



IPPR
NORTH

BRIEFING

UNDERSTANDING AND REDEFINING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH



LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

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THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH

This report is part of a three-year programme of work by IPPR North on the state of civil society and the voluntary sector in the North of England.

ABOUT IPPR NORTH

IPPR North is IPPR's dedicated thinktank for the North of England. With its head office in Manchester and representatives in Newcastle, IPPR North's research, together with our stimulating and varied events programme, seeks to produce innovative policy ideas for fair, democratic and sustainable communities across the North of England.

IPPR North specialises in regional economics, localism and community policy. Our approach is collaborative and we benefit from extensive sub-national networks, regional associates, and a strong track record of engaging with policymakers at regional, sub-regional and local levels.

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SUMMARY

The north of England has always been characterised as having a rich and vibrant civil society. However, civil society in the North is currently undergoing considerable change. Over the next three years, IPPR North will undertake a programme of research on, and entitled, the Future of Civil Society in the North. It will form a coherent evidence base to help inform and shape local, regional and national policymaking regarding the role of civil society in the north of England.

This short briefing paper sets out a different way of thinking about civil society, which will inform our ongoing programme of work. We propose that civil society can be understood in terms of three key principles.

- **Civil society is about relationships:** it is about people coming together on the basis of a mutual interest, a common goal or a shared space, and about the networks of relationships that emerge through this process.
- **Civil society is about space and place:** it takes place in local communities, in neighbourhoods and public spaces; it helps to shape and bring meaning to local areas; and it constitutes a public sphere in which people can come together to converse. In each of these respects, the forms and nature of civil society are necessarily determined in part by wider structural trends.
- **Civil society is about value:** it is both about how we value its activities and the types of values, beliefs, opinions and attitudes that underpin it.

Informed by these three key principles, our work on the Future of Civil Society in the North will investigate different ways of thinking about and understanding civil society. Our programme of work will be particularly focussed on the following themes.

- The types of civil society relationships and institutions that are likely to survive or thrive in light of ongoing structural changes across the north of England.
- How civil society is shaped by, and in turn shapes, different spaces – from the level of the neighbourhood to that of the devolved city region, and across entire regions, including the North as a whole.
- The different ways in which civil society is valued in the North, and how that value is shaped by political, economic, environmental and social contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH

The north of England has always been characterised as having a rich and vibrant civil society. The region is strongly associated with closely bonded local communities, robust regional identities and a long history of bold civic engagement.

However, across the North, many elements of civil society are undergoing a period of considerable turbulence and change, as a result of both recent shifts in policy and longstanding social, economic and political trends, including the following.

- **Reductions in local and central government budgets** have disproportionately affected the charity sector, with small and medium-sized organisations particularly affected by loss of funding (Crees et al 2016). The impact has been felt most keenly in the poorest areas (Hastings et al 2015), and is likely to adversely affect the diversity and range of civil society activities that can take place (CLES 2014). However, the ongoing impact of these austerity measures, and the changing role of the state, also offer opportunities to those civil society networks that are able to adapt and take up different, and potentially more productive and co-operative, roles in society (EESC 2013; see also Corner 2013).
- **An ongoing shift in public funding models**, away from grant-funding and towards contracts for service delivery, will continue to reshape the funding environment for charities and community organisations that draw directly upon money from the state. Such organisations vary in their ability to attract other sources of funds, and it is likely that the emerging settlement will favour more professionalised and delivery-focussed organisations (Hunter and Cox 2016).
- **New legislation and new arenas for debate** are shifting the political landscape, and changing how organisations engage with policymakers. The Lobby Act and new ‘no advocacy’ clauses that will be attached to public grants have been identified as potential obstacles to civil society ‘voice’ (Civil Exchange 2016); and while the devolution of greater powers to cities and regions across the North brings with it new opportunities for local people to have a say in decisions that affect them, new models of engagement and scrutiny will be required to ensure that this actually happens.
- **Many communities and neighbourhoods continue to be adversely affected by longstanding socio-economic trends**, including the rise of more insecure and temporary forms of employment, patterns of national and international migration, the impact of welfare reforms, and an uncertain economic climate, as well as by the fact that people are growing more geographically mobile and digitally engaged than ever before.

