

THE 'BIG SOCIETY', VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE CASE OF SPORT CLUBS IN THE UK

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Abstract keywords

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Introduction

Within the United Kingdom, there has been a modern shift in the way that governments seek to work with the voluntary sector and voluntary sports clubs. This shift dates back to the New Labour administration of 1997, and has continued with the Conservative, Liberal Democrat coalition elected in 2010 (Alcock, 2012, pp381).

New Labour's 'Compact' with the voluntary sector and programmes such as 'Futurebuilders' and 'Change Up' have been built upon by the Coalition's Big Society agenda with policies such as 'Big Society Capital' and the National Citizen Service. These have sought to devolve responsibility and power to the voluntary sector, in order to create an independent sector which is socially responsible for creating strong local communities and fostering social capital amongst the individuals who participate in civil society. This devolution of power towards an independent voluntary sector has become increasingly marked with the introduction of David Cameron's 'Big Society'. With over 150,000 sport clubs and 2 million volunteers, voluntary sport clubs represent an important population within the broader voluntary sector which has been the focus of the 'Big Society' ideals. The literature shows that recent government policy has sought to influence and exploit voluntary organisations and sports clubs to fulfil their own ends (See Elson 2006, Coalter 2007, Alcock 2012).

However, there is strong debate (See Putnam 2000, Seippel 2006, Coalter 2007), over whether voluntary sports clubs are an appropriate location to foster social capital, or whether they risk losing their focus upon sport provision. This research indicates that governments have been naively optimistic in the belief that voluntary sports clubs can aide communities in the building of social capital because they are being overloaded with responsibility (Seippel 2006, Coalter 2007). However the reasons for why sport clubs have not lived up to expectations are not entirely clear.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons that voluntary sport clubs have not been able to live up to government expectations. We do this through critically examining the nature and characteristics of voluntary sports clubs and the research on their experiences in implementing government policy, in particular with regard to the constraints this nature holds over their ability to foster social capital.

Theoretical background

The analysis will use Putnam's widely accepted definition of 'social capital', as "connections among individuals; social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p19). He addressed the good that participating in voluntary organisations can offer individuals and communities in his work 'Bowling Alone', concluding those who involve themselves civically have higher levels of social capital and quality of life, hence it's rise up successive government's agendas.

Putnam distinguishes between two different types of social capital, 'bonding' and 'bridging'; while bonding creates small scale relationship groups and is beneficial for individuals, it is bridging capital that governments are interested in, because it creates a wide-scale sense of community and social trust. It is an important distinction, because it is highly disputed as to what levels of social capital voluntary sports clubs can create, in spite of government expectations (See Seippel 2006, Coalter 2007).

Methods

The methodology of this project begins with a systematic review of the relevant literature surrounding the nature of sports clubs, social capital and the way in which the government interacts with the voluntary sector. Specifically this will address the research question of whether voluntary sports clubs can generate social capital and the challenges they face in this process. The results of this review are then compared to the objectives of the Big Society to assess the successes and failures of the policy. We use this analysis in a discussion of the Big Society policy aims to identify why voluntary sport clubs are not suitable for the requirements of this policy and identify suggestions for further research.

Discussion and implications

While research has clearly identified that sport clubs have difficulty in meeting government objectives related to policy implementation, the reasons why this is the case have not been thoroughly considered. The results of this study will detail the reasons why sport clubs have not been able to meet government objectives of developing social capital.

References

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