

Civil society supporting dialogue and deliberation

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About the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland

The Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society was established to explore how civil society could be strengthened in the UK and Ireland. The Inquiry Commission was chaired by Geoff Mulgan and was also informed by an International Advisory Group.

The objectives of the Inquiry were to:

- explore the possible threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025;
- identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society;
- enhance the ability of civil society associations to shape the future.

The Inquiry Commission's work began with an extensive futures exercise to explore possible futures for civil society. Drawing on the findings of the futures work, which are documented in two reports, *The Shape of Civil Society to Come* and *Scenarios for Civil Society*, the Inquiry Commission agreed to explore the current and possible future roles of civil society associations in relation to the following themes:

- **Growing a more civil economy**
- **A rapid and just transition to a low carbon economy**
- **Democratising media ownership and content**
- **Growing participatory and deliberative democracy**

This paper was commissioned to inform the Inquiry's work on the roles of civil society associations in growing participatory and deliberative democracy.

The final report of the Inquiry Commission, *Making good society*, was published in March 2010.

For further information about the Inquiry and to download related reports go to www.futuresforcivilsociety.org

Published on behalf of the Commission by the Carnegie UK Trust

www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

March 2010

ISBN 978-0-900259-65-4

Design by Falconbury

Front cover image: London Citizens/Chris Jepson - May Day rally in Trafalgar Square for migrant workers, 2006

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Executive summary

UK and Irish society is facing a range of very important and difficult challenges, such as climate change, social cohesion and growing inequalities.

In increasingly diverse societies, agreement on how to meet challenges of all kinds cannot be assumed. Dialogue and deliberation are not a panacea for all ills. Nor are they an easy 'feel good' option. They can, however, make valuable contributions to thinking through and responding to some of the most pressing challenges facing society. In this context dialogue and deliberation can:

- offer an alternative to purely strategic politics and/or the decision to keep divisive issues off the political agenda;
- enhance the capacity of individuals and groups to engage with these difficult and potentially divisive issues;
- offer the possibility that a careful, collective engagement with the challenges we face might make a valuable contribution to rethinking assumptions, questioning ways of life and formulating responses in ways that avoid authoritarian impositions.

Dialogue and deliberation are, by their nature, open-ended. Their legitimacy hinges on their being free from attempts to manipulate outcomes. And their success also depends on how disagreement is handled. Indeed, this report distinguishes between 'disagreement failure' and 'disagreement success' (Neisser, 2006), and argues that the articulation and exploration of disagreement is often more important than attempts to arrive at a premature consensus.

Civil society associations have important roles to play in maximising the potential of dialogue and deliberation and such activity needs to be nurtured and supported. Their independence from government is a significant strength; and by using dialogue and deliberation, civil society activity can: put new issues on the agenda; open issues up for critical examination; encourage people to ask new questions; provide platforms to discuss issues that governments shy away from; help build solidarity; and counteract disagreement failure. Evidence from both theory and practice suggests ordinary citizens often value and enjoy genuine dialogue or deliberation.

Civil society associations have important roles to play in maximising the potential of dialogue and deliberation. Their independence from government is a significant strength.

Introduction: What kind of talk does civil society need?¹

Clearly, the term ‘talk’ can cover a huge spectrum of things – from campaign meetings, panel debates and strategic negotiation to deliberation, dialogue and private exchanges between individuals.

Sometimes, civil society associations need talk that allows them to think through and develop positions on issues facing them. Sometimes, they use talk to enthuse and energise their core constituencies or membership. Sometimes, they need talk to build public support for their work or their positions. Sometimes, they use talk to negotiate specific outcomes.

No type of talk fits all circumstances

As Example 1 (right) illustrates, often talk is about strengthening existing positions.

Group polarisation can strengthen civil society. It can, for example, help previously unrepresented and/or dissenting groups to become more vocal and to challenge the mainstream.² It becomes problematic, however, when conversations within groups become not a way of strengthening debate in the public sphere, but a substitute for engagement with other perspectives.

It is important to look at group polarisation not least because it is the likely outcome of styles of talk that are prevalent in our daily lives. As Jones (2006, p. 99) points out:

‘We chat behind closed doors and with close friends, and we engage with matters that interest us online, but in groups and among friendship circles in which conversation is safe and reinforcing, rather than challenging and changing.’

Talk ‘behind closed doors’ is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is disconnected from more public conversations, when being social (‘living together in numbers’) is a substitute for being societal (‘thinking and acting in ways that will help us to continue to live together’) (Jones, 2006, p. 36). Being societal needs more than talk ‘behind closed doors’. It requires public conversations, in which:

‘We talk with others who might not share our opinions. Risk, in this context, ... is the challenge of being open and exposing your opinions and attitudes to scrutiny. This process is difficult but, at the same time, it is necessary if we are to live together equitably, democratically and cooperatively.’ (Jones, 2006, p. 57)

Example 1: Group polarisation: strengths and weaknesses of a predictable outcome

‘Group polarisation’ describes the following situation: If a group of people who share similar views come together to talk about those views, they are likely to feel even more strongly about the rightness of their positions after the conversation. Group polarisation occurs partly because of social influence – ‘peer pressure’ – and partly because the arguments presented are limited and towards one side of the wider debate.

This can be a problem. In conflict situations (for example in Northern Ireland) the tendency to retreat into comfort zones, and to avoid engaging with opposing views can lead to more extreme positions and end in violence. Similarly, racist groups thrive on group polarisation. As Neisser (2006) observes: ‘Truly dangerous levels of hate have sometimes been generated when there was a prolonged absence of talk across the relevant borders, when group-think and dehumanization went unchecked by actual encounters with the “other.”’

On the other hand, group polarisation can be an engine for the emergence of previously marginalised voices, for collective action to challenge power and inequality, or for constructive action in response to challenges such as climate change and peak oil. It can ultimately strengthen deliberation by allowing a greater range of perspectives to become visible in the wider public sphere.

As Sunstein (2000) points out: ‘The ambivalent lesson is that deliberating enclaves can be breeding grounds both for the development of unjustly suppressed views and for unjustified extremism, indeed fanaticism.’

Public conversations do not need to happen in front of an audience. They can happen in a range of settings and at different scales. They can take place both across different groups and organisations and within them. Spaces for dialogue and deliberation can be built into organisational or network structures, or they can be created in response to particular needs or crises. Such spaces can involve organised groups or individuals. Dialogue and deliberation can be one-off events or ongoing long-term processes. They can be enjoyable and invigorating, or difficult and uncomfortable. Most importantly, though, they tend to be less predictable than the effects of group polarisation.

Example 2 (right), as recounted by Sunstein (2000), illustrates how deliberation among people with very different starting points can counteract the effects of group polarisation.

This report focuses on dialogue (aimed at increasing understanding across different positions) and deliberation (the careful weighing of alternative possibilities). It does so not because dialogue and deliberation are the only forms of talk that are important for civil society, but because they have particular potential for encouraging people to engage with experiences and views that are different from their own.

Why does this matter for civil society?

It matters because, as a society, we are facing unprecedented challenges. It matters because responding to these challenges, in ways that avoid authoritarianism, violence or exclusion, requires engagement across divisions. It matters because, ‘for our public services to be sustainable, we need to think societally’ (Jones, 2006, p. 69). It matters because:

‘For our public realm to be restored to the discursive state in which it must exist, we require spaces in which we are comfortable in confronting those of a dissimilar persuasion – we need to do more than simply surround ourselves with like minds.’ (Jones, 2006, p. 103)

Dialogue and deliberation are not a panacea for all ills. Nor are they an easy, ‘feel-good’ option. They can, however, make valuable contributions to thinking through and responding to some of the most important challenges facing society – not least because they can help to build solidarity between individuals and groups who come at the issues from different perspectives.

Talk ‘behind closed doors’ is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when it is disconnected from more public conversations, when being social (‘living together in numbers’) is a substitute for being societal (‘thinking and acting in ways that will help us to continue to live together’).

Example 2: Dialogue and deliberation: less predictable outcomes (Sunstein, 2000)

Here is what happened in one of [James Fishkin’s] deliberative opinion polls. There was a small group, about six people, talking about family policy. The group had as two of its members a farmer from Oklahoma and a welfare mother from New York City. The woman, who was a single mother of two kids on welfare, was talking about her family and its needs, and the Oklahoma farmer was getting increasingly agitated. People in the group didn’t know what exactly the agitation was about: Did he disagree with her? Was he racist? What was going on?

Finally, he exploded at her and said, ‘In the United States, a family means a mother, a father, and some kids. There’s no father in the picture in your situation. Do not speak in my presence of the word “family”. You do not have a family.’

As you can imagine, the conversation for the next couple of days was difficult. In the little group, they did talk, but the Oklahoma guy and the New York woman never spoke to each other directly. They didn’t exchange a single word. But they did talk, both of them, about what they thought, just not to each other.

As they left on Sunday, she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned around, and there was the Oklahoma guy looming – she wasn’t big; he was – looming over her.

She said, ‘Yeah?’

‘What are the three most important words in the English language,’ he said, somewhat sternly.

She said, ‘I don’t know.’

He said, ‘I was wrong.’

What is civil society?

The Inquiry’s working definition of civil society sets out three inter-related dimensions; civil society as associational life, civil society as a ‘good’ society and civil society as the arenas for public deliberation. This definition draws on the work of Edwards (2003), which draws in turn from a large body of thought on civil society stretching from antiquity to the present day.

Adopting this three-dimensional definition enabled the Inquiry to go beyond a sole focus on the associations and groups that make up civil society and to explore the notions of the ‘good’ society and the state of the public sphere. For the Inquiry working definition of civil society see Appendix 3 on p. 35.

Scope and structure of this report

This report was commissioned to inform the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland, supported by the Carnegie UK Trust. The Inquiry found that: 'The strongest single message to have emerged is the underlying weakness of the arenas for public deliberation.' (*Futures for Civil Society*, 2007). Against this background, this report considers the distinctive roles civil society associations might play in creating spaces for dialogue and deliberation, and the things that might make it easier or more difficult for them to do so. For civil society associations, it is important to identify both the potential benefits and the limits of dialogue and deliberation, and this report aims to clarify some of these issues.

This report does not specifically focus on spaces for deliberation, participation or consultation created by national or local government, or by statutory services. There are a number of other reports that do so,³ and they do not need to be replicated here. This does not, of course, mean that civil society associations do not need to relate to government-created opportunities for deliberation, that dialogue and deliberation within civil society should be remote from policy agendas, or that the state should abdicate responsibility. Civil society associations can and do respond to government consultations, take part in participatory processes and partnerships with government agencies and statutory services, and use the results of deliberative processes to push for changes in policies and practices. All of these activities are important, and some of them involve dialogue or deliberation. The primary focus here, however, is on how civil society associations can create their own spaces for dialogue and deliberation – not least because, in order to fulfil its potential to contribute to social and political change, it is critical that deliberation is 'also situated and controlled, to a very significant degree, in civil society' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 18).

This report is based on a review of relevant policy and academic literature, informal conversations with civil society associations involved in dialogue and deliberation, and a one day workshop with representatives from civil society associations held at the University of Bradford in December 2008. The authors would particularly like to thank the participants of this workshop – their contributions have stimulated thinking on many of the themes covered in this report.

This report starts by clarifying and distinguishing the concepts of 'dialogue' and 'deliberation', and outlining the attitudes and principles that are common to both. It

then looks at the context in which civil society associations operate, and particularly at the critical challenges of diversity and difference, power and inequality, and the unsustainable character of current ways of life. For each of these themes, it identifies examples of attempts to encourage dialogue and deliberation by civil society. Each of the themes also raise some critical issues in relation to dialogue and deliberation, and the report considers a range of questions facing organisations interested in promoting dialogue and deliberation. Following this, it looks at how dialogue and deliberation relate to activist politics and the pursuit of substantive outcomes. The concluding section suggests ways of enhancing the capacity of civil society associations to encourage meaningful dialogue and deliberation. Finally, while this report does not itself detail particular methods, it points to some freely available resources that can help practitioners weigh up the advantages and limitations of different processes that can be used to encourage dialogue and/or deliberation.

What is dialogue? What is deliberation?

The terms 'dialogue' and 'deliberation' are often used interchangeably. Many of those who specialise in this field, however, usefully distinguish the two concepts in terms of their styles and intended outcomes.

This distinction should be made clear from the beginning and should be borne in mind in what follows. In this report, the authors have generally used the expression 'dialogue and deliberation', however, this does not imply that the two can be used as if they were the same thing – which form is used for what situation will depend on circumstances.

Deliberation 'can be defined as a problem-solving form of discourse, which involves problem analysis, setting priorities, establishing evaluative criteria, identifying and weighing alternative solutions', and which, at least in aspiration, 'aims toward a reasoned consensus.' (Levine *et al.*, 2005, p. 8). Deliberation may or may not be linked to actual decision-making processes.

Dialogue, by comparison, is more of 'an open-ended discussion in which participants do not try to solve a problem but instead simply try to understand each other's experiences, languages, and ways of thinking and arguing.' (Burkhalter *et al.*, 2002, in Mansbridge *et al.*, 2006, p. 8). As Holloway (2004), writing for Community Dialogue in Northern Ireland puts it: 'Real dialogue has only one agenda, the deepening of understanding of oneself and of others through sharing, listening, critical thinking and questioning.'

Both dialogue and deliberation are clearly distinct from debate, which is much more adversarial in its nature and aims. Table 1 (below) provides a useful overview of the distinguishing features of debate, dialogue and deliberation.

In practice, distinctions may be less clear-cut, and the same 'conversation' may include elements from all of these ways of engaging with each other (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, conceptual clarity is helpful in thinking through the intended aims and style of both planned and 'naturally-occurring' conversations.

It is also important to emphasise that dialogue and deliberation are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, there are strong arguments that an initial phase of dialogue, focused on mutual understanding, can be a very useful precursor to deliberation, particularly in contexts of difference and inequality.⁴

There are some **key principles and attitudes** that underpin both dialogue and deliberation:

- A willingness to enter into conversations that are open-ended and unpredictable, with all the confusion and loss of control that this can imply.
- A willingness to listen genuinely to the contributions of others, even and especially where they conflict with our own.
- Honesty and sincerity, and the avoidance of manipulation.
- An openness to change, not least in our own ways of thinking.

These principles are both simple and challenging. What does it mean to follow them in practice?

Where are their limitations? These questions will be asked and answered throughout this report. First, though, it is worth taking a closer look at the context in which civil society associations in the UK operate.