These issues are relevant across the country, but they are felt particularly acutely in the North, where there are proportionately fewer formal voluntary organisations,¹ higher

¹ There are 130,000 registered charities across England as a whole, but they are relatively sparse in the North. Approximately half of all charities in England are based in the South West and South East (including London), and on a per-capita basis the North has fewer such organisations than elsewhere (1.9 organisations per 1,000 people, compared to a national average of 2.7). Source: <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/>

levels of deprivation,² lower levels of formal volunteering,³ and fewer philanthropists⁴ than elsewhere in England, and England as a whole. Local authorities in the North have also been disproportionately impacted by reductions in spending power,⁵ and the northern economy is less productive than that of the rest of the UK.⁶ At the same time, new opportunities for civil society in the North are emerging – through, for example, the ‘northern powerhouse’ agenda, and wider devolution to local authorities. These have the potential to create new opportunities, and new spaces in which people can come together, at both the local and regional levels, to contribute to society and hold power to account.

Against a context of austerity, devolution and public sector reform, a new programme of work by IPPR North – the Future of Civil Society in the North – will explore ways to recast the relationship between the state and civil society at the local and regional levels, and set out ways in which the existing strengths of communities across the North can be drawn upon to contribute towards a more progressive settlement across the whole of the region.

2 http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/465791/English_Indices_of_Deprivation_2015_-_Statistical_Release.pdf

3 <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac15/volunteer-profiles/>

4 Schmuecker 2011

5 Innes and Tetlow 2015

6 Cox and Raikes 2015

2. IPPR'S NEW PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH

Over the next three years, IPPR North will undertake a programme of research on, and entitled, the Future of Civil Society in the North. It will have three main objectives.

1. Understanding and redefining civil society in the North

This will involve setting out why we need different way of thinking about civil society, and what that new conception should be (which is the focus of this short paper), as well as exploring the size, scale and nature of civil society activity in the North.

2. Exploring the role of civil society in the North in relation to public service provision within the region

This will explore how reductions in local and central government spending, and the rise of new centres of power through both the devolution and centralisation of different powers, have impacted upon relationships between the state and different elements of civil society, including those that are involved in the delivery of public services.

3. Identifying the role that civil society plays in transforming neighbourhoods in the North and enhancing quality of life at the local level

This will explore some of the ways, both new and established, in which communities of individuals have been able to organise themselves in order to improve their local areas, and the possible ways in which public policy can support, or hinder, this activity.



This programme of work will include a survey of the voluntary sector, an exploration of its relationship with public service delivery and the role of civil society in transforming neighbourhoods. The research will also consider how people and organisations in the north of England are responding to the challenges that civil society faces both now and in the future.

3. REDEFINING ‘CIVIL SOCIETY’

‘Civil society’ is a difficult concept to neatly define, particularly as there are ongoing debates about whether it is best thought of in terms of the groups that constitute it (which might include voluntary and community organisations, trade unions, faith groups, co-operatives, businesses, philanthropic organisations, campaign organisations and grassroots community groups); as a description of particular behaviours or actions; as a certain set of values; or as a hybrid of all three (Edwards 2011).

To further our understanding of the complexities of this concept, and of its potential importance to the future of the North, this short briefing will unpack some of the main assumptions about what civil society is, and from that discussion draw out the three key principles that we will use to inform our programme of work.

