

Civil society associations and the values of social justice

This report explores how civil society associations (CSAs) understand and operationalise the concept of social justice. In addition, it considers what distinguishes CSAs from organisations in the public and private sectors and the obstacles civil society associations encounter in operating as social justice organisations.

Key Findings

Defining social justice

- Research found that civil society associations (CSAs) most commonly referred to the concepts of “**fairness**” and “**equality**” as the key components of their social justice definition; although it was clear that respondents had different ideas about what fairness and equality mean.
- In relation to fairness, respondents focused on the distribution of resources and fairness in the way society treats people.
- The concept of equality was referred to almost as much as fairness and often in conjunction with it. Most common were references to equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.

Translating social justice into policy and practice

- In relation to their organisation’s internal policy and practice, most respondents focused on a range of formal policies, including equality or diversity policies, equal opportunities, and so on.
- In answering how the values of social justice impact on wider publics, four key dimensions emerged: 1) the external presentation of the organisation’s mission; 2) the groups to which the work or services are targeted; 3) how the organisation works with those target groups; and 4) which other organisations are chosen to partner with.

Are CSA’s distinctive from market and state actors in their approach to social justice?

- Respondents were strongly critical of both state and market and saw civil society as a rather embattled sector attempting to promote the values of social justice.
- The private sector was distrusted ideologically because of its adherence to market economics, that is, that services were provided essentially on the basis of people’s ability to pay for them rather than their need for them.
- Criticisms were made by respondents both of the role of the state, where the New Labour government was seen as moving away from a social justice agenda and local government having to follow suit in most cases.
- The major obstacle to operating as social justice organisations was perceived to be structural. Society as a whole does not operate within a recognisable social justice framework and government, in particular, has not done enough to change the terms of this national value framework.
- It is striking that only those CSA’s largely free from government funding felt free to pursue what they saw as their social justice mission.

This is a summary of a full-length report
written by Professor Gary Craig.

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Background

This is the summary of a study undertaken in the Spring and Summer of 2008 into the relationship between civil society associations (CSAs) and the values of social justice. The paper was commissioned to inform the Carnegie UK Trust Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland.

Social justice is one of the key values underpinning the Commission's notion of a 'good' civil society.

Theories of social justice

The definition of social justice this paper has developed from the literature and current debates recognises the importance of difference and diversity in UK society, and draws on political discourse. The definition is that of a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with:

- achieving fairness, equality of outcomes and treatment;
- recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;
- the meeting of basic needs, defined through cross-cultural consensus;
- reducing substantial inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and
- the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged.

This goes beyond many current definitions by privileging equality of outcomes, and the effective participation of those currently disadvantaged.

The meaning of social justice for CSAs

This research started from the position that there should be no presumption that CSAs would share a common set of values which might recognisably be described as social justice. Organisations were therefore asked how they would define social justice.

Only a few organisations felt unable to offer any kind of definition of social justice. Most respondents were able to provide a reasonably detailed definition and some a very exhaustive outline indeed, suggesting that the concept was a very familiar one and people had thought hard about its meaning, even within organisations which might, on first glance, appear not to be concerned with the concept.

The two most common concepts explicitly referred to in response to this question were those of **"fairness"** and **"equality"**. It was clear however that respondents had different ideas about what fairness and equality mean and they often used these terms without explaining, for instance, what a "fair share" of resources might look like. It was

possible to perceive strong currents reflecting the historical split between political left and right, between the traditional concepts of (socialist) equality and (liberal) freedom.

Fairness

In relation to fairness, there were a number of ways in which respondents approached the concept. Most focussed on fairness in the distribution of resources and fairness in the way society treats people.

"Social justice should give groups and individuals fair treatment and a share in the benefits of society."

"...giving everyone in society a fair chance."

"...a fair and just society in which everyone has equal opportunities and full representation in all aspects of life."

In addition, many respondents noted that fairness needed to take account of diversity and disadvantage. Fairness was not about treating people the same, but rather taking account of different starting points. Equal access to service provision regardless of starting points (age, disability, etc) means that service providers need to nuance delivery to diverse needs in order for it to be fair.

"An equal and fair society where no-one is at a disadvantage due to reasons or circumstances beyond their control."

"Giving everyone in society a fair chance, a level playing field."

For other respondents, fairness needed to be connected to behaviour reflecting on the transaction between individuals and society.

