

# The UK2070 Papers



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# The UK2070 Papers

## Series 3: February 2021

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*\* Bartlett School of Planning, University College London*

*\*\* Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, Newcastle University* (Page 28)

The problems of so-called ‘left-behind’ places – typically former industrial regions have figured prominently in voting patterns over the last five years in the UK, and also the USA and Europe. This paper examines the following issues: the political economy of ‘left-behind’ regions; the new policy prescriptions for ‘left-behind’ regions; and the kinds of institutions that are required to create a new economic future in such disadvantaged places.

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*The UK2070 Papers* are a collection of think pieces and essays produced for the UK2070 Commission since the publication of our Final Report in February 2020. For more information and contact details please visit our website - [www.uk2070.org.uk](http://www.uk2070.org.uk)

The UK2070 Commission is an independent inquiry into the deep-rooted spatial inequalities that exist across the UK, chaired by The Right Honourable, The Lord Kerslake. It published its findings in its Final Report published in February 2020. This Report drew upon a substantial body of

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9. **Rethinking decision making**

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## 1) A civil society perspective on inequalities: the COVID-19 revision

Dr. Hyunji Cho, Elisabeta Ilie and Dr. Lucy Natarajan,  
The Bartlett School of Planning

*This paper re-examines the ‘civil society perspective’ on engaging in strategy that can respond to the current rapidly changing context by unpacking the roles of civil society organisations throughout the pandemic. The evidence collected through this research shows the need to recognize civil society’s efforts and contributions to the wellbeing of their communities.*

### COVID-19 and regional inequality

The extent of inequality in the UK is amongst the most extreme in high-income countries. The richest region of Europe, London, is to be found in the UK, but so are six of Europe’s ten poorest regions.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 and local lockdowns in 2020 have been shown to accentuate the inequality between regions in the UK, which has been observed throughout the past decades. Within that context, our previous report, *Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality*,<sup>2</sup> aimed to explore through conversations with representatives of both local and national civil society organisations how these non-governmental groups experience and understand economic, social, and environmental inequality. Through the five focus-groups held with organisations across England, we heard reflections on issues of existing regional disparity. A priority concern that emerged from those research events is the ‘economic insecurity’ hindering communities from moving towards their goals.

From the perspective of the focus group participants, economic insecurity as experienced in the communities where they worked was associated with a growing number of low-income households and a sharp fall in local standards of living. A lack of job security, and inadequate skills training and funding for social projects, together with an overall increase in living costs sharpened the effects of widening economic inequality. The dynamic is clearly producing insecurity for disadvantaged communities; it both impacts on quality of life and fuels feelings of social alienation amongst these groups.<sup>3</sup>

There is no reason to suppose that these concerns identified by civil society organisations in relation to the existing patterns of regional inequality would have diminished throughout the pandemic. On the contrary, recent UK data shows that the recent decline in GDP decline is the largest seen in 300 years,<sup>4</sup> and deprived

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<sup>1</sup> McCann P (2019) Perceptions of Regional Inequality and the Geography of Discontent: Insights from the UK.  
<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/01-McCann-UK-Regional-Inequality-Debates.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Natarajan L, Ilie E, and Cho H (2020) Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality: Focus Group Research Findings Report. Report, Sheffield University, UK, February.  
<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-Civil-Society-Perspectives-UCL-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [Office for National Statistics \(2020\) Labour market overview, UK: August 2020.](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/labour-market-overview-uk-august-2020)

communities tend to experience the worst health impacts from the first wave of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

During the pandemic the compounding effects of socio-economic performance on public health are apparent both at regional and national levels. Nine of the ten worst affected local authorities are in the Midlands and North West experience higher levels of infection, while typically economically high performing regions such as Oxford, Milton Keynes, London, and Edinburgh remain less exposed to the effects of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> There are also implications for recovery, as recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>6</sup> demonstrated. That investigation of unemployment in the UK during COVID-19 highlighted that the regions where recovery from COVID-19 is likely to be hardest are concentrated in geographic areas with low-performing economies.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, areas with low pre-pandemic employment levels were found to be on average more than twice as likely to be in danger of COVID-19 related job losses, amounting to 'double distress' in those specific areas.<sup>8</sup> Inequalities of the impact of COVID-19 on employment opportunities is particularly evident between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance claims increased by 88% between March and April 2020, as compared with the 59% increase in predominantly urban areas.<sup>9</sup>

Notably, the present crisis highlights not only regional differences but also differential impacts on social groups.<sup>10</sup> The economic effects of COVID-19 tend to place extra pressures on already vulnerable groups, effectively trapping them in untenable economic positions. In addition to those who are unemployed, the circumstances of rough sleepers, and those off sick or self-isolating are of particular concern.

The socio-economic gaps between different English regions has also led to disparities in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, wealth, health, education, and skills, which all have a spatial component to them.<sup>11</sup> For example, the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are accommodation and food services, arts and recreation, and wholesale and retail

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<sup>5</sup> Public Health England (2020) Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19. GOV.UK, Public Health England, August.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/908434/Disparities\\_in\\_the\\_risk\\_and\\_outcomes\\_of\\_COVID\\_August\\_2020\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics (2020) COVID-19 Infection Survey pilot: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. GOV.UK, Office for National Statistics, October.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveysurvey/16october2020>

<sup>7</sup> Innes D, McDonald R, and Benett S (2020) Targeted action for parts of Britain at risk of surging unemployment. Report, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, UK, August.

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/targeted-action-parts-britain-risk-surg-ing-unemployment>

<sup>8</sup> Locality, Co-operatives UK and the Plunkett Foundation (2020) Communities Work. How community organisations can lead the post COVID-19 jobs recovery. Report, Communities in Charge Campaign, UK.