Context: Challenges faced by civil society

Civil society faces a number of challenges, some of which are unprecedented in their scale and likely impact, and in which 'the status quo is not an option' (*The Shape of Civil Society to Come*, 2007a, p. 43). Moreover, the context is one of diversity and inequality, disagreement and dissent, and one in which there is no 'common vision about what a 'good' society might look like or how it might be achieved' (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

It is also a context in which many of us do not regularly engage in 'public' conversations, that is, conversations with people who do not share our experiences, beliefs and values. This is in spite of the fact that more people have access to more information – to a wider range of perspectives – than ever before:

'New technologies enable us to speak to people anytime, anywhere and about virtually any topic we wish and this has led to a fragmentation of interest groups. As a result, we are talking less with those who do not share those interests and less to people in the areas in which we live and more to people to whom we are tied by interest, but not necessarily locale.' (Jones, 2006, p. 17)

Table 1: Characteristics of debate, dialogue and deliberation⁵

Debate	Dialogue	Deliberation
Compete	Exchange	Weigh
Argue	Discuss	Choose
Promote opinion	Build relationships	Make choices
Seek majority	Understand	Seek overlap
Persuade	Seek understanding	Seek common ground
Dig in	Reach across	Framed to make choices
Tight structure	Loose structure	Flexible structure
Express	Listen	Learn
Usually fast	Usually slow	Usually slow
Clarifies	Clarifies	Clarifies
Win/lose	No decision	Common ground
Most useful when: A position or course of action is being advocated and winning is the goal.	Most useful when: People want to talk together about something without desiring any particular outcome from the conversation.	Most useful when: A decision, or criteria for a decision, about the best way(s) to approach an issue or problem is needed.

New forms of communication open up significant possibilities. They make it far easier for civil society associations and social movements to access information, exchange perspectives, build solidarity and co-ordinate action with others across geographic boundaries. They also allow them to have a public presence that can be accessed relatively easily. In addition, information technologies are increasingly being used to seek inputs from organisations and individuals on a whole range of topics – government consultations, for example, are accessible and can be responded to online.⁶ The potential of new technologies in relation to dialogue and deliberation is considered later in the report.

On the other hand, the ready availability of specific information makes it possible to develop very personalised world views – what Sunstein (2000, cited in Jones, 2006, pp. 83-84) calls the ‘Daily Me’ – and it becomes easier to ‘close off potential avenues of other, more general information’ and wider debate.⁷

Similarly, ‘an underlying perception that we have no functional need to affiliate with other people because we already have most of the things we need or are likely to get’ (Jones, 2006, p. 87) – and the fact that many people prioritise paid work over other forms of activity in order to get these things⁸ – also have disconnecting effects. As participants at the Bradford workshop pointed out, some of the myths that motivated civil society activity in the past (for example, labour solidarity) have been eroded and replaced with the myths of the media/marketplace (rights before responsibility, consumerism, individualism, litigation), which inhibit the values that need to underpin civil society activity.

This does not, of course, mean that there is no public discussion. However, much of the public debate in the media is more focused on scoring points than on fostering genuine engagement with different perspectives. Moreover, the ways in which issues are framed constrains the range of alternatives that are considered.

Policy framings also constrain the context within which civil society associations operate. For some, there is a direct effect: as the relationship between the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector becomes more and more shaped by the commissioning and delivery of services and by ‘partnership working’, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) has lost some of its independence. In the words of a local government officer in Bradford, there is a feeling that VCS groups are now increasingly ‘part of our world’, where ‘previously, they were part of the world outside’ (Kelly, 2008). In some ways, this brings opportunities: as (some) voluntary and community associations are taken more

seriously as partners, they may become more able to influence agendas. The flipside, however, is that for civil society associations that are tied into partnerships or dependent on the local or national state for their funding, it is hard to challenge policies and priorities publicly.

The increasing focus on service delivery also makes it difficult to develop work that does not demonstrably meet targets. Participants at the workshop commented that it is much harder to get funding for dialogue and deliberation processes than for service delivery. The open-ended, time-intensive nature of genuine dialogue/deliberation does not sit easily with most funders’ emphasis on measurable outputs. The strings attached to funding can thus have the effect of eroding an already-fragile sense of independent agency. The difficulty of getting funding for open-ended dialogue and deliberation work looks set to get even worse as the recession deepens and the focus for both civil society organisations and governments moves to keeping essential services afloat (Stratton, 2009).

For other civil society associations, the link between policy and their own activities may be less direct but still important – because they need to respond to government agendas in order to advance their own cause, for example, or because their own work becomes easier or more difficult in changing policy contexts.

The following section outlines three key contextual factors that partly shape the terrain in which civil society associations operate: diversity, difference and ‘community cohesion’; poverty, inequality and ‘empowerment’; and the unsustainability of current ways of life. These correspond to the key faultlines that emerged from the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society. These are:

- social cohesion under pressure;
- isolation of the poorest;
- challenges of sustainability.

All of these issues are intensely political – not least in the sense that the political is ‘that which the public ought to discuss’ (Mansbridge, 1999, in Macedo, 1999, p. 214). This report thus focuses not just on the substance of the issues, but also on how they are being discussed, on the ways in which civil society associations are attempting to encourage dialogue and deliberation around them, and on the challenges these issues pose for dialogue and deliberation.

Diversity, difference and 'community cohesion'

Who we are, who we are in relation to others, how we represent ourselves in public spaces and the negotiation of rights, needs and values is a key academic debate. It is also a debate that civil society often addresses in practice as the UK and Ireland becomes ever more diverse against a backdrop of increasing global connections, uncertainties and new technologies and inequalities. Social scientists and political theorists have been debating diversity and multiculturalism for decades, with Hall (1993, pp. 349–63) arguing that the capacity to relate to difference is a key question of the 21st century.

The debate about the nature of identity and difference in diverse societies was raging long before the UK government launched its 'community cohesion' agenda. Some thinkers such as Brian Barry (2001) have argued that multiculturalism is moral relativism, that it essentialises and fixes group identities in a way that runs counter to enlightenment values. He is joined by other commentators (Kenan Malik, David Goodhart), who have argued that multiculturalism treats one aspect of identity as the crucial part, ignoring the complex nature of identity and entrenches divisions created by racism. On the other side of the debate are academics such as Modood (2007), who makes the case that multiculturalism enhances democratic citizenship, and that in order to treat groups equally you may need to treat them differently. Other academics, such as Kymlicka (2007), agree that multiculturalism is the only pragmatic way to recognise minority rights.

The political philosopher Parekh (in Baggini, 2007, p. 46) has attempted to tread a middle path in this debate by calling for an 'interactive multiculturalism', a multiculturalism that does not ghettoise but rather values 'the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each culture.'

Some of these questions/discussions have entered the public sphere through the UK government's 'community cohesion' agenda, which emerged in response to the riots and disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. The 'community cohesion' discourse has identified as problems tendencies towards separation, disconnection, and the relative lack of shared spaces in which differences can be explored in ways that encourage co-operation rather than increased division.

On the one hand, this has created opportunities for civil society associations interested in 'bridging' activities and in encouraging conversations on potentially divisive issues.⁹ In practice, it has been civil society associations who

have often led the way in interpreting cohesion through interfaith forums, dialogue spaces for young people and cross-community linking or bridging initiatives.

On the other hand, the language of 'shared values', 'common visions' and the emphasis on 'what binds communities together rather than what differences divide them' (Commission for Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 7), has raised suspicions that these are code words for assimilation, disregard for independent and particular identities, the erosion of hard-won equalities and a neglect of the socio-economic divisions that many would see as the root cause of tensions between and within communities.¹⁰ For the critics, this is exacerbated by a sense that the terminology of 'self-segregation' and 'parallel lives' puts too much responsibility on working-class and economically-deprived, and particularly Black and Minority Ethnic, communities and neglects long histories of discrimination, one of the results of which has been that people choose to live where they feel safe, thus reinforcing prejudice.

Neither does cohesion sit particularly well with the emphasis on citizenship, the need for a common set of values and the very nature of what it means to be British. After the 7 July London bombings, things got even more complicated, with the emphasis shifting towards Preventing Extremism Together (PET) or Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), with a focus almost exclusively on British Muslim communities. This seems somewhat at odds with many of the arguments from the cohesion agenda and also risks creating feelings of being unfairly targeted or even demonised on one side, and perceptions of unfair allocation of resources on the other. This has affected civil society associations, with much of the funding for dialogue or 'linking' (cross-community) work coming now from PVE sources. For some, this seriously undermines the integrity of such work.

Another difficult issue for civil society associations to consider in relation to diversity is the rise of the political Far Right. Support for the British National Party (BNP) rose from 3,022 votes in 2000 to 292,911 votes in 2007 (Goodwin, 2008). Professor Roger Eatwell, one of the leading researchers of the Far Right in Europe, has commented that the BNP is closer to the general public than New Labour in its support for authoritarian attitudes on issues such as reintroduction of the death penalty and immigration (Eatwell, 2008). And of course the BNP has itself developed other civil society organisations, such as its own trade union. How then do civil society associations, often led by those with left-of-centre or liberal values, interact with actual and potential sympathisers of the far right?

Irrespective of the fact that the cohesion agenda has been led by the government in a very difficult national and global context, it remains a key issue for civil society, and civil society associations themselves need to think about how people relate to each other in an increasingly diverse society, about the implications for democracy, and about the nature of civil society.¹¹

There is a range of interesting work on dialogue/deliberation in the UK which relates to diversity and difference

Some of this work is motivated by faith: St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London, 'a Christian foundation with a mission of radical hospitality towards people of other faith traditions', has used unique and experimental physical spaces to host encounters between people from different spiritual traditions to explore disagreements as well as common ground.¹² Blackburn Cathedral employs a Muslim Dialogue Development Officer to facilitate dialogue on potentially controversial issues and encourage people to ask each other difficult questions in a spirit of honesty.¹³ City Circle in London, led by British Muslims, is 'an open circle for open minds' that holds weekly events to 'provide an atmosphere where individuals are pushed to think outside the box'.¹⁴ The Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine, meanwhile, is specialising in the specific task of 'host[ing] and facilitat[ing] sensitively interfaith dialogue on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, within and between Jews, Christians and Muslims in the UK'.¹⁵ This work is motivated by the recognition that, while this particular issue generates passionate responses, it can, if not tackled constructively, lead to dangerous levels of polarisation.

Faith is factored into, but not prioritised as the key aspect of, identity in the Intercultural Leadership and Communication School (ICLS) managed by Active Faith Communities based in West Yorkshire. The ICLS model – inspired by work in the former Yugoslavia – takes young professionals on a four-day residential course where there is a mixture of training in conflict resolution, media skills and leadership/social change, alongside space to explore identity, different and shared perspectives of locality and to ask the 'burning questions' that participants wouldn't normally feel able to. The original ICLS West Yorkshire programme privileged religious faith or lack of it as the key aspect of identity to explore through inputs to develop religious literacy. Now, the ICLS encourages participants to choose their own 'identity ingredients' instead, and to consider how these might change in different contexts. Creating a space where people feel able to explore and disagree is a key aspect to the ICLS.

Example 3: Developing good relations in northern towns and beyond

In Burnley, local people and agencies have been working with the support of the Belfast-based Mediation Northern Ireland on a programme to 'develop good relations'. This is an innovative programme, introducing new elements to familiar processes of community engagement and work for cohesion.

The Good Relations Programme aims to support sustainable social change; works on large-scale multi-party disputes or tensions at a societal level; and creates safe spaces for managed dialogue to encourage better understanding. It is made up of four strands of work: civic diplomacy; the development of structures and mechanisms; training of practitioners and raising awareness of civic mediation principles; and direct work on projects and cases.

From the work in Burnley, and similar work that has been taking place in Oldham, there is now an intention to develop a hub to promote and support the development of civic mediation in the north-west of England and more widely.

The Programme for a Peaceful City (PPC)¹⁶ based at the University of Bradford is a network with secular roots which creates discussions on various issues and using various means. Participants have very diverse belief systems, from the deeply-religious to the deeply-atheist, and the discussions range from the more political, such as exploring the state response to violence in an exchange between Belfast and Bradford,¹⁷ to the more value-based, such as religious belief and sexual orientation or negotiating tensions between secularism and religion.

In addition to these examples of organisations that specialise in dialogue or deliberation across difference, other civil society associations contribute to bridging differences in the course of activities that have other primary aims. It is important to acknowledge that engagement across differences can also be an integral part of efforts to identify and organise around common goals.

What, then, can dialogue and deliberation offer in a context of difference and disagreement?

Proponents of dialogue and deliberation suggest that these processes offer an alternative to purely strategic politics and/or the decision to keep divisive issues off the political agenda. They can provide a forum in which disagreements can be explored (and potentially resolved) in an atmosphere of mutual respect. They argue that

dialogue and/or deliberation are particularly needed in situations where it cannot be assumed that people from very different backgrounds share common assumptions or a 'background consensus' (Habermas, 2000).

None of these suggestions are without problems, or are easy in practice. Are dialogue and deliberation really neutral umbrellas that make space for difference, or do they reflect a set of values that exclude other views of morality and politics? If they do, is this a problem or strength? What is an appropriate balance between the need to define what is acceptable in a conversation space on the one hand, and the need to keep such spaces open to disagreement and dissent on the other?

Other sections of this report come back to these dilemmas. First, however, it is important to recognise that the current context is not just one of diversity and difference, but also one of inequality.

Poverty, inequality and 'empowerment'

The Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society identified structural socio-economic inequalities as a major fault line, with several associated challenges for civil society:

- to support and empower the most marginalised;
- not to replicate inequalities in [civil society associations'] own structures;
- to find different ways of articulating outcomes that are not based on paradigms of economic growth or market delivery. (*Futures for Civil Society*, 2007, p. 4)

The current financial crisis and deepening recession reinforce the urgency of these challenges even as they make it harder to meet them – for example, in relation to the sustained funding needed to do serious work. They may also bring opportunities, not least in terms of challenging paradigms of economic growth that are beginning to be perceived more widely as being deeply flawed.¹⁸ They also raise important questions about how civil society associations should respond to conflicts engendered by the loss of livelihoods or standards of living. In this context, civil society associations can play a critical role in engaging with real concerns in ways that encourage inclusion, rather than exclusion.

Alongside economic structures, however, there is also an emerging political context that it is important to consider in relation to both opportunities for, and obstacles to, enhancing civil society's roles in creating spaces for

conversation. Recent policy developments in the UK speak the language of 'participation' and 'empowerment',¹⁹ with Prime Minister Gordon Brown setting his government the aim of 'empowering communities and citizens and ensuring that power is more fairly distributed across the whole of our society' (DCLG, 2008a, p. i).

Government rhetoric, then, is partly shaping the territory in which civil society associations operate. On the one hand, the rhetoric on 'participation' and 'empowerment' creates space for civil society associations, not least in challenging practices that fall short of proclaimed ideals. There are important questions, however, about whether 'empowerment' is something that can, as the White Paper suggests, be 'passed' from above or something that has to be taken from below. As critical debates within the development field have shown, the promotion of 'participation' or 'empowerment' from above is often problematic,²⁰ not least because it can depoliticise concepts whose origins were about profound challenges to power relations.

As Balitwala (2007, p. 560) points out, many of the (feminist) activists who were originally inspired by the concept of empowerment saw:

'Empowerment as a process that shifts social power in three critical ways: by challenging the ideologies that justify social inequality (such as gender or caste), by changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural and intellectual resources, and by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (such as the family, state, market, education and media).'

Arguably, this vision of empowerment implies collective action and struggle. While government action has an important place alongside and in response to such struggle, it cannot be a substitute.²¹ This, in itself, raises a challenge for civil society associations, particularly in the UK: how can they strengthen their own capacity for forms of collective action so as to create the conditions for genuine shifts in power?