What is civil society? Challenging some common assumptions

Civil society is more than its formal organisations and institutions

It is normally assumed that ‘civil society’ covers not only registered charities, social enterprises, trade unions and housing associations, but also ‘community’, ‘grassroots’ or ‘below the radar’ groups that may not have formal legal status. These might include neighbourhood associations, for example, or sports clubs, community choirs and parent-teacher associations.⁷

But should our definition of ‘civil society’ extend beyond these groups? It could also include the looser networks that exist beyond structured associational life, including day-to-day contact between friends and neighbours, and other social networks (including social media) through which people interact, tell stories and share resources. Beyond this, civil society might even comprise the everyday and chance interactions between relative strangers in public spaces such as parks, local shops or the street. Although they may be fleeting and, in isolation, seemingly inconsequential, these interactions are an important part of any local community, and play an important part in shaping the ‘feel’ of a particular place.

At this level, ‘civil society’ is better thought of in terms of the myriad relationships that exist between people, including but not limited to those relationships that have become formalised and sustained through institutions. In other words, the strength of any one organisation is wholly dependent on the relationships that constitute it (Corner 2013).

Civil society is more than a ‘third sector’

Civil society is often characterised as a separate entity in its own right – a ‘third sector’ associated with specific values and particular ways of working, distinct from both the state and the market.⁸ However, the extent to which the distinctions between the three sectors holds true in practice is debateable.

⁷ See for example <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac12/what-is-civil-society/>

⁸ For example, in 2006 the then Labour government established the Office of the Third Sector; this was replaced in 2010 by the Office for Civil Society.

For example, many formal and informal civil society organisations are closely linked to the state. On the one hand, the state determines the legal, social, democratic and financial contexts in which civil society in its current form exists and acts.⁹ And on the other hand, the state, in its pursuit of social policy goals, relies implicitly and explicitly upon the structures of civil society. Beyond this, many state institutions (such as schools and universities) and services (such as community alcohol services, mother-and-baby sessions at local Sure Start centres, and physiotherapy groups run by occupational therapists) perform civil society functions in that they are all instances in which a community of individuals meets to help each other, share information, and get support and advice. This ‘relational’ approach is increasingly being recognised as a valuable model for how the state can better deliver a wide range of services (Muir and Parker 2014).

Furthermore, it is often difficult to draw a clear distinction between elements of the private sector and civil society. There is a wealth of academic research that points to a blurred boundary between the private and third sectors, especially given that some charities and social enterprises are adopting increasingly commercial structures and practices (Westall 2009a). And, at a community level many private businesses make a vital contribution to civil society. For instance, small local businesses such as pubs, nurseries and cafes provide spaces in which people can come together, and are often valued institutions within their local areas (ibid).

The idea of a distinct ‘third’ sector might sometimes be a useful simplification for use as a term for framing research questions and discussions; and it is useful to consider the ‘strategic purpose’ that underpins any claim for the distinctiveness of the sector (Macmillan 2012). However, for the purposes of this research, we need to add a caveat to this distinction: it would be overly reductive to assume that civil society can be understood purely through the lens of the ‘third sector’ definition.

Civil society is more than civic engagement

‘Civil society’ could be understood as ‘civic engagement’ – that is, public participation in political decision-making. This is because often the most visible elements of civil society are groups campaigning on issues such as disability rights, climate change and poverty, whose objective is to lobby governments in order to bring about change, as well as the formal relationships that exist between civil society and the state – for example, voting in elections; the lobbying of local councillors; the contributions made by school governors; and membership of political parties. The role of civil society organisations, in this context, is to ensure that the views and opinions of local communities and communities-of-interest are heard and have influence on local and national decision-making processes,¹⁰ and to boost levels of social capital, particularly in deprived areas, in ways that support all citizens’ capacity to participate.

Furthermore, civic engagement may imply a relationship between civil society and the formal structures of the state through, for example, participation in representative democracy through voting; the lobbying of local councillors; the contributions made by school governors; or membership of a political party. From this perspective, the imperative for policymakers would be to boost levels of social capital, particularly in deprived areas, in ways that to enhance the ability of all citizens to pursue civic engagement.

9 For example, the state provides funding to support voluntary programmes and maintain public spaces such as parks and community centres.

