The social evils series

Individualism and consumerism: reframing the debate

Viewpoint
Informing debate

November 2008

The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'individualism'. Stephen Thake argues that, in the face of selfish individualism and wasteful consumerism, we must create a counter-dynamic that supports new forms of agency, solidarity and individual behaviour to rebuild a strong civil society. Investing in civil society will help to foster behavioural change and reinvigorate existing forms and create new forms of agency, which are better able to harness the advances in technology and economic development for the common good.

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Key points

- A concentration on social evils focuses on symptoms rather than the drivers that bring them about. It is more productive to consider selfish individualism and wasteful consumption as products of a destructive dynamic that has overwhelmed agency and undermined trust.
- The consultation has identified a myriad of interconnected social evils: it is difficult to know where to intervene.
- The last century has witnessed cultural, scientific, technological, economic and political change that has brought large benefits, but at a cost.
- Supra-governmental agencies and representational government at all levels have been reactive and unable to protect against the negative aspects of change, with a consequential loss of authority and decline in participation.
- The retreat into protective individualism, while contributing to both, is an understandable response to the failure of agency and the loss of solidarity.
- It is imperative to invest in a counter-dynamic that generates practical solutions at every level of engagement, from the individual to the global.
- Change takes place at the level of the individual and community association. We need to support the change that is already taking place within civil society.
- Without a strong civil society the larger issues will not be resolved. The role of government is to establish the framework and to release the resources to enable civil society to thrive.

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

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Social evils in the twenty-first century

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is to be congratulated for going back to its roots to reassess the continued relevance of the drivers that brought it into being: it is a sign of a mature and confident organisation. The consultation on social evils has proved to be important for a number of reasons. Firstly, social evils may have changed in name and, in some instances, character but those identified by Joseph Rowntree in 1904 are still recognisable in the issues raised in 2008. It suggests that there are abiding concerns that are passed from generation to generation. Secondly, the lucidity of the response is also interesting. Such an extensive and informed debate indicates that these issues are being discussed around kitchen and dining room tables, in pubs and workplaces across the UK. It is also striking that there is an uncanny unanimity between views expressed by 'vocal' groups in society and by 'unheard' groups.

It would appear that social evils have had a field day. There is not a corner of society that is not infested by one or more social evils. They are legion, multiplying and also made more urgent by the issues of climate change, global population growth and the competition for basic commodities, such as water, fuel and food. The task of addressing social evils at the beginning of the twenty-first century appears to be of titanic proportions. The traditional approach of growing our way out of trouble is no longer open to us, as it lands us with a more difficult set of outcomes. Yet not to grow denies those who are poor a route out of poverty.

It is difficult to know how to intervene effectively. As a consequence, a profound shift has taken place. The optimism and pragmatism that was expressed by Joseph Rowntree one hundred years ago, and still evident at the time of Beveridge and his peers, has been replaced by a sense of hopelessness and despair.

