Civil Society Futures

Research Report Summary
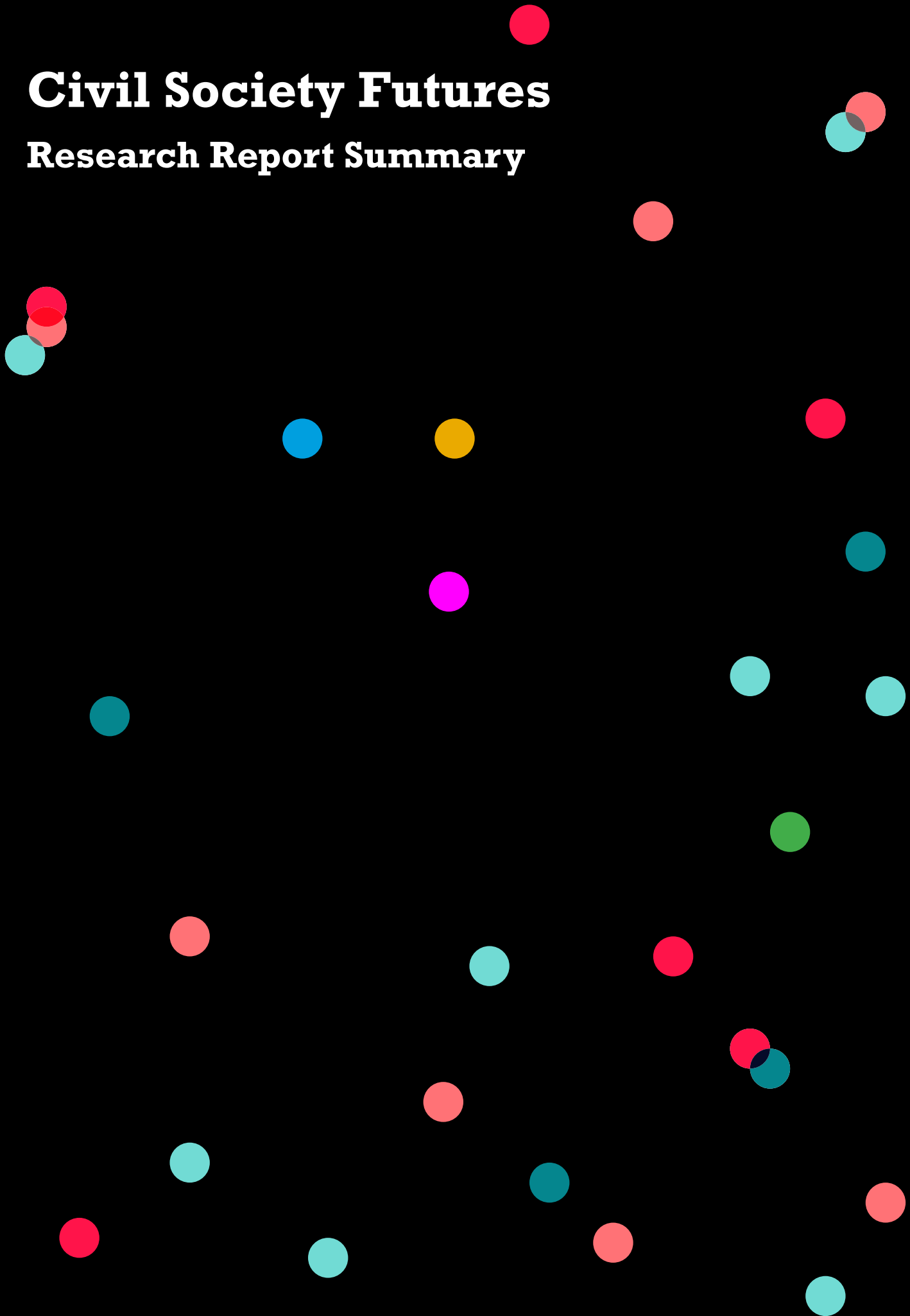
Civil Society Futures is a national conversation about how English civil society can flourish in a fast changing world.

Through community events, academic research and online debate, Civil Society Futures will create a space for a much needed conversation among those involved in all forms of civic action – from informal networks to vast charities, Facebook groups to faith groups. Considering how both the nature of civil society and the context it exists in are changing fast, we will investigate how to maximise the positive effects of civic action and provide a guide to how to release its potential to drive positive change.

