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Locally grounded principles for a Good Society

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Abstract

There is a revival of interest in the notion of a Good Society, within the context of the search for an alternative to neoliberal hegemony, but the concept remains imprecise. One way to provide greater clarity is to focus on underpinning principles. Attempts to date have largely taken a top-down approach. This article provides a new perspective by considering principles that should underpin a Good Society from a local, grounded perspective. It draws on research with people on low incomes from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, whose voice is rarely heard in debate. Findings include differences with more top-down approaches but also points of resonance. It is argued that developing a more robust construct of a Good Society with potential for broad appeal, requires linking principles to the realities of the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged groups, and with process a key consideration.

Keywords: Good Society, neoliberalism, principles, grounded, alternative

Introduction

The notion of a Good Society is far from new, its roots going back to Aristotle, but the idea is experiencing something of a revival in interest. For example, John Cruddas MP (2012) has declared “I love the notion of ‘The Good Society’”. There is a think tank/pressure group, Compass, whose website describes its entire *raison d’être* as “building a Good Society” with publications variously on ‘Good London’ (Cowie-Fraser and Howard, 2017), ‘Good Europe’ (Coatman, 2016) and so on. Interest is further demonstrated in Knight’s (2017) *Rethinking Poverty: what makes a Good Society?* in which he argues for a formulation based on building ‘the society we want’, framing the task positively and as something in which we all have a stake.

The context for this renewed interest lies in the search for an alternative to current orthodoxy i.e. neoliberalism. Neoliberalism will be discussed in detail below. Suffice to say at this point that while neoliberalism has been successful in achieving “a significant and enduring shift in the politics shaping social policy” (Humpage 2015: 79) and establishing a position of “global hegemony” (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018: 464) it is also fiercely criticised. Such criticism is captured in media commentator George Monbiot’s (2016) description of neoliberalism as “the ideology at the root of all our problems...Financial meltdown, environmental disaster and even the rise of Donald Trump”.

The idea of a Good Society stands in contrast to these criticisms of neoliberalism. As Cruddas (2012) puts it, a Good Society is about “how you build intermediary institutions that help people to flourish; about the virtues that we wish to nurture, so we can live more rewarding lives. In short as the site for contesting the hollow atomised individual of orthodox [neoliberal] economics”. Compass’s pursuit of a Good Society is based on a ‘much more equal, sustainable and democratic’ future while Knight (2017) draws on Keynes to set out a vision of economic bliss bringing security and

freedom, so we can develop our creativity and spirituality and build harmony between human beings and nature.

But despite renewed interest, the concept of a Good Society lacks clarity. On the basic question of what in the 21st Century constitutes a Good Society, there is no clear answer. For example, drawing on research with civil society groups Goldstraw and Diamond (2017) posit three potential, and mutually exclusive, visions of a Good Society. For Wilson and Bloomfield (2011), building a Good Society is about a new form of progressive politics while Knight (2017) contends that a Good Society requires creative methods to engage people to develop new ideas and approaches. The notion of a Good Society remains imprecise.

One way to give greater clarity is to focus on the question of what principles should underpin a Good Society and there is growing interest in such an approach. A number of examples can be drawn upon. Most recent is work by the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON), New Economics Foundation, FrameWorks Institute and Public Interest Research Centre (NEON et al., 2018). Others include a project by Compass (Orton, 2016) and an initiative in the West Midlands (see Knight, 2017). In each of these cases, a set of underpinning principles has been identified.