Individualism and consumerism: reframing the debate

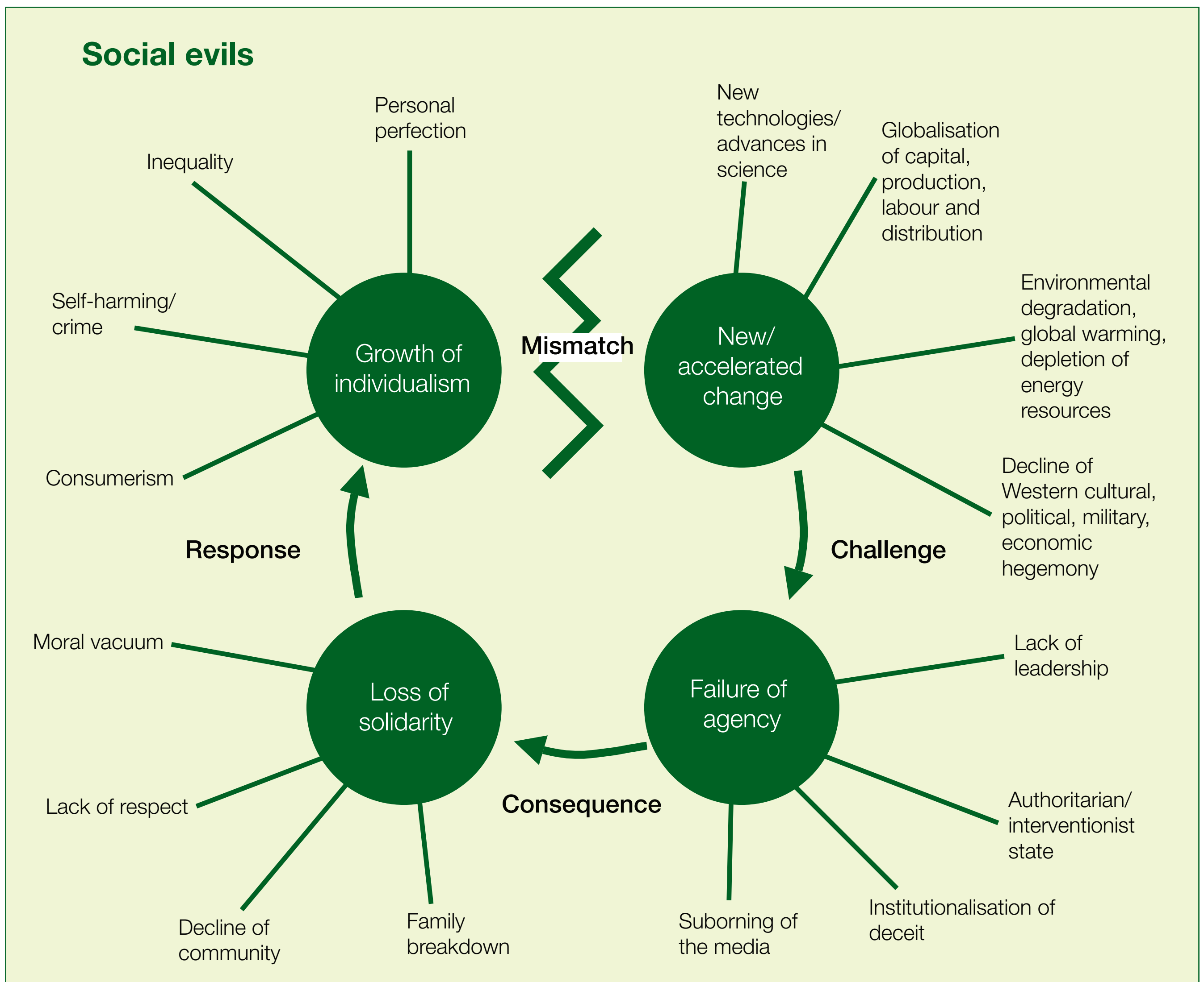
My task is to address the cluster of social evils, identified in the JRF consultation, that coalesce around individualism and consumerism. At first sight it is odd that individualism can be considered a social evil. The individual is the cornerstone of western philosophy, economics, politics and religion. Individualism becomes a social evil when it morphs into narcissistic self-absorption. Similarly, consumption is a necessary aspect of the human condition. Without food, water and protection from the elements we die. Consumption becomes a social evil when it becomes an end in itself and is driven by greed rather than need. It is a question of balance and we have got the balance wrong.

The consultation recognises, however, that social evils are not a set of stand-alone phenomena and that the relationships between them are not always straightforward. Selfishness is a consequence of greater individualism and greed is a driver of consumerism. Alcohol misuse can be a cause and a consequence of family breakdown, and drug dealing can be a way out of poverty.

My concern is that by concentrating on a multiplicity of social evils the discussion focuses on symptoms rather than causes. Without understanding the drivers it is not possible to find a point of entry, and the social evils will remain unsolved. To make progress it is important, therefore, to reframe the debate concerning the shifts from positive individualism into selfishness and necessary consumption into consumerism. I suggest that we need to see these shifts as the products of a dynamic so deep-seated and powerful that it can both explain them and give order to the other social evils identified by the JRF's consultation (see Figure 1).

We are experiencing levels of technological change, shifts in economic power and alterations in environmental conditions that have overwhelmed the institutions tasked with the responsibility of protecting society from their negative impacts. This failure of

Figure 1: Social evils as symptoms of the failure of institutions to respond to global change



institutions has in turn resulted in the withdrawal of trust and engagement in existing forms of social action, and explains the retreat into individualism. Consumerism, like comfort food, becomes a form of displacement behaviour to mask the stress. The consequence is that we consume more than we need and contribute to the larger forces driving the destructive dynamic.

My proposition is that it is important to understand the existing dynamic in order to establish agencies that are better able to manage technological and economic change and their environmental consequences for the wider good. That requires intervention at all levels but crucially it is important to support behavioural change at a local level that is consistent with addressing the larger issues. Change at the local level is where change has to take place but in doing so it also engenders new forms of action and solidarity that in turn provide the drivers that can reinvigorate existing and establish new forms of agency.