How and to what extent, moreover, can they model alternative visions of 'participation', 'empowerment' and democracy in their own practices – and thus avoid 'replicating inequalities in their own structures'? And what roles might there be for dialogue and deliberation? How might activism/advocacy and dialogue/deliberation enhance each other, and where might they conflict?

Example 4: Can 'empowerment' be delivered? The case of participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, when the PT (Workers' Party) – a party with close links to radical social movements and with a strong commitment to participation – came to power in 1989. It was intended as a way of involving citizens, especially those in poorer neighbourhoods, directly in decision-making about the city budget. The system rested on an annual cycle of deliberation and mobilisation, involving thousands of people, both as participants and scrutinisers of the process itself. Its impact was felt particularly strongly in poor neighbourhoods as both political participation and spending increased.

The example of Porto Alegre inspired similar experiments elsewhere in Brazil and abroad. Those who began to promote participatory budgeting ranged from radical activists to government institutions and the World Bank. In the UK, PB is one of the strands promoted by the government under the empowerment agenda, and the PB Unit (part of Church Action on Poverty) has been tasked with 'promoting and co-ordinating the delivery of participatory budgeting' (DCLG, 2008c, p. 15). Pilot projects have attempted to run participatory budgeting processes in relation to relatively small pots of money ('community kitties').

The government's promotion of PB devolves some decision-making to local people and thus creates opportunities for civil society associations to be more involved in setting spending priorities. It is questionable, however, to what extent the promotion of PB 'from above', where the political project and the popular mobilisation

that accompanied its success in its original context are absent, can produce 'empowerment'. As Blakey (2008) points out, there is a tendency to see PB as a 'technical fix' – a set of 'tools and techniques' that can be 'delivered', that is presented as a 'win-win strategy', and that is 'not the outcome of a bottom-up struggle for inclusion, but rather an orchestrated attempt from above to re-engage the "poor" with existing representative processes.'

Separating PB from the politics of social justice has seriously undermined its practice even in Porto Alegre, where the PT was voted out in 2004 (Baierle, 2008). As Cornwall (2008, p. 47) points out, 'it is no coincidence that where participatory budgeting has made a difference, it has been in the context of radical democratic administrations.'

For civil society associations interested in challenging inequality in the UK, the case of participatory budgeting raises several questions: is the promotion of PB an important opportunity that they need to engage with? If so, is working in partnership with statutory agencies the way forward? Or does this risk undermine the more radical potential of PB, which could perhaps be realised by mobilising and politicising communities? Is it possible to do both at the same time?

Another important issue to consider is the extent to which deliberation will be incorporated into the process. Although deliberation was an integral part of the Porto Alegre model, the current UK pilots have centred on voting rather than deliberation. The government strategy does mention deliberation as one of the elements to be promoted. Is this an opportunity for civil society associations interested in spaces for meaningful conversations? What are the possibilities – and the limitations – of 'invited spaces'?

There are several civil society associations in the UK that are taking up these challenges

ATD Fourth World,²² based in London and part of an international movement, aims 'to empower people experiencing poverty to access and exercise their fundamental rights, to have their voice heard and so lead to fulfilling their potential' – as well as to create greater awareness of the realities of chronic poverty in society at large. The strategies used include offering 'people experiencing poverty the opportunity to express their views and offer solutions to issues affecting their lives by running participatory policy projects'.²³ Oxfam UK also works with poor communities to strengthen their voices and enhance their confidence to demand change – as, for example, in the case of Sunny Govan Radio in Glasgow, which is

'helping local residents give voice to the poverty they are experiencing and the confidence to demand change'.²⁴

Groups based on the approach of community organising inspired by Saul Alinsky – London Citizens, Together Creating Communities Wales, Changemakers (Church Action on Poverty) – explicitly work on enhancing people's sense of agency and power. Changemakers aims to enable 'the poorest and most marginalised communities to have a voice at the table of power by claiming their own political spaces'.²⁵ Community organising works by building coalitions between different groups, providing training on how to organise effectively and running campaigns that aim to 'turn private pain into public action'.²⁶ Conversation is an integral aspect of this work: For London Citizens, 'bringing together different interest groups into a trusted forum to

listen to each other and to take action together ... play[s] an active role in breaking down mistrust and suspicion across diverse communities'.²⁷ This is conversation with the clear aim of promoting substantive change.

Other attempts to encourage public conversations around issues of inequality, poverty and power share this focus on generating commitment to change. Recent work commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for example, focuses on which ways of framing and communicating poverty are most likely to build public support and engagement.²⁸

In terms of engaging the general public in discussion of poverty, a focus on 'framing-to-persuade' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 11) seems more common than attempts to encourage open-ended conversations.

Civil society associations working on poverty and inequality, then, tend to share a commitment to change. What does this mean in relation to dialogue and deliberation?

Ideas and principles of deliberative democracy provide a yardstick against which the exclusion of many from decision-making processes that affect their lives can be criticised and challenged. Many of those who argue for dialogue and deliberation also seek to enhance the inclusiveness of such processes, often as a matter of justice as well as with the hope of generating better outcomes. In addition, deliberation can also contribute to building solidarity, both among people who have been marginalised, and between them and other social groups.

On the other hand, poverty, inequality and power also raise critical challenges for dialogue and deliberation: does an emphasis on dialogue and deliberation detract from other political activities that may be more effective at challenging inequalities, such as various forms of contentious collective action, identity politics or lobbying? Are there tensions 'between the attributes of a social environment that would be best for participatory democracy [contentious collective action for change] and the kind that would be ideal for deliberative democracy'? (Mutz, 2006, p. 150). Moreover, even if deliberation and/or dialogue are worth pursuing, can such processes actually succeed in creating the sense of equality that most of them presuppose?

These questions are the themes of later sections of this report. First, though, the next section considers a set of issues that raise additional challenges in relation to inequality and social justice.

Example 5: London Citizens

London Citizens is a broad-based organisation comprised of faith groups, trade unions, schools, universities and community groups. It seeks to organise communities that are diverse in terms of ethnicity, faith and class in order to effect social change. Recent initiatives have focused on a 'living wage' for London workers and on the idea of granting an amnesty for undocumented workers in the UK – 'strangers into citizens'.

Dialogue and deliberation on issues is facilitated by full-time organisers, who continually hold both one-to-one meetings with affiliates and/or potential affiliates, and local caucuses that feed into the larger assemblies of the whole organisation.

This process can be illustrated by the Lunar House Inquiry, set up by South London Citizens in 2004. In one local meeting in Croydon (South London), a Priest told the story of a parishioner's treatment at Lunar House (Home Office building processing asylum/immigration applications). At the same meeting, there was a person who worked at Lunar House who tried to explain the difficulties the staff faced on a day-to-day level.

The full-time organisers then took these testimonies from caucus to caucus and found that many affiliates had individuals who had experienced similar poor service provision. At the first South London Citizens Assembly, the organisation agreed to set up an Inquiry into service provision at Lunar House. Crucially, given the input of both staff and users, the Inquiry was able to integrate the perspectives of both groups.

In this case, what started as a local dialogue broadened into a deliberative process that engaged different groups on a common issue and was followed up by appropriate action.

Challenges of (un)sustainability

It is becoming increasingly clear that our current ways of life are not sustainable. There is mounting evidence that human-induced climate change is accelerating and passing important 'tipping points', and that the scale of change required even to mitigate some of the worst effects is unprecedented.²⁹ In addition to climate change, and partly related to it, are the challenges of resource depletion. 'Peak oil', a concept that refers to the point at which oil production will go into irreversible decline, is gaining increasing acceptance: several recent reports suggest that it will occur in the near future, raising very serious questions about the sustainability of systems that underpin current ways of life, including transport and food production.

In this context, maintaining the status quo is not a long-term option. Government rhetoric and policy, however, is often contradictory and confusing, reflecting both recognition of the need for change and the reluctance to admit that this fundamentally challenges business as usual.

Given the scale and likely impact of the issues, critical conversations about how to respond to them are urgently needed – not least because citizens' attitudes, dispositions and social interactions are themselves likely to be significant determinants of responses to change in a time of crisis (Kearns, 2008). Thinking through possible responses to crisis scenarios before they happen, and building strong networks of solidarity, are important ways of increasing resilience in the face of these challenges.

Yet public conversation about these questions is often limited and difficult. Recent assessments³⁰ of the state of public conversations concerned with climate change and related issues suggest several obstacles:

- limited political space (narrow range of discourse and few opportunities to engage critically with existing paradigms);
- uneven engagement across different social groups;
- actual or perceived tensions between what is needed to address challenges of sustainability on the one hand, and struggles for social justice on the other hand;
- psychological barriers to engagement/unwillingness to consider an uncertain future (for instance, resistance to unwelcome information (violent futures), personal and social forms of denial, etc);
- tensions between open-ended, inclusive participation and the urgency of the scale and nature of the responses that are needed.

Civil society associations can and do play important roles in overcoming some of these obstacles. Many of the groups that see climate change and/or peak oil as driving forces of their activities are very critical of existing mainstream discourses and are trying to put alternative perspectives on the agenda; many – including those, like religious groups or trade unions, for whom these issues are not a primary focus – are making efforts to engage their constituencies; others are explicitly making links between climate change, resource scarcity and social justice.³¹ Underlying many of these activities, however, there is a real tension between the urgency of decisive action and commitments to dialogue and deliberation.

In this connection, one of the interesting debates between civil society groups in the current UK context is between those who favour confrontational, direct action against state policies and/or business practices, and those who are attempting to engage a wide range of people and organisations (including state institutions and business) in generating collective responses.

One example of this tension is the Transition Movement, and the debate it has generated with, and between, advocates of confrontational direct action (see Example 6 on p. 16).

Similar tensions around the role of the state have also arisen in UK climate camps. Climate camps have attempted both to encourage direct action against identifiable targets and to create spaces for discussion and debate. They have tried to be non-hierarchical and open to a range of participants – with all the tensions and dilemmas this implies.³³ Other civil society associations that have organised discussions or debates about climate change have also lived with the tension between encouraging an exchange of views and having a clear commitment to far-reaching change. The World Development Movement, for example, has hosted a series of online and face-to-face debates as part of its campaign against climate change.³⁴

On the one hand, then, deliberation and dialogue offer the possibility that a careful, collective engagement with the challenges we face might make a valuable contribution to rethinking assumptions, questioning ways of life and formulating individual and collective responses in ways that avoid authoritarian impositions. On the other hand, there is tension between: the idea that dialogue and deliberation should, in principle, be open-ended and not tied to particular outcomes; and the sense of urgency for action that arises from the latest scientific studies on climate change in particular.

In light of this urgency, is it justifiable to spend time and resources on processes with uncertain outcomes? If such processes are worth pursuing, are all perspectives open for discussion, or should there be a bottom line determining which perspectives are credibly based, for example, on scientific evidence? What is the potential – and are there limitations – of involving citizens in dialogue and deliberation about the challenges of sustainability?

The team of international theorists and practitioners involved in planning public deliberation on climate change in Alberta, Canada,³⁵ recorded that in one of their meetings:

'There was healthy discussion and some different views on how the issue should be framed. Many participants agreed that the framing should be hopeful, not disastrous. For some, this meant getting away from "climate change" as a term: they argued for headings like "clean air, clean water, clean land," or "treating the environment better," which may be less polarizing than climate change but which raise climate change issues in their resolution. Other participants thought it was important to put climate change front-and-center. They argued for starting with the understanding that global warming is occurring, and the question is what to do about it; it may be necessary to not waste time in a discussion with the small fraction of the public that does not believe in climate change. Other participants thought that deliberation should address the range of concerns that exist in the public.' (Kahane, 2008)

Practical experiments with dialogue and deliberation processes in relation to climate change are growing. In May 2009, a deliberative opinion poll canvassed the views of citizens from across the European Union on climate change, immigration and EU policy-making (CDD, 2009). There are also ambitious proposals for a mass engagement process in the lead-up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference (currently being developed by Involve, AmericaSpeaks, E3G and the Centre on International Cooperation together with other partners); this was one of the proposals considered in an international workshop in September 2009 of theorists and practitioners engaged in developing global dialogue and deliberation around climate change (Wilson *et al.*, 2009). The framing, processes and results of these experiments will be worth watching.

Example 6: The Transition Movement

The Transition movement attempts to encourage proactive, community-based responses to the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil. From its origins in Kinsale, Ireland (2004) and the first 'Transition Town' in Totnes, Devon, the Transition idea has rapidly spread both within the UK and beyond.

Engaging people in dialogue and deliberation is a key element of the Transition approach. Such engagement does not prescribe fixed answers to these challenges but focuses on local communities generating their own ways of increasing resilience. It is about listening and building relationships. Transition initiatives use a variety of methods to encourage conversations, including Open Space, World Café and Fishbowl discussions. Because the focus is on community responses, the responsibility of making links from conversation to action lies largely with participants themselves (Hopkins, 2008).

One of the issues that has come up with the Transition movement is the question of how it can move beyond the white, middle class, 'usual suspects', beyond an 'us and them' mentality, and out of comfort zones (Hopkins, 2008b).

The movement has generated interest from – and sought to engage with – a range of organisations, including businesses and local government. However, it is partly this willingness to build alliances with the state and the market that has triggered a critical debate between the Transition movement and radical activists who see it as not sufficiently capable of confronting power and clashes of interest.³²

The preceding sections have considered three key challenges facing UK society. Each of these challenges generates opportunities for dialogue and deliberation; each also raises critical questions about the role and nature of dialogue and deliberation, and also about how dissent is experienced and responded to.

The following sections take up some of these questions. Their discussion, and potential responses to them, draws both on the literature by theorists and practitioners and on discussions at the practitioners' workshop held in Bradford in December 2008.

Deliberation and dialogue – key questions and potential responses

What can be expected from dialogue and deliberation?

Why create spaces for conversation? For civil society associations interested in promoting dialogue or deliberation, clarifying their response to this question is an important first step that will shape many other decisions.

As outlined above, dialogue and deliberation are, by their nature, open-ended and unpredictable. This does not mean that they don't have outcomes or can't lead to change; it just means that attempting to direct them towards a specific substantive outcome runs counter to the spirit they are trying to foster. Specific instances of dialogue and deliberation can be self-contained or linked to other processes or political projects, and their actual results can be used in different ways, for example, to press for change, to inform decision-making or as a resource for further discussion. The credibility of such results, however, does hinge on the extent to which they were arrived at freely and without manipulation.

Dialogue and deliberation can lead to a range of outcomes:

- they can lead to agreement on a policy, a course of action or a set of values;
- they can help participants to make sense of the wider picture, to 'test their ideas' and to clarify what they think and how they feel about the issues discussed;³⁶
- they can open up new possibilities, new ways of viewing an issue and new ways of acting, whether for a whole group/organization or for individual participants.
- they can help participants to understand more about the ways in which and the reasons why they disagree;
- they can foster a sense of solidarity and 'co-operation in public deliberation, even with persistent disagreements' (Bohman, 1996, p. 89);³⁷
- they can contribute to the development of 'social intelligence':³⁸ '(1) the protection and expansion of our capacity for free and communicative inquiry and (2) the protection and expansion of our capacity to perceive and evaluate the shared consequences of our choices, habits, policies and practices;' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, pp.16-17);
- they can help to build relationships between individuals and groups.