"a fair's day's work for a fair day's pay"

This perspective, suggesting that people should earn or generate fairness through their behaviour was problematic for other respondents; it did not recognise that power and control over resources are not fairly distributed.

One particular obstacle to some forms of fair redistribution was felt to be a lack of understanding. A respondent from a rural area felt urban areas had very limited understanding of their problems. Others pointed to the supposed connection between poverty and laziness as not being supported by reality.

"I think poverty is created, it does not come into being because of laziness. Some of the poorest people in the world are the most hard-working, the brickworkers in India, for example, work their socks off and they earn a pittance, carrying huge loads to earn less than a pound a day."

Although many respondents acknowledged that ignorance of the other was an important factor, they also felt that this perspective obscured the realities of just how unfair society had become and the structural reasons for this.

"We are in the deepest trouble because most of the sources of social injustice are not about individual discrimination, but reside at the systemic level where no-one feels guilty, it allows everyone to wash their hands of it..."

Equality

The concept of equality was referred to almost as much as fairness and often in conjunction with it. Again, like the concept of fairness, respondents had different emphases. Most common were references to equality of opportunity and equality of outcome although respondents also spoke of being "on an equal footing", of equal rights, of being valued equally, of equal treatment, equal access, equal participation and of the "equal right to fulfil their potential and have a happy life". Several, however, stressed the point that equality was not the same as uniformity:

"If you treat me equally, you have to treat me differently, it means you recognise my individuality and uniqueness, we are not all the same, integration is not about assimilation but recognising we are different and not being troubled by it."

Respondents explicitly referred to equal opportunities with regard to access to services, participation in decision-making and the ability to pursue the life they aspire to.

"...equality of access to all the benefits of society, addressing inequalities so taking action to remove barriers to access, a proactive, and not a passive stance."

Clearly, most respondents expected the state to have a strong role in promoting social justice and expected the more wealthy and powerful individuals to have a stronger responsibility in this regard. However, several respondents felt that the private sector should also be required to promote social justice and not, as it appears, to leave it to the public sector simply to protect individuals from the consequences of the inequality and greed rife in the private sector.

Most respondents were aware that equal opportunity was something of a myth because people were differentially able to take advantage of opportunities. Without some support (financial, educational, etc) equality of opportunity meant very little. An opportunity is clearly not an opportunity if it is unattainable due to the poor life chances some have been dealt.

Equality of opportunity must, therefore, be accompanied by equal access (removing the barriers to access), and variable support mechanisms (once the opportunity is taken up), dependent on the needs of the individual and/or group. Achieving equality is therefore an ongoing process, not a one-off event.

"We know inequality is because of structural factors and not largely because of individuals. Our job is then to help the underperforming, with their internal capacity, to talk with them and for them and to continually empower people."

Respondents were clear that wealth should not be the precondition for accessing services.

The other main area of agreement about key elements within the respondents' definitions of social justice lay in a nexus of ideas about respect for difference and diversity.

At one level, of course, it could be argued that respect for difference and diversity could effectively be regarded as the same thing as equality for all, and several respondents argued this case explicitly. This did not mean that all were treated the same, though, and it was important also to recognise the need for minority rights. Additionally, respect for all did not necessarily mean that they had the same needs or that all members of a minority should be treated the same. As one respondent observed:

"The line between race and disadvantage is sometimes blurred, definitions of social justice sometimes seem to suggest that we have to support BME groups because they are BME groups, and not because they are disadvantaged."

On the other hand of course what all black and minority ethnic (BME) groups do have in the UK is their common experience of racism, which underpins much disadvantage; respect for difference challenges racism and provides an important base on which to build equality.

Asked to think about social justice deficits in society at large, respondents' answers clustered around a number of very clear issues. The most frequently-mentioned deficits were (in no particular order of priority), child poverty and inequality – which many saw as growing in recent years – in terms of income, wealth and other resources; educational opportunities; health inequalities; access to the labour market (for people with disabilities) or to health services (for older people); racism, prejudice and discrimination; environmental injustice; and the gap between rural and urban people in terms of certain quality of life indicators, including access to, and the cost of, services.

What was striking was that no respondent had any difficulty in focusing on what they perceived to be serious social justice deficits. Whilst it might be argued that many civil society workers were attracted to this work precisely because they identified the need to address these issues, the strength of feeling displayed in discussing this and related issues was frequently palpable.

