Futures for civil society

Summary
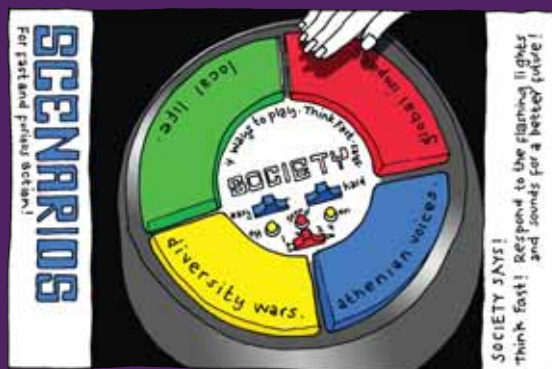
The shape of civil society to come

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Scenarios for civil society

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This report is a summary of the following two reports:

The shape of civil society to come and **Scenarios for civil society**

The full Inquiry futures reports can be downloaded at www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

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Foreword

Chair of Inquiry Commission, Geoff Mulgan

This report summarises the findings of a series of futures events held by the Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. The purpose of these interactive events has been to help the Inquiry focus on the most 'burning issues' facing civil society, looking out to 2025.

One of the reasons for having conversations about the future is to understand the present better – and differently – so that we act with foresight rather than regret with hindsight.

Many of the issues raised in the futures reports will come as no surprise – though in practice too many are ignored. So the reports look at the prospect of widening gaps between the rich and the poor, and the risks of greater social segregation. They explore the possible effects of an ageing population on civil society, and the implications of continuing disengagement from traditional politics. They also look at how climate change could affect civil society – whether by encouraging a revived localism or a much stronger sense of global responsibility. Each of these issues poses distinct and difficult challenges for civil society – not least because of the limits of its power to act relative to the big battalions of government and business.

The reports also air other issues which are only beginning to be understood – like the long-term impact of devolution on civil society, or the growing importance of diasporas.

Like all good futures exercises this one addressed not only what could happen but also what we might want to happen. The idea of civil society has always contained within it our aspirations for a good society – aspirations which continue to point in often conflicting directions, for example, with some people seeking a messy, even hedonistic pluralism and others hankering for greater social order, some welcoming ever more developed technologies and others seeing this as a road to hell.

The findings of the report draw on the inputs of many hundreds of people who shared their time and their insights in what turned out to be a fascinating series of discussions across the jurisdictions. Many of the participants in the Inquiry events commented on how helpful futures thinking can be. Few get the time to 'look up' and think about the likely context in which they work, and few get the chance to think hard about what different futures might mean for their organisations.

We hope that the Inquiry futures reports will provide a useful tool for further deliberation. It doesn't offer either forecasts or prescriptions. But it does provide a seriously researched prompt that should be helpful for any organisation – or group – that wants to be prepared for the future.

That matters, because in the past, civil society has often been ahead of other sectors in warning of new threats – like those from climate change – as well as embracing new opportunities – like those from a wider understanding of human rights. Our aim with the futures reports, and with the work in the later stages of the Inquiry, is to stay ahead of the game and to help civil society shape the future rather than simply responding to events when they come.

Geoff Mulgan
Chair, Inquiry Commission

Introduction

In 2006, the Carnegie UK Trust launched an Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. Informed by an Inquiry Commission, chaired by Geoff Mulgan, and an International Advisory Group, the goals of the Inquiry are to:

- Explore the possible threats to and opportunities for the development of a healthy civil society, looking out to 2025.

- Identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society.

- Enhance the ability of civil society associations to prepare for the challenges of the future.

The Inquiry's working definition of civil society has three dimensions. Civil society is understood by the Inquiry as a goal to aim for (a 'good' civil society), a means of achieving it (through civil society associations such as voluntary and community organisations, trade unions etc.), and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means (arenas for public deliberation).

To better understand what might be the future threats to and opportunities for civil society in the UK and Ireland, looking out to 2025, the Inquiry applied futures thinking. With support from Henley Centre HeadlightVision, the Inquiry hosted a number of futures events across the UK and Ireland, gathering insights from over 400 individuals with diverse professional and life experiences.

This report summarises the findings of the Inquiry events that are documented in detail in two separate reports (**The shape of civil society to come**..., and **Scenarios for civil society**). This summary first outlines the drivers of change that are likely to shape the future nature and role of civil society, looking out to 2025. Drivers of change are forces (social, technological, economic, environmental, political, organisational or legal) that may affect civil society, for good or for bad. This summary then goes on to outline four scenarios for civil society and their implications.