None of these outcomes are guaranteed. Priorities among these potential outcomes will shape the design of appropriate processes and determine whether the emphasis is on dialogue or deliberation. Most of these outcomes become more likely, though, if dialogue and deliberation are underpinned by the general principles that were outlined above:

- a willingness to enter into conversations that are open-ended and unpredictable, with all the confusion and loss of control that this can imply;
- a willingness to listen genuinely to the contributions of others, especially where they conflict with our own;
- honesty and sincerity, and the avoidance of manipulation;
- an openness to change, not least in our own ways of thinking.

The following sections consider what a commitment to these principles might mean in practice.

Face-to-face or online?

Most accounts of dialogue and deliberation are based on the assumption of face-to-face encounters between participants, and online methods tend to be regarded as a 'peculiar form' of deliberation. As the recent report of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC, 2008, p. 41) points out, however, it is time to 'give deeper attention to online methods' – not least because online forms of deliberation are likely to be cheaper and can potentially be accessed by greater numbers of participants. There are some significant differences between face-to-face interactions and online communication: while face-to-face exchanges happen in real time, with participants responding directly to each other, participants in online communication may or may not be engaged in the conversation at the same time. Body language, a significant dimension of direct communication, is missing online, and participants are 'disembodied' and potentially anonymous.

What do these differences imply for dialogue or deliberation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of online methods? Online 'conversations', of course, are part of many people's everyday experience, and there are debates among researchers about whether this promotes deliberation across difference or not.³⁹ The focus here, though, is on online spaces that are created specifically to promote dialogue or deliberation.

Example 7: Web Lab

Very interesting and pioneering examples of online dialogue and deliberation have been hosted by Web Lab, a New York-based, non-profit think tank. Founded in 1997, Web Lab has developed an online method for 'small group dialogue' that has been used – with very encouraging results – to engage participants in dialogue on a range of topics, including the Clinton impeachment process, interracial relationships, the aftermath of 9/11 and the redevelopment of ground zero, and education reform.

Starting from the observation that 'most Web-based bulletin boards have so many people dropping by, and there is so little accountability, that they encourage a series of "drive-by" postings, rather than the give and take of an in-person conversation', Web Lab's own model of 'small group dialogue' takes a different approach:⁴⁰

- Participants are assigned to small and diverse groups (for instance, 30 people), within which they interact. All the members of a group start and finish the process at the same time. Rather than the anonymity of a mass of participants who come and go, this small group format encourages participants to engage with each other seriously, to feel that they are listened and responded to and to get to 'know' each other.
- In addition to limiting the size of groups, Web Lab also encourages accountability and dialogue by asking participants to introduce themselves to each other. Experience has shown that many participants share very personal information, often more freely than they might have done face-to-face.

- Web Lab dialogues are of limited duration (for example, two weeks). This time limit encourages higher levels of participation and a more intense experience while it lasts, and a sense of closure for participants, who all finish together. Within this time limit, participants can read and post messages whenever it suits them; they do not need to be present on the site at the same time.
- A large number of small groups can run in parallel, discussing the same questions. While participants can only post messages within their own small groups, they are free to read the discussions taking place in other groups, and to use them as inputs for their own contributions. In this way, the advantages of accessing the views of a large and diverse range of people are combined with the intimacy of a small group.
- Small group dialogue can run with or without facilitation, and both have been tried.
- Small group dialogues have 'monitors' who follow the dialogues within the different groups, pick up interesting threads and posts to feature on the website, and stimulate the groups as necessary.
- Since they are online, Web Lab's small group dialogues leave a written record. The archives of past dialogues are freely accessible on the web and constitute a fascinating resource.⁴¹

www.weblab.org

Web Lab's experience (see Example 7) suggests that online dialogue and deliberation, if organised well, do have significant potential, including some advantages over face-to-face encounters: Participants tend to communicate across differences and disagreements both honestly and constructively, sharing deeply personal stories and experiences, and supporting each other through the process even without facilitation. Online communication can give participants the time and space to make fuller contributions than they might in face-to-face situations. The online environment also offers the opportunity to access and share information in ways that are not necessarily available offline.⁴²

Nevertheless, there are still challenges associated with online dialogue and deliberation. Perhaps most significant are the issues of (in)equality of access to the web, relevant internet and writing skills and confidence in posting messages. Studies of the Web

Lab experiments show that while the gender and ethnic distribution of participants have varied in relation to the topic, a disproportionate number of participants have been well-educated and comparatively well off.⁴³ For all of these experiments, participants were self-selected, that is, they actively chose to respond to invitations that were in principle open to all. The key question here is whether and how this inequality can be overcome.

Some of these issues were addressed in the first online deliberative poll, carried out by James Fishkin and Shanto Iyengar in 2002.⁴⁴ In this experiment, inequalities of access and participation were minimised by randomly selecting participants, providing the necessary equipment for participants who did not already have it, using voice communication rather than written text and using trained facilitators. Like the Web Lab dialogues, and like face-to-face deliberative polls, this online deliberative poll put participants into small

groups. Unlike in the Web Lab dialogues, participants 'met' at designated times and communicated in real time (using facilitators and a queuing system to manage the logistics of online conversation). Interestingly, the results of this online experiment paralleled those of a face-to-face deliberative poll on the same issues. This suggests that under the right conditions, online deliberation can be a feasible alternative to face-to-face meetings.

Online dialogue and deliberation have significant potential if well set up. Online forms of communication have some unique characteristics that may actually enhance the potential for dialogue and/or deliberation; they also face some particular challenges. The field of online dialogue and deliberation is still developing; new experiments and research are contributing to this development.⁴⁵

Many of the issues that need consideration if dialogue and deliberation are to be genuine and meaningful, however, are relevant both to online and face-to-face situations. Most of the following sections consider challenges faced by both.

Who sets the agenda?

'The most common error in dialogue construction is defining the subject matter so that an actual encounter between truly different views is unlikely or impossible. This easily happens when those designing events are fundamentally like-minded.' (Neisser, 2006, p. 21)

The question of who sets the agenda for a conversation space is closely related to its intended purpose. For some civil society associations, the agenda may be target-driven and/or set by funders, including governments, and there may be very little space for manoeuvre. The problem with predefined agendas, however, is that it is very easy to limit the conversation's ability to take participants into new and unpredictable directions. At their worst, events with predefined agendas:

'Structure important perspectives out of the conversation, or in one way or another push, pressure, or shame participants into agreeing to pre-conceived conclusions.' (Neisser, 2006, p. 5)

At the other end of the spectrum are approaches – including, for example, Open Space and Bohmian dialogue – that consciously try to maximise the opportunity for participants to set the agenda. These have the advantage of being responsive to participants' needs and concerns and 'avoid[ing] ruling out any topics in advance as insufficiently "public" and thus inadmissible' (Neisser, 2006, p. 1). They are perhaps particularly helpful where it is not clear what needs discussing or what the range of relevant perspectives are; they may, however, sacrifice

some of the advantages of a systematic, structured engagement with a set of issues and perspectives.

Much of the best practice of deliberation attempts to avoid the steering of deliberation towards a predefined outcome, and to structure it in ways that encourage engagement with different perspectives on an issue. It does so in order to protect the integrity of the deliberative process and to lend legitimacy to the outcome. Against this background: 'The question of who will lead, design and control a deliberative process is critical because the democratic integrity and efficacy of the process can be compromised in a hundred little ways' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 7).

Kadlec and Friedman (2007, p. 7) also argue that, if the goal is a deliberative process that is open to a range of outcomes: 'The basic principle that ought to guide us in meeting the challenge of control is that no single entity with a stake in the substantive outcome of the deliberation should be the main designer or guarantor of the process.' They suggest two main ways of protecting deliberation from being used to serve particular interests:

- **Non-partisan Intermediary Organisations:** In this solution, deliberative processes are 'controlled and safeguarded by those whose stake is in the integrity of the process, not in its substantive outcome' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 8). It presupposes the existence and availability of a particular type of civil society organisation, whose specialism and commitment does not relate to substantive issues but to deliberation itself.
- **Multi-partisan Deliberative Leadership Coalitions:** This involves building coalitions between parties that represent different substantive perspectives on the issues to be deliberated. It is a 'checks-and-balances approach, in which a variety of actors with cross-cutting agendas join together – perhaps out of frustration with a long-stalled issue – and in so doing tend to ensure the desired result of an open and fair-minded process' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 8). Building coalitions to shape the planning of a deliberative event can also go alongside enlisting a non-partisan intermediary organisation to design the process.

Similar strategies are also relevant for spaces that emphasise dialogue. The experience of St Ethelburga's, for example, suggests that 'interfaith activities that are planned, developed and delivered as a shared venture with other faith groups are more effective than events where a single faith group invites others into their space to participate in their ideas'.⁴⁶ Community Dialogue in Belfast produces 'dialogue leaflets' that reflect the range of diverse views relevant to an issue (Holloway, 2004).

The issue of who sets the agenda, and how the integrity of a deliberative process can be protected, is not only relevant to deliberation and dialogue at a societal level; nor is it limited to processes that involve several organisations. Civil society associations interested in genuine internal dialogue and deliberation also face the challenge of how the integrity of such processes can be safeguarded. This issue is particularly acute for processes in which decisions need to be made. In the context of intra-organisational deliberation, the strategies identified above could mean hiring independent facilitators and/or actively seeking out people with a diversity of views within the organisation to oversee process design and agenda setting. For organisations in which deliberation is an integral feature of their work rather than a one-off exercise, moreover, structures that facilitate the representation of different experiences and perspectives are also likely to make for more genuine deliberation. The Trade Union Council's General Council and associated committees, for example, is structured in a way that facilitates inputs from representatives of different identity groups, different unions and regional bodies.⁴⁷

For civil society associations, following any of the strategies identified above has implications in terms of cost and time. It also means giving up control over what emerges from the process. Protecting the integrity of deliberative processes, however, is likely to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the outcomes – especially if this is combined with inviting the 'right' people to participate. The question of who the 'right' people are is the focus of the next section.

Who is invited to participate?

In the theory and practice of dialogue and deliberation, the question of who participates – and of how to attract the 'right' participants – is clearly important. There are several questions that seem particularly salient here:

1. How important is it that participants are broadly representative of a cross-section of the relevant population?
2. Are people invited as individuals or as representatives of groups to which they belong? Does interaction happen at the interpersonal level or between (opposing) groups?
3. How many people should participate?
4. Is there anyone who should not be invited?

1. Representative samples?

In relation to the first question, the extent to which participants are a representative sample of the relevant (local, national, or 'community of interest') population matters a great deal if it is one of the aims of the dialogue/

Example 8: Balancing representation

In the Bradford workshop, participants discussed their own practices in relation to inviting people to take part in conversations. While most of the participants agreed that it is important to create spaces that are open to a range of people and perspectives, they recognised that there were different ways of trying to achieve this. Open invitations, for example, might appear most inclusive, but do not necessarily result in broad representation.

A participant involved in a transition initiative 'initially felt [the transition group] was open, but the nature of who we are and people's perceptions shape who comes'. The same participant suggested that '[targeted] invitations might actually make it more inclusive'. For the Tim Parry Jonathan Ball Foundation for Peace, its work with victims and survivors of political violence often involves a process of building trust with individuals before they will join group processes. In working with young people moreover, the Foundation recognises the importance of balanced representation of different groups to avoid potentially destructive power dynamics.

Opening conversations to different groups of people also involves taking a critical look at physical space. Blackburn Cathedral's ExChange work, for example, is based on the recognition that the Cathedral itself is a 'white middle-class space', and that it is important to take dialogue into other spaces, such as pubs or Mosques.

Invitations to participate, whether open to all or more targeted, are rarely neutral.

deliberation to gauge 'the conclusions the public would reach, if people had the opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues' (Fishkin, no date). Representative samples can overcome the common problem of conversation events being dominated by 'the incensed and the articulate' (Carson, 1999).

One of the most trusted ways of achieving broad representation is random selection. Theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy tend to argue for random selection particularly in relation to deliberative events that are part of the democratic process – in order to find out what informed public opinion would look like, or in forums that are more directly linked to decision-making (also see DDC, 2008, pp. 33-34).

How can civil society associations benefit from using random selection/representative sampling as a method for recruiting participants to dialogue and/or deliberation?

- Representative samples are important for conversations that form part of research projects carried out to inform an organisation's strategic priorities. For civil society associations that are interested in promoting a particular agenda, for example, it can be very helpful to have a good sense of current perspectives among the general public or more specific groups. This relates to dialogue and deliberation when the aim is to find out how engagement with the relevant issues and/or particular inputs might change people's existing perspectives.⁴⁸ It is, however, an instrumental use of deliberation rather than the promotion of 'meaningful conversations' for their own sake.
- Deliberation among a representative cross-section of people can be used to challenge decision-making processes that are unrepresentative and/or dominated by vested interests. In such cases, demonstrating the legitimacy of the process is particularly important and random selection helps to avoid accusations of manipulation (Carson and Martin, 1999). The flipside, of course, is that outcomes, while democratically legitimate, are unpredictable. This strategy, then, is perhaps most useful to those civil society associations whose agenda is more about democratic legitimacy than about substantive outcomes.
- Random selection can be a useful way of recruiting people who might be hard to reach otherwise, and/or who do not have particular 'axes to grind'.

If, on the other hand, it is important that people participate in dialogue or deliberation because they are highly motivated to do so, or if it is important that particular individuals, groups or stakeholders take part, random selection would clearly be the wrong strategy.

2. Individuals, representatives, groups?

If participants are randomly selected, they are likely to be representative of a wider population; they are not, however, representatives chosen by constituents. Nor are they there as part of a group that they belong to. Random selection thus runs counter to the practices of representative democracy. Clearly, there are instances of deliberation that need participants who can interact on behalf of groups or organisations. Deliberation that aims to build coalitions between different organisations, or attempts to find solutions to a conflict that involves a range of groups, would be relevant examples.

It is worth noting here that being invited as a delegate/representative makes different demands of participants than does being invited as an individual. For example, it may make it more difficult for participants to express their personal views and feelings and/or to change their

positions. Inviting people as delegates may also mean that a longer overall process is needed – especially where there are concerns about democratic legitimacy – including time for participants to prepare/debrief with their constituents.

Then again, participants may be invited to take part specifically as individuals rather than as members of groups. Much dialogue work assumes that the most significant interactions happen at the interpersonal level, and there may be conscious attempts to encourage people to speak only for themselves.⁴⁹ Similarly, some theorists and practitioners of deliberation 'believe that good deliberation requires that we step away from group memberships, or that participants function as 'unaffiliated citizens' (DDC, 2008, p. 34). On the other hand, though, there are strong arguments that strengthening group identities and encouraging interaction at the group level can be helpful in contexts of inequality and (asymmetric) conflict.⁵⁰ Following this route has important implications not just for how people are invited, but for process design and facilitation. This issue is revisited in the section on power and inequality below.