Looking across these three pieces of work, however, there are limitations. For example, only the Compass work is directly about the idea of a Good Society with the other two being about progressive principles more generally. Also, these were primarily top-down approaches drawing on the views of professional experts. The West Midlands work was more grassroots but still with a particular set of people - those already engaged as active citizens/community activists and it was acknowledged that people on low incomes, from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds and under 25 years of age were under-represented in it. This means these examples of setting out principles do not include the views of a broader range of people and in particular, marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

In the light of the above, the contribution of this article is twofold: it addresses directly the question of what principles should underpin the idea of a Good Society; and it does so not by a top-down approach but from a local, grounded perspective, drawing on research with people on low incomes from BME groups - people whose voice is rarely heard in debate - and thereby providing a new perspective. The article is in four parts. First is a more detailed discussion of neoliberalism and the search for an alternative, including the above examples of principles. Second, the research methodology is discussed. Third, findings from the research are presented and key themes identified. Fourth is the concluding discussion which highlights differences between themes raised by participants in the research presented here and more top-down sets of principles. But points on which there is strong resonance are also identified and this leads to consideration of how developing a more robust construct of a Good Society, with potential for broad appeal, requires linking principles to the realities of the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The final point raised is the importance of process in seeking resonance between the grounded experience of marginalised groups and the views of professional experts, community activists and so on.

Neoliberalism and the search for an alternative

The roots of neoliberalism lie in Hayek's (1944) *Road to Serfdom* and a simple but absolute belief in free markets and competition as the drivers of growth, requiring market principles to permeate all aspects of life (Standing, 2011). Hayek's classic free market economics ran counter to the post-war welfare state and it was not until the 1970/80s that his arguments gained greater attention. They informed shifts at the level of the political economy variously referred to as the 'Washington Consensus', 'Reaganism', 'Thatcherism' and so on, but all of which shared Hayek's fundamental free market philosophy.

Humpage's (2015) comment about the impact of neoliberalism has already been noted and she also demonstrates how neoliberalism has developed through different phases (ibid. – also see Peck and Tickell, 2002). In the UK this began with an early period of 'roll-back' neoliberalism under Margaret Thatcher; a subsequent 'roll-out' or embedding phase under New Labour governments from 1997 (i.e. New Labour had far greater concern with social justice but still adhered to core neoliberal economics); and subsequent to the 2008 economic crisis, and from 2010 with Conservative-led governments, a new 'roll-over' period with a strongly neoliberal economic agenda based on austerity and further retrenchment of the welfare state. The pace of neoliberal change may therefore vary and go through different phases but the overall direction of travel is consistent.

Farnsworth and Irving (2018) similarly note apparent differences within neoliberalism but also its core consistency. Thus, the label 'neoliberal' is more often used by its critics than by free market reformers. While the latter may share broad principles, there are different types of neoliberals occupying different policy spaces and with significant differences in terms of their preferred social models. However, neoliberalism can also be understood as a dominant set of ideas that shape economic and political discourse and prescribe a set of policy solutions regardless of the politics of the government in power. This is expressed in neoliberalism's five short and easily accessible principles: free markets, low tax, small state, individual liberty and big defence. It is these principles that are used across time and geographies to guide a well rehearsed neoliberal policy prescription of marketisation, privatisation and reduction of public spending and services, as appropriate to national and contemporaneous realities. It is this that has provided the basis for different types of neoliberal to push in the same free market direction. It also serves as an example of why establishing principles for a Good Society is important.

Despite its hegemonic success, criticism of neoliberalism is widespread. This ranges from work in the 1990s by Bauman (1994) and Beck (1992) through to recent contributions such as Farnsworth and Irving (2018), Davies (2016), Jessop (2015) and Crouch (2011). Particular criticisms focus on neoliberalism as the cause of gross economic inequalities, high levels of poverty, increasing socio-economic insecurity and demise of the public realm. More generally, Bauman (1994) has described neoliberalism as denying the basic human need for belonging and instead creating uncertainty, loneliness and the future as the site of fear (not hope), with our lives becoming disjointed and inconsequential rather than flourishing and fulfilled. As noted above, Monbiot (2016) describes neoliberalism as being the ideology at the root of all our problems.

