

Privatising our common wealth: what it means for charities and community groups

This is a summary version of our full paper on privatisation, including the related topics of cuts, localism and the ‘big society’, which is available from us on request. The full paper contains evidence, references and ideas for further reading. This is just the start of setting out our views on these complex matters. We want to prompt more thinking and debate and expect our views to change as we go along. Join us in these discussions on our website www.independentaction.net

Cuts and privatisation

The current government’s cuts to public services and funding to charities and community groups are an ideological decision, not an economic necessity. The nature of the cuts fits the government’s agenda of taking support away from the poor and vulnerable and privileging the rich. It is a vision of society in which public services are not a matter for the state, but operate to make profit. Where this is impossible it is up to people to provide the service for free.

Commissioning

Charitable organisations, in common with the health and education sectors, are being pushed further towards a market model. The process of commissioning, in which organisations compete to deliver a service which the government or local council wants, has replaced grants for much activity. The local charitable organisation competes with national organisations and the private sector, and the main deciding factor is cost. Commissioning is bad for the voluntary sector because it ignores local knowledge and people’s assessment of their needs, gives the largest and most corporate organisations the advantage, leads to cutting of corners and bad employment practices, reduces the ability of organisations to campaign on policy issues, divides them from each other through competition, and undervalues what makes charities unique: motives other than profit and provision of services for people who will never be able to pay.

Localism and ‘big society’

The ‘big society’ is not a coherent plan but a government marketing term for decentralised services. It is linked to the localism bill, which promises to shift power from central government to local people, councils, charities, businesses and social

enterprises. But rather than locally-rooted independent action it means a hands-off state and an expansion of the last government's support for a powerful privatised market.

NCIA doesn't want to waste our time in discussions about how community groups and charities can be used to deliver yet another top-down government agenda, particularly one that is stifling debate about cuts and privatisation, threatening our welfare state and ignoring inequality in our society. We want local debate and political negotiation for resources not just competition for who can provide a service most cheaply. This means reclaiming our ideas and language when powerful people appropriate them rather than rushing to label ourselves as the 'big society'.

What we want

- Be confident and united: work together to explain what is different and valuable about what you do and refuse to operate in a market.
- Negotiate the terms you want with your local commissioners and challenge unfair commissioning practices.
- Speak up and tell your stories about why privatisation, 'big society' and cuts will destroy services people want and need.
- Reject 'managerialism' in your organisations: look for alternatives to top-down hierarchies, time-consuming monitoring and quality assurance and everything that takes you further from what you were set up to do.

NCIA is working on resources and information exchange to help people with all of the above. Get in touch and help us to pool our ideas. We have work at different stages on the following:

- Reasons to oppose commissioning paper
- How to negotiate with your local authority
- How to mount a local campaign
- 'Funding for independence'
- Opposing 'managerialism' in your workplace: training sessions
- Independence audits, in memoriam awards
- Manifesto for independent CVSs

Together we can keep challenging the status quo: there are other ways of organising society which encourage equality and wellbeing for everyone instead of just those who make money. Inform yourself, argue and join campaigns. You are not alone!



Cartoon: Morag MacInnes