



Social Action Solutions
Facilitating self-empowerment

Their Social Action and Ours – social change or social control?





Facilitating self-empowerment

As part of the ongoing debate on the changing relationship between citizen and State there is much interest by government and the voluntary sector in social action. The Coalition Government has 'gone large' on it with a plethora of initiatives in which social action is named as a key concept, for example the social action funds or the centre for social action or embedded in other programmes such as the National Citizens Service or the Prince's Trust.

This prompts us to ask – is social action an idea whose time has come or is there something else going on?

There are a range of programmes including Regenerate's Community Organisers based in Locality, through to the social action funding to the National Citizens Service and the Prince's Trust volunteering schemes.

The current rhetoric about social action, in its new incarnation, began in earnest prior to the 2010 election. The Conservative party's manifesto promised a new "National Citizens Service" (NCS) for 16 year-olds on the cusp of adulthood. This new service had its roots in a report, "Context, Concepts and Considerations", by the Young Adult Trust (itself pulled together in 2006 to devise the new intervention) which outlined a perceived need for marking the transition to adulthood, and identified certain characteristics desirable in a good citizen to be encouraged through the programme. These were social mixing, challenge and positive relationships with wider society, among others. A key tenet of the program was a week undertaking "Social Action" which, as the first years of the program got underway, came to manifest itself as groups of young people undertaking charitable works, often through fundraising, in their communities.

NCS was greeted with suspicion by many in the field of informal education, however the reaction of young people to the program was often positive, although whether it succeeds in its mission to produce "Young Adults" remains to be seen. Criticism that the program is prescriptive, and based on the agendas of those with power rather than a democratic, inclusive and participatory approach were rejected and a raft of new initiatives bolstering its character-building, philanthropic values; allying "good citizenship" with spending time "In the service of others".

Aside from an interim report, "In the Service of Others" by Dame Julia Cleverdon and Amanda Jordan OBE (July 2013), which was commissioned by David Cameron to explore how the government, business, the voluntary and education sectors can work together to support young people to engage in "social action", there was no overarching outline of the various interventions in this field until November 2013. "Encouraging Social Action" (Nov 2013) rectified this, detailing (often retrospectively) a strategic outline of social policies and interventions designed to support the development of





philanthropy across society. The document outlines a four-pronged approach – “Giving of Money”, “Giving of Time”, “Community Action” and “Encouraging Young People to get involved in Social Action”. It is a thorough piece of work, drawing together a number of initiatives which have, or are about to be implemented to help create the new philanthropic landscape, and as such it is comprehensive, clear in its vision, and includes practical changes and real funding opportunities to develop this work. There is little doubt that the measures in the report will make it easier to give money (for those who have it), and will increase volunteering, particularly amongst young people.

Viewing the document through the lens of the historical definition of “Social Action” however, raises a number of problems; Firstly if, as it seems, this represents a fundamental shift in the direction of social policy and funding for communities, the lack of involvement of those already engaging communities in its development is marked. Many agencies working in the field have been forced to rethink, or at least cosmetically adjust, their current programmes in order to try to access the new raft of funds aimed at developing “volunteer opportunities”. Many of the funds have been launched with little or no time for agencies to develop responsive, community-led programmes which tick the relevant boxes, however the current dearth of funds available to the third sector leaves them little choice but to patch together interventions which meet the criteria in order to access the funds. The longer term rise in the commissioning of services has been some preparation for this way of working; many organisations are now well used to attaching funders requested outcomes to their current practice. However, the new funds do nothing to create a more dialogue based approach to funding which would capitalise on the knowledge and expertise such agencies have gathered from years of listening to the communities they work with.