Scale of change

In 1904, when Joseph Rowntree set up his four trusts, the earth was thought of as a solid object and no one had developed a model of the atom. Einstein had yet to publish his theory of relativity and Fauvism, Dada and Atonality had yet to deconstruct our concept of art and culture. Germany and Great Britain, the pioneers of the first industrial revolution, were still engaged in a competition to carve out, control and police a world dominated by the concept of territorial empire. The First World War was still over the horizon, as was the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarian socialism and fascism. Joseph Rowntree was unable to foresee the future. The year in which he anticipated his four trusts to have completed their remit coincided with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Since then the face-off between the USA and the Soviet Union, the leaders of the second industrial revolution, has come and gone. The theories of relativity and quantum mechanics have revolutionised science and moved it beyond the comprehensible concepts of Newton, Hooke and Faraday. In this new space, innovation is no longer limited to the thought processes and breakthroughs of a few individuals. It has taken on a life of its own with a myriad of advances taking place that are transported around the globe at ever-increasing speed. The driving forces of progress have become distanced from us, beyond our control and yet impact upon our daily lives.

In the last 50 years, the third industrial revolution, in which de-mechanisation, miniaturisation, hydrocarbons, computers, telecommunications and containerisation have all had a part to play, saw the geographical centre of gravity of economic growth shift to the Pacific Rim. We are now in the throes of the fourth industrial revolution, which brings together the models of production developed through the first three phases of industrialisation with the unexploited labour markets in China and the Indian sub-continent.

The benefits and costs of change

Advances in science and changes in technology, organisation, production and distribution have offered progressive governments the prospect of eradicating want and disease: goals that have eluded them for the last 100 years. These advances have given rise to huge increases in wealth worldwide. For the first time in the history of humankind, the prospect of establishing a basic standard of living and health care for the poorest has become a possibility and the prospect of moving beyond meeting basic physical needs has, for the majority in advanced economies, become a reality.

But it has come with social, physical and economic costs. In developing economies, industrialisation has brought enormous upheavals. Taking place on the back of a shift out of agriculture, it has resulted in massive population movements and rapid urbanisation. It has created the overcrowding, squalor and polarisation of wealth and poverty that epitomised the creation of the first generation of industrialised cities 150 years ago.

Industrialisation of developing economies has not narrowed the wealth gap across the globe. In developed economies, the per capita income has grown faster over the same period. But that increase has also come at a price. The transition from an industrial to service economy has resulted in the demolition of large swathes of our cities with the dislocation of labour markets, communities and families. Manual workers have been spun out of the system while the options for other groups have been closed down. Increases in personal and corporate wealth within the service economy have resulted in accelerating polarity between rich and poor, which is felt not only at personal level but also geographically. The City of London prospers while the steel mills of the Don Valley are demolished.

These changes have also generated unanticipated consequences that undermine any apparent gains. Of the social evils listed by Joseph Rowntree there is a sense of satisfaction that war and slavery have been eradicated. Yet more people have died in war and civil war in Africa and Asia in the last 60 years than were killed in the First World War and the Second World War combined. The thud of explosions and the cries of pain have been muffled by distance. Similarly, the wealth generated through globalisation is a product of the exploitation of labour in far-off locations supported by complicit governments, with the trade routes policed not by gun-ships but by the World Trade Organisation. Humankind has also crossed a threshold. Within our own lifetime, the surplus wealth created by new forms of production and distribution has meant that many, in western society, have moved from meeting basic needs to having a surfeit. In evolutionary terms, however, humans still have the genetic makeup of hunters and gathers. Unsure of where or when the next meal would come from we are adapted to cope with shortages and excess. We can consume more than we need because future supply was uncertain and uneven. As a consequence, we have little in the way of coping mechanisms when confronted with excess, as the history of emperors, princes and sultans indicate. It is not part of our DNA. The problem is that in historical terms we are all emperors now.

Increases in population and production have meant that the supply of energy and the control of raw materials have replaced labour and capital as key resources. Pollution arising from the greater use of fossil fuel energy has taken global warming to and, some argue, beyond its tipping point.

The failure of agency

The destructive aspects of the global dynamic have put national governments under pressure. For 100 years through to the 1950s, civil society through trades unions and mass political parties struggled to secure an equitable distribution of the wealth created. Yet at the time when a consensus of a mixed economy had been secured, the mode of production shifted from being predominantly national in form to become increasingly global. The global economy today is distorted by corporations that operate in the unregulated space beyond the control of state governments. Much of the wealth created moves off-shore and is held by banks, hedge funds and sovereign wealth funds. These take on a life of their own, with the capacity to distort and destabilise the financial systems.

