faith organisations?

## 9 Questions

- Big Society does not include all factions or groups as some do not feel part of society and only support their community in isolation. Giving power to community interest groups could lead to greater inequalities particularly with increased unemployment, loss of dignity, loss of income, community capacity collapse, decline of community cohesion, fear of unknown, rise of fascism leads to riots …
- Is it Big Society or small government? Is this re-inventing community? What is Big Society anyway? It could mean anything you want. There is no description of it; it's an idea or concept. It is for us to find out what it means. For example is it about philanthropy or taxation? Is there to be a transition of economy through philanthropy, volunteering service delivery? Perhaps we need to think society not Big Society.

## What can faith based groups offer to Big Society?

### 1 Spiritual values

- Depends who is asking the question, government or faith groups. Faith groups are strong (see census statistics) they are self-reliant. They need to articulate faith and spirituality more openly as the spiritual is part of our make-up as human beings, social health and common good. Faith groups have concern for justice; concern for the poor; shared values of hope, faith, peace, justice; are able to offer a sense of equality hope and guidance to all; and a sense of responsibility that can be shared more widely. Faith based groups should offer spiritual support and leadership for the social action for Big Society based on value led activity, trust, giving, service, selflessness and other issues which can improve society and community. Conscience as an antidote or balance to market driven forces.
- A multi faith approach is far less likely to arouse suspicion of evangelism than a single faith approach. We can offer opportunities to share in our rich cultural heritage through celebration of festivals e.g. diwali, holi.

### 2 Critique of government

- FBOs offer a critique of the Big Society so it can't be a cover up operation. We can keep raising key themes of connectedness and justice, and infrastructure. We can be advocates, reminding the Big Society that it has to pay attention to small societies in their particularity. Who sets the agenda? Government is defining the role, are they prepared to leave us free to follow our ethics? We may set an agenda not necessarily supported by government but socially necessary. Sometimes what we want and what communities want are at odds with government policy
- Is the Big Society about government telling us that we should be doing it all, or are we being asked whether we want things done this way? We have a bigger vision than the Government's – they don't see the local agenda. Governments come and go but faith traditions have a long view of things. We can offer continuity and assist with Big Society long-term strategy as well as short-term vision. Faith based groups must not be restricted or limited to a role assigned by government. For example we have geographical linkage across the world that is hugely valuable in this global society.

### 3 Collaboration

- Do faith groups delivering services pose a danger that they are still signing to a local government agenda? Making a difference, filling in gaps left by withdrawal of local authority ability to provide, but need to resist becoming cut price service providers
- Faith groups can work in local communities on Big Society with other local community partners. They can be a critical friend and valued partner as best practice is shared. People can be more committed to smaller organisations, not large business providers who have the capacity to out-bid others. Faith groups can work with business and make introductions to other faith groups' organisations.

### 4 Local cohesion

- The faith communities share a fundamental belief in the connectedness of all humanity, which is the spiritual heart of any real Big Society, so faith based groups would want cohesion to be at the heart of any society however big or small. A faith basis requires a need to look after the stranger in our midst. Local people trust long experience in the community of a faith based organisation. Faith groups have a local reach being part of the local neighbourhood, local people being there with local people. Localism is a positive aspect of Big Society because real local connection means developing real local relationships. Faith groups can offer a presence in every community. Faith groups bring relational, people-focused approaches to transformation i.e. small society not big society, but local impact with life-changing results. Can offer common sense and compassion and integration in terms of human rights. Innovation partnership approaches connect with local issues but how does this translate into equality? We can offer to work in unity to look at how we best approach those who, in the name of religion, preach hatred and work against the Big Society. We can offer a rational and measured response to any event that creates fear, disharmony and suspicion; can offer a commitment to work with other faiths and learn more about one another's faith; can also work with civil service and private sector in this way.
- In an environment of reducing resources – importance of demonstrating impact and being able to measure and articulate what we achieve. Captive audience, significant numbers of local residents willingly coming together in places of worship and willing to contribute to society. Encourage people to help themselves to be participants rather than consumers. This way Faith groups can keep progressing the regeneration of relationships between faith communities and the public square. We must not work in isolation, we must communicate, share ideas and good practice. Faith based groups can co-operate more; network more. Faith groups together share common ground to address inequalities. Need to be more vocal and profile work more actively.