3. Numbers?

How many people can and should participate in a dialogue/deliberation process? Answers to this question very much depend on the scope and purpose of a particular conversation space. Samples, for example, need to be of a certain size in order to qualify as representative. On the other side of the spectrum, a space for dialogue created specifically for people interested in exchanging perspectives can be very small but very effective.

A key question here is to do with the scale at which participants can actually engage in meaningful dialogue and deliberation with each other. While theorists and practitioners vary in the exact numbers they suggest, it is clear that there are upper limits. This does not mean that processes of deliberation and dialogue cannot involve large numbers of participants. What it does mean is that they need to be structured to allow for conversations in relatively small groups, with or without plenary forums that connect them. Web Lab's online dialogues, for example, have involved hundreds of people (with the capacity for more), organised into small groups but with access to all participants' contributions. Deliberative opinion polls, with representative samples of several hundred people, have combined small group sessions with plenary question-and-answer sessions.⁵¹ Open Space⁵² events can involve large numbers of people who then organise themselves into small and flexible groups.

Meaningful dialogue and deliberation need relatively small groups, but this does not preclude the involvement

of large numbers of participants in a wider process. The issue is not so much whether large-scale deliberative/dialogue events are possible, but what they imply in terms of structure, costs and organisation. Online methods and other forms of mass communication clearly have potential to enable greater numbers of participants to participate without escalating costs.⁵³

4. Boundaries?

Example 8 illustrated some of the problems involved in trying to create spaces in which disagreement can be articulated and explored: (how) should civil society associations that are committed to inclusive dialogue and deliberation engage with individuals and groups who hold views that denigrate or discriminate against others? Should such views be 'given a platform' and aired in public spaces? Are some views simply unacceptable and should they thus be excluded from deliberative spaces?⁵⁴

Answers to these questions clearly depend on the purpose of the dialogic/deliberative space. Excluding participants with views that are unacceptable to others may be the only way of building viable coalitions or working towards constructive outcomes. In other situations, 'enclave deliberations' – conversations within relatively homogeneous groups from which others are excluded – may be important (for example, single-identity work in conflict zones, spaces that allow marginalised voices to strengthen).

Conversation spaces that are about exploring the range of positions that exist – 'acceptable' or not – on the other hand, risk becoming less relevant by excluding 'problematic' perspectives from the start.

Including perspectives that are likely to generate conflicts raises the stakes and is likely to require careful facilitation. The question of the extent to which facilitation is needed, and what it can contribute, is the theme of the following section.

What about facilitation?

Do dialogue and deliberation processes require facilitation by people with specific skills, experience or qualities?

In everyday life, dialogue and deliberation can arise spontaneously, without prior planning or external facilitation. As the stakes rise, however – for example in divisive contexts, or where the democratic legitimacy of a process is critical – spontaneous, naturally-occurring conversations can reflect unhelpful patterns and habits that fuel conflict or undermine legitimacy (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, p. 5). Herzig and Chasin observe: 'In a polarized social and political climate, meaningful dialogue rarely happens without considerable thought and planning.'

(2006, p. 2). In such situations, skilful facilitation can be key to enabling meaningful dialogue and deliberation.

Quite a few of the suggestions made in the sections that follow assume facilitation. Skilled and experienced facilitators can enhance dialogue and deliberation in many ways – for example, by creating an atmosphere conducive to meaningful conversation, reminding participants of their commitments to each other, making it easier for participants to engage deeply with others across divides and inequalities and being responsible for the timing and flow of an overall process.

The professionalisation of facilitation skills, however, can also have counterproductive effects: it can lead to facilitation expertise becoming a marketable product that needs to be protected rather than shared (DDC, 2008, p. 40) (and the costs of which can be prohibitive), it can lead to the phenomenon of professionals coming into and out of particular contexts without making a real connection with local people or concerns and it can erode people's trust in their own skills and minimise opportunities for practice.⁵⁵

There are several ways in which the tension between the benefits of good facilitation and the potential negative effects of professionalisation could be addressed:

- Encouraging an ethos of sharing experience and expertise. A good example of this is a free publication by the Public Conversations Project in the United States, which makes a clear case for good facilitation and shares the PCP's facilitation expertise in a spirit of openness and in a way that encourages others to use it (Herzig and Chasin, 2006).
- Developing resources that can be used by groups who are unable to bring in external facilitators. Examples include the 'self-help tools for participants' included in the PCP publication mentioned above, the New Economics Foundation's Democs conversation kits⁵⁶ and argument maps, and processes that can be run by untrained facilitators or participants themselves, such as Open Space or World Café.

Nevertheless, there are no easy substitutes for skilled and thoughtful facilitation.⁵⁷ This applies especially to contexts of disagreement, conflict and inequality, as the following sections will illustrate.

How can disagreement be handled?

Many instances of deliberation that involve civil society associations aim to find ways of tackling problems together, to reach common ground and/or to make decisions. Such efforts to move towards agreement, however, are not the only type of conversation that is needed in a diverse

and unequal society. As the section above on diversity, difference, and community cohesion illustrates, attempts to focus on 'common visions' are themselves controversial.

What, then, can be done to encourage conversations in which disagreement can be honestly articulated and explored? In a suggestive article, Philip Neisser (2006, p. 4) argues that:

'Above all we need to become – as individuals and as a society – more pro-disagreement. A democracy of conversation requires, first and foremost, a culture that explicitly celebrates disagreement as an activity, meaning that it treats actual engagement in disagreement as a part of a life well-lived, and that it therefore routinely pushes for the inclusion of as many "sides" as possible in public talk of all kinds.'

The exclusion of divisive issues from public conversation, Neisser (2006, pp. 5-6) suggests, is likely to lead to 'disagreement failure':

'Disagreement failure exists when ideas and experiences that are playing an important role in a given situation are not brought to the surface by means of cross-border, public conversation, either because such conversations have not taken place or because the conversations which did take place were not adequately in-depth and inclusive. Disagreement failure most fully exists when that lack of conversation and surfacing plays a role in creating, or allowing, a violation of basic human rights, a failure to realize worthwhile goals otherwise within reach, or the persistence of damaging misunderstandings.'

The important point here is that 'failure' does not refer to the existence of disagreement, but to the avoidance of inclusive, in-depth conversations about the disagreements that exist. The goal, then, is not (necessarily) to move from disagreement to consensus, but rather towards what Neisser (2006, p. 29) calls 'disagreement success':

'Disagreement success exists when ideas and experiences which have been playing an important role in a given situation are brought to the surface in cross-border, public conversations, and when this conversation causes the terms of disagreement (or agreement) to be rooted in new understandings of the situation and the people involved. Such success may very well help to remedy or prevent serious harm or injustice. It may bring a variety of worthwhile goals within reach. What it does not do is require or imply agreement.'

As Neisser (2006, p. 20) himself points out, taking this argument seriously is challenging. It is tempting but problematic to see dialogue or

deliberation as a way out of disagreement *per se* rather than out of disagreement failure:

'Someone who says that [people] should have talked more about this or that, and should now make up for it with new conversation, may very well have in mind dialogues structured to favor pre-conceived ideas about the conclusions all should reach, which in one way or another push, pressure, or shame participants into agreeing to those conclusions. And many contemporary programs intended to encourage deliberation suffer from precisely these problems.'

If the idea of disagreement success is to be meaningful, it needs to be 'non-paternalistic' and 'anti-manipulative' (Neisser, 2006, pp. 20-21). People's positions may change as a result of engagement with those with whom they disagree, but if they do, this needs to happen freely and without coercion.

What could this mean in practice?

There are a range of practices that might encourage moves towards disagreement success:

- Focusing on dialogue and encouraging storytelling, either as a precursor to deliberation or in its own right.⁵⁹ Because the emphasis in dialogue is on enhanced mutual understanding, the question of what is 'acceptable' is much less important than in deliberation, especially where deliberation is aiming at consensus and/or decision-making. Dialogue can create space for participants to express and listen to a range of positions, beliefs and life experiences, including those that may be very different from – or even fundamentally opposed to – their own.
- Training participants in communication skills – 'how to listen, how to ask questions, how to express yourself' – in preparation for dialogue and/or deliberation.⁶⁰ A useful example of a communication practice that may make disagreement success more likely is 'having to state the enemy's position to their satisfaction'.⁶¹
- Making space for disagreement, both in how the conversation space is framed, and in the ways in which it is facilitated. This can include the facilitator 'naming the "hot spots" or sensitive issues (and thus demonstrating it is safe to talk about them)', 'being a non-anxious presence' (Huxley and Keyes, 2009), and encouraging people to feel curious about opponents' positions.⁶² It can mean moving from 'framing-to-persuade' to 'framing-for-deliberation' that is, consciously presenting a range of relevant positions, including those that are marginalised in mainstream discourses (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 11).

- In some cases, especially where there are significant differences in power, it may also include explicitly encouraging confrontation (Halabi, 2004 and Kelly, 2004).
- Encouraging the perception of complexity, including the ways in which people can hold contradictory views within themselves, and thus opening up space for a more detailed exploration of controversial issues. This can also help to avoid the danger that a focus on disagreement may push people into one-sided positions (Herzig and Chasin, 2006).⁶³
- ‘Dynamic updating’ at various points in a conversation process, that is, consciously updating participants’ understandings of commonalities and conflicts as the process evolves. This can help to guard both against false consensus and against the assumption that conflicting interests and values are static (Karpowitz and Mansbridge, 2005).
- Deliberately using silence, either to encourage thoughtfulness and reflection (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, pp. 13-14), and/or as a way of acknowledging the limits of talk (Zaidi, 2007, p. 427).
- Taking enough time for the dialogue/deliberation, not just within one instance of conversation, but also across a series of encounters over an extended period.⁶⁴ This can also include significant time connecting with potential participants and planning the process in response to their needs and concerns (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, p. 17).⁶⁵
- Allowing for uncertainty and unpredictability of outcomes.

Some of these suggestions challenge widespread practices, ideas and structures. The argument that it is worth investing significant time in extended conversations that may not change participants’ minds or lead to substantive outcomes or actions is controversial and does not sit easily within a culture that tends to focus on the delivery of measurable targets. Nor does it easily correspond to the sense of urgency involved in questions of injustice, sustainability and other issues that need clear decisions and actions. It might even undermine activism.⁶⁶ Because of these factors, it is not an easy route for civil society associations in the current context.

The idea of disagreement success may, however, generate helpful responses to the challenges of diversity and difference outlined above. It is certainly more attractive than disagreement failure. It is also likely to be more attractive than attempts to reach common visions prematurely and/or in ways that exclude some ‘ideas and experiences that are playing an important role in a given situation’ from the start. It is attractive, not least, because:

‘Democracy happens and just policy outcomes are made more likely through such border-crossing,

not by creating unanimity so much as by bringing participants to see themselves and issues in new ways, understand their interests more inclusively of those of others, and viscerally experience the humanity they share with those others.’ (Neisser, 2006, p. 1)

What about power and inequalities?

‘[The] problem is how more of the people who routinely speak less – who, through various mechanisms or accidents of birth and fortune, are least expressive in and most alienated from conventional ... politics – might take part and be heard and how those who typically dominate might be made to attend to the views of others.’ (Sanders, 1997, p. 349)

Power is a complex and contested concept. In a diverse society, the intersections of different aspects of individual identities mean that to some extent, power is relative to context. In many interactions, it is not immediately obvious where power lies. And yet, stressing the complexity of power can also lead to a neglect of persistent larger structural inequalities.

Inequalities and power bear on efforts to encourage dialogue and deliberation in a number of ways. They raise issues about access and ability to participate, about what happens within conversation spaces and about what happens to the results of deliberative processes. Some of these issues have already been touched on in other sections of this report:

- For marginalised groups, spaces in which they can express their experiences, find support and strengthen their individual and collective voices can be important. In this sense, group polarisation can be an important step towards a public sphere in which a wider range of perspectives is expressed and heard. Civil society groups can play important roles in creating and supporting such spaces.
- The ways in which potential participants are identified and invited are not neutral; they can either perpetuate or challenge existing power relations. It is also important to recognise that potential participants who lack the material resources, skills or confidence for effective participation may need additional support to enable participation in the short term, as well as more far-reaching structural changes to overcome barriers⁶⁷.
- The question of who controls the agenda, discussed in a previous section, clearly relates to issues of power.
- When power and inequality in a dialogic/deliberative space come to the surface, this can lead to confrontation and disagreement – and many of the suggestions made above about disagreement also relate to power and inequality.

Example 9: The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power*

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (CPPP) was set up by the UK Coalition Against Poverty in 1999 and supported by Oxfam and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It brought six 'grassroots' and six 'public life' commissioners together over a period of nearly a year and gave them the task of 'examin[ing] why people experiencing poverty do not influence decision-making and policy' (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002, p. 1).

The Commission's set-up and way of working was innovative and experimental, and the report it produced raised a number of important issues in a way that was accessible, honest and critical. The experimental nature of the process, however, also meant that it was a challenging process for all involved: As the Commission's final report recognised: 'We recognised how difficult it is to really hear another person when their experience is light years away from your own. We too experienced similar problems ... at Commission meetings, ourselves.' (CPPP, 2000, p. 27). An independent evaluation by Sarah del Tufo and Lucy Gaster (2002) also generated interesting observations and reflections. In relation to issues of power and inequality within dialogic/deliberative processes, the following lessons stand out:

- Clarity of purpose, and a process that fits the purpose, are essential.
- Effective facilitation, present in some of the meetings, helped to counteract unhelpful dynamics. Without a facilitator, and without clear ground rules, Commissioners and staff struggled to create an atmosphere in which all participants felt they were listened to and able to make contributions.
- An opportunity to get to know each other at a deeper personal level would have helped the Commissioners to understand where their fellow Commissioners were coming from, to identify and address their perceptions and expectations of each other earlier, and to establish a productive working atmosphere. The relative lack of such an opportunity early on (partly because an attempt to introduce a participatory

'getting to know each other' exercise was resisted by a Commissioner) meant that it took several meetings – and a 'cathartic confrontation' – before 'the air was cleared' and 'the group came together' (p. 38).

- As it was, the process was difficult for both grassroots Commissioners and public life Commissioners. The very different backgrounds of the two groups meant that 'notions of truth, reality, method and language' were contested (staff member, cited on p. 6). Commissioners from both groups felt silenced at times for several reasons – because they did not share the same language, because their experience or knowledge was being questioned, because it was difficult at times to know how to respond to each other's contributions. For Commissioners from both groups, the process involved 'exposure, vulnerability and threat'. The public life Commissioners realised that 'if they were really going to tackle power relations, there was an unexpected personal aspect. They had to open themselves up and connect with feelings and emotions – their own and others' (p. 6). Even if painful, however, the moments when power relations were explicitly tackled eventually helped to create a more equal relationship.
- The two groups of Commissioners had different stakes in the process. As a public life Commissioner commented, 'I realised that there was a big difference between myself as a public life Commissioner and the grassroots: I can go back to a comfortable home and, if the Commission fails, it won't affect my life. This is totally different from [the grassroots Commissioner]'s position.' (p. 37). '[The grassroots Commissioners] "owned" and were affected by the process in a far more fundamental way than the public life commissioners.' (p. 6).
- A process of this nature needs significant time and resources to be done well. This includes time to get to know each other, time for people to develop the confidence to make full contributions, and appropriate material and logistic support to allow all participants to take part and feel valued.