The conversation will be guided by an independent panel of people with perspectives ranging from theatre making in South Wales to tech investment in Gaza, local government in the North of England to the world's alliance of civil society organisations. It will be chaired by Julia Unwin, the former chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and is made up of Asif Afridi, Sarah Gordon, Bert Massie, Danny Sriskandarajah, Rhiannon White, Carolyn Wilkins, Steve Wyler, Debu Purkayastha.

This panel will be powered by a collaboration of four unique organisations. Citizens' UK has its roots in communities across England. Goldsmiths University brings skills in academic research, looking at the changing trends in civil society. openDemocracy facilitates wide ranging discussion about the powerful institutions in our society. And Forum for the Future brings years of experience of helping people figure out how the world is changing and how best to respond.

Civil Society Futures.

The independent inquiry

This report aims to explore current trends and identify future possibilities for civil society that the Inquiry will take up in the next phase of its research and engagement. The Constructive Summary presents an overview of thekey elements from the background research that stand out as underpinning the possibilities for civil society futures, and sets out the key questions they raise.

Constructive summary

Walls and Bridges?

An inquiry in to the future of civil society suggests concern about the present. In politics this relates to concerns about a democratic deficit, and a series of public issue crises: an environmental crisis, a refugee crisis, and health and housing crises. This is set against a backdrop of concerns about fake news which adds to and reflects a lack of trust in public actors. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2017), between October 2016 and January 2017 trust in government fell from 36% to 26%; in business from 45% to 33% and in the media from 32% to 24%. Britain also has a significant 'trust gap' of 19% between 'informed publics' ('in the upper income quartile, university educated and with a declared interest in politics and the media') and those with an income of less than £15,000.

In the economic realm, austerity, unemployment, high personal debt, extreme poverty and inequality feature heavily. The impact of these crises is particularly marked for working class and minority communities as well as for young people - whose experiences are also inflected by the 'war on terror', student fees, housing inflation, urban riots, and youth unemployment. An important question for the future of civil society in England is whether social stability and harmony can prosper where poverty and inequality are apparent across so many intersecting fault-lines: young and old, black and white, religious and secular. And then there is Brexit: leave/remain emerges as a sort of super-divide: writ large, though too blunt to be sure what the message really is, or how to respond.

Prominent reports have observed, '[t]he need for change; the need to seek the voice of marginalised and disadvantaged people in decision-making processes is of undeniable and acute local, national and global relevance' (RSA and JRF consultations, 2017). For civil society, this has heightened concern but also sharpened purpose. As Viv Slack, co-founder of Street Support, states "For many, 2016 was a year of turmoil - a collective realisation that something about how we function as a society is broken, that we are in an age of disruption. At a global, national and local level, in economic, environmental or social terms, there is understandable cause for concern. Yet for me personally, and for many others, this was a year when our purpose felt clearer, new relationships and networks blossomed, where we opened to learning, and dared to hope that we could see real change".

Civil society is inherently contested space - where actors jostle for power, influence and impact to enact the things they want. How will those in these spaces respond to the enormous forces for change represented by Brexit and Trump? Will the future of civil society be one of bridges or walls? What factors may determine this?

Less State; More Civil Society?

In 2008 a global banking crisis unfolded, to which governments across the world have responded in a variety of ways. In England between June 2010 and March 2016 welfare reforms enacted reductions of £26 billion in UK social security and tax credits spending, and 'deficit reduction' was the primary goal of government. A main aim has been to 'simplify the welfare reform agenda and make work pay' (DWP[1], 2013). 59% of reductions

> **"Voluntary organisations are now facing threats not just to their independence, but to their survival."**
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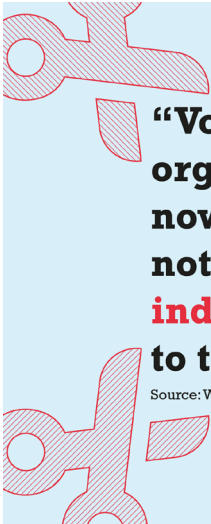> Source: Wilks-Heeg et al, 2012.

> **"Civil society activity meets fundamental human wants and needs, and provides an expression for hopes and aspirations.**
>
> **It reaches part of our lives and souls that are beyond the state and business."**
>
> Source: Carnegie UK Trust 2010

Welfare reforms have also hit hardest where reliance on benefits has been greatest. The most affected places are older industrial areas – Yorkshire, North West & North East England, the South Wales valleys, seaside towns like Blackpool, Hastings, Yarmouth & Margate, and some London Boroughs (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). These places have also been among the most affected in terms of cuts to local government (Hastings et al, 2012; Wilson *et al*, 2013), reducing statutory funding to voluntary and community sector (VCS) bodies in these areas (Clifford, 2012, Clifford et al., 2013; McCulloch et al, 2012).