<https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.09.16-Locality-report-Communities-work.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Plunkett Foundation (2020) Plunkett's Vision for a COVID-19 Rural Recovery. Report, The Plunkett Foundation, UK, July.

<https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Plunketts-Rural-Vision.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Public Health England (2020) Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19. GOV.UK, Public Health England, August.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/908434/Disparities\\_in\\_the\\_risk\\_and\\_outcomes\\_of\\_COVID\\_August\\_2020\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

industries.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, these represent the core elements of foundational economies.<sup>13</sup> Pre-pandemic data suggests that the communities in left-behind regions rely heavily on the local services and employment opportunities provided by foundational economies. The same data suggests that in the context of disadvantaged communities, foundational economies are negatively affected by the relatively low pay rates alongside the high costs and small turnover involved in running related businesses.

The constraints on foundational economies add pressure particularly on the young (under 25s) and older (over 65s) individuals who constitute the predominant work base in these sectors. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these two age groups is underlined in a recent study that showed half of the under 25s and over 65s interviewees who were in employment in the early days of the pandemic were either furloughed or out of work by June, compared with less than one third among other age groups.<sup>14</sup>

These are all indications that regions of the country already experiencing socio-economic inequalities prior to the pandemic are the hardest affected by a loss of employment.<sup>15</sup> In other words, dimensions of inequality are mutually reinforcing in left-behind regions, thus deepening the socio-economic divide and further increasing levels of local economic insecurity.

In light of this context, we argue that the role of civil society needs to be given greater attention and we consider its importance in two ways. First, civil society organisations can play a key role in responding to the immediate needs of local vulnerable groups. Our earlier work for the UK2070 Commission demonstrated this unique role in providing flexible and responsive initiatives in localities at the point and time of need. Second, there is a real long-term need to seek a different means of shaping UK strategy to be more locally sensitive, and for that purpose civil society organisations are well positioned with their local knowledge and experience. They are witness to COVID-19 impacts, and the vulnerabilities of the UK's economic structure. To address the vast gaps between regions, the economic recovery from COVID-19 will involve large scale, long term, and comprehensive interventions. However, our work suggests that it

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<sup>12</sup> Allas T, Canal M, and Hunt V (2020) COVID-19 in the United Kingdom: Assessing jobs at risk and the impact on people and places. Report, McKinsey & Company, UK, May.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID%2019%20in%20the%20United%20Kingdom%20Assessing%20jobs%20at%20risk%20and%20the%20impact%20on%20people%20and%20places%20new/COVID-19-in-the-United-Kingdom-VF.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Natarajan L, Ilie E, and Cho H (2020) Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality: Focus Group Research Findings Report. Report, Sheffield University, UK, February.

<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-Civil-Society-Perspectives-UCL-2020.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Laura Gardiner, Maja Gustafsson, Mike Brewer, Karl Handscomb, Kathleen Henehan, Lindsay Judge and Fahmida Rahman (2020) An intergenerational audit for the UK. Report, Resolution Foundation, Intergenerational Centre, UK.

<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/10/Intergenerational-audit-2020.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Allas T, Canal M, and Hunt V (2020) COVID-19 in the United Kingdom: Assessing jobs at risk and the impact on people and places. Report, McKinsey & Company, UK, May.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID%2019%20in%20the%20United%20Kingdom%20Assessing%20jobs%20at%20risk%20and%20the%20impact%20on%20people%20and%20places%20new/COVID-19-in-the-United-Kingdom-VF.pdf>

can also usefully involve those already working in the areas that suffer from regional inequality, to learn from them and seek to ensure that the job opportunities which would come with economic recovery do not exacerbate existing place-based inequalities.<sup>16</sup>

In view of the above, this paper re-examines the ‘civil society perspective’ on engaging in strategy that can respond to the current rapidly changing context. In the following sections, we unpack the roles of civil society organisations throughout the pandemic. We draw on our previous UK2070 research project published in early 2020, *Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality*<sup>17</sup> and draw particular attention to how the already existing barriers to action continued and worsened during the pandemic. We have added more recent data, with an online survey distributed to 59 civil society organisations across England, including the 40 groups that took part in the 2019 focus groups. We also conducted documentary analysis of the websites belonging to these 59 civil society organisations, documenting their initiatives and activities undertaken during the pandemic, as well as online publications where relevant, all of which are referenced throughout this paper. We gathered supplementary information regarding the social and financial capacity of nation-wide civil society organisations from publicly available data in governmental (as referenced) and third sector online resources.<sup>18 19 20</sup> From the 59 civil society organisations approached for the online survey part of this research, we received 13 responses. A breakdown of these responses indicates 3 civil society organisations representing the North East, 6 representing the North West, 3 representing the South East and 1 that kept its association anonymous. The online survey consists of 12 questions, designed around the Ten Point Action Plan proposed by the UK2070 Commission in its 2020 report.<sup>21</sup> The Commission’s plan aimed to scale up positive change in disadvantaged communities and consists of the following actions:

1. A spatially just transition to zero-carbon
2. Delivering a connectivity revolution
3. Creating new global centres of excellence
4. Strengthening the foundations of local economies

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<sup>16</sup> Locality, Co-operatives UK and the Plunkett Foundation (2020) Communities Work. How community organisations can lead the post COVID-19 jobs recovery. Report, Communities in Charge Campaign, UK.

<https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.09.16-Locality-report-Communities-work.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Natarajan L, Ilie E, and Cho H (2020) Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality: Focus Group Research Findings Report. Report, Sheffield University, UK, February.

<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-Civil-Society-Perspectives-UCL-2020.pdf>

<sup>18</sup>

<https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/what-funding-is-available-to-charities-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

<sup>19</sup>

<https://locality.org.uk/services-tools/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-information-and-support/covid-19-funding/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.grantsonline.org.uk/coronavirus.html>

<sup>21</sup> UK2070 Commission (2020) Make No Little Plans. Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future. Report, UK2070 Commission, UK, February.