But criticism of neoliberalism has not led to identification of a plausible, progressive alternative. Some attempts at articulating an alternative have been made. Examples include communitarianism (Etzioni 1995), New Labour's Third Way (Giddens, 1998) and the capabilities approach (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Other examples could include debates about a moral economy (e.g. Pettifor, 2014) and work such as by Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006). However, none have developed into a widely supported, credible alternative to neoliberal hegemony. As Harris and McKibbin (2015) put it: "Progressive-minded people are struggling to articulate an end-goal for politics. The Right remains committed to neoliberalism. The Left, meanwhile, has failed to respond convincingly".

Harris and McKibbin (ibid.) argue that a new approach is needed – a politics of values. This links with findings from a review of UK progressive society (outside party politics) undertaken by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and Compass. The review (NEF and Compass, 2015) identified several strengths including the large numbers of organisations and individuals involved and the ability to mobilise millions of people to support specific causes. However, weaknesses were also identified with the primary one relating to principles. It was noted that there are strong and overlapping progressive values – equality, democracy, social justice – but there is a lack of shared principles which express what these values mean in practice.

Both NEF and Compass have subsequently undertaken work to identify principles, as has a separate initiative in the West Midlands. These three projects have all set out principles as will now be discussed.

Examples of principles as an alternative to neoliberalism

The Compass project was based on interviews with national level social actors e.g. in civil society organisations, think tanks and academia, in which they were asked what constituted for them a Good Society (see Orton, 2016). The outcome was:

We all have a decent basic standard of living; so we are secure and free to choose how to lead our life; developing our potential and flourishing materially and emotionally; participating, contributing and treating all with care and respect; and building a fair and sustainable future for the next generations. (ibid: 24)

NEF, with NEON, the FrameWorks Institute and Public Interest Research Centre have jointly undertaken a project called 'Framing the Economy' which includes identification of six principles and four values. These were produced in consultation with NEON organisers and an affiliates network of journalists, communications officers, campaigners, political advisors and thought leaders (NEON et al., 2018). The outcome was as follows.

Six principles: collective provision of basic needs; democratic and common ownership; co-operation and sharing; participation and empowerment; controlling our work and time; sustaining ecological systems.

Four values: equality and human dignity; solidarity and community; autonomy and liberation (building a society which gives people genuine freedom to fulfil their potential and live the lives they choose); stewardship of the environment.

A third example is from a slightly different perspective. This consisted of an informal network of people in the West Midlands, described as community activists involved in a wide range of groups and with different starting points e.g. faith-based, political, community action, etc, coming together around a theme of seeking an alternative to austerity and through a deliberative, consensus building approach agreeing on five shared principles: enabling potential; equal society; participatory democracy; environmental sustainability; an economy for the common good (see Knight, 2017).

The aim of this article is not to undertake a detailed unpacking of these sets of principles, but to identify common themes by way of context for, and a basis for comparison with, the empirical evidence that will be presented. Thus, it can be seen from the three sets of principles that there are a number of common themes. Environmental sustainability is the most evident, including as both a principle and value in the work by NEON et al. (2018). Basic needs and fulfilling individual potential are evident across the projects, albeit expressed differently and suggesting some differences in emphasis e.g. NEON et al. (2018) are explicit in seeing basic needs as being met through collective provision but in the other cases the point is more generic. Equality appears in two cases but in the third there is a less specific reference to a 'fairer future'. Democracy/participation appears in all three projects along with a slightly more diffuse theme around community/co-operation/solidarity/contributing.

What is also notable is a commonality of process and in particular, a top-down approach. As has been seen, the Compass project was based on interviews with national level social actors while the work by NEON et al. involved NEON organisers, journalists, communications officers, campaigners, political advisors and thought leaders. The West Midlands work was different in being undertaken at sub-national level but it still involved a particular set of people i.e. those already engaged as active citizens/community activists. Thus, the views of a broader range of people, and especially marginalised and disadvantaged groups, is conspicuous by its absence. This links to a further point made in the NEF-Compass (2015) review of progressive society, namely: progressive groups are not genuinely representative of different cultures and backgrounds; most work about injustice does not involve the voices of those most affected; salaried staff within the progressive movement do not look and sound like those outside the movement; and this is a profound weakness.