How are these meanings translated into the organisation's own policy and practice?

Faced with this relatively clear notion of social justice, and a strong sense that the world was not a just place, how did CSAs react? Respondents were asked a series of questions to illuminate how their organisation responded organisationally to these issues. One set of questions looked at their policy and practice in relation to the organisation itself.

In this regard, most respondents focused initially on a range of formal policies, including equalities or diversity policies, equal opportunities, and so on. These shaped, for example, their approach to recruiting, developing, supporting and training staff, ensuring job satisfaction, challenging inappropriate behaviour, and ensuring that staff were fully briefed and signed up to the range of organisational policies and procedures. These policies were supported by a raft of actions including, for example, ethnic and gender monitoring and training.

Several organisations made a strong distinction between private and public views held by staff. It was expected that staff joining the organisation would do so because they felt attracted, if not committed, to its value base and mission and therefore would hold similar values to those of the organisation – to that degree such staff are almost self-selecting. If, however, they held differing views, this was acceptable but they would not be permitted to express or act them out publicly.

“People wouldn't get past the interview stage if they had views which were manifestly against our mission; so long as these views were not manifest in their work, they could work here but if they did something in their work which went against our views, they would have to toe the party line.” (This was not a political party).

In organisations which had a very large staff base, it was not regarded as realistic to ‘police’ people's values very closely, particularly where staff were in fairly marginal roles in the organisation (eg running printing presses or packing parcels), but more obvious cases of oppressive language or behaviour were nevertheless challenged.

These approaches towards the expectations of staff also affected the stance of staff in relation to the roles of trustees or members of management committees. In most cases, board members were required to sign up to a range of policies and values as indicative of their willingness to serve the organisation, and this commitment was then translated in practice into the creation of a range of policies which, in turn, shaped how the staff (and, in many cases, volunteers) were expected to behave.

In some instances, membership of boards was limited to people from particular groupings; this might be because of religious orientation or because trustees were put forward as

service users, for example. Once again, however, there was a process of self-selection because it was anticipated that people would not be interested in serving an organisation if they were out of sympathy with its value base.

Overall, as respondents reflected on the work of their organisations, it was clear that procedures and processes had formalised over time. This was welcomed in most senses, because it gave staff and trustees a clear sense of structure, roles and boundaries.

How do the values of social justice impact on wider publics?

The research explored how the values of social justice impact on what we call the ‘wider publics’, i.e. those connected to the organisation in some way but not part of it, as service users, partners or those who collaborate with it in some other way. These were identified as the key relationships which CSAs had and they tried to use them in ways consistent with their view of the association's mission.

There were four key dimensions:

- 1 the external presentation of the organisation's mission;
- 2 the groups to which the work or services are targeted;
- 3 how the organisation works with those target groups;
- 4 which other organisations are chosen to partner with.

The first dimension – how the organisation presents itself, its use of publicity, the ways in which it promotes its work and the emphasis it puts on certain aspects of its work – can be significantly affected by its value base. For example, a large children's organisation used striking images of children in its publicity and ensured that they reflected a commitment to diversity; the images were the subject of consultation with children themselves.

Organisations also wanted to present themselves, and their employment and other policies as models of good practice, for example, by having recognised trades unions, Investors in People status and with publicity in a variety of formats.

Organisations also tried to use more general publicity targeted at the wider public to raise awareness of social justice issues; this included working with the media to challenge some of the more common myths, such as around the impact of minorities (‘they steal our houses, take our jobs’) or perceptions of young people as feral and dangerous.

The second approach lay in their selection of targets or priorities for the association's work; and the third dimension was in terms of how these ‘targets’ were treated in practice by the staff of the organisation. In general, most organisations identified themselves as targeting their work on the most vulnerable or disadvantaged groups:

“...targeted community development work undertaken in areas of most disadvantage and with groups to promote their involvement in society...”

Where provision of services was not appropriate or was limited by funding available, organisations often acted as advocates for marginalised groups.

"We speak up about local people's needs, respond to consultations, etc, to add strength to what local people are saying and because official consultations are too often taken over by the most articulate..."

People who used the organisation's services were said to be regarded in the same way as staff, that is, they were treated with respect and courtesy as a matter of principle and, as far as possible, were enabled to have a voice in the running of the organisation and developing its policy, through consultative means of various kinds. Where organisations used volunteers, they too had both to be recruited, and then themselves behave, in a non-discriminatory manner. This all required a non-discriminatory environment and attitude within buildings as a whole so that all users experienced it equally as welcoming.