<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

5. Rethinking the housing crisis
6. Harnessing cultural and environmental assets
7. Implementing a comprehensive framework for inclusive devolution
8. Future skilling the United Kingdom
9. Levelling the playing field: fairer access to funds
10. Shaping the future: a national spatial plan for England

The report of our research is structured as follows: firstly, we outline the importance of civil society organisations in dealing with the societal shocks and changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, using concepts of regional resilience and responsive initiatives; secondly, we present the empirical findings that explain how civil society organisations are dealing with local issues brought on by the current COVID-19 crisis; and finally we offer a series of lessons surrounding the participation of civil society in policy-making post-COVID-19.

### **Civil society and economic shocks**

#### *Building networks for economic regional resilience*

In the context of uncertainty given the current pandemic, the key to local economic recovery lies in how places are coping with change and how well they are prepared to adapt and react to crisis specific challenges. Economic regional resilience is a useful concept to better understand the process behind the responses of local areas during a crisis.

Resilience has quickly become a concept used to explain how local and regional economies respond to an economic crisis. There are two key approaches to the concept of resilience.<sup>22</sup> The first is the engineering conception of resilience, focusing on the resistance of a system. It centres on how the system deals with shock and how quickly it can return to its previously existing structure.<sup>23</sup> The second notion is based on the adaptive capacity of a system.<sup>24</sup> It emphasises not only recovery from crisis but also re-orientation and renewal of systems.

The roles of civil society organisations tend to be discussed more extensively in relation to the second conception of resilience. With their concern for human agency, Bristow and Healy<sup>25</sup> argue that complex adaptive systems are made possible through the networks and bottom-up processes with interactions between people. The highly connected system of regions is seen as necessary to deploy resources and react to immanent changes. They especially note the relations between the networks of local actors and places where they are embedded are highlighted. Psychological studies explain the processes for social adaptations to external changes as the strategic

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<sup>22</sup> Pendall R, Foster K A and Cowell M (2010) Resilience and regions: building understanding of the metaphor, *Cambridge Journal of Regions. Economy and Society* 3(1),59–70.

<sup>23</sup> Hill E, St.Clair T, Wial H, Wolman H., Atkins P., Blumenthal P, Ficenec S and Friedhoff A (2011) Economic Shocks and Regional Economic Resilience. Working Paper Number 2011-13. Building Resilient Regions: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>24</sup> Martin R and Sunley P (2007) Complexity thinking and evolutionary economic geography, *Journal of Economic Geography* 7, 573–602.

<sup>25</sup> Bristow G and Healy A (2014) Regional Resilience: An Agency Perspective. *Regional Studies* 48(5), 923–935.



transformation of human behaviours over time.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the relationship between groups of people and their socio-economic contexts is a critical factor that can help build nimble systems. In this sense, local people connecting with each other within a specific context and their shared stores of local knowledge are key factors in civil society organisations' ability to operate well as a system. In effect, the working model of civil society organisations relies on building networks with members of the communities within which they work, as well as with local businesses and public authorities.<sup>27</sup>

Highly connected networks are necessary for local actors to collectively react to shocks or changes, and importantly here understandings of how these various actors interpret and articulate socio-economic shocks will shape policies. Building regional economic resilience requires consideration of what is vulnerable and how to know when resilience is achieved.

The experiences and knowledge of civil society organisations, including both local organisations and those that are part of a national 'umbrella', about how localities are affected by and respond to socio-economic changes can be<sup>28</sup> a critical resource of strategic policy-making. We argue that civil society organisations should be included in the learning processes of policy making to support regional economic resilience, and especially when working with left-behind places and vulnerable community groups.

#### *Economic shocks and civil society organisations*

The role of civil society organisations is critical in building a stronger system for future resilience. Their activities are also essential to supporting the social functions during times of crisis. Some of the most immediate actions of civil society organisations are practicably impossible for governmental bodies to undertake directly. As noted earlier, socially disadvantaged groups are worst affected during economic shocks, and civil society organisations working with socially vulnerable groups are well-positioned and have the necessary know-how to continue supporting these groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the bridge between local communities and public authorities offered by civil society organisations can support policymaking. Civil society organisations' experience and knowledge can therefore help shape locally suitable and timely policies.

Historically, the role of civil society organisations in supporting vulnerable local groups has been well documented. For example, their role in poverty reduction has been discussed in relation to development and social networks. The research report commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2011<sup>29</sup> states that these networks are important in improving access to employment opportunities. Social networks are

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<sup>26</sup> Magis K (2010) Community resilience: an indicator of social sustainability. *Society and Natural Resources* 23(5), 401–416.

<sup>27</sup> Locality, Co-operatives UK and the Plunkett Foundation (2020) Communities Work. How community organisations can lead the post COVID-19 jobs recovery. Report, Communities in Charge Campaign, UK.  
<https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.09.16-Locality-report-Communities-work.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> As argued for some time by collaborative planning theorists such as Patsy Healey.

<sup>29</sup> Asif A (2011) Social networks: their role in addressing poverty. Programme paper, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, UK, March.

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poverty-social-networks-full.pdf>

likely to play four simultaneous roles: enhancing service delivery; mentoring and raising aspirations; mutual support; and collective action and campaigning (also see the next section). For example, the voluntary sector can utilise social networks in order to deliver services. It has been seen that civic sectors contribute to strengthening the local economy by offering skills development programmes and by providing opportunities to develop start-up social enterprises.<sup>30</sup> It eventually can help local people into employment. Mentoring programmes run by civil society organisations are especially helpful for disadvantaged children and young people. The programmes focused on youth groups help them to escape poverty and boost social mobility (see for instance [100 Black Men of America, Inc.](#)). In addition, social support for older people is essential to prevent social exclusion and to provide emotional support.<sup>31</sup> Single pensioners tend to lack a social network and/or are in poor health,<sup>32</sup> and sometimes social activities or support provided by these local organisations are one of only very few opportunities accessible to them. In view of such instances it seems perhaps unsurprising that civil society organisations have been filling in the gaps left by the shortcomings of the state in meeting the needs of its most vulnerable citizens.