The purpose of futures work is to 'disturb the present' and to help organisations understand and manage uncertainties and ambiguities. Futures thinking operates on an assumption that there is not one future but multiple possible futures, dependent partly on how we choose to respond to or create change. We can influence the future through our actions and our choices, even if many dimensions of the future are outside of our direct control. Exploring the extent to which we can affect change depends on our understanding of the drivers of change.

# Scanning, understanding and interpreting the drivers of change

Participants in the Inquiry events prioritised which drivers of change will likely have the most significant impact on civil society. Figure 1 lists the prioritised drivers and organises them accordingly in to three categories.

The first category represents contexts. These are important but largely certain drivers of change over which civil society associations have little influence (yet civil society associations will need to respond to them). The second category are those drivers which present the greatest uncertainties for civil society. These drivers of change are variable, and can therefore be influenced by the actions of civil society associations. The uncertain drivers have been clustered into the following headings:

- Limits of economics (such as growing socio-economic divides and pressure on global resources)

- Personal values (such as rising individualism and shifting identities)

- Shifting activism (such as disengagement with formal politics and the rise of 'digital natives')

- State and individual (such as the visibility of the security state and the regulation of civil life)

The third and final category of drivers of change are those which represent outcomes of some of the contextual and/or uncertain drivers of change (such as the increasing complexity of family structures and the 'professionalisation' of third sector organisations).

Figure 1: Schematic of prioritised drivers
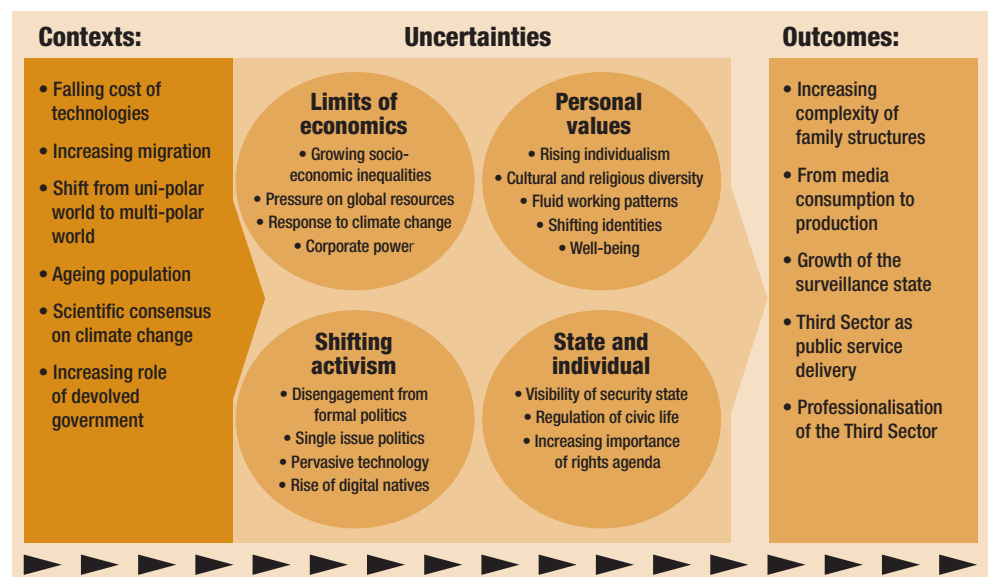
Having identified the key drivers of change for civil society, participants in the Inquiry futures events explored how the drivers of change might affect civil society in the future. The analysis of these insights led to the development of nine faultlines that present significant challenges or opportunities for civil society:

The challenge of sustainability. Participants in Inquiry events were clearly concerned about the growing pressure on global resources and the associated threat this may have on civil society as the 'good' society. While environmental activism has put new energy into some parts of civil society, there is a question about how the sustainability agenda or the so-called 'green value shift' will shape the nature of civil society associations and their relationships with the state and the business sector (who are critical players in tackling climate change at a local and global level).

Growing isolation of the poorest. There is a strong sense from the Inquiry events that economic polarisation between the rich and the poor and the associated growing social divides are likely to significantly affect civil society. The challenge for civil society associations is to support and to empower the most marginalised and not to replicate inequalities in their own structures. A second challenge is to find different ways of articulating outcomes that are not based on paradigms of economic growth or market delivery. For example, the burgeoning well-being literature has a more holistic approach to measuring success.