A succession of government initiatives over the last 50 years have attempted to tackle economic decline in such areas, including the National Community Development Programme (NCDP) in the 1960s and 1970s, Urban Development Corporations in the 1980s, City Challenge in the 1990s, and the New Deal for Communities in the 2000's. They have been variously criticised for tending to locate the blame for disadvantage with the disadvantaged communities themselves – bought about by their own lack of skills, motivation or community (see NCDP Editorial Collective, 1977; Faith in the City, 1985; Lister, 2002; Alcock, 2005).

Since 2010 there have been no specific initiatives targeted at these areas, though the proposed 'Northern Powerhouse' is intended to give greater powers to the major cities in the north of England, including Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Newcastle, with the goal of promoting social, economic and cultural development in these regions (HM Treasury, 2016). A general devolution of responsibility to local councils is part of a localism agenda,

in income as a result of these reforms fall on working households. More than half of people in poverty are also in work (55% according to Tinson *et al*, 2016).

It is apparent that these reforms are causing significant hardship: Although the *proportion* of people in poverty in the UK is the same as a decade ago (21%), the *profile* has changed. Older people are now far less affected, even though the number of people over 65 has increased during this time (Tinson *et al*, 2016). But young adults (16-24) are experiencing 'rapidly falling real wages, incomes and wealth' (Hills *et al*, 2013:3). Poverty is also strongly linked with disability and ethnicity, with people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities experiencing multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage (EHRC, 2016).

Twice as many
65 – 74 year olds
as 18 – 24 year
olds say they are
absolutely
certain to vote.

Source: Hansard Society 2016

but is widely criticised for devolving responsibility without power, or funds especially when local authorities in England are currently dealing with a scheduled 40% cut in core funding from central government.

Participation

In its 2012 report, Democratic Audit highlighted the role of independent voluntary associations in supporting and strengthening democracy, counter-balancing the power of the state and the market and holding both to account as well as 'creating a space in which people can empower themselves in association with others'. The Audit concluded that there had been a modest improvement under new Labour in this regard, but the rise of the 'contract culture' was a risk to the sector's independence. It also suggested that this risk had increased under the Coalition government, such that 'voluntary organisations are now facing threats not just to their independence but to their survival' as a result of cuts in statutory funding (Wilks-Heeg *et al*, 2012).

Cuts are also related to the search for alternative forms of delivery, wherein people and communities are increasingly emphasised as 'co-producers' rather than consumers of services (NESTA, 2009, IPPR, 2014, NHS England, 2014). This has been criticised as hollow concealment of straightforward cuts. It has also been

challenged for instrumentalising civil society organisations, and distorting the relationships and values of communities, which in fact underpin the contributions they might make (RSA, 2015, Dinham, 2012).

Charitable resources are also unevenly distributed, with many more located in affluent areas where they are more likely to support cultural activities, rather than basic urgent needs (Lindsay, 2013; Mohan and Breeze, 2015, chapter 3). Both Lindsay (2013) and McCulloch et al (2012) link this to the concept of 'community wealth': more people in affluent communities have the time, skills resources and connections to participate.

Meanwhile the possibility of participating in society through defending your rights is diminishing. The Law Society reports that ordinary people are finding it more and more difficult to access justice because of legal aid cuts, court closures and increased court fees, as well as changes to the rules regarding the legal costs a client can recover. In 2009-10 more than 470,000 people received advice or assistance for social welfare issues. This number dropped by nearly 90% by 2013-14, a year after the government's reforms to legal aid came into force. Cuts to legal aid inevitably hit the most vulnerable in society the hardest.