10 In 2012, the Coalition government highlighted ‘the special ability of voluntary and community organisations to mobilise and support people, particularly those who sometimes struggle to find a voice’ as part of its strategy for a ‘stronger civil society’. See HM Government (2012) *Building a stronger civil society - a strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/supporting-a-stronger-civil-society>

While civic engagement is an important element of civil society, taken in isolation this approach overlooks the everyday politics of life outside of formal democratic structures. A particularly important omission is the capacity of people to come together to make decisions, take action, and reshape local spaces without recourse to external formal political channels. Almost all civil society groups and organisations do valuable work that has nothing to do with political engagement, but rather is about action in their communities. Examples of this include the parents who decide to set up a football club to occupy their children during the summer, and the community activists who encourage co-operation to clean up a local park. These actions often stem from the ability, and the freedom, of people within a given area to organise and co-operate spontaneously and independently.

Civil society is more than a set of values

As well as thinking about civil society in terms of particular organisations, or particular forms of engagement, it can also be characterised as encompassing certain *values*, such as social justice, equality, solidarity and civility (Craig 2009) that inform what we regard as being in the public interest and part of a vision of a good society. This moral aspect of civil society, which has its roots in the philosophy of the Enlightenment (Ehrenberg 2011), is a recurring theme for politicians of all allegiances, who often make the argument that there is a moral imperative to support civil society as a means of nurturing certain positive values among the public, often as part of a drive to tackle particular social challenges.¹¹ However, it can be argued that civil society is not unique in this regard given that public and private organisations – not least schools, families and workplaces – play an equally important role in nurturing and influencing people’s values (Edwards 2011).

Third sector organisations may also feel that their work is underpinned by particular values that makes their work distinct. However, one of the challenges of using values as a means to define ‘civil society’ is the question of the extent to which an understanding of what values such as ‘social justice’ actually mean can be shared. For example, in their 2008 inquiry into the future of civil society in the UK and Ireland, the Carnegie Trust suggested that there was a lack of consensus among civil society organisations about the definition of values such as ‘social justice’ and ‘fairness’ (Craig 2009). Furthermore, public and private organisations may argue that their work is also driven by, or exemplifies, a particular set of values.

11 See for example Lord Taylor on the ‘big society’ and civil society as ‘an independent force for good’, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/101005-0001.htm>; and Tony Blair on civil society and the ‘moral fabric of community’, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/nov/10/queensspeech2002.tonyblair>.

4. CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH

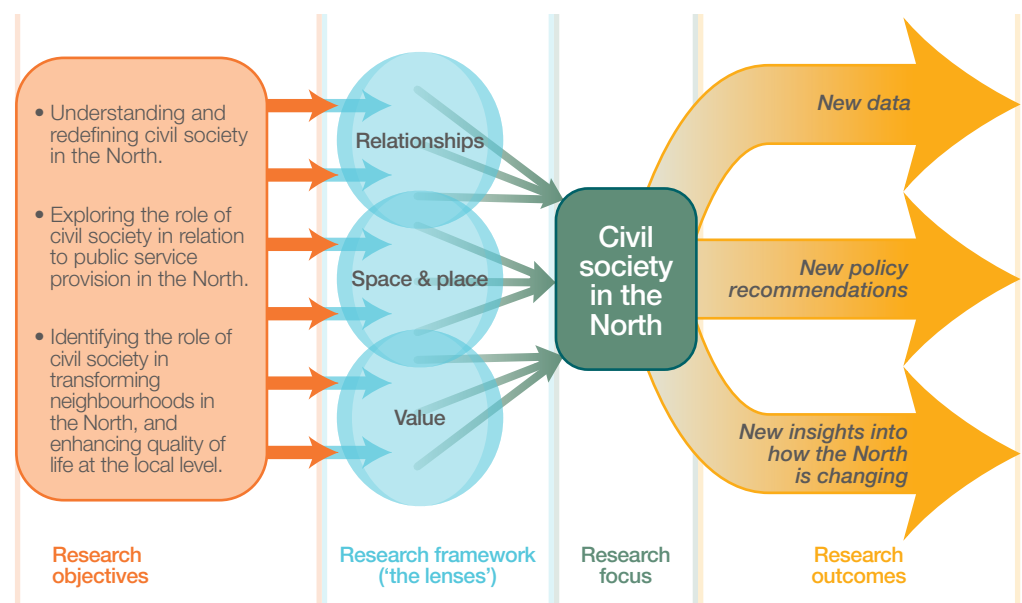
SOME PRINCIPLES AND EMERGING QUESTIONS

In one sense, defining civil society is very simple. It is fundamentally about people coming together, and the networks and institutions that arise from this. This definition, however, is so broad that it risks making any meaningful analysis impossible.

In the context of this programme of work, we will consider civil society in the North through an overarching framework that will structure the way in which we think about civil society and its effects. We suggest that civil society can be best understood in terms of three interlinked principles concerning what civil society is fundamentally about: ‘relationships’, ‘space and place’ and ‘values’.

Figure 4.1 below visualises our research framework. It outlines the programme’s research objectives and how in pursuit of them we will use the above three principles as ‘lenses’ through which we can better examine, interpret and understand civil society in the North. The outcomes of this research will include new data about civil society organisations and engagement, new insights into how the North is changing, and policy recommendations for implementation at the local, regional and national levels.

Figure 4.1
The Future of Civil Society in the North: A visualisation of our research framework



Principle 1: Civil society is about relationships

Put simply, someone watching television at home is not actively participating in civil society, but they are when they go to church, volunteer at a homeless shelter or join a local sports club. Fundamentally, civil society is about people coming together – on the basis of a mutual interest, a common goal or a shared space – and about the networks of relationships that emerge through this process.

Relationships in civil society are not fixed or static, but nor are they completely fluid: they have established histories, with strong emotional attachments; and they cannot easily be moved, replaced or replicated, even as they grow into new arenas. This means that civil society is also about institutions and organisations, and the networks of relationships that exist between them, and between them and the state.

The relational aspect of civil society also leads us to consider the issue of social capital. Social capital is key to thinking about civil society, partly because social capital is developed and nurtured through the kind of interactions that characterise civil society, and partly because, in turn, the distribution of social capital between individuals helps to determine how the dynamics and structures of civil society relationships play out.

A strong civil society in the North will be characterised by the quality and strength of its relationships, including:

- the diversity of participation within all types of communities – for example, membership of local clubs and organisations, and volunteering
- a flourishing voluntary sector, measured in terms of its ability to build collaborative relationships between and within different communities across the North
- evidence that effective and equitable relationships operate between community and voluntary organisations and the state.

Principle 2: Civil society is about space and place

Civil society does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, it takes place in parks and playgrounds, in people's homes and backyards, in community centres, on the street and, increasingly, in online spaces, to give just a few examples.

The spatial element of civil society plays out in three different ways.

- First, and on a very practical level, the existence of civil society depends upon its ability to find and secure both space and time for its activities to take place. Many networks are reliant upon the free use of public spaces, for example, such as community centres, parks, streets, backyards or libraries, and/or upon the donation of time through volunteering. Other organisations may charge for services, or bid for grants and contracts, as a means of securing the space (either physical or virtual) that they need in order to operate.
- Second, civil society helps to shape and bring meaning to local places. This purpose may be explicit, such as in the cases of neighbourhood planning groups that come together to improve their local areas, or those of protest movements that oppose planned new development in their local areas. It may, on the other hand, be more implicit, in the sense that it is people's everyday interactions with their friends and neighbours, as well as local community events, that help shape and develop a sense of place and belonging.
- Finally, civil society is often thought of as an abstract 'public space', drawing upon Habermas' (1962) work on the deliberative public sphere, in which people come together to debate, and through which various visions for society can be worked through and reconciled.

The deliberative sphere is often idealised as a collaborative and democratic space in which citizens engage with each other as equals. However, in reality it is better thought of as a contested arena in which the way that debates are framed and decisions made are inevitably determined by local power structures (Mouffe 2000).