Within the West Midlands initiative it became evident that people on low incomes, from BME backgrounds and under 25 years of age were under-represented and from this the idea developed for new research specifically to include disadvantaged and marginalised groups. An application was submitted to the Webb Memorial Trust who agreed to fund a project, as will now be discussed.

The research

The core aim of the research was to include in debate about principles for a Good Society, people whose voice is rarely heard. More specifically, the aim was to involve people on low incomes, from BME backgrounds and under 25 years of age. The

project was undertaken by brap, an organisation which has particular expertise in engaging under-represented groups. Reflecting the preceding West Midlands work, the research was conducted in Birmingham which is an appropriate setting given its super-diversity and areas of extreme economic deprivation. To be clear, while the research was undertaken at local level this was not about community development e.g. the ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) approach or other such models: it was about the specific debate regarding principles for a Good Society and hearing the views of those who rarely have voice in such matters.

The project consisted of six half-day discussion sessions. Participants were recruited through brap's network of partnerships with local community groups serving particular communities and in low income areas with a large number of residents from BME backgrounds. The definition of low income included people on low wages and/or benefits.

A total of 42 people participated in the discussion sessions. The sessions were as follows: young people aged 16-25 (ten participants); people from Asian or Asian British backgrounds (eight participants); Black people (eight participants – two separate sessions of four in each); people from new migrant communities, mainly Eastern Europe (six participants); a mixed group (ten participants). There was an even balance of men and women.

'Principles for a Good Society' is hardly the stuff of everyday conversation so the format of sessions was to begin by prompting participants to talk about their most pressing concerns. A world café approach was used, a methodology employed in facilitating participatory research, with participants asked to identify the things that make them (un)happy on a day-to-day basis. From this, participants then reflected on common concerns within the group and weighed the relative importance of different claims. Session facilitators (from brap) used further participatory techniques to encourage probing of responses and further reflections within the group discussions. Particular themes that developed were around how universal participants thought their concerns were, what participants thought were the underlying causes perpetuating their concerns and whose responsibility it is to redress problems identified. Discussion sessions concluded with participants identifying a top four or five common concerns they thought central to the kind of society they want to live in.

Data were analysed using a framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Preliminary themes were identified and the deductive approach was then supplemented in subsequent iterations by identification of further sub-themes. This was accompanied by ongoing comparison and discussion among the researchers and key points were examined both for individual discussion sessions and across the sessions as a whole. The analysis therefore evolved from categorising data to interpretation, and development of themes to identification of key findings.

The project adhered to good ethical practice in relation to participatory research. Informed consent was ensured. Confidentiality was an important issue for many participants and best practice was used in data management and for this article an approach is taken of not attributing quotations to individuals but using a broad descriptor of the discussion session in which they participated. All participants were

given a £15 gift voucher as a thank you for their engagement and travel expenses were reimbursed.

The empirical evidence presented here is therefore based on a very different approach to top-down examples discussed above. The project engaged with marginalised groups to understand their fundamental concerns and issues and how these might inform attempts at setting out principles. This is about a participatory approach putting people who are invariably not included in public debate, at the centre of research and co-production of knowledge. It is about valuing the expertise by experience of people on low incomes, from BME groups and under 25s: not treating them as passive observers or recipients of ideas imposed upon them.

Findings

Unsurprisingly, a very wide range of issues were raised in the discussion sessions. These included debt, housing and lot more besides. However, both within and across sessions, six very clear core themes were evident. These were: relationships; respect; jobs; basic services; voice; community. These are considered in turn.

Relationships

The starting point for many participants was personal relationships, something not evident in the discussion of principles above. Participants primarily framed this in terms of interpersonal relationships being fundamental to their wellbeing and sense of happiness. For many people this meant familial relationships, as the most important and central relationships in their lives.

Some participants emphasised the importance of interpersonal relationships in terms of having someone to love and care for and who loves and cares about them. This is illustrated by two quotations from participants.