Civil society initiatives aimed at tackling socio-economic difficulties of local citizens are also important, and particularly since they can lead to further political engagement. There is a wide range of political activities such as providing information and policy design in the field of unemployment and precarious working conditions.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, civil society organisations have knowledge regarding priority issues for communities, and importantly too have insight into how local people understand governmental policies, including the perspectives of disadvantaged groups such as young people, elderly and the homeless who have difficulties in joining formal public participation processes. Civil society organisations have the unique position of liaising between local people and public authorities<sup>34</sup> and can therefore help policymakers to develop more locally sensitive plans tailored around socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

As mentioned in the introduction, the population experiencing precarious circumstances has been growing significantly from the early days of the pandemic. The difficulties these people are facing are notable not only in terms of economic impacts, but also in social terms since unemployment resulting from ‘waves’ of COVID-19 can produce significant economic and social isolation. The social support which both local

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<sup>30</sup> Quatermain, S. (2008) ‘Defining poverty and approaches to reducing it’, Development Trusts Association. Available at: [www.dta.org.uk/activities/campaigns/poverty/dtsandpoverty/sqpoverty](http://www.dta.org.uk/activities/campaigns/poverty/dtsandpoverty/sqpoverty)

<sup>31</sup> Hoff, A. (Oct 2008) Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion of Older People – Lessons from Europe. Working paper 308, Oxford Institute of Ageing.

<sup>32</sup> Patsios, D. (2006) ‘Pensioners, Poverty & Social Exclusion’ in Pantazis, C., et al., *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*.

<sup>33</sup> Baglioni S, Lorenzini J and Mosca L (2014) The Political Role of Civil Society in the Policy Field of Youth Unemployment and Precarious Working Conditions. In: Baglioni S Giugni M (eds) *Civil Society Organizations, Unemployment, and Precarity in Europe: Between Service and Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 13-31

<sup>34</sup> Locality, Co-operatives UK and the Plunkett Foundation (2020) Communities Work. How community organisations can lead the post COVID-19 jobs recovery. Report, Communities in Charge Campaign, UK.

<https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.09.16-Locality-report-Communities-work.pdf>

and national civil society organisations offer can be vital for disadvantaged groups during the pandemic. Activities such as those directed at distribution of funding and building social networks can attend to immediate needs such as food provision and healthcare and emotional support by helping them to cope with the isolation brought on by recurring lockdowns and other travel restrictions.

### **The initiatives of civil society organisations during COVID-19**

During the last several months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the activities rolled out by civil society organisations demonstrate their potential of being flexible and their adaptive capacity. Civil society organisations have been running an extended range of initiatives for local communities, including fundraising, provision of immediate care service and financial support for local businesses. Some of these initiatives consist of the usual activities which the organisations have been offering prior to the pandemic but modified so as to be accessible during the pandemic, while others are tailored for specific community needs during COVID-19. In both cases, initiatives are responsive in nature and aimed at counteracting the ‘fall out of disadvantage’.<sup>35</sup> This means that civil society organisations have had to display a range of ready tools and answer with a sense of urgency, in their drive to ensure that basic community needs were met.

The range of initiatives that are being used, as set out in the following paragraphs, suggests that civil society organisations are manifesting a widespread ‘net’ of support for those with limited or no access to everyday essentials like food and medication whether on account of self-isolating or living in otherwise disadvantaged communities. Examples of the latter are rural communities, disproportionately affected by the dependence on national and global supply chains, particularly in terms of food provision.<sup>36</sup>

In these circumstances, the growing reliance on food banks amidst disadvantaged communities before COVID-19,<sup>37</sup> increased substantially in the months of the pandemic. In this sense, civil society organisations included in this research, such as The Real Junk Food Project, The Ready Healthy Eat Project and The Hornbeam, were found to have championed programmes that facilitated the delivery of fresh food and/or ready-made meals to the communities’ more vulnerable individuals. Other civil society organisations have been running initiatives offering advisory and/or financial support on a variety of issues from workers’ and tenants’ rights to safeguarding community businesses. The support set in place might be more crucial particularly for those directly affected by national and local lockdowns alike, through the loss of employment and core social care services. Some areas are clearly more heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than others, and civil society organisations based in areas that perform worse in economic terms are significantly more stretched than their peers operating elsewhere.

Community resilience throughout the pandemic also highlighted concerns for both

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<sup>35</sup> Natarajan L, Ilie E, and Cho H (2020) Civil Society Perspectives on Inequality: Focus Group Research Findings Report. Report, The University of Sheffield, UK, February, p. 12. <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-Civil-Society-Perspectives-UCL-2020.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Plunkett Foundation (2020) Plunkett’s Vision for a COVID-19 Rural Recovery. Report, The Plunkett Foundation, UK, July. <https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Plunketts-Rural-Vision.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

physical and mental wellbeing in relation to recurring periods of quarantine and restricted social encounters. Many of the civil society organisations included in this study run programmes that seek to overcome isolation and loneliness while simultaneously enabling skills and knowledge sharing to build up social capital. These types of programmes reflect continuity in the civil society organisations' pre-pandemic work to resist economic insecurity and curb regional levels of inequality.

Financial support for community businesses often comes in the form of grants. As a source of funding, these grants are designed to reach vulnerable people in the community and the local civil society organisations who work directly with these groups. With overarching names like 'Comic Relief COVID-19 Community Grants', 'Community Resilience Fund' and 'COVID-19 Essential Resources for Social Enterprises' these grants are the result of either fundraising efforts or collaborations between various civil society organisations and charity groups.