Activism

England has seen a resurgence in collective social protest in recent years, reflecting an international resurgence in mobilisation responding to the great political and economic crises of the early 21st century. Waves of collective action are not isolated, spontaneous events, but rather speak
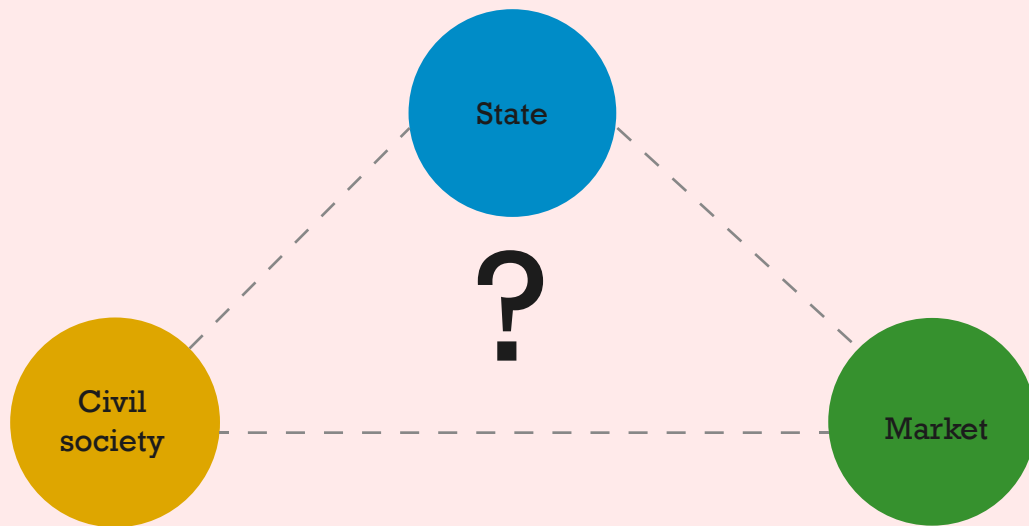
"**Without a** secure and independent civil society, **goals such as freedom and equality cannot be realised.**

But without the protective, redistributive and conflict-mediating function of the state, **struggles to transform civil society are likely to become more fragmented.**"

Source: David Held

55% of people in poverty are also in work

Source: Tinson et al, 2016.
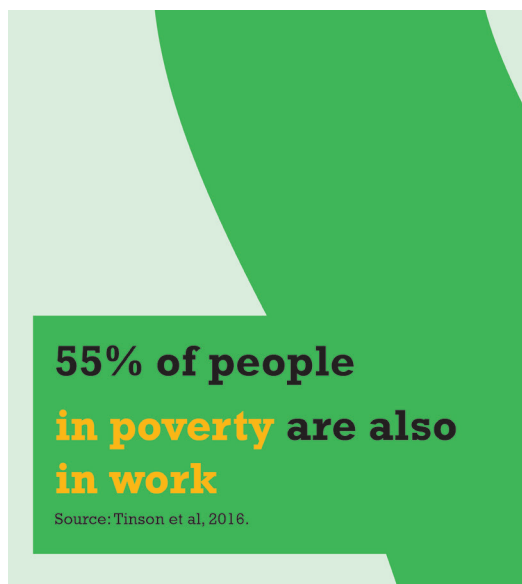
to long histories of dissent and specific contextual changes in opportunities and resources. This is one way of understanding the English Occupy Movement, Student Protests in 2010, the Urban Riots of 2011, the burgeoning Black Lives Matter UK movement, recent anti-Brexit and anti-Trump marches, Refugees Welcome, the Coal Action Network and others.

More social protest is not simply a result of more technology: while social media may be useful in mobilising people, they do not cause protests (Fenton, 2016). And while public perception of civil society activism is partly affected by online campaigning it is also countered by viewpoints disseminated by mass media that support dominant narratives, (e.g. austerity is inevitable, the welfare state is too big to be efficient, the undeserving/deserving poor). As the ownership of mainstream media becomes evermore concentrated (Media, Reform Coaltion, 2016) the role of civil society in holding power to account increases. At the same time, serious threats to the voices and independence of civil society have been identified by the Baring Foundation's Independence Panel (2015, 2016).

This highlights the importance of existing and emerging independent community-orientated media, like the Bristol Cable and Gal-Dem Magazine, which provide bottom-up access to and control over information. A key question for our inquiry is how English independent media can contribute to a strong civil society milieu by better representing the un/misrepresented, highlighting important debates and holding decision makers to account.

Self-help

In contrast to these emerging movements of protest and resistance, a turn has also been noticed towards "...new forms of 'survival tactics' and social organization based on solidarity and collective self-empowerment, such as neighbourhood food banks, solidarity economy initiatives, alternative currency networks, prefigurative experimentation, new alternative media initiatives, and so much more" (Zamponia and González, 2017). They argue that this has "potentially transformative long-term consequences, long after the squares are empty". They observe that they tend to have an online presence but are principally active in the 'thigh to thigh' and 'eye to eye' world of actual meetings. Examples include:

DIY Space For London is a cooperatively-run social centre located in South London that offers low cost creative facilities and social space as well as space for screenings, talks and performances.