Civil society spaces are, in each of these three respects, necessarily shaped in part by wider structural trends. The availability of physical space and time depends to an extent on the cost of rent, for example, or the ability of local government to maintain open public spaces. People's sense of place is influenced by factors such as local economic opportunities, patterns of migration and diversity, as well as by social and cultural attitudes. Similarly, the 'public space' of civil society is shaped by the distribution of social capital, and the power exercised by vested interests over local decision-making processes.

A strong civil society in the North will be characterised by the types of spaces and places that it inhabits and shapes, including:

- the opportunities that people have, both in terms of time and equitable access to public space, to participate in their community
- a positive and dynamic sense of place
- high levels of local involvement in decision-making processes (for example, in local government, public services and community forums).

Principle 3: Civil society is about value

In the context of civil society, 'value' takes many forms. At its most basic level, civil society activity in a particular place – for example, a bowling club or an allotment – can have an '*existence value*', in that it is valuable simply because it is present (Westall 2009b).

The outcomes of civil society – such as volunteering, increased social capital and the development of new organisations – are considered to be evidence of civil society's *social value*, and consequently its importance for society as a whole; to 'the collective benefit to a community' rather than just to the individual (Social Enterprise UK 2012). However, these outcomes are also discussed in terms of their *process value*, which is concerned with valuing the ways of working, such as co-operation or fair trade, with which civil society is associated.

The question of how these outcomes – particularly those generated by civil society organizations – should be measured has provoked a great deal of debate. There are arguments that support greater scrutiny and evaluation of social outcomes in an effort to bring greater rigour to community and voluntary organisations, particularly those using public funds – that is, the measurement of what might be called '*public value*' (Westall 2009b). However, there are concerns that the way in which 'public value' is measured has become synonymous with a narrowly defined conception of '*economic value*', which is based on a conventional understanding of welfare economics and is problematic because it overlooks many of the wider contributions made by civil society (ibid).

We can also refer to a set of 'values' that describe the types of beliefs, opinions and attitudes that help generate civil society activity, and which 'may be within an organisation's mission or strategy, held by individual stakeholders, or part of working practices' (Westall 2009b). Values in this sense are crucial to setting out a distinctive identity (either of individual organisations and coalitions, or of civil society as a whole), and are an important part of the narratives that we tell about the future of civil society across the North.

A strong civil society in the North will be characterised by how it is valued, and by the values that it sets out, including:

- recognition among funding organisations, local government and the wider public of the different ways in which a strong civil society generates social value, including through public service delivery
- the types of distinctive values that are expressed by civil society organisations in the north of England, and how they are used more widely to tell new stories about the region and its people.

Emerging questions

Informed by these three key principles, IPPR North's Future of Civil Society in the North research programme will investigate different ways of thinking about and understanding civil society. A summary of the programme's research design is included in figure 4.1 below. Our work will be particularly focussed on considering the following themes.

- **The types of civil society relationships and institutions that are likely to survive or thrive in light of ongoing structural changes across the north of England.**
This will include new work on mapping trends within the voluntary sector across the region.
- **How civil society is shaped by, and in turn shapes, different spaces across the north of England, from the level of the neighbourhood, to that of the devolved city region, and across entire regions, including the North as a whole.**
This will include research on local and regional identities, including the extent to which there is a specifically 'northern' identity.
- **The different ways in which civil society is valued in the North, and how these values are shaped by political, economic, environmental and social contexts.**
This will include research on public sector commissioning that will investigate how civil society is valued in the North, and how this shapes and is shaped by organisations within civil society.

Getting involved:

If you would like to learn more about this work, or play a more active role in the programme – for example, by becoming a funding partner, being kept up to date about our work, or sharing your experiences about being involved in civil society in the North – please get in touch.

Email: research@ippr.org

You can also follow the progress of our work on Twitter: [@ipprnorth](https://twitter.com/ipprnorth) [#civilsocietynorth](https://twitter.com/civilsocietynorth)

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