As you get older you realise that having someone who cares about you is more important than all the things that you got hung up about before – the cars and the big house. (Mixed group)

[What's the most important thing to be happy in society?] Just, having someone who loves you. Someone who chooses to be with you. (Young person group)

Another theme, however, was relationships as a source of security. This related particularly to family relationships and with a considerable sense of reciprocity. As one participant explained:

I would [put] my mom first, because she's always been there for me when I've needed her...I know she always will be – whatever happens, at school or college – I know she'll love me and my brothers and sisters. (Young person group)

While the importance of relationships and family is hardly unique to the participants in this research, their marginalised position in society is perhaps evident (at least in part)

in the strength of the emphasis here. If a person feels they do not live in a good society and society is not there for them, then the importance of someone who, as in the preceding quotation, is always there when needed becomes all the more important. This point is closely connected to a second theme which featured strongly – respect.

Respect

The notion of ‘respect’ was generated by participants and across sessions was a major point of discussion. Some participants talked at length about how they felt they are not respected within society. This was invariably linked with racism. For example:

Stereotypes are really damaging, I have been pulled over by police for running, like in my running gear with my brother and asked what I was doing. It was stupid because it is like, ‘how are you going to ask me what I am doing if I am running and you can clearly see that?’ It’s obvious they just see you as ‘a black man’. (Black group)

It annoys me how based on ethnicity you are called different things even if you are doing the same thing; say for instance holding a knife: for black people you are violent criminals, for Muslims it is dangerous terrorists and for white people they are misunderstood, or just playing a game. It’s obvious who they think is part of society and who isn’t. (Black group)

While generating considerable discussion, many contributions about respect tended towards the abstract rather than concrete. This quotation, linking respect for self and respect for others, was typical of many that were made:

Respect, for me, is one of the most important things. Respect for yourself, because a lot of people don’t respect themselves, but when you respect yourself you’ll respect other people. (Mixed group)

There was some discussion of how respect is manifested in practical terms. Examples included free education or providing support to people out of work. But far more marked was the sense of not feeling respected and the impact of that. This was common across all the sessions. Participants did not necessarily find it easy to express this in ways that adequately captured their feelings, but what recurred was concern about constantly being unfairly treated and how this impacts on respect and self-esteem. The key point was that participants saw it as impossible to build the kind of society they want, without feeling respected.

Jobs

A third key theme raised by participants was about the need for financial security and providing basic necessities but this was overwhelmingly expressed in relation to jobs. At heart, participants saw having a well-paying job as critical to having a good life. This was deemed essential to provide basics although, especially among younger participants, a good job was also seen as the means of obtaining the ‘nice things’ in life like foreign holidays or expensive clothes. Overall, however, it was covering basics that was most emphasised with specific comments made about not seeking ‘flash cars’ or ‘loads of houses’.

But such comments have to be set within the reality of participants' experience. For example:

Poor people are paying higher rents and paying more and more money and it is leaving some homeless. There are people who are struggling now who probably will not be able to own houses in five, ten years and will end up on the streets. (Young person group)

Participants were almost unanimous in stating they wanted money in return for work, rather than money in and of itself. This appeared to be linked to ideas around respect, self-respect and self-esteem, in a sense of conception of self as an independent person, capable of providing for your own needs. For example:

You have to earn your position in society, and that's the way it should be. (Mixed group)

I don't want to have to rely on anyone else for my rent or whatever. I want to look at my trainers and say, 'I paid for those', 'I paid for my phone'. (Black group)

Such expressions of points of possible principle, however, again came up against the reality of participants' experience of disadvantaged positions, this time in relation to the labour market. One theme that featured was that low-wage jobs are not sufficient to provide for basics. In this respect, participants argued for a higher (National) Living Wage as these quotations illustrate.