Homebaked is a Liverpool social enterprise which started as a group of people who wanted to save the local bakery from closure. They have become a co-operative and community land-trust that 'works collectively to buy, develop and manage land and buildings to improve their area, including potentially providing affordable housing'.

Sisters Uncut combine activism with self-help. With three branches in London and six regional collectives they have highlighted the need for secure social housing for women fleeing domestic violence. Over the summer 2016 the South East London branch reclaimed a vacant shop in Peckham, hosting workshops to discuss the current

> ## "Only 7% of employees are able to have some time off work to volunteer."
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> Source: Charities Aid Foundation
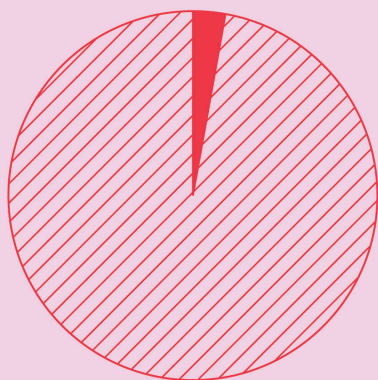
state of domestic violence services, attended by approximately 700 people over a month. Until they stormed Southwark Council's cabinet meeting in September, the group received little attention from the council.

Volunteerism

Activism and self-help are very significant parts of the civil society picture, but according to the Community Life Survey long-established forms of 'volunteering' have also remained stable for many years.

Time seems to be a major barrier preventing more people from volunteering or increasing the hours they give (Mohan, 2015, Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), 2013, Brodie et al, 2011). More than half (57%) of respondents to a CAF survey (2013) said that more paid volunteering leave and/or fewer work commitments would make a difference, with only 7% of employees able to have some time off work to volunteer. Others have argued that the reality of working life for many people today - insecure, low paid, zero hours contracts – makes volunteering unrealistic (Mohan, 2015, Buckingham, 2012, Coote, 2010). Mohan suggests that 'if we want to promote more voluntary action we need to recognise that we are working against the grain of economic and housing policy' (Mohan, 2015:12).

It is equally important to understand what motivates people to participate. The evidence suggests that many do so for personal and social reasons, and especially because of their faith (Dinham 2012). It can also be rooted more broadly in "...values, their sense of community, whether of identity, interest or place, or simply a desire for friendship and conviviality" (Jochum et al, 2005:33).

What volunteers do is also noteworthy. Most people volunteer in the areas of sport and exercise (54%), arts, hobbies and recreational activities (40%) and children's education/schools (34%) (Buckingham, 2012; Lindsey and Mohan, forthcoming). Others have argued that people participate for their own reasons and not in response to a government agenda (Patel, 2016). Volunteering is not easy to direct or steer towards particular needs.

Civil Society Infrastructures

The need for an active and supportive voluntary and community sector infrastructure to enable local voluntary and community organisations to flourish is a clear theme in the literature (Crisp, et al, 2016, Bolton, 2013, Moore & Mullins, 2013). This is not the capacity-building support to enable organisations to deliver public services that characterised programmes such as Change Up (Home Office, 2004) or its successor, Capacitybuilders (2006). What is highlighted are local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) that can help groups develop and learn, co-ordinate their activities, represent their interests and connect them to resources and decision-makers in other sectors.

Yet this goes against the grain of policy, which has sought to promote a market-place of support to 'empower' organisations as consumers of LIO services (Rochester, 2013). This has been reflected in the closure of the Regional Development Agencies, and threats to the funding of Councils of Voluntary Service (CVS), as well as the closure of national bodies including the Community Development Foundation and CDX. Yet the value of infrastructure bodies, and LIOs in particular, has been recognised by the Independent Commission on Local Infrastructure (2015), convened by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action. This found that many LIOs were struggling with rising demand and cuts to their service. The report concluded that there is a compelling case to be made for long term investment in local infrastructure, but LIOs also need to review their provision in light of the 'new normal' and ensure that the services they offer are relevant to the needs and circumstances of the sector today.

In the gaps, new approaches seem to be emerging: Community Mutuals, Credit Unions, Community Land Trusts, Co-operative childcare etc. While such community action can be valuable, it is often by its nature small-scale 'and cannot be expected to tackle area-wide disadvantage in isolation' (Crisp, et al, 2016:i). The wider social, political and economic context impacts not only on local areas, but also on people's ability to participate and their power to influence the wider determinants of poverty and disadvantage that affect their lives and the life of their community (Buckley *et al*, 2017, Crisp *et al,* 2016, IVAR, 2015). Partnership with business, local councils and other public agencies, including the NHS, can be an important enabler of (or barrier to) change (Matthews and Pratt, 2012, Aiken et al, 2011).