Social cohesion under pressure. In addition to fears that society will further fragment along socio-economic grounds, there is a notion that increased cultural and religious diversity may lead to further fragmentation of civil society. There are a number of challenges this faultline presents, including how a secular state engages with strong value-based communities (such as faith-based organisations), and how civil society associations best act as mediators or brokers between individuals/organisations/sectors etc.

Shifting activism and increasing obstacles to engaging with civil society. A number of obstacles seem to stand in the way of active participation in civil society. Time and the pressure of work was a common theme across the Inquiry events. Regulatory barriers, such as health and safety regulations, were also of concern to participants, especially the impact they have on small-scale civil society associations whose actions may be inhibited by their lack of capacity to deal with them. The perceptions of diminishing and/or commercialisation of 'spaces' (whether they be physical or virtual) for deliberation also surfaced as possible obstacles or threats to active participation. Freedom to express oneself and the space in which to do so was highlighted as a key foundation stone for a healthy civil society. The increasing importance of non-institutional or less formal forms of civil society associations were highlighted by participants, questioning whether they will replace or supplement more traditional or 'organised' forms of civil society associations.

Traditional political engagement on the wane. Many of the discussions at the Inquiry events highlighted the decrease in participation in formal politics and the changing relationships between civil society associations and formal structures of representative democracy. The challenge to civil society is how it might connect formal and informal democratic processes.

Application of technology. The application of technology has great strengths and has energised many parts of civil society, increasing the ability of associations to broaden their scope and the richness of connections. It was also seen as a good organising tool for collective action. However, technology was also seen by participants in the Inquiry workshops as a source of fragmentation and atomisation. Civil society associations will inevitably review the way in which they apply technology given the rise of the 'digital natives'.

Voluntary and community associations lose their distinctiveness. Increasing partnership with the state, for example in the delivery of public services, has brought with it demands for accountability and performance. To achieve this, participants in the Inquiry events noted that civil society associations have often imported governance models from outside to improve delivery and productivity. Participants felt that attention needed to be given to supporting diverse forms of organisational models and practice to ensure civil society is strong. It was also felt that homogenous models of management should be avoided.

Diminishing arenas for public deliberation. One of the most common themes from throughout the Inquiry events concerned the underlying weakness of the arenas for public deliberation. These arenas have been eroded by a number of trends such as the declining engagement in formal politics, the concentration of ownership of traditional media, the privatisation of public spaces and the interpretation of the burgeoning number of laws about security and disorder.

Marginalisation of dissent. Participants raised concerns about the marginalisation of dissent in the UK and Ireland, especially in relation to those that lack the power or confidence to voice their concerns or those who have non-mainstream views. It was also noted that any restrictions in civil liberties in the UK and Ireland, for example in the name of security, can have significant detrimental affects on civil society in other parts of the world. For example, in less democratic countries civil society activists can be imprisoned and labelled as 'extremists' under the cloak of anti-terror legislation.

Scenarios for Civil Society

Drawing on the analysis of the drivers of change and the subsequent Inquiry scenarios/ implications workshops, four scenarios were developed (summarised below). Scenarios are not forecasts or predictions. They are plausible yet challenging stories that illustrate what the future might hold for civil society, looking out to 2025, designed to stimulate further deliberation about how civil society might better take advantage of emerging opportunities or diminish possible threats.

- **Local Life:** Resource scarcity and energy costs lead to the regeneration of local life. Civil society has been in the vanguard of this process, and as a result has gained significant political influence. But there is insularity and competition between localities.

- **Athenian Voices (Electronic Age):** Technology and innovation leads to far greater involvement and engagement in politics, and in more inclusive debate. But technology can also facilitate and encourage atomisation; it indulges individualism and can transform media from a 'broadcast' to a 'narrowcast' paradigm.

- **Diversity Wars:** Cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity – along with social divisions arising from inequalities of income and environmental impacts – has led to conflicts between and within communities over resources and values. But younger generations have more in common – and large scale environmental problems require co-operation to be managed.

- **Global Compact:** The security state constructed for the 'war on terror' is no longer regarded as effective. Civil society associations have led the campaign against the exploitation inherent in cheap goods and, together with global agencies, they play a key role in monitoring labour practices. But migrant labour, which is increasingly needed in Europe, is a different story. States oscillate between local populism and a global view.