The national 'umbrella' organisation Groundwork, for instance, is offering grants via its Comic Relief Community initiatives to the local civil society organisations which are considerably smaller in size and have a registered income of less than £250,000. The types of funding schemes supported through these grants include: *Children Survive & Thrive* for the support of children under the age of 5 and *Fighting for Gender Justice* for women who are affected by domestic violence. *A Safe Place to Be* is for homelessness or forced migration, and *Mental Health Matters* focuses on those experiencing social stigma and discrimination due to their conditions.

In these ways, national 'umbrella' civil society organisations have provided a financial lifeline for their local counterparts. The financial support offered has proven to be essential to the continuation of the work of local organisations throughout the current crisis, and to some extent mediate uneven distribution of centralised public funding streams. The collaborative social networks put in place by national civil society organisations, such as those networks that allow access to funding partners, made it possible for them to distribute resources towards the hard-to-reach socio-economic groups and reshape services in as short a time as possible, so as to adapt to the changing circumstances.

National civil society organisations also seek to support both their local peers and community groups not only during but also after the pandemic under their overall visions by conducting research and sharing it. The online article, *How to make green space accessible to all*<sup>38</sup> by Friends of the Earth, gives an example of such efforts.

The types of initiatives outlined above suggest that the pandemic has incentivised civil society organisations to actively promote shared community and environmental agendas. In many regions across England, self-isolation has become synonymous with a paramount need for free and unrestricted access to both social support networks and decent quality green and open space.

As part of advancing these agendas, a number of civil society organisations such as Just Space and the Rural Coalition issued official letters calling on the Secretary of State to take action, while others formed partnerships to better equip them in delivering common objectives. One notable example is the call for a 'data collective',

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<sup>38</sup> Paul de Zylva (2020), How to make green space accessible to all. Friends of the Earth, UK. <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/life-after-lockdown-how-make-green-space-accessible-all>

which is supported by several national civil society organisations whose work spans a diverse range of issues from economic to social and healthcare. The key argument put forward by the group is that a suitable and long-term response to the socio-economic problems produced by the COVID-19 pandemic requires a more joined-up approach to knowledge building, stating that ‘fundamental questions that many different organisations are trying to answer. But the information [they] need to do this is held by different people, in different places and cannot be easily joined up. This makes it hard to act on’.<sup>39</sup>

In the examples given here, the initiatives go beyond responsiveness to issues experienced at community level and successfully showcase civil society’s capacity for strategic and collaborative work in times of crisis. This capacity is not often recognised but, given the local know-how of these civil society organisations, there is clearly great potential. As Locality puts it they can ‘bring local people and institutions together around shared visions or missions for local economies’.<sup>40</sup>

### **Priority concerns of civil society and COVID-19**

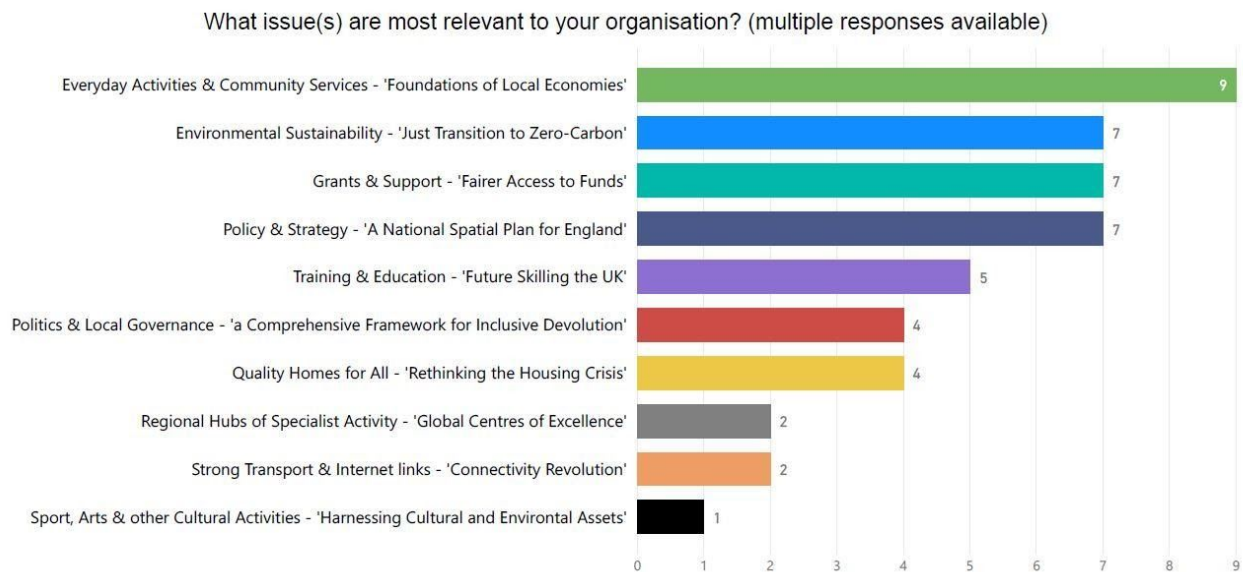
The documentary analysis above indicates that the opportunity to actively work during COVID-19 is not equally possible for all civil society organisations alike. In geographically disadvantaged areas, the precarious funding streams were identified as one of the priority concerns during the focus groups meetings in the pre-pandemic first stage of the research. This limitation to accessing financial resources was also seen in responses to the online survey and the online documentation reviewed for this study, suggesting that precarious funding remains a significant barrier in meeting organisational goals in the COVID-19 period.