Adapting forms of civil society?

Trade Unions are huge presences in the civil society milieu. Part-political, part-activist, part-service provider, their role in the future is also changing and new forms of union activity are emerging. The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) is an example of a new, smaller union working creatively and on a small scale for workers' rights. It is a small, independent trade union originating from the big unions, whose members are predominantly low paid migrant workers in London. Another

emerging shift is towards the unionising of the precariat from traditional city bicycle couriers to gain the London Living Wage to Uber and Deliveroo food delivery couriers.

Faith Groups also have a long and leading tradition of service and action in civil society spaces. A 2007 review shows that the majority of faith based community activity takes place through projects and associations (Dinham 2007). What is also clear is that faiths are particularly well placed to engage in such ways. Many traditions have organisational structures which respond to the local, for example in the diocesan structures of the Anglican and Catholic churches. These often mean that they maintain a long-term and very rooted presence in every area, even where many other agencies may have withdrawn. Others draw on their long histories as providers of community support through established charitable organisations. Their values and relationality are often regarded as underpinning effective civil society participation. On the other hand, widespread ideas of faiths as oppressive, sexist, homophobic, evangelical and violent feed in to an idea of them as best kept to the private, not public realm. This tension plays out in a context which depends upon faith groups to plug gaps in services and communities, whilst struggling to talk well about them (Dinham 2015).

A crisis of trust

Percentage of trust in institutions, 2016 vs. 2017

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2017

| In media | In business | In government |
| 32% / 24% | 45% / 33% | 36% / 26% |
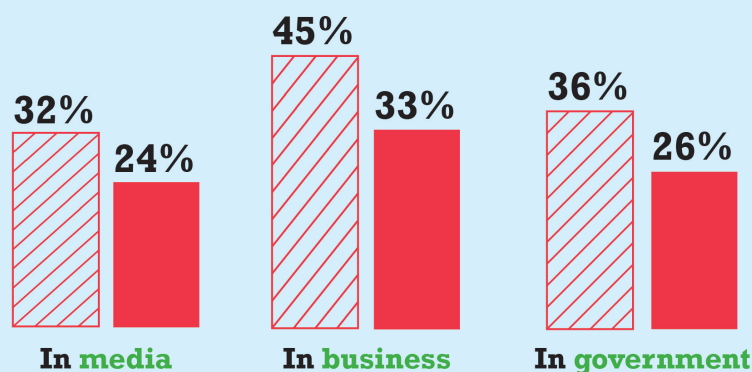
Call for contributions

Public call for evidence to gather existing knowledge and insights

The call for evidence builds on this initial research report and will help expand and deepen the initial review and its associated open database. This call will further inform the future research direction of the inquiry.

The call for evidence sits alongside a strand of research via community workshops in eight locations across England. Further engagement via a series of Civil Society Futures Conversations will be running in parallel for communities of practise, interest or locality.

Civil Society Futures is an independent inquiry into how civil society can flourish in a fast changing world. In order to answer this question, we want to gather as much wisdom as possible. As such, the Inquiry invites submissions that help answer the following questions:

1. What purposes does civil society fulfill now? What purposes will civil society need to fulfil in the future? What do you think they should or should not be doing?

2. What is driving or inhibiting change in civil society? How will different forms of civil society respond to social, political, economic, environmental and technological change over the future?

3. What new forms of civil society do you see emerging now and why? Given the right circumstances, what might their impact be in the future?

4. How and in what ways can civil society enable human flourishing now and in the future? In what ways is civil society important for a healthy democracy?

Responses should be no longer than 1,000 words and multimedia contributions are encouraged. Contributions may be shared publicly on the online hub, so your submissions will support the creation an open source bank of research into the future of civil society.

All submissions received will be reviewed by the Inquiry panel members and a synthesis will be shared on this online hub as appropriate. We may have an additional call for evidence in Jan 2018 depending on initial submissions.

Deadline for initial submissions is Monday 5th September 2017 - via the form available on civilsocietyfutures. org/call-for-contributions/

We're also seeking opinion pieces on the same topics – you can get in touch with Adam, adam.ramsay@ opendemocracy.net, if you would like to contribute to the hub in other ways.

For any queries, please contact Kharda:

k.aden@ forumforthefuture. org.

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www.civilsocietyfutures.org

@civsocfutures

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info@civilsocietyfutures.org