Implications arising from the scenarios

There are a number of implications which emerge overall for the future of civil society. Since it is one of the intentions of this report to help civil society use futures thinking to improve its own planning and decision making, we have framed these implications as a series of questions that can be applied to this particular scenario set.

- How does civil society respond to the emerging conflict between conventional economics and environmental and resource issues?

- How does civil society help to support the spaces (physical and otherwise) where differences can be explored and reconciled about future values, social needs and problem solving?

- How do civil society associations prevent themselves and indeed society from fragmenting along socio-economic, ethnic and/or religious lines?

- How does civil society connect to representative politics at all levels – from the global to the national to the local?

- How does civil society respond to shifting notions of the workplace, more international supply chains, and to the increasing levels of economic migration which appear likely?

- How does civil society influence the development of technology so it supports the development of a 'good society' rather than undermines it?

- What are the future problems which can only be addressed by civil society and its organisations – and what is the nature of these problems which make this true?

A **toolkit** outlining how the scenarios report, and the other inquiry materials, might be practically used to inform the strategic thinking of civil society associations can be downloaded at www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

Andrew Siddall – civic Architects Ltd
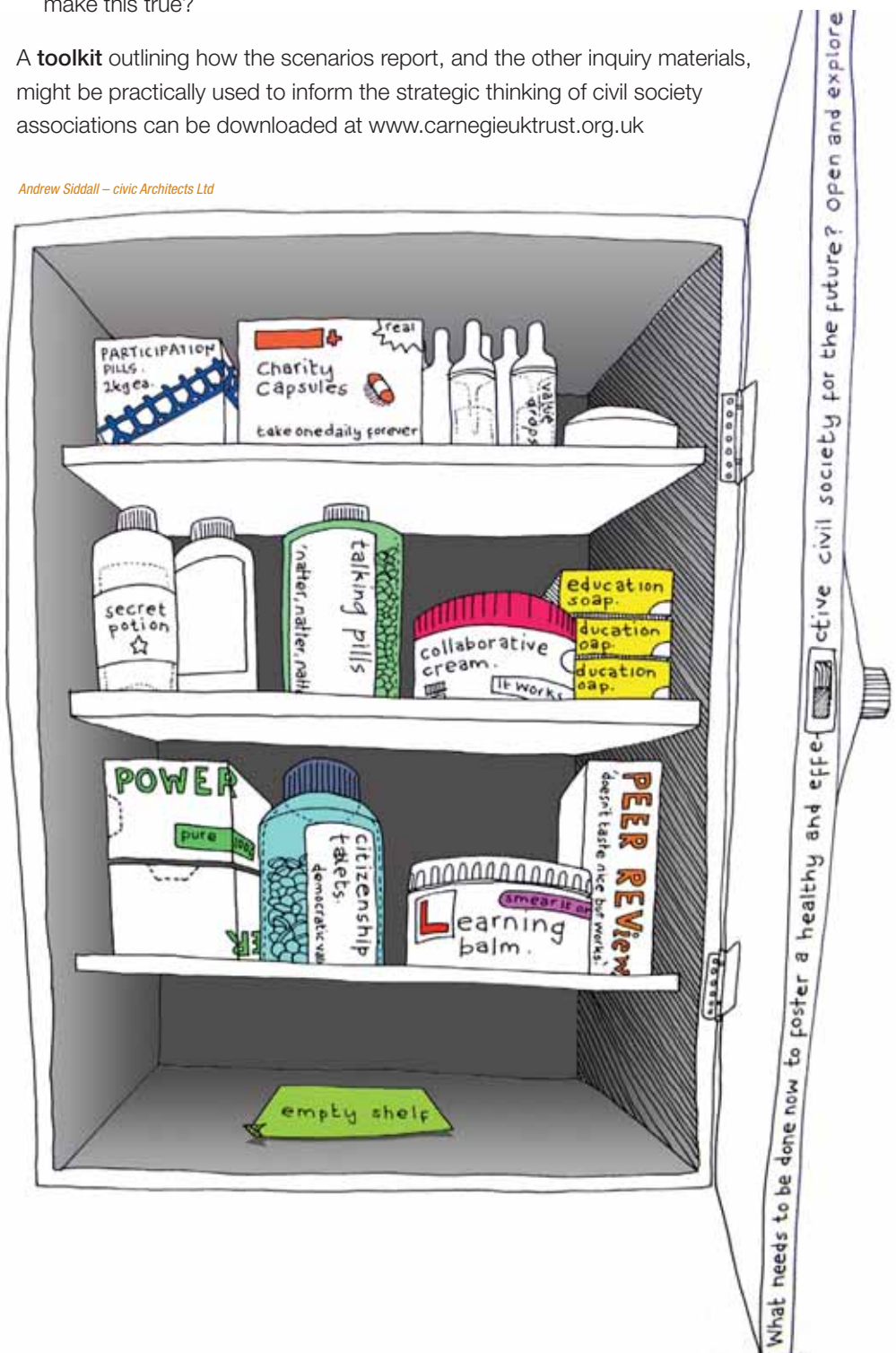
What now?