* Page numbers quoted in this example refer to del Tufo and Gaster (2002) unless otherwise stated.

A further issue that emerges strongly from research into, and experience of, participation by people living in poverty is to do with (lack of) respect, both within and beyond conversation spaces. As the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000) pointed out:

'The main problem is that too often people experiencing poverty don't feel respected. Too often they aren't respected. And what is the ultimate disrespect? Being involved in phoney participation, by people who don't listen, when things don't change. Phoney because it doesn't lead to a shift in power.'

Some of the issues raised here – people not listening, the experience of disrespect within a conversation space – can be addressed at the level of that space itself. The other key issue – things not changing – points beyond that space. For people with long histories of marginalisation, everyday struggle and experiences of disrespect, the question of whether participation actually leads to meaningful change is especially important. In the context of this report, however, it is important to remember that not all processes of dialogue and deliberation are directly tied to a promise of change, or to an agent capable of delivering the desired change. Nor is a consensus on the nature of desirable changes necessarily the outcome. This does not mean that spaces for dialogue and deliberation are inevitably 'phony'. What matters is that those organising such spaces are genuinely interested in encouraging serious listening, and that they are clear and honest about what can be expected and what will happen to people's contributions. Still, the need to explore potential ways of maximising the impact of dialogue or deliberation is likely to be greater when inequality and injustice are being addressed (see also Kadlec and Friedman, 2007). The next section – on deliberation and activism – looks at some of the ways in which this might happen. Here, the main focus is on the difficulties of overcoming inequalities within dialogue/deliberation spaces, and suggestions for how these might be tackled.

Contemporary proponents of dialogue and deliberation typically specify equality of participants and freedom from coercion among the integral elements of a legitimate, worthwhile process. Despite this stated commitment, dialogue and deliberation themselves have been criticised for being biased in favour of educated, articulate, 'reasonable' elites. As Young (1996, pp. 120-136), for example, points out:

*'Norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people ... predominant norms of "articulateness" ... are culturally specific, and in actual speaking situations ... exhibiting such speaking styles is a sign of social privilege.'*⁶⁸

It is important to ask, then, 'what biases are masked by the norms of deliberation [and dialogue]' themselves, and which perspectives are marginalised in the process (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 6). The key point here is that the explicit or implicit 'ground rules' that operate in spaces created for deliberation and dialogue can contribute to the valuation of some perspectives and forms of expression and the marginalisation of others.

Practitioners of dialogue and deliberation tend to respond to the criticisms and problems outlined above by emphasising that 'good facilitation and design can mitigate the problem of inequality.' (DDC, 2008, p. 34). How can facilitation and design 'allow all participants to participate freely and effectively'? (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 2).

There are a number of strategies that emerge from practitioners' experiences and from the literature:

- Choosing and designing the physical space so that it feels welcoming to a range of people and does not unintentionally create barriers to equal participation (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, p. 36). Issues to take into account here include accessibility, catering for dietary needs, spaces for prayer, and the connotations of particular places, buildings and room set-ups.
- Skilful facilitation that consciously counteracts manifestations of power and inequality, for example by encouraging the less vocal to speak, reining in attempts to dominate the conversation or creating structures that give all participants equal opportunities to speak and to listen. As Kadlec and Friedman (2007, pp. 12-13) point out, skilled facilitators are more likely to live up to this challenge than individuals who are selected from within a group of participants.
- Having facilitators who themselves come from traditionally marginalised groups. At the School for Peace in Wahat-al-Salam/Neve Shalom, for example, each of the two co-facilitators in Jewish/Palestinian encounters belongs to one of the groups in conflict and can thus understand the processes they are going through, including feelings of superiority/inferiority (Halabi, 2004).
- Making space for a variety of ways by which participants may express themselves, including 'greeting, rhetoric and storytelling' (Young, 1996; Black, 2009), testimony/life story dialogue (Harrist and Gelfand, 2005; Sanders, 1997), and the expression of emotions (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2006).
- Using methods that require 'those who typically dominate' to listen, for instance, the fishbowl, in which only participants who are in a small circle in the middle are allowed to speak while others listen from the outside.
- Explicitly identifying as problems issues of power among participants, for example through 'power tools' – exercises designed to analyse power (*The Shape of Civil Society to Come*, 2007b).
- Not putting participants in a position where they are alone in holding particular views, may feel 'ganged up on' and/or responsible for single-handedly defending their 'side' (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, p. 34).

- Including more participants from marginalised groups than from groups who are usually dominant.⁶⁹
- Designing the dialogue/deliberation as an encounter between groups rather than individuals. This can be appropriate in situations of asymmetric conflict/inequality, and is a way of bringing structural inequalities to the fore, often in confrontational ways. It can go together with separate sessions for each group, either prior to, or in parallel with, the inter-group encounter.⁷⁰
- Moving away from the goal of consensus and prioritising engagement with a range of perspectives on a common problem (deliberation) or better understanding of participants' experiences, feelings and thoughts (dialogue) instead (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007).

The strategies above can help to suspend or, sometimes, to shift power relations within dialogue/deliberation. It is important to remember, however, that such suspensions or shifts do not change the larger realities outside. Dialogue and deliberation, while important in their own right, are not substitutes for the other kinds of action that may be needed to challenge problematic forms of power. The next section examines how dialogue and deliberation relate to activist politics.

How do dialogue and deliberation relate to activism?

'Activists and organizers of deliberations are not sharply distinguishable. It is not only activists who have agendas, desired outcomes, and some degree of power. However, the two groups cluster at opposite ends of a spectrum. At one end, politics is strategic and oriented toward policy goals (albeit constrained by procedures or ethical principles). The main evidence of success is achieving the desired outcome. At the other end of the spectrum, politics is open-ended; the main evidence of success is a broad, fair discussion leading to a set of goals that may be unanticipated at the outset.' (Levine and Nierras, 2007, p. 1).

At various points this report has discussed the tensions between attempts to create open-ended deliberative processes on the one hand, and attempts to promote substantive goals on the other. Given these tensions, do dialogue and deliberation have anything to offer to activists? And can activist forms of politics enhance deliberation?

Example 10: St Ethelburga's and the G20 protests

In April 2009, St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace found itself 'at the epicentre' of demonstrations planned to coincide with the G20 meetings in London. A climate camp was set up outside the European Climate Exchange, a few doors away from St Ethelburga's. Reflecting on what this meant for St Ethelburga's, Director Simon Keyes posted the following on the Centre's blog prior to the event:

'Issues of environmental and financial mismanagement continually arise in our inter-religious dialogues. Our fragile relationship with nature and the ethics of global capitalism are powerful issues which unite serious-minded people across the boundaries of different faith traditions. I suspect a good number of the people who come to St Ethelburga's share a belief that things are very wrong with the ways we (ab)use both the environment and money. But, by the same token, we also welcome many people who earn their living in the glass towers of the banking, insurance and trading companies that surround us.

So what attitude should our Centre take to the demonstration?

... We think there is value in listening to other positions and points of view, in being curious about how and why people think differently, in avoiding polarisation and being open to complexity and contradiction. We are interested in how you build relationships that don't require agreement or like-mindedness. You can't run a demonstration on such principles – you need certainty, passion and commitment (and I admire that).

... Few can now deny that we are talking here about huge and pressing problems that concern us all. Sure, there are vested interests to be challenged, but with so much at stake shouldn't we be investing in reconciliatory approaches which bring people together across divisions to co-create a better future?

... If we want to be peaceful in the handling of conflict, clearly we must reject violence in all forms – including, I would say, using strident, polarising language which demonises and dehumanises others.

... St Ethelburga's cannot ignore what is going to happen outside its front door, but I don't think joining in, in support of one side or another or both, is our calling. We will think further about how we will spend those two days – we'll want to find a way of saying "take these issues seriously", "don't demonise", "be peaceful", "contemplate".'

Many activists express reservations about ‘talking shops’ that don’t visibly lead to action and change. As one of the community organisers at our workshop put it, ‘two-thirds of what we do is conversation, but the end is social change.’ From this premise, the key question becomes not so much whether dialogue and deliberation can enhance understanding of, or critical engagement with, the range of relevant perspectives on an issue, but whether they are likely to contribute to, or distract from, struggles for substantive change. Activists, then:

‘May ask whether the “right” people (ie, those who share their own views and interests) will be represented in adequate numbers, whether the “right” facts and arguments will be emphasized, and whether the agenda will be structured in favorable ways. [Activists often complain] that deliberation doesn’t “come up with the right answer.” Their desire to move the discussion in a particular direction can sound cynical, but often it reflects a principled belief that something else (for example, economic equality, freedom, public health, environmental sustainability, or growth) is more important than a deliberative process.’ (Levine and Nierras, 2007, p. 8)

Given the urgency of some of the challenges we are facing, this position is understandable. Some activists, moreover, give good reasons for their suspicion that deliberative processes may not come up with the right answer (Young, 2001; Levine and Nierras, 2007):

- In societies that are characterised by structural inequalities, ‘more powerful and socially-advantaged actors have greater access to the deliberative process and therefore are able to dominate the proceedings with their interests and perspectives.’ (Young, 2001, p. 679)
- Deliberative processes, especially when they are tied to policy-making, operate within narrow parameters that inhibit more radical critical questioning. This is not necessarily the result of conscious manipulation; dominant discourses can be so powerful that they make alternative visions invisible or unthinkable.

Some of the suggestions made in the sections on disagreement and power above hopefully go some way towards addressing concerns about the distorting influences of power, manipulation and narrow agendas. They cannot, however, promise the ‘right’ outcome without opening themselves up to the same criticisms. There is, then, a genuine tension between the pursuit of particular outcomes and the commitment to open-ended exploration of different perspectives.

If this is so, can dialogue and deliberation offer anything to civil society associations that are

seeking to promote substantive goals? There are strong arguments that they can:

- The ideas and principles of dialogue and deliberation can be used to criticise decision-making processes that exclude affected people or relevant perspectives.
- Spaces for deliberation and dialogue can offer activist individuals and organisations opportunities to express their positions and arguments in front of people who may not otherwise be exposed to them. They can thus offer the possibility that participants engage with activists’ positions more seriously than they might outside the deliberative space (Carson, 2001, pp. 7-22).
- Dialogue and deliberation offer opportunities for learning and reflection (Levine and Nierras, 2007). For activists who participate, this can be important both because critical examination of their own initial positions in the light of other perspectives may ultimately strengthen them, and because having a good sense of how other people think may help them devise better ways of engaging a broader public.
- The potential of dialogic and deliberative processes to encourage reflection and learning can also ‘change perceptions and create opportunities that did not seem to exist before’. This potential of ‘eroding underlying political obstacles to change’ is likely to increase if dialogue or deliberation are not one-off exercises, but sustained over time in ‘continuous, multilevel interactions’ (Saunders, in Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 16).
- Dialogue and deliberation can be important elements of processes within activist organisations or coalitions. They can help to build solidarity, generate commitment and support activist claims to legitimacy.

Deliberation and dialogue can be integral elements of struggles for justice. At the same time, activist politics can enhance public deliberation and dialogue:

- Contentious collective action can put new issues and actors onto the public agenda, challenge complacency and broaden the range of alternatives for consideration. It can ‘rupture a stream of thought’ and ‘make us wonder about what we are doing’ (Young, 2001, p. 687)
- Sometimes, people and organisations engaged in struggles for ‘another world’ pioneer and model new ways of interacting that can be an inspiration to those interested in dialogue and deliberation. Participatory Budgeting and Social Forums are examples of important innovations motivated by struggles for justice.

At the top of this section, two questions were raised: do dialogue and deliberation have anything to offer

to activists? Can activist forms of politics enhance deliberation? This report argues that the answer to both questions is yes. It may still be difficult to engage in both at the same time (Young, 2001), but both are integral parts of struggles for social and political change that seek to 'get rid of existing evils without landing us finally in some form of coercive control from above and outside'.⁷¹

There is yet another sense, however, in which deliberation and activism can be mutually enhancing. Kadlec and Friedman (2007) suggest a project of 'deliberative activism':

'Operating on "either side," so to speak, of deliberation itself. It is activism that precedes deliberation to make it more possible, and follows it to more meaningfully connect it to processes of change. ... We are concerned here with advancing a form of activism capable of encouraging and, when necessary, compelling an authentic response to legitimate deliberative processes by those with power.' (Kadlec and Friedman, 2007, p. 20)

This is a specific form of activism, with a primary commitment to democratic deliberation, rather than to other substantive goals that may or may not coincide with the outcomes of deliberation. It is also a form of activism, though, that can help to invest deliberative processes with a greater sense of purpose and direction, and connect them to struggles for change.⁷² Deliberative activism can take different forms, from building relationships with powerful institutions, to challenging and confronting them.

Kadlec and Friedman (2007, p. 18) argue that in order to fulfil its potential to contribute to social and political change, it is critical that deliberation is:

'Also situated and controlled, to a very significant degree, in civil society... In this light, public deliberation is just as much about strengthening civil society and civic practices as it is about adjusting how public officials do their work.'

How, then, could civil society associations be strengthened in their capacity to facilitate dialogue and deliberation, and to link this to broader change where appropriate?

The following section takes a look at opportunities and obstacles for civil society associations in the current UK context, and makes suggestions for how some of the obstacles might be addressed.

Civil society and dialogue/deliberation: what next?

This report has argued that dialogue and deliberation do have the potential to strengthen the capacity of civil society to act as 'a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means'.⁷³ They can put new issues on the agenda, open them up for critical examination, encourage people to ask new questions, help to build solidarity and counteract disagreement failure. Evidence from the theory and practice of deliberation also suggests that 'ordinary citizens' often value and enjoy opportunities to take part in genuine deliberation or dialogue.⁷⁴

How, then, can civil society associations encourage dialogue and deliberation?

Throughout, this report has referred to examples of dialogue and deliberation that are currently happening in the UK in response to the challenges of diversity, inequality and sustainability. There is no doubt that innovative and important work is going on.

The key strength that civil society associations can bring to this work is their independence from governments. As Kadlec and Friedman (2007, p. 19) point out:

'Deliberation must always be anchored and controlled from outside officialdom to some extent if it is to address issues—and solutions to issues—that are controversial and threaten to significantly upset the status quo.'

Officially sanctioned and organized deliberation will naturally tend to be limited to those issues and solutions with which officials are comfortable. And should issues and solutions uncomfortable to officials make their way onto the policy agenda through the efforts of enterprising citizens, officially controlled deliberation is likely to be conducted in a less than whole-hearted fashion. Thus, relying solely on institutionally-based solutions to the problem of power invites the very distortions and dangers of agenda setting, exclusion, constraining rules of engagement and the like that [the critics] warn about. In short, if one way to connect public deliberation to processes of political and societal change is to make official institutional practices more inclusive of public deliberation, another is through citizens, groups and coalitions learning to leverage deliberation on behalf of democratic change from the position of civil society.'