The Living Wage should be higher to keep up with inflation. (Black group)

Age and minimum wage should go together, just because I am under 25 does not mean I don't deserve a living wage. (Young person group)

A key focus of discussion across all groups was racial discrimination in the labour market. This will not be presented in detail here as it is already well-documented but it is important to note that for many participants this was a critical issue, with some talking at length about being excluded from the labour market and citing employer discrimination as a key barrier. Young people talked about the difficulty of even getting a job while a particular concern for newer migrants from Eastern European countries was employers' perception of them solely as low-skilled workers with nothing to contribute in terms of ideas and creativity and some associated issues around support for learning and improved proficiency in English.

Providing economic security through a system of social security/welfare benefits was far more contentious than discussion of jobs and will be considered in the following section.

Basic services

Participants in all sessions talked about the importance of ensuring everyone receives certain basic services. There was broad consensus that these included free education

and free healthcare. There was also broad support for ensuring older people are looked after and sympathy for ensuring provision is in place for homeless people.

A small number of participants also raised issues around public transport and ensuring internet access. These were linked to points raised above i.e. as necessary for being able to maintain relationships with family and friends, either in person and/or virtually, plus being able to get to work and/or access information about employment opportunities.

There was less agreement about the basic standard of living the state or society should ensure people not in work should have (other than older people). Some participants had very negative attitudes:

I don't agree with benefits, people get too many...have a bunch of kids and just sit on benefits. (Mixed group)

Other comments reflected hostile and negative attitudes common in debate about welfare, including people in receipt of benefits criticising other claimants as previous research has also found. Some participants described benefit recipients as lazy or even parasitic. Others (especially some of the younger participants) argued that even if jobs are not available there are still business/self-employment opportunities people could and should exploit. Several participants made comments about not wanting their money to pay for migrants claiming benefits and that help should not be provided for 'foreigners'

In contrast, other participants expressed more collective and solidaristic views. People in this category were much more open to migration and saw it bringing benefits to society, with many arguing that people coming to the UK want to integrate and that support should be available to help them. People in this group still tended to have notions of deserving/undeservingness, but generally emphasised that compassion towards those in need should be society's overriding concern. The following quotation was typical:

It's difficult to determine who's deserving and who's not but we need to give because there are issues, genuine issues, there are genuine people. (Asian group)

Some participants went further and talked expressly in the language of human rights. They argued that there are fundamental rights which people should have but which are not being met. This was mainly framed in terms of government spending cuts.

The key finding on this point is that participants expressed strong support for the provision of basic services and help for certain groups – pensioners and homeless people – but the specific issue of welfare benefits was as contentious as it is in broader public debate with a division between very negative and more positive views. The latter points at least to a basis for support for a minimum safety net, but the strength of negative views should not be under-estimated.

Voice

A theme that came across strongly was participants expressing a feeling of being 'invisible'. What they meant by this was that: they rarely, if ever, see people like themselves in public debates whether within the media or politics; do not have opportunities to make their voice heard; feel assumptions are made about their views; and questioned whether institutions even wanted to hear and understand them.

The following quotations were typical of many comments made in the sessions:

I think the government does not want to hear us because of the colour of our skin. There are hardly any Black MPs to represent us. (Mixed group)

MPs believe that what we think and what we want are the same as what they want because, you know, for them having two houses is not a big deal but it is a really big thing, having a mansion. (Black group)

There are big assumptions made about what we think and they just do not know what we want. (Mixed group)

There was some evidence of participants feeling multiple disadvantage in relation to being heard. Some people argued that in addition to racial discrimination there are other aspects of people's identity, such as class, that are of equal or even greater significance to life chances. Indeed, when people talked about not being represented in the media or politics, it was not just about being a Black or Asian person, but also about being young, on a low income and from Birmingham (i.e. outside Westminster/London).

The theme of not being heard also related to public agencies with which participants interact. Participants were clear that they want agencies to be responsive to their needs and the way they consume services, with this currently often not being the case. However, there was no evidence of participants wanting to be involved in consultation and engagement activities, instead expressing frustration around 'just wanting services to work'.