In this context, the online survey data confirms that the most significant priority concern of civil society organisations remains economic insecurity. Following the matter of availability of ‘Everyday Activities & Community Services’ (what the UK2070 Commission identified as ‘Foundations of Local Economies’), access to ‘Grants & Support’ (‘Fairer Access to Funds’) is identified as one of the most relevant issues to local civil society organisations. ‘Policy & Strategy’ (‘A National Spatial Plan for England’) and ‘Environmental Sustainability’ (‘Just Transition to Zero-Carbon’) are also identified as critical concerns.

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<sup>39</sup> Multiple authors (2020) Why we’re calling for a data collective. Catalyst, UK, June. <https://www.thecatalyst.org.uk/blog/why-were-calling-for-a-data-collective#:~:text=By%20being%20part%20of%20the,on%20how%20to%20use%20the>

<sup>40</sup> Locality, Co-operatives UK and the Plunkett Foundation (2020) Communities Work. How community organisations can lead the post COVID-19 jobs recovery. Report, Communities. Report, Communities in Charge Campaign, UK. <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.09.16-Locality-report-Communities-work.pdf>



**Figure 1** Online survey responses to ‘What issue(s) are most relevant to your organisation?’ (August 2020)

The main barriers leading to precarious funding streams can be seen from two different perspectives. Firstly, national funding tends to be provided for the larger civil society organisations, which are more likely located in bigger cities. Second, support funding during the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be allocated on the basis of economic sectors rather than geographic regions.

In the early days of the pandemic, the UK Government put in place a £30 billion support package for small to medium-sized UK businesses and the self-employed.<sup>41</sup> A much smaller £750 million support package was made available for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises.<sup>42</sup> That disparity of funding put the civil society sector in a disadvantaged position in its attempt to address the toll the pandemic was having on communities across the country.

Private and charitable sector bodies stepped in to act where public sector support fell short. At a national level, groups like the National Lottery Community Fund, Lloyds Bank Foundation, BBC Children in Need, Locality, CRISIS, The Plunkett Foundation, Groundworks, Great Places and Historic England set up community-oriented recovery funds either individually or through partnerships with similar bodies. In a similar fashion, many local authorities and organisations established sources for regional funding. Examples of such sources include: Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, Community Foundation for Merseyside, County Durham Community Fund, London Community Response Fund, and Newcastle Round Table (Tyneside).

A closer look at the financial support behind the various responsive initiatives discussed earlier demonstrates the national trend where most community grants are

<sup>41</sup> GOV.UK (2020) Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak on COVID-19 response. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-of-the-exchequer-rishi-sunak-on-covid19-response> (accessed 19 October 2020)

<sup>42</sup> GOV.UK (2020) Financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to respond to COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/financial-support-for-voluntary-community-and-social-enterprise-vcse-organisations-to-respond-to-coronavirus-covid-19> (accessed 19 October 2020)

provided by the large and medium size ‘umbrella’ civil society organisations that operate either at regional or national levels. For example, Great Places Housing Group which was able to offer Community Resilience Fund<sup>43</sup> is one of the largest housing groups in the North of England managing around 19,000 homes by approximately 600 colleagues across four regional offices including Manchester, Oldham, Sheffield and Blackpool. As a large housing group, the organisation managed to draw donations through its partnerships. The organisation provides more than £100,000, including the donation from Countryside and Emanuel Whittaker. Smaller civil society organisations – and arguably those that are most locally rooted – tend to rely on funding opportunities made available by those larger bodies. In the absence of such funding, smaller local civil society organisations depend on volunteers in order to run their everyday activities. The nature of capacity building and social capital within volunteer networks make organisations that are dependent on them even more vulnerable. As evidenced for instance in a UCL-led networking event carried out in 2019 with members of the wider community and voluntary sectors,<sup>44</sup> the core volunteering base for many small civil society organisations is often made up of elderly individuals who are retired and therefore with the necessary free personal time to offer for the benefit of the wider community. This same demographic group is highly vulnerable in the face of COVID-19 and in need of extended self-isolation, leaving many civil society organisations struggling to replace this unpaid workforce with other members of the community in order to effectively deliver their everyday activities.

For civil society organisations outside of central England, the economic inequality seems to be experienced through several layers. The economic foundations of the regions are not stable but additionally the financial support to work on local issues within this context is insufficient, as confirmed by the online survey responses. This precarious funding is still seen as a main issue in the context of COVID-19. When we consider the fact that the economic environment of already disadvantaged regions worsened as a result of the pandemic, this limitation is likely to be more critical in recovering from the shock.

Secondly, the funding tends to be allocated according to sectors, not for the comprehensive uses targeting certain regions. Consequently, the central government's allocation of funding towards national economic recovery further decreases the resilience of civil society organisations based in disadvantaged communities. In this sense, the £124.3 billion of funding committed by the UK Government in responding to COVID-19 across the four nations were distributed as follows:

- £6.6 billion was to support the health and social care response (not including £13.4 billion of NHS debt that has been written off).
- £15.8 billion was for other public services and the wider emergency response.
- £19.5 billion was for support measures for individuals.

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<sup>43</sup> Great Places (2020) Great Places launches Community Resilience Fund to support COVID-19 Recovery. <https://www.greatplaces.org.uk/about-us/latest-news/detail/2020/07/16/great-places-launches-community-resilience-fund-to-support-covid-recovery>

<sup>44</sup> University College London, Queen Mary University of London and UK2070 Commission (2019) Creating Connections East: UK2070 Commission on Inequalities. London, Oxford House, 10 June. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/planning/events/2019/jun/creating-connections-east-uk-2070-commission-inequalities>

- £82.2 billion was for financial support for businesses.
- £0.2 billion was for other support<sup>45</sup>

The much lower £750 million funding for UK’s frontline charities is stipulated under ‘Support for other public services and the wider emergency response’ alongside funding dedicated for judicial courts, prisons and probation services, transport improvement and devolved government funding.<sup>46</sup> This unbalanced funding allocation is reflected in the online survey data collected (see Figure 4). The survey results show that the initiatives of the participant civil society organisations tended to focus on local housing and employment rather than areas such as sport and cultural activities. The contribution to quality of life made by activities such as cultural offer appears to be given low priority in areas of low-economic performance, and the survey responses show that concerns surrounding economic insecurity tended to be prioritized over other issues. This uneven allocation of funding in sectors implies further issues which might occur in local areas with limited funding. Although education, culture, and sport are essential parts for everyday lives of local communities, scarce resources sometimes sacrifice these aspects.