### 5 Safe trusted spaces

- Faith based groups can talk about humanity and can create a space to do this. We can broker neutral and safe space for learning, negotiation, mediating, sharing, but must not lose a sense of how to communicate across religious/cultural, faith/non-faith boundaries.
- We are value led, not value judging, so it is about the quality of the conversation within and between faith and non-faith groups. We are experienced and credible grassroots organisations we have resources, volunteers, staff, buildings and a long term presence in communities.

## 6 Volunteers and capacity building

- Social capital is important, as we need to tap the hidden skills in the community. Faith groups have a long basis of experience on which to build social capital. Faith groups have valuable resources in volunteers who are reliable, committed and dedicated but it is important that they are supported and trained. Faith groups are keen to prevent moral decay and campaign to raise awareness and stop people on a path to social destruction Offer skilled and enabling leadership to disadvantaged communities and volunteers motivated by faith rather than money.
- New projects need appropriate lead-in times, with well thought out plans and resources. Faith groups need to support each other to identify and develop capacity and work with partners to respond to community needs. How much can we do? We are doing a great deal already research suggests that people of faith are already the most active volunteer group.

## 7 Clarification

- Is Big Society a smoke screen? Is there room for shaping Big Society or is it a fait accompli? For example, the position of women post cuts – will they be expected to do more caring at home if services are cut?
- Need to define levels and scale of faith groups; does the government understand what we look like on the ground?

## What help do faith based groups need to participate more fully in Big Society?

### 1 National and Regional Faith bodies

- Nurturing national and regional structures. We need national and regional structures as well as local groups to support, encourage and act. The Church of England should play a crucial role together with other large communities. FbRN and the Inter Faith Network for the UK are important.
- However existing denominational structures are barriers unless senior church leaders encourage local leaders to engage.

### 2 Values of faith based organisations

- Government and statutory bodies need to properly recognise the value that faith based groups bring to an issue/project. There needs to be a paradigm shift in understanding what the faith sector is and can do.
- Faith groups need to understand why they are participating and articulate with confidence the basic tenets of their faith and the impact it makes on life style. It would help if faith groups could be more confident about common values.

### 3 Credibility of FBOs

- We need to increase the credibility of faith communities and dispel the 'amateur appearance' of faith based social action. Faith based groups need help to review and understand their motivation for engaging with community and government and, the various levels of Big Society. Guidance and encouragement to participate, from their own faith leaders, would help.
- Ensure those delivering faith based services know this is to be done without overtly evangelising.

### 4 Local relationships and activities

- Someone needs to champion a dialogue on the context of Big Society in the locality. We must not throw out the area based work that has been developed over the past few years e.g. neighbourhood management. People will work, worship, interact, have their children educated in numerous local contexts. While we have centres of faith in every locality, people cross localities for different services. The importance of community space cannot be ignored.
- We have two kinds of customers: the people we serve who don't pay and the people who pay but don't receive our service. There needs to be a structure so that faith based groups can see how and where they can best serve, meeting the needs and expectations of both groups of customers. This is connected to the need to develop partnerships with local authorities and government.

### 5 Cross sector literacy and communication

- Greater religious literacy about faith, in local authorities and government, especially about capabilities and structures because we need government to respect faith based organisations and the role they can play. We also need greater religious literacy between faith groups. We need to listen particularly to the minority faiths and ensure the appropriate people provide training about minority faith beliefs and culture.
- We need greater literacy about government and civil society among faith groups – do we understand what we're letting ourselves in for?