In order to maximise the potential of ‘leveraging deliberation on behalf of democratic change’, civil society associations need the capacity to do some, or all, of the following:

- **Put issues, and perspectives on issues, on the (local, national or international) public agenda for dialogue or deliberation.**
- **Participate in dialogue/deliberation processes organised by others** – including government – that look legitimate and challenge those that don’t.
- **Design dialogue and deliberation processes that are experienced as legitimate** both by participants and by wider audiences.⁷⁵ This includes:
 - being clear about the parameters and intentions of a deliberative/dialogic process from the outset;
 - enabling the participation of individuals and groups who might be especially affected by the outcomes of deliberation, and/or whose perspectives need to be heard if genuine dialogue or deliberation on an issue is to take place;
 - considering random selection of participants, particularly where claims will be made about how an informed public might approach an issue;
 - avoiding manipulation – intentional or otherwise – through building multi-partisan coalitions or drawing on non-partisan organisations specialising in dialogue or deliberation, and/or through ‘framing for deliberation’ rather than ‘framing –to persuade’;
 - making space for disagreement;
 - documenting the outcomes, where appropriate, in ways that reflect the diversity of views expressed, as well as any common ground or consensus.
- **Design dialogue and deliberation processes that connect to people’s concerns**, and to the needs they are trying to meet in talking to others. These include:
 - a desire to understand, and to be understood by, others;
 - a need to release frustrations and fears and, more generally, space for the expression of emotions;
 - the need to gain a better sense of the bigger picture, and of the connections between different issues;
 - opportunities to test ideas in a safe space;
 - room for ambivalence and grey areas;
 - a desire to hear the authentic experiences and viewpoints of others;
 - a desire to build connections and relationships;

- a welcoming atmosphere, with adequate time and space;
- a sense that change is possible, and opportunities for personal or collective agency.⁷⁶

- **Be prepared to give up control.** As one of the participants at the Bradford workshop put it: ‘If you are going to encourage real voice and deliberation it threatens organisations and power. You can’t control these agendas if there is real deliberation.’ For many civil society associations, this may be a challenge.
- **Follow up the results of dialogue and deliberation where appropriate.** For example, where a consensus has emerged, where the outcomes challenge established policies or practices or where participants express a need for more sustained dialogue or deliberation. This can include forms of action that are not inherently deliberative, such as contentious collective action, negotiation and using the media.

The above is not intended as a list of conditions that all civil society associations need to meet. It is, rather, an attempt to consider the skills, attitudes and capacities that need to be present – whether in the same organisations or in different ones – to enable deliberation that is anchored in civil society. All of these are present in UK civil society. Nevertheless, it is worth asking how they could be strengthened.

What might help civil society associations in the UK to strengthen their capacity to encourage dialogue and deliberation, particularly in relation to potentially divisive issues?

There are several potential responses to this question:

- **Funding:** as noted above, the current culture of funding for civil society associations makes it difficult to gain the resources for sustained, non-instrumental, open-ended dialogue and deliberation processes. Recognition on the part of funders, including governments, that there is value in this work, and a genuine willingness to give up control over the outcomes, would significantly increase opportunities for civil society associations interested in promoting dialogue and deliberation.
- **Critical alliances of civil society associations:** part of the problem with funding is the competition and fragmentation it encourages. One of the ways in which civil society associations could respond to this problem and increase the resources available for dialogue and deliberation work would be building critical alliances between a range of organisations working on an issue and making a collective argument that public deliberation on this issue is important. This might work especially well for

alliances that have the characteristics of multi-partisan deliberative leadership coalitions (see above).

- A support network focused on processes of dialogue and deliberation:** networks of practitioners and theorists in the field of dialogue and deliberation have considerable potential for strengthening civil society capacities. In North America, for example, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation,⁷⁷ the Deliberative Democracy Consortium⁷⁸ and the Canadian Community for Dialogue and Deliberation⁷⁹ are building links between people and organisations involved in dialogue and deliberation, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experience, and making a wealth of resources available. While many of the resources are available online, and thus can be accessed from the UK, the building of a support network that could have face-to-face meetings or conferences could raise the profile of dialogue and deliberation work in the UK, strengthen the development of expertise relevant to the UK context and facilitate critical alliances.
- Organisations specialising in dialogue and/or deliberation:** civil society associations may feel more inclined to undertake dialogue or deliberation if they can draw on the expertise, resources and reputation of organisations that specialise in processes of dialogue and/or deliberation. In the US, for instance, organisations like the Public Conversations Project,⁸⁰ Everyday Democracy (formerly Study Circles Resource Center),⁸¹ Public Agenda,⁸² America Speaks⁸³ and The Centre for Deliberative Democracy (specialising in Deliberative Polling®)⁸⁴ have recognised expertise related to particular processes. Organisations specialising on process rather than particular topics – non-partisan intermediary organisations – can bring credibility and legitimacy to dialogue or deliberation hosted by civil society associations that have more particular agendas. They can also initiate conversations on particular topics themselves.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that there are potential problems with this model. As people involved in some of the organisations mentioned above have commented, ‘the way the field is funded discourages co-operation and encourages practitioners to magnify their differences’ (DDC, 2008, p40). The need for specialist organisations to be financially viable may also be an obstacle to sharing expertise and building local capacity. The existence of organisations with specialist expertise on dialogue and deliberation, in order to enhance the capacities of civil society as a whole, thus needs to be balanced with critical alliances, support networks and an ethos of sharing experience.

- Training and education:** one of the obvious ways of sharing experience and building capacity is training and education. This includes both training in using specific processes and a broader engagement with current theory and practice in the UK and abroad. There are, however, similar issues here to those discussed above: like ‘process expertise’, specialised training and education can also become exclusive and inaccessible. One way of addressing this might be through fostering a culture of dialogue and deliberation in primary, secondary, further and higher education.⁸⁵ Outside formal education, direct experience of genuine, non-manipulative and transparent dialogue and deliberation processes can also help to build the capacity and inclination of individuals and organisations to engage in similar processes in the future. For civil society associations, emphasising the educational potential of such processes may also be a way of accessing a greater range of funding opportunities. For those who plan and organise dialogue/deliberation processes, learning through experience is another important way of enhancing their capacity.
- Further-reaching changes:** some of the obstacles to meaningful and inclusive dialogue and deliberation beyond ‘the usual suspects’ call for wider social, political and cultural changes. Attempts to promote such changes would include addressing structural barriers to involvement, such as lack of time and/or resources, and long-standing experiences of marginalisation, exclusion and disrespect.⁸⁶ They would also include challenging individualism and consumerism and encouraging more *societal* ways of ‘thinking and acting ... that will help us to continue to live together’ (Jones, 2006, p. 36). Perhaps most importantly, they would include attempts to foster a culture of dialogue and deliberation – a culture that placed a high value on integrity, honesty and dignity, and a culture that valued genuine engagement with the perspectives of others, even and especially where there is real disagreement. The state clearly has a role to play here, both in relation to material barriers and with regard to political culture. Fostering a culture of dialogue and deliberation also has far-reaching implications for the media and, as noted above, for the education system. Civil society association themselves, of course, are critical to such changes, both in terms of pushing for them, and in relation to how these aspirations are reflected in their own ways of working.
- Beyond funding?** Funding is central to many of the suggestions above. It is worth remembering, though, that innovations in democratic processes, and the building of skills and experience, can also

come through movements and groups that largely exist outside the culture of funding and service delivery. Given the nature of current and likely future crises, the existence of non-professionalised activist or voluntary groups with a commitment to inclusive, democratic processes may become critical to civil society's capacity to develop constructive responses.

Conclusion and proposal

As a concrete next step, a high-profile process focused on the substantive challenges outlined in this report could draw on existing strengths, motivate the building of critical alliances and networks, and demonstrate the potential of civil society-generated dialogue and deliberation. The next section proposes such a process, not in a prescriptive way, but in the spirit of drawing together the themes of this report, with a view to inspiring UK civil society associations to take them further.

A national process of dialogue and deliberation on current and future challenges: A concrete proposal

This report was commissioned to inform the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland, supported by the Carnegie UK Trust. The final report of the Commission *Making good society* clearly outlines the importance of civil society associations in enabling meaningful dialogue and deliberation, not only in the interest of strengthening participatory and deliberative democracy, but also in the interest of finding solutions to society's most pressing issues.

One such issue is the challenges associated with climate change and resource scarcity. The Commission highlights the importance of civil society activity in enabling a rapid and just transition to a low carbon economy, and specifically notes the importance of periodic citizen conventions to support and monitor this transition. While the UK government has committed itself to major emissions cuts in the Climate Change Act, and established the Forum for a Just Transition (set up to provide a forum for discussion and expert advice to ministers on strategic issues) this report proposes that the net for discussion, debate and deliberation needs to be cast much wider than experts and political elites. The Forum for a Just Transition currently includes business leaders and trade unionists, among others. Given the scale of the change needed to comply with emissions targets this issue of transition, of who pays and how the costs and benefits are distributed across society, is particularly ripe for a much broader engagement from citizens and

civil society. Bringing a wide variety of perspectives and voices to bear on this issue is a powerful opportunity.

The authors of this report propose a high-profile, widely-publicised, well-designed and credible process of dialogue and deliberation on the question of how UK society should respond to the urgent challenges we are now facing. Ideally, such a process should fulfil the following criteria:

- It should involve a large, random, representative sample of the population, creating an opportunity to explore how an informed, engaged and diverse public would respond to the issues.
- The process should be led by a coalition of civil society associations that are committed to, and able to guarantee, the integrity and legitimacy of the process. It should also be independently recorded, monitored and evaluated.
- Participants would receive accessible inputs based on the latest credible evidence on climate change, resource depletion and social justice issues. They would also be presented with a range of realistic potential responses to these issues and the likely scenarios that they imply – including, but not limited to, the call for a rapid and just transition. (There are different ways of delivering these, including written material, televised inputs, a panel of experts, etc).
- Participants would work in small groups, with enough time to get to know and connect with each other through an initial phase of dialogue. They would then move on to deliberation about the urgent challenges facing society, and about how to respond to them.
- Small group conversations would be facilitated by trained and experienced facilitators in order to minimise the effects of power, inequality and disagreement failure.
- In addition to the central deliberative process involving a random sample, local or regional spaces could create additional opportunities for face-to-face conversations.
- Alongside face-to-face processes, online opportunities for dialogue and deliberation would be maximised in order to involve greater numbers of people. Online deliberation could go beyond randomly selected participants and be a chance for other interested citizens to get involved.
- The results would be widely publicised to generate high-profile public responses from policy-makers, business and civil society associations, and to stimulate everyday, private conversations among citizens. If necessary, the results could also be followed up through deliberative activism as outlined above.

There are no guarantees that dialogue and deliberation will lead to agreed outcomes, or that their outcomes will lead directly to action. Even in the absence of such guarantees, however, they are likely to enhance civil society's capacity to respond to unpredictable changes and crises in ways that are constructive and non-authoritarian. Evidence suggests that people from diverse backgrounds value genuine opportunities for dialogue and deliberation, and that they tend to live up to the responsibility of engaging in informed discussion of issues that matter. Much of the potential of dialogue and deliberation is currently untapped. For civil society associations, the question is how more of this potential could be released. We hope that this report makes some contribution to answering this question.

Appendix 1: Particular processes for particular contexts: useful resources

Most of this report has focused on the potential of dialogue and deliberation in general rather than the strengths and weaknesses of particular processes. This broad focus is important, as practitioners from the Deliberative Democracy Consortium have pointed out:

*'Comparing and contrasting different methodologies of deliberation is less important than how this whole approach fits into other strategies. We can get too inward-looking and precious, not worried about the broader context.'*⁸⁷

Nevertheless, it is important for practitioners to consider which process might be helpful to encourage dialogue or deliberation in the particular contexts in which they work.

There are many freely available resources that profile different processes, from broad approaches to micro-techniques. These include the following:

www.thataway.org: website of the **National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation**, based in the US. This has a wealth of resources, including a very useful 'learning exchange' tailored to finding appropriate resources for particular contexts.

www.deliberative-democracy.net: website of the **Deliberative Democracy Consortium**, including a 'Democracy Helpline' that is currently being developed (this will allow anyone interested in deliberative processes to search for what might be appropriate to their aims, topic, location, etc). From this website, there is also a link to the **Journal of Public Deliberation**, which contains articles by leading theorists and practitioners in the field.

www.peopleandparticipation.net: website written by **Involve**, based in the UK. The resources available include a 'process planner', details on a range of methods, case studies, an 'ask an expert' facility and a library of useful resources and links.

Involve's report, *People and Participation*, which also includes a useful overview of the strengths and limitations of a range of participatory methods, can be downloaded at: **www.involve.org.uk/people_and_participation**.

Mapping Dialogue report: a very useful overview and exploration of different approaches and techniques, with helpful tables that compare the approaches in relation to purpose and context. Online at:

http://pioneersofchange.net/library/dialogue/Dialoque%20Project%20V%202.0c.pdf.

St Ethelburga's Spectrum guide: A guide developed by St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, based on their own practice and including sections on dialogue and facilitation. Online at:

www.stethelburgas.org/Spectrum/home.htm.

Community Dialogue's Guide to Dialogue: Developed by Community Dialogue in Belfast and based on their experience of carrying out cross-community dialogue in Northern Ireland: Online at: **www.communitydialogue.org/PDFs/PracticalGuidetoDialogueDHAugust04.pdf**.

Public Conversations Project Nuts and Bolts Guide:

A guide by the Public Conversations Project, based in the US, detailing how to use their approach to dialogue across divides. Online at: **www.publicconversations.org/docs/resources/Jams_website.pdf**.

Participation works handbook: Published by the New Economics Foundation, this publication provides an overview of 21 techniques of community participation: Online at: **www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=16**.

Beyond the Ballot report: Written for the Power Inquiry, this report details '57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World', including sections on 'deliberative innovations' and 'e-democracy innovations'. Online at: **www.powerinquiry.org/publications/documents/BeyondtheBallot_000.pdf**.

Appendix 2: Workshop participants

Special thanks to Lisa Cumming, Tariq Bashir, and the Programme for a Peaceful City at the University Bradford, for organising and facilitating this workshop.

Anjum Anwar
Sam Causton
Jane Clements
Paul Hutchinson
Julie Jarman
Mohammed Kamran
Simon Keyes
Ratna Lachman
Christine Pilsbury
Steve Smith
Sam Tedcastle
Perry Walker
Clare White

Appendix 3: Inquiry working definition of civil society

Civil society as associational life: civil society is the ‘space’ of organised activity voluntarily undertaken, and not undertaken by either the government or for-private-profit business. This includes formal organisations such as voluntary and community organisations, faith-based organisations, trade unions, mutuals and co-operatives. It also includes informal groups, from the very local to global social movements.

It is important to note that all civil society associations are not necessarily ‘good’ in and of themselves. As noted by Tom Carothers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: ‘Civil society is the good, the bad and the downright bizarre.’ At their best, civil society associations can fundamentally enhance the lives of the poorest in society, strengthen democracy and hold the powerful to account. At their worst, they can preach intolerance and violence.

Civil society as a ‘good’ society: the term civil society is often used as shorthand for the type of society we want to live in; these visions are both numerous and diverse.

Civil society associations can, and do, play a critical role in creating a ‘good’ society. However, they will not achieve this alone. Creating a ‘good’ society is dependent on the actions of and interrelationships between the market, state and civil society associations.