In the final dimension, organisations made choices about the partners they worked with. This was an increasingly important arena for debate as partnership working has become, in one commentator's words "the only game in town".

The choice of partners was, where possible, also shaped by the organisation's commitment to social justice. This was more complex, however, since it was recognised that the achievement of some of the organisation's goals required it to work with organisations which might not have an explicit commitment to the values of social justice.

The attitudes of partners frequently presented serious barriers to developing social justice agendas. This might be linked also to funding issues; the agenda of funders, particularly government, might skew the work of an organisation away from what it saw as important social justice work.

"The government agenda might sometimes divert the attention of organisations that might be working on racial justice, for example. If it is considered to be an unpopular cause, or not receiving adequate funding, organisations are reluctant to pursue such causes..."

Some organisations felt able to take a principled stand where issues of money were concerned, although these were generally a small minority. Most organisations clearly did feel prevented to some degree from pursuing a social justice agenda by their funding relationships.

In some instances, organisations had taken a more subtle stance towards partnership working, operating on an insider-outsider basis. One such organisation felt it had been perceived by many of its potential allies as having compromised its social justice agenda by sitting at the partnership table with government and other 'insider' agencies. However, it argued that its particular agenda was most effectively pursued by

having both insiders of this kind and outsiders who were, in a sense, freer to be 'on the streets'. What was critical was that the two kinds of organisation could work together in a trusting way – being committed to the same value base – and use their different structural positions and their relationships in a creative manner.

Issues of power were also raised: smaller CSAs often felt they were at the bottom of the food chain as far as their ability to influence policy was concerned. One BME group observed that they felt patronised when they were involved in partnership working, especially with government. This reflected disparities in power.

"People say we are privileged to sit at the big tables, but when the big players say jump, they expect you to jump. Government office seemed more concerned about how our involvement might help them [tick boxes] rather than help us. But if a funder says I am asking you to do something, it is difficult to refuse."

This organisation felt their partnership strategy needed to be about identifying like-minded people,

"...people you can trust who you know will represent your views ... but the trouble is you also have to work with people with whom you have little success because we know we can't be outside this network of agencies."

Essentially, the stance associations took on issues of power reflected their own power base. Larger national organisations with strong political connections and secure funding bases, felt more able to promote their views of social justice unfettered by relationships with other major partners, including funders. The smaller an organisation, and particularly where it was dependent on funding from powerful organisations such as government, the more likely it was to feel that its freedom of movement to act or speak out on a social justice agenda, might be compromised.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as a result of the devolution of political power, the opportunities had arisen for CSAs to come much closer to the centre of political power. Respondents in these areas commented on the tensions inherent in this situation: it offered the possibility of greater influence, but the possibility also of greater incorporation into the agendas of government and a loss of autonomy.

Are CSAs distinctive in relation to the values of social justice?

CSAs sit between public and private spheres with many, for this reason, incorporated into what has come to be known as the Third Sector. Criticisms were made by respondents both of the role of the state, where the New Labour government was seen as moving away from a social justice agenda and local government having to follow suit in most cases, and of the private sector which, despite some good practice, was committed substantially to the maximisation of profit.

So was there anything distinctive about CSAs, then, in the pursuit of social justice? This was the area of questioning which respondents found most challenging to reflect on, but there were, nevertheless, some interesting and stimulating responses to consider.

The most significant observations related to the relationship with the public sector. This is a focus both of considerable concern and of significant contestation within the sector, with some major national Third Sector organisations seemingly pitted against each other in a war of words as to the likely impacts of this trend.

What most were agreed upon is that public service delivery tends to limit the independence of many CSAs, and will favour larger organisations rather than medium-sized ones. This was underlined by one respondent:

“The development of Local Area Agreements will without question lead to the decimation of many small existing frontline VCS services in the near future: this will be because local authorities will have little option but to turn to the larger nationals because of their cost effectiveness. This is not social justice, but the survival of the fittest.”

What was also of concern to respondents was the fact that CSAs, particularly those working at grassroots level, were far more likely to enjoy the trust of local people than the public sector, but that maintaining this trust was difficult where government funding and policies pushed CSAs away from a social justice mission.