When discussing what it meant to feel represented or listened to by public agencies, what emerged was participants meant being listened to by specific people in specific situations. Examples that were mentioned included a teacher at school, a police officer after having reported a crime, or staff at a jobcentre. Discussions here returned to the key theme above – respect. Participants questioned whether in day to day situations and interactions, professionals in such circumstances showed them respect – or even common courtesy – giving them the opportunity to speak, listening to what they had to say, and, importantly, believing them.

This is far removed from the kind of citizen involvement in the design and delivery of public services that might be envisaged as one way forward. Nor does it particularly suggest ideas of co-production of services and delivery. Abstract discussion of participatory democracy did not feature at all. Participants' views were based on the realities of their daily lives, far removed from media and political debate and in which interaction with public institutions is often negative not positive. The sense of invisibility is powerful.

Community

Many participants – particularly those in the new migrant and Asian sessions – talked at length about a desire for more cohesive communities. In the Migrant session, ‘cohesion’ was at least in part about physical security and freedom from being victims of hate crime. However, participants also talked at length about a sense of belonging and acceptance that comes from shared cultural and moral values. For some this meant protecting the traditions of ‘their’ community. Others, however, disagreed, arguing that moral values were cross-cultural. Furthermore, it was claimed it is important that individuals build their *own* community of friends and other people who share common interests and concerns. Not only was this seen as essential to creating a more cohesive society but it was also argued that: (a) creating communities engenders a stronger sense of acceptance; and (b) widening cultural perspectives, meeting new people, and being introduced to different beliefs is important for individuals’ personal development:

[The community centre where the session was held] is a great place where you can meet new people...I’ve learnt a lot about myself and different cultures being here. (Asian group)

It’s really important that young people today have broad cultural horizons. People from my generation were a bit ‘sheltered’, if you like, and that really limits your opportunity to learn about all what is happening in the world. (Asian group)

In terms of ways of developing communities, the main theme that emerged was around providing common/shared spaces for people from different backgrounds. There was no fixed view on particular forms nor focus. People coming together on the basis of shared interests whether that be sport, art, education, training, etc, were all seen as equally valid.

However, a greater barrier to progress was identified by participants as a general unwillingness to talk to people from different backgrounds. At the time of writing the ‘hostile environment’ in relation to migration is in the public eye, as its consequences in relation to the Windrush generation are gaining attention. What participants saw was a toxic political climate where ‘others’ (Muslims, migrants, refugees) are demonised, including by some participants themselves (albeit a small number of individuals). Participants did not necessarily identify ways forward but self-evidently a hostile environment approach, irrespective of specific targets, is antithetical to any sense of a Good Society.

The implications of the research findings will now be discussed.

Discussion

From the perspective of the participants in the research presented here, principles for a Good Society need to reflect six core concerns: relationships; respect; jobs; basic services; voice; and, community. This means recognising how being loved and having someone who cares about them is fundamental to people’s sense of well-being and its importance in reflecting a good life. Respect was a similarly critical theme, meaning

being treated as an individual and having individual needs and wants taken seriously by the state and society regardless of background, age, ethnicity, or gender. Discrimination, racism in the labour market and a hostile environment for migrants or any other group is consequently antithetical to any notion of a Good Society, although also recognising critical and negative comments made by some participants.

A third theme is economic security, but expressed as being about decent jobs. Economic security is also evident in a theme of basic services, with these relating in particular to education, health, care for older people and the homeless. The provision of welfare benefits was far more contentious. There was considerable negativity although with some support for at least a safety net being evident. A very striking theme was participants' sense of invisibility. The remedy, voice, was expressed in particular in relation to wanting to be listened to in day-to-day interactions with public services. A desire for a more representative political and media class was also evident, although it is less clear on which aspect/s of identity this representation should take. The final theme was community, with community seen very much in terms of a space (or spaces) enabling people from different backgrounds to come together around shared interests or concerns. It is evident that the participants do not feel they currently live in Good Society. They certainly do not see the UK today as a fair society in which they can access the same opportunities as everyone else without fear of discrimination.