Civil society as the arenas for public deliberation: we will not all necessarily agree what a ‘good’ society is or agree on the means of getting there. Civil society is therefore also understood as the arenas for public deliberation where people and organisations discuss common interests, develop solutions to society’s most pressing problems and ideally reconcile differences peacefully. These arenas are a key adjunct to a democratic society. They may be actual – a community centre, for example – or virtual, such as a blog.

In short, civil society is a goal to aim for (a ‘good’ society), a means to achieve it (associational life) and a means for engaging with one another about what a good society looks like and how we get there (the arenas for public deliberation).

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Endnotes

- ¹ This question is inspired by two related pieces of work: McCoy, M. L. and Scully, P. L. (2002) and Harwood, R. C., Scully, P. L. and Dennis, K. (1996).
- ² There are many examples of civil society organising that draw on group polarisation in order to be effective. Trade unions, for example, need to energise and organise their (potential) members prior to gaining recognition from employers that then allows them to enter collective bargaining. Similarly, organisations that specialise in meeting the specific needs of particular groups – including ethnic minorities, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, disabled people, faith groups, refugees, etc. – can help to strengthen their public visibility and challenge inequalities. For a useful overview of the strengths and importance of such ‘equality groups’, see van der Feen (2009). On a similar theme, see Cornwall (2008) p. 59ff. For an argument that points to the importance of like-minded, including ‘extreme’, groups for a democratic public sphere, see Dahlberg (2007) ‘Rethinking the fragmentation of the cyberpublic: from consensus to contestation’, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 9:5, pp. 827–847.
- ³ For examples see Cornwall (2008); Dunn et al. (2007) and other publications by Logolink (www2.ids.ac.uk/logolink/index.htm); Morris (2006); Warburton et al. (2005) and other Involve publications (www.involve.org.uk/publications); Smith (2005) and Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000).
- ⁴ This table is taken from materials for a workshop entitled ‘Deliberation forums: a pathway for public participation’. The workshop was given by Zelma Bone, Judith Crockett and Sandra Hodge at the APEN (Australasia Pacific Extension Network) International Conference 2006 on Practice Change for Sustainable Communities in Victoria, Australia; www.thataway.org/exchange/resources.php?action=view&rid=2839.
- ⁵ See, for example, McCoy and Scully (2002), Burkhalter et al. (2002) or Harrist and Gelfand (2005), pp. 225–246.
- ⁶ Directgov List of Government consultation websites: www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/PublicConsultations/DG_170463 [accessed January 2010].
- ⁷ Participants’ comments at the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research. It is worth noting, though, that the question of whether the internet is indeed leading to this kind of fragmentation is contested and unresolved. See Dahlberg (2007).
- ⁸ Participants’ contributions at the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research.
- ⁹ For an example of a recent government document that aims to encourage dialogue across difference and is likely to open up opportunities for civil society associations working in this field, see Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG, 2008b). Despite the declared commitment to dialogue in the document, however, much of the focus seems to be on ‘social action’, and there is little engagement with the very real difficulties that can emerge in attempts to address deep disagreements, especially where these are anchored in belief systems that are non-negotiable.
- ¹⁰ The potential impact of community cohesion policy on civil society associations that meet the needs of particular groups and communities of interest has become the subject of debate around ‘single group funding’: While for some – most notably the Commission on Integration and Cohesion – ‘the presumption should be against Single Group Funding’, others are worried about the adverse effects this would have on groups that do play an important role in supporting disadvantaged groups in a wider context of inequality. See Commission for Integration and Cohesion (2007, Annex D); DCLG (2008).
- ¹¹ Ashutosh Varshney’s study of the role of civil society in preventing outbreaks of sectarian violence in India supports this point. According to Varshney, associational structures in civil society ‘can be a serious constraint on the polarising strategies of political elites. Places with strong networks of this kind are likely to remain peaceful.’ (Varshney, 2003, pp. 42–45, p. 43).
- ¹² St Ethelburga’s website: www.stethelburgas.org; Huxley and Keyes (2009); and contributions from the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research.
- ¹³ Blackburn Cathedral, ‘ExChange’: www.blackburncathedral.com/levels.asp?level_id=46; and contributions from the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research.
- ¹⁴ The City Circle – ‘An Open Circle for Open Minds’: www.thecitycircle.com/aboutus.php.
- ¹⁵ The Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine: www.fodip.org/whatisfodip.html.
- ¹⁶ The PPC, established by Professor Jenny Pearce, May 2001, is a network of academics and practitioners who share thinking, research and ideas about how people participate and interact together in Bradford District and beyond. The PPC aims to work with partner organisations to develop shared discussion spaces and support critical reflection. It aims to develop thinking and practice on how to facilitate honest encounters challenging ourselves to hear ‘the other’. See www.brad.ac.uk/acad/ssis/activities/ppc and Cumming (2007).

- ¹⁷ In partnership with the Institute of Conflict Research in Belfast and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nov 2007-Feb 2008.
- ¹⁸ Several participants in the practitioners' workshop framed the economic (as well as the environmental) crisis as an opportunity for civil society.
- ¹⁹ For example, DCLG/Local Government Association (2007) and DCLG (2008a and 2008c).
- ²⁰ For key contributions to this critical debate, see the articles in Cooke and Kothari (eds.) (2001); Hickey and Mohan (eds) (2004) and *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, numbers 4-5.
- ²¹ Cornwall (2008); Balitwala (2007); Leal (2007, pp. 539-548).
- ²² See ATD Fourth World: www.atd-uk.org.
- ²³ See ATD Fourth World, 'Policy development': www.atd-uk.org/ukprogrammes/UKPa.htm.
- ²⁴ See Oxfam UK, 'Sunny Govan Radio': www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/sunny_govan.
- ²⁵ Church Action on Poverty, 'Changemakers': www.church-poverty.org.uk/about/voice/changemakers.
- ²⁶ Participants' contributions at the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research.
- ²⁷ London Citizens: www.londoncitizens.org.uk/pages/whatwedo.html.
- ²⁸ See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Public Interest In Poverty Issues: Programme Summary', www.jrf.org.uk/research-and-policy/public-interest-poverty/default.asp#summary.
- ²⁹ For example, Spratt and Sutton (2008); Public Interest Research Centre (2008).
- ³⁰ IPPR (2008); Carnegie UK Trust (2007); Carnegie/nef (2008); Few, Brown and Tompkins (2006); Hopkins (2008).
- ³¹ See separate Carnegie report [ADD NEF REPORT TITLE? INFO] for an examination of attempts to bridge the agendas of climate change and social justice. Also see Johnson, Simms and Cochrane (2009).
- ³² Chatterton and Cutler (2008); see also reactions from Rob Hopkins and others at Hopkins in 'The Rocky Road to a Real Transition: A Review' Transition Culture, 15 May 2008, online at <http://transitionculture.org/2008/05/15/the-rocky-road-to-a-real-transition-by-paul-chatterton-and-alice-cutler-a-review>.
- ³³ For participants' thoughts on some of these issues, see contributions to the online Climate Action Cafe, <http://climateactioncafe.wordpress.com/about>.
- ³⁴ See World Development Movement, 'Turning up the HEAT: Can big business really save the planet?' online at: www.wdm.org.uk/news/events/heat/events.htm.
- ³⁵ 'Public deliberation on climate change in Alberta. Engaging citizens, shaping action', Ning social network, online at: <http://climateconversation.ning.com>.
- ³⁶ Two reports from the US suggest that this is an essential part of what many people are looking for in conversations. See Harwood et al. (1996) and Harwood et al. (1993).
- ³⁷ Also see Jones (2006).
- ³⁸ The concept of 'social intelligence' comes from the philosopher John Dewey.
- ³⁹ For an overview of the debate, see Dahlberg (2007).
- ⁴⁰ See www.weblab.org and linked websites; Adams and Goldbard (2000).
- ⁴¹ See, for example, the archives for 'Listening to the City' about the reconstruction of ground zero (<http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org>), and 'American Love Stories' (www.weblab.org/lovestories2).
- ⁴² See Black (2009); Polletta, Chen and Anderson (2009).
- ⁴³ See Adams and Goldbard (2000); Polletta, Chen and Anderson (2009).
- ⁴⁴ See Trei, L. (2003) 'First-ever online deliberative poll reveals informed opinions on worldwide issues' Stanford University News Release 28 January 2003 (Stanford: CCD), online at <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/03/onlinepoll129.html>.
- ⁴⁵ For examples of online experiment and research based in the UK, see Wilson and Casey (2008); Smith et al., (2008).
- ⁴⁶ St Ethelburga's, 'Facilitating interfaith events', paper sent to the authors of this report. Online at: www.stethelburgas.org/Spectrum/26_spectrum_facilitation.html [accessed January 2010]
- ⁴⁷ See TUC, 'General Council': www.tuc.org.uk/the_tuc/about_makingpolicy.cfm.
- ⁴⁸ For an example of this kind of approach, see Castell and Thompson (2007).
- ⁴⁹ For example Holloway (2004); Herzig and Chasin, (2006).
- ⁵⁰ Halabi (2004); Kelly (2004) in Hickey and Mohan (2004), pp. 205-218; DDC (2008) p. 34.
- ⁵¹ See the website of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy based at Stanford University: <http://cdd.stanford.edu>.
- ⁵² Open Space World, 'What is Open Space Technology?', online at: www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace.
- ⁵³ See also Wilson and Casey (2008).
- ⁵⁴ See, for example, the essays in Macedo (1999).
- ⁵⁵ Conversation with Heather Blakey, International Centre for Participation Studies, University of Bradford.

- ⁵⁶ New Economics Foundation, 'Democs', www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx.
- ⁵⁷ For a useful overview of what to look for in facilitators, see Bojer, Knuth and Magner (2006).
- ⁵⁸ This is perhaps especially challenging for people who are interested in promoting substantive change and need to get people 'on board'. The question of how dialogue and deliberation relate to activism will be dealt with later in the report.
- ⁵⁹ See, for example, McCoy and Scully (2002); Levine et al. (2005); Burkhalter et al. (2002); Harist and Gelfand (2005); Black (2009).
- ⁶⁰ Participants' contributions at the Bradford workshop organised to inform this research.
- ⁶¹ Participants' contributions at the Bradford workshop.
- ⁶² Participant's comment at the Bradford workshop.
- ⁶³ Also participant's comment at the Bradford workshop.
- ⁶⁴ In one of Neisser's (2006) examples, women on opposite sides of the abortion debate in the US met for seven years. David Bohm (1996) suggests regular meetings over several years, and Daniel Yankelovich (2001) argues that in situations where there is mistrust and serious disagreement, what is needed is 'a commitment of at least six months' duration with frequent meetings'.
- ⁶⁵ Also participant's comment at the Bradford workshop.
- ⁶⁶ For an argument along these lines, see Mutz (2006). Tensions between dialogue/deliberation and activism are more fully explored later in this report.
- ⁶⁷ Edwards (2003); Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000), esp. section 10; del Tufo and Gaster (2002); ATD Fourth World (2008).
- ⁶⁸ Also see Sanders (1997).
- ⁶⁹ Participant's contribution to Bradford workshop.
- ⁷⁰ Halabi (2004); DDC (2008, p. 34). St Ethelburga's work on 'speaking truth to power' is also relevant here, e.g. Palestinian refugees talking to Jewish bankers (contribution to workshop).
- ⁷¹ NEED AUTHORS TO CLARIFY THIS REFERENCE: John Dewey, *The Economic Basis of a New Society*, in Boydston, J.A. (ed) *The Collected Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press), *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 13, p.320; cited in Kadlec and Friedman, 'Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power', p. 16.
- ⁷² 'Deliberative activism' is probably more suited to deliberative processes that aim towards some form of consensus; on the other hand, evidence of a diverse range of perspectives could also help to challenge assumptions of consensus/a narrow range of options on the part of policy-makers and/or the media.
- ⁷³ Carnegie UK Trust's working definition of civil society, based on Edwards (2003).
- ⁷⁴ See, for example, Jones (2006); Harwood *et al.* (1993 and 1995); Fishkin (1997).
- ⁷⁵ For a list of principles specifically related to deliberative public engagement in decision-making processes, see Warburton (2008).
- ⁷⁶ See Harwood *et al.* (1993 and 1995); Jones (2006); Herzig and Chasin, (2006).
- ⁷⁷ www.thataway.org – this can also be joined by organisations abroad.
- ⁷⁸ www.deliberative-democracy.net – this is an international network based in Washington.
- ⁷⁹ www.c2d2.ca
- ⁸⁰ www.publicconversations.org
- ⁸¹ www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Index.aspx
- ⁸² www.publicagenda.org
- ⁸³ www.americaspeaks.org
- ⁸⁴ <http://cdd.stanford.edu>
- ⁸⁵ For a related argument, see Steuer and Marks (2008).
- ⁸⁶ For a discussion of some of these barriers, and suggestions for how they might be removed, see Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000); Cornwall (2008).
- ⁸⁷ Pat Scully, Study Circles Resource Center/Everyday Democracy, cited in DDC (2008, p. 40).

About the authors

Dr Ute Kelly is Lecturer in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. Her research centers around the theory and practice of participation, deliberation and dialogue. Within this broad field, she has a particular interest in the potential of participatory/deliberative approaches in situations of conflict, diversity and inequality, and in the roles of both reason and emotion in shaping people's engagement with each other. Her reflections on these issues attempt to link the relevant theoretical literature with an exploration of the challenges faced by practitioners, both at the 'micro-level' of what actually happens in particular instances of participation and dialogue and in relation to larger social and political contexts.

Dr Kelly has been involved with the Programme for a Peaceful City. As part of this involvement, she wrote a report on the concerns expressed at a discussion forum on the possibility of a 'Diversity Exchange' for Bradford (2002) and carried out evaluations of the pilot seminar for the new initiative of an Intercultural Leadership School for the Bradford District (May 2002) and of the Bradford-Keighley Youth Parliament's first year (August 2003). She is hoping to continue to link her research interests with constructive engagement with the challenges faced by practitioners.

Lisa Cumming is Community Associate for Programme for a Peaceful City (PPC), based within Peace Studies & the School of Social and International Studies at the University of Bradford. The PPC network brings together academics and practitioners in knowledge exchange spaces and builds thinking and practice about public conversation. Practical experience of talking processes includes six years working with young people using forum theatre and over five years of intercultural dialogue facilitation. Lisa has a particular interest in developing thinking and practice about the value and limitation of talking processes in exploring deep disagreement and building resilience in a context of converging crises.

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This report looks at the roles civil society associations in the UK can and do play in encouraging dialogue and deliberation. It looks at the challenges they face in this work, and at how some of these challenges may be met.

The findings of the report are particularly relevant to policy-makers and independent funders seeking to develop a more deliberative culture. The report is also particularly relevant for civil society associations who want to develop their own deliberative processes as a means to engage with their internal stakeholders and/or to interact with other groups in society.

Published on behalf of the Commission
by the Carnegie UK Trust

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Andrew Carnegie House
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Dunfermline
Fife, KY12 8AW

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Scottish charity SC 012799 operating in the UK and Ireland

ISBN 978-0-900259-65-4

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