To recap, both the online survey and documentary data accounting for the COVID-19 pandemic period show that the economic insecurity experienced by civil society remains problematic both in terms of regional economic foundation and funding streams.

### Levelling up policy-making and civil society

Within this context, civil society organisations continue to argue strongly for the importance of public participation in policy making and for strengthening collaboration networks. In the online survey, participant organisations responded positively to the action plan for public engagement proposed by the UK2070 Commission.<sup>47</sup> It is worthwhile noting the finding that civil society actors prefer direct engagement rather than mediate through representatives. This indicates both a desire and a need to build an effective model for levelling up policy making processes. Throughout the focus groups meetings and subsequent online survey, participants representing both local and national civil society organisations mentioned the importance of local knowledge

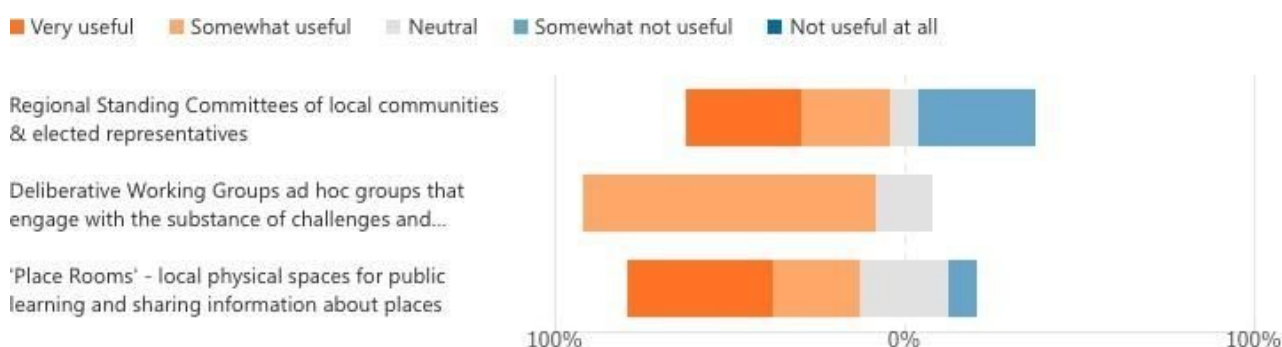


Figure SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 3. Online survey responses to 'In your view how useful would these processes of inter-regional exchange be?' (August 2020)

<sup>45</sup> National Audit Office (2020) Overview of the UK government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Report, National Audit Office, UK, May.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Overview-of-the-UK-governments-respon-se-to-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 19

<sup>47</sup> UK2070 Commission, *Make No Little Plans*, 2020



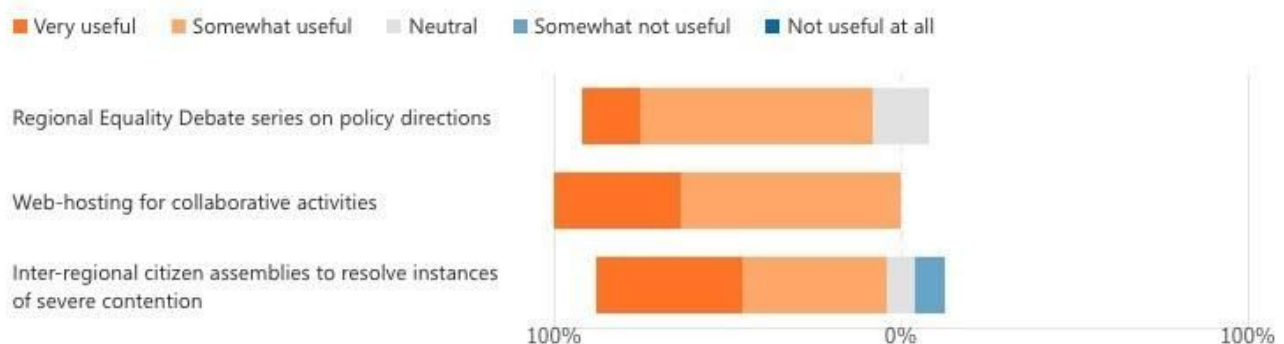
and locally sensitive actions, and the direct involvement of local groups was considered as a means to make voices in the community heard (Figure 5).

The concerns regarding the means for public engagement were highlighted particularly in the context of COVID-19 and associated lockdown(s). In relation to this, the participants noted the potential dangers and restrictions caused by digital exclusion.

This is an interesting point that links to the fact that the current pandemic has triggered an increased reliance on technology. Not only did businesses and institutions move their centres of activity online, but digital platforms have become spaces that facilitate social interaction and decision making. The increased popularity of digital platforms as tools enabling local engagement, information and support processes was picked up in the documentary analysis as well. While digital channels have the potential of reaching wide audiences and possibly even include disadvantaged communities, it can nonetheless exclude those with restricted access to digital technology.<sup>48</sup> Such is the case for rural areas, where inadequate digital connectivity has a negative impact on economic performance and distribution of services.<sup>49</sup>

This switch to digital channels has made public participation more challenging during national and local lockdowns alike. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, some members of the community, particularly those from socio-economically vulnerable groups, are therefore difficult to reach. Without better online structures to build and strengthen social relations between people, individuals tend to become isolated.