The status quo is not an option.

Looking back, in one generation alone we have seen significant changes in international relations, the global economy, communications technology and the rise in the number and voice of civil society associations throughout the world.

Looking forward, this report has illustrated that there are many forces that will change the future nature and role of civil society, for good or ill. Clearly, there is not one future, but multiple possible futures, dependent partly on how we choose to respond to or create change.

The Inquiry sought to explore the possible threats to and opportunities for civil society in the UK and Ireland, looking out to 2025. By applying futures thinking and gathering insights from over 400 people, this report and the complementary scenarios report has heightened our understanding of what the future might hold.

The challenge now is how best to focus energies so that threats are diminished and opportunities are taken advantage of. Given the scale and scope of the challenges ahead, much action may need to be collective in nature, bridging diverse civil society associations.

"Futurism is the art of reperception. It means recognising that life will change, must change, and has changed, and it suggests how and why. It shows that old perceptions have lost their validity, while new ones are possible."

Bruce Sterling, Science Fiction Writer

For the Inquiry, drawing on the findings of the futures work, this will involve identifying a number of 'burning issues' that are critical to the future health of civil society. The Inquiry will focus its energy on exploring how policy and practice might be enhanced in relation to the identified burning issues during 2008.

For civil society associations more widely, we hope that the Inquiry's futures reports and the accompanying toolkit on how to use scenarios (available on the Inquiry website) will stimulate further deliberation about how civil society associations might better prepare for and shape the future.

Andrew Siddall – civic Architects Ltd

"the landscape of civil society is shaped by its people"

What is civil society?

Civil society is clearly a contested concept. For the purpose of the Inquiry, the working definition of civil society draws on the work of Michael Edwards[1] and has the following three dimensions:

Civil Society as **associational life**. Civil society is the 'space' of organised activity not undertaken by either the government or for-private-profit business. It includes formal and informal associations such as: voluntary and community organisations, trade unions, faith-based organisations, co-operatives and mutuals, political parties, professional and business associations, philanthropic organisations, informal citizen groups and social movements. Participation in or membership of such organisations is voluntary in nature.

> Civil society is a goal to aim for (a 'good' society), a means to achieve it (associational life), and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means (arenas for deliberation).

Civil Society as the **'good' society**. The term civil society is often used as a short-hand for the type of society we want to live in and can therefore be viewed in normative terms. It is often assumed that civil society is a good thing, but this is not necessarily true. For example, civil society associations can help strengthen democracy and improve the well-being of deprived communities as can they undermine human rights and preach intolerance and violence. The Inquiry is therefore especially concerned about the strength of civil society associations as a means through which values and outcomes such as non-violence, non-discrimination, democracy, mutuality and social justice are nurtured and achieved; and as a means through which public policy dilemmas are resolved in ways that are just, effective and democratic. The actions of civil society associations alone cannot achieve a 'good' civil society. A 'good' civil society is dependent on the outcomes of and relationships between government, statutory agencies, the business sector and media.

Civil Society as **arenas for public deliberation**. Civil society is the 'space' in which societal differences, social problems, public policy, government action and matters of community and cultural identity are developed and debated. These public spaces might be physical in nature, such as community centres or conference facilities, or virtual, such as blogs. We may never share a common vision about what a 'good' society might look like and how it might be achieved, but we can be committed to a process that allows people of all ages and backgrounds to share in defining how the different visions are reconciled.

To summarise, civil society is a goal to aim for (a 'good' society), a means to achieve it (associational life), and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means (arenas for deliberation).

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This report is one in a set of three

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