Secondly, and more fundamentally problematic, is the ideological path the drive to philanthropy carves out. It would be churlish to decry the encouragement of people to be more charitable with their time and money, and there is no doubt that volunteering benefits the volunteers as well as the causes they support. Volunteers gain new skills, knowledge and experiences. However, the difficulty with relying on philanthropy, which the original ideology of Social Action critically addresses at its core, is that it does nothing to address imbalances of power. In a philanthropic world those who have time or money give it, and those in need, and who are lucky enough, receive it gratefully. There is no autonomy for the powerless in philanthropy, and no benefit for those unlucky enough to be deemed by society as unworthy of charity – asylum seekers, people with ‘invisible’ disabilities, ‘welfare scroungers’ and poor families with more than two children. Social Action in its original conception addressed these problems by deliberately placing power in the hands of the powerless. In contrast many of the interventions in “Encouraging Social Action” do little other than to make dependency endemic.





A third difficulty with some of the current measures, particularly those aimed at young people, is the emphasis on the benefits of philanthropy for the people doing the volunteering. “Step up to Serve” (formally the Independent Campaign for Youth Social Action), launched by HRH The Prince of Wales states on its website;

“The most significant areas of impact are:

- Improving young people’s skills (academic, metacognitive, character capabilities) and employability;
- Strengthening social bonds and integrating young people who are on the margins, thereby reducing crime and anti-social behaviour;
- Increasing other dimensions of active citizenship, like formal political engagement;
- Better emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing which in turn leads to higher levels of educational attainment and more engagement in school.”

The idea that the “most significant” benefits of volunteering are to be felt by individual volunteers themselves is in direct opposition to the Social Action principle that collective action, by and for a community, can create real benefits for the community as a whole, through creating a greater understanding of shared problems and enacting a collective response to them. Building character through doing good deeds for others may well be valuable and beneficial, but it is not Social Action. It cannot provide the same lasting collective benefits to communities as our version of Social Action sets out to achieve.

Our version of social action was developed in Nottingham in the late 1970s. It was a critical response to the prevailing models of practice in social, youth, youth justice and community development work. What these practices had in common was:

- They operated on a deficit model
- Professionals were in control - doing to, for or on behalf of communities and service users
- Community members were passive recipients in the programmes
- The agents of change were the professionals not the service users

The models that social action challenged can be summarised as compensation, modification or reparation. All these models saw community members as being part of the problem but not potentially the people to transform the situation as the agents of change. Social action set out to change this by viewing people as experts in their own lives. Professionals negotiated a new relationship, working alongside people and facilitating them to identify and address issues and concerns that were important to them. The focus was on community members addressing root causes and creating social change for themselves. In the process they would empower themselves and their communities and learn new skills and behaviours, which could be used in other areas of their lives. Central to this was a shift of power in the relationship between professionals and the people we are paid to work with. Professionals were no longer ‘On Top’, but now need to be ‘On Tap’. This required professionals to develop new skills as facilitators rather than leaders, because the leadership now comes from the





community and group members.

To promote and develop this way of working we established the Centre for Social Action at the University of Nottingham in 1989. The Centre currently resides at DeMontfort University, Leicester.

So how does the current range of social action programmes meet up to the social change agenda?

Apart from the Locality Community Organisers, the other social action programmes that started with an agenda more geared to social change seem to be getting sucked back towards the traditional models with the professionals being in charge, and away from the community setting the agenda and taking social action for themselves. What has become the focus is the service and helping of others rather than mutuality and reciprocity. The power is shifting back to managed programmes that process and prescribe, rather than open ended community development driven by community members. The programmes gestated through current, philanthropy focussed, social policy are perhaps lacking an optimism and radicalism needed for real change, and in their place cautious, traditional values have reasserted themselves; conservative (with a big and little c) ideology is now in the driving seat and the radical sounding parts of the Big Society rhetoric are a distant memory. The term "Social Action" has been misappropriated (as was the term "Free Schools") to support an agenda which increases social control and conformity, rather than an emancipatory one based on autonomy, equality and democracy.

Social Action Solutions has launched two free to access resources for community members, practitioners, volunteers and educators. Both publications are available at:

www.socialaction.info

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