A number of points can be posited in relation to what would constitute a Good Society, from the perspective of participants. Drawing on language used in the sessions, and with potential therefore to resonate with participants and others in similar positions, this can be expressed as a Good Society says: we won't judge you because of who you are; your problems are our problems; we'll make work worthwhile; we'll help you find a place where you feel accepted; we're happy for you to pursue your dreams – whatever they might be.

In more detail, this means a Good Society will take active steps to ensure people are not discriminated against in key areas of public life (education, employment, health, criminal justice, etc). It means recognising discrimination can take many forms and can be on many grounds. Equality law is not enough on its own and what needs to be challenged is the way society privileges and disadvantages particular people. A Good Society shows compassion in saying 'your problems are our problems'. It cannot solve people's problems for them but it will say, 'you're worth investing in' because it respects and values everyone, and recognises life is tough for many people.

A Good Society recognises people value work as a means of providing independence, self-reliance and a sense of accomplishment. But some jobs do not provide this so a Good Society says it is about jobs that are productive and well paid. But a Good Society also says basic services that everyone needs, such as health and education, will be provided and some form of safety net. A Good Society also says we will help you find a place where you feel accepted, creating spaces to help connect people with others who have similar interests. It also wedges the door open on a range of opportunities, it is encouraging, helping people to expand their horizons and cultural perspectives. A Good Society therefore recognises people's aspirations and offers support to help people fulfil their dreams.

So how does this compare with principles set out by others e.g. NEON et al., Compass and the West Midlands initiative discussed earlier? It was seen above that such attempts had common themes around environment, equality, basic needs, fulfilling individual potential, democracy, community and the economy. On the one hand there can be seen to be points of clear difference between these themes and those raised by participants in the research presented here. Most markedly, environment did not feature in the discussion sessions at all whereas it is a key element in the other sets of principles. Similarly, discussion of the economy as an overarching structure which can take many forms, did not appear at all in the discussion sessions.

On the other hand, there are some points of clear agreement. For example, equality and fulfilling individual potential run across the three sets of principles considered earlier and were also strong themes raised by participants in the discussion sessions. The synergy on these points is very evident.

On other points, the challenge perhaps lies in linking principles to the realities of participants' lives. Thus, the sets of principles discussed above all include democracy/participation but the reality for people in this research is of feeling invisible and not respected in day to day dealings with professionals in public services. Having voice is the common link but needs to be expressed as part of a principle of democracy and participation which addresses invisibility and discrimination. In the three sets of top-down principles 'community' is part of a diffuse theme around community/co-operation/solidarity/contributing but for the participants in the discussion groups community means a place of safety and spaces to come together with people from different backgrounds around shared interests. Bringing together the principle with day to day realities provides a way forward and could even allow for exploration of environment from a perspective of concern with community and locality. Finally, meeting basic needs is a contentious issue but emphasis on services and at least some form of safety net do provide potential starting points for synergy, while also recognising more critical views.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, there are two points to emphasise. First, in terms of principles, there are certainly differences between those set out such as by NEON et al., Compass and the West Midlands initiative, and themes raised by participants in the research presented here: but there are also points on which there is strong resonance. The key challenge perhaps lies in linking principles to the realities of the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged groups. This ties to the second point to emphasise, which is about process. It was noted above that a review of progressive society identified a profound weakness as being that it is not genuinely representative of different cultures and backgrounds, work about injustice invariably does not involve the voices of those most affected and salaried staff within the progressive movement do not look and sound like those outside the movement. Indeed, it has been seen that a strong theme in the empirical evidence above was participants' sense of being invisible. This is not about an either/or choice between the grounded experience of marginalised groups versus professionals, community activists and so on: it is about seeking resonance between the two and that means a process in which people with lived and learned expertise work together, co-producing knowledge and ideas. If the

notion of a Good Society is to become a plausible alternative to neoliberal hegemony, such a process is key.

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