“In the public sector you – and your work – aren’t as valued as they are in civil society. The main problem with statutory agencies is just that - they are reactive, they don’t have the flexibility to deal strategically with the future, they are target-driven: we have more time to think about the future, and users do feel differently about the way we go in. We can also respond much more directly, for example, to the media if issues arise. Our problem is that we don’t have the resources to implement our ideas.”

The private sector, in the view of the respondents, despite a few interesting initiatives, remained simply concerned with maximising profit.

In reality, of course, the private sector does have a considerable stake in civil society associations through providing funds, nominating trustees and providing specific skills to underpin the management and administration of many organisations. Notwithstanding these positive and sometimes very significant contributions, and a little evidence of collaborative partnerships with the private sector, the interviews gave a strong sense that the private sector was seen as a threat by Third Sector organisations since it was increasingly seen as competing for the kinds of work that the Third Sector had traditionally undertaken and, thus, bringing a very different set of values to that work.

Most of all, the private sector was distrusted ideologically because of its adherence to market economics, that is, that services were provided essentially on the basis of people’s ability to pay for them, rather than their need for them.

Civil society associations were, in general, wary of private sector involvement, whether in situations where small amounts of money were distributed from high-earning corporations to support ‘good causes’ or the;

“more recent enthusiasm for venture philanthropy where some wealthy person who has made it in business wants to go in and more or less take over some organisation, suggesting they know how the Third Sector should work.”

Overall, respondents were strongly critical of both state and market and saw civil society as a rather embattled sector attempting to promote the values of social justice through its imagery, its organisational policies and its work with users and partners.

Conclusion

On the basis of this representative sample of interviews and survey responses, we can draw the following conclusions with regard to CSAs and the values of social justice.

The overwhelming majority of CSAs have a clear view of the meaning of social justice, one which incorporates the values of fairness, equality and respect for diversity and difference.

This definition is close to the mainstream definition which has emerged from the literature and places most civil society associations somewhat to the political left of government and in a position which is generally distinct from the public sector and very distinct from the private sector.

The great majority of CSAs also perceive themselves to be social justice organisations in their own right: those which did not were clear that this was not because they were hostile to the values of social justice, but because their relationship with civil society as a whole made them necessarily more hybrid in their orientation.

The perception of CSA’s seeing themselves as social justice organisations is supported by both the internal policy and practice frameworks of civil society associations – in relation to staff and trustees or management committee members – and to their policy and practice to external users of their organisation.

Some user-led organisations had policies which were exclusive, in that only people defined as part of certain tendencies – defined, for example, by ethnicity or faith, were enabled to use the organisation’s services.

These CSAs saw no contradiction between this and their self-definition as social justice organisations, but saw themselves as working in a more narrow sectoral way to promote wider social justice goals.

There are, however, obstacles to most associations operating as full social justice organisations. In relation to users or affiliates, those organisations operating open-door policies may have little control over how their services are used in practice, despite having frameworks to shape this. Control may be easier to exercise where services are being delivered to targeted populations, where the targets are determined in line with social justice values.

Many associations work in partnership with other agencies either for pragmatic reasons or because they are required to do so as a condition of funding. These relationships were often problematic, as these partners, whether in public or private sectors, may be less committed to the values of social justice as CSAs understood them. In relation to funders, other compromises may be required which CSAs saw as unavoidable; although they tried to maintain their social justice stance in their work, this might often be diluted.

The major obstacle to operating as social justice organisations was perceived to be structural or systemic i.e. that society as a whole did not operate within a recognisable social justice framework and that government, in particular, had not done enough to change the terms of this national value framework. Amongst the respondents to this study, it is striking that only those organisations largely free from government funding felt similarly free to pursue what they saw as their social justice mission. Thus, for most, ironically, although CSAs saw themselves as pursuing an agenda which they largely felt government had abandoned, like government, there was not infrequently a gap between their own rhetoric and reality.

This is a summary of a full-length report written by Professor Gary Craig. To download a free copy of the full report visit www.futuresforcivilsociety.org

The Carnegie UK Trust Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland is an independent commission, chaired by Geoff Mulgan and informed by an International Advisory Group. The goals of the Inquiry are to: explore the possible future threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025; to identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society; and to enhance the ability of civil society associations to prepare for the opportunities and challenges of the future. The findings of the Commission will be presented in 2009.

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Published by the Carnegie UK Trust:

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