### 6 Structure and governance

- Faith groups need some sort of structure and framework. They need professional input to ensure good governance building on the natural structures that are integral to their tradition. They need particular help with mergers.
- Structures need to include accountability, recognising the need for volunteers and that volunteers don't necessarily have consistent time to contribute, so paid staff and professional support are both required.

### 7 Training and shared practice

- Sometimes people want to start an initiative but they don't know how to ask for help. We need training in the community and up to date knowledge, capacity building around organisation and support, training to work with the media, ongoing mentoring. Services run by volunteers need resourcing professionally
- We need structure to enable us to share and emulate good practice. Our communication and networking needs to improve. We need to be able to work across faiths. We need to transfer our learning.

### 8 Resources

- We need infrastructure to encourage more involvement, and resources to run buildings for volunteers to work from. This could include faith groups sharing buildings for delivery of social action projects.
- We need financial resources. We can do a cup of tea for everyone in facilities offered by members for no money, after that to run youth activities; provide food; put on round table discussions; arts groups or any kind of social action, you need at least £50k for a worker, office and expenses. The bias against the faith sector in the funding criteria needs to be removed.

### 9 Questions

- Big Society – what is new about it, does it exist? We need government to define exactly what "Big Society" means. We need definition of the mechanics of localism and whether there is clear thinking about what Big Society means. We recognise that inequalities relate to a lack of social mobility. Is there a danger of projecting a middle class view of the world?
- What skills and research will be needed to support the Big Society, how do we connect with Higher Education?
- Multi faith conferences should be held locally for more awareness of 'haves' and 'have-nots' to help bring unity in the country. We will participate in the wider community because we all gain energy by doing so.

# Section 3 So what will Faith Based Regeneration Network do?

The evidence of the conference is that Big Society needs faith based social action if it is to succeed. The conference highlighted a number of ways in which this action might happen and a number of key points which need to be borne in mind particularly about resources. Members of the conference will take up their own learning from the day. This section outlines how FbRN will use the learning to promote the role of faith based social action in the Big Society.

**Faith based groups can offer extensive experience in community development based engagement which can ensure that community organising is sustainable in the long term.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Continue to provide community development based resources for faith based social action to develop and flourish
- Champion the role of community development among those who train community organisers.

**Faith based organisations are often well placed to act as partners in engagements with local communities.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Provide web-based resources for developing good partnerships
- Support minority faith groups who may not have the national structure to develop sustainable partnerships.

Faith based community groups provide value for and beyond money.

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Report the learning from excellent stories of faith based social action across the network, and to partners and funders beyond the network
- Advise members on new funding streams and opportunities to develop social enterprise.

**Faith based groups hold values that are essential for the well being of individuals and neighbourhoods.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Promote the values that underpin faith based social action at all levels
- Demonstrate how these values create community well being.

**Faith based projects can be the hub of community life enabling strong relationships to flourish across all divides such as age, gender, culture.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Continue to promote activities that cross community divides, such as Inter Faith Week and national campaigns
- Assist local groups to 'tell their story' in such a way as to bring influence on policy decisions.

**Faith based groups provide large numbers of volunteers in local communities.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Support local groups in creating good opportunities for volunteering
- Provide up to date information about changes in volunteering regulations.

**Faith based groups work with the most marginalised people in society and can be marginalised themselves.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Seek out and promote the good practice of small, under-represented faith based social action
- Focus particularly on the distinctive characteristics of minority faith groups seeking to establish their presence while at the same time appreciating the important social action offered in the name of the Christian Churches.

**In order to develop a context for faith based social action to play its role in Big Society, faith based groups require clear information about changes in government policies and charity law, and government needs information about the affect of policies on faith based social action.**

Faith Based Regeneration Network will:

- Provide regular policy updates and interpretations drawn from reputable sources
- Work constructively with policy makers to help develop a context in which faith based social action can flourish.