*‘Virtual meetings are nothing like as useful as being in the same space as others, and there is a digital divide which means many voices, especially those least often listened to anyway, are not heard.’ (The response of a participant in the online survey, August 2020)*



In light of the current circumstances which only allow virtual meetings, the online survey responses show that building a more accessible online platform is important from a civil society perspective. The option of an online platform to collect opinions from within the community has probably always been important for local civil society organisations, but this option has become essential during the COVID-19 pandemic as there are much more limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions. While there are concerns about limitations occurring during an online-based public participation process, digital public participation appears to be the only alternative for interaction

<sup>48</sup> Natarajan L. (TBD) Participatory Democracy for Inclusive Devolution. Think piece, UK2070 Commission, UK

<sup>49</sup> Plunkett Foundation (2020) Plunkett’s Vision for a COVID-19 Rural Recovery. Report, The Plunkett Foundation, UK, July.

<https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Plunketts-Rural-Vision.pdf>

between local communities and institutions in a scenario that makes face-to-face meetings impossible. The implication here is that developing a more effective digital platform, one that is accessible to broader populations could be an urgent priority if public engagement processes are to include vulnerable individuals and disadvantaged communities.

## **Conclusion**

Recent statistics have shown that the economic shocks due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated national and regional lockdowns have significantly affected regions with low-economic performance preceding the pandemic. Existing economic gaps have been seen to extend both geographically and socially. Regions with low-economic performance are not only more significantly affected by the pandemic, and continuingly so, but they also appear to be less well positioned to recover after this crisis. Moreover, this economic inequality is shown in the gaps between social groups as well as the regional gaps. Populations finding themselves in precarious employment situations are also more likely to suffer from economic insecurity both during and following the pandemic.

COVID-19 has therefore redoubled the problem of inequality and intensified the dynamics that produce economic insecurity. Front-line COVID-19 efforts are needed beyond the NHS and social care, with emergency economic responses to support communities. This research shows that civil society organisations work through responsive initiatives by quickly altering their organisational systems in order to adapt to immediate community needs. Civil society organisations, the non-profit local groups and associations with boots on the ground, are thus on the front-line for responding to the growing challenge. For example, they redirect their funds in order to help local communities. These funds, in the form of grants provided by large and medium size civil society organisations conducting extensive work in various regions were employed to support communities who suffer as a result of the pandemic. These organisations' strong pre-existing social networks with other partners and public authorities allows them to reach local vulnerable groups such as women who are facing domestic abuse, young children, and the homeless.

Our research found that civil society organisations have both increased and diversified the core initiatives they delivered in their communities prior to the pandemic and these are vital to maintain local communities. The social actions driven by civil society organisations over the period of the pandemic share one overarching priority, that of physical and mental wellbeing. This common goal saw many organisations diversify not only the services they provided, but also their delivery in order to reach the most marginalised and at-risk groups in local areas. These at-risk groups were found to be the primary target of the diverse activities undertaken by the organisations studied. The reason for this is that they are the very groups facing the most precarious circumstances as a result of the pandemic's impact on the local economy; they face the loss of local businesses and service providers, social isolation and access to goods. Their local know-how and grasp of the place-based economy allowed civil society organisations to step in and effectively put forward tailored initiatives for the benefit of disadvantaged communities.

In other words, civil society organisations can reach local communities which might remain beyond the central and local government's attention in rapidly changing

circumstances of the pandemic. However, their roles, which have been seen as essential for local areas, do not seem to be sufficiently recognised in terms of the allocation of public funding. The support for civil society organisations is mixed but appears to have been mainly non-governmental. Our work shows that civil society funding streams, provided mainly by 'umbrella' organisations, constituted the lifeline of smaller, local civil society organisations. In effect, this galvanized the non-governmental sector as an active and essential service provider.

Within this limited governmental support, the funding which civil society organisations formed is too scarce to cover needs. In particular, disadvantaged areas struggle and remain underfunded. Moreover, civil society organisations in these areas have additional challenges as they rely on older and disadvantaged communities to deliver services. The economic insecurity that disadvantaged regions have been experiencing pre-pandemic has a continuing impact on their activities. The relatively weak economic foundations in the North and North West of England is still one of the biggest barriers to civil society meeting its goals in their communities, while funding to expand their activities remains insufficient.

In addition, in disadvantaged areas localities have on average fewer digital resources. The digital divide across regions, like economic insecurity, has been highlighted and aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting digital exclusion impacts on left-behind regions by further isolating vulnerable groups, decreasing economic performance of local businesses and putting additional strains on the delivery of civil society organisations' initiatives.

This picture is one of civil society organisational action with major barriers where action is needed most in terms of capacity building and funding. The existing means in allocating funding and supporting local communities seems not sustainable. It may well be an impending challenge to explore better means to mediate unbalanced funding allocation and to reach local communities that are likely to remain beyond the attention of the government. However, the first step will be the greater recognition and involvement of civil society organisations in policy-making. Firstly, their knowledge about local areas can be taken into account in policy-making processes to catalyse their capacity and restructure funding streams. Second, their networks can be more fully utilised for delivery of support to local communities.

This research has a number of implications for the work carried out by the UK2070 Commission, the most significant one being the need to recognize civil society's efforts and contributions to the wellbeing of their communities. Given the unique position of these organisations and their first-hand understanding of local social economies, it is critical to involve them from the outset in decision-making processes targeting disadvantaged regions. The balanced development of regions is only possible through the active participation of local actors who have a first-hand experience and understanding of local issues. With regional inequalities highly likely to worsen through the pandemic, moving forward it will be necessary to amplify the voices of local civil society organisations in order to resolve the national uneven distribution of resources and to build resilient communities.