All this has happened within the lifetime of the current generation of political and intellectual leaders. This presents them with new challenges. Most political and intellectual leaders spend their early adulthood developing a frame of reference that identifies the points of entry to tackle the problems that were the unfinished legacy of previous generations. They spend the rest of their lives trying to implement their vision. Now, they not only have to deliver against the unfinished business of the past generations, they also have to work out how to deal with those of the present and all while they are still in office. It puts Harold Macmillan's "Events, my dear boy, events" into a totally new perspective.

Developments in communications means that, in many ways, we are familiar with the implications of the eclipse of the nation state; the rise of China and India as major economic powers; the relative decline in western cultural, political, military and economic hegemony; and the acceptance and understanding of the consequence of economic and population growth on food and energy production and global warming. However, knowledge is not the same as developing coping mechanisms.

The need to manage this unregulated space has resulted in a crisis in supra-national organisations. Some such as Bretton Woods have been dismantled. Others, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, have struggled to renew themselves. Others have morphed into more powerful agencies – such as the EEC into the EU (1993), GATT into WTO (1995). It has also resulted in the emergence of new forms of supra-national agencies and groupings – such as the World Economic Forum (1971), G8 (1975), G7 (1976) and North American Free Trade Alliance (1994).

However, responses have been reactive and hobbled by the competing interests of participating nation states. As a consequence the architecture of the international regulatory framework is non-anticipatory, incomplete and the regulatory systems weak. Domestically it has been difficult for national governments to admit that they are unable to protect their populations from the uncertainties of the new world order. Powerless to halt the process, they have sought to manage change in order to maximise the benefits while mitigating the dis-benefits.

But it is not only national governments that have struggled. The impacts of globalisation – whether in terms of growth or decline – are experienced differently depending on location. This has posed new challenges regionally, sub-regionally and locally, resulting in regions and sub-regions pulling apart. Governments at all levels have sought to professionalise their interventions. In doing so, they have corporatised and distanced themselves from the communities they serve, while at the same time penetrating deeper and deeper into people's daily lives. Yet the levers at their disposal are limited. Their responses are seen to be inadequate, clumsy, giving rise to unintended consequences or simply irrelevant. Many communities feel abandoned, neglected or betrayed.

It is no wonder that politicians become cautious and risk averse. Words, promises and commitments are chosen carefully and being careful with the truth becomes a way of life. This has led to a crisis of agency and the withdrawal of authority. Politicians, although they might be better equipped and more professional than their predecessors, are held in lower esteem and are required to be more accountable for their actions. Practices once tolerated are now exposed and derided, leading to a further deterioration in authority.

Loss of solidarity

The failure of agency has resulted in a decline in participation in the political process. The bonds that held together the alliances at the heart of mass political parties have loosened. Both voting at elections and membership of political parties have declined. There is no point in participating if it does not achieve results. With the decline in membership, the control of political parties is fought over by activists from competing tendencies. There is, therefore, the constant and consequent danger of government by sect.

The loss of solidarity is evidenced in other ways too. Community activity has been built around three pillars: the workplace, the family and faith. All have experienced considerable change over the last 50 years, with a significant knock-on effect on community activity and community capacity. The UK has had a strong tradition of philanthropic entrepreneurs – Rowntree in York, Cadbury in Birmingham, Owen in Lanark, Salt in Shipley and Lister in Bradford. Trades unions ensured that similar outcomes were developed elsewhere and embedded in state-owned enterprises and agencies. However, many of the manufacturing industries have gone and with them workplace or work-based community activities. Those industries that have thrived have jettisoned their commitment to community because it does not contribute to the bottom line. It does not produce returns for shareholders. Those companies that have thrived have also changed the relationship between the employer and the employee, with short-term contracts and performance-related pay becoming the norm.

In addition, the nature of the workforce has changed. The growth in the UK economy during the last quarter of the twentieth century was largely built on the greater participation of women in the labour market. It now takes two working adults to generate sufficient income to maintain a tolerable quality of life. That has brought enormous benefits in terms of equality and growth of income. But this has been at a cost. For two-wage-earner families, life is fragile. For those with children, life is dominated by getting food on the table as quickly as possible and the never-ending juggling of childcare. Adults and children have to get by with less of each other; family life is hollowed out. And affluence is precarious. With the perpetual fear of illness, accident or job closure, everything can fall apart at a moment's notice. There is little time for community activity.

The negative impacts of change mean that many families and communities are epitomised by the absence of work. For them life is hard. Simply getting by is a draining and a full-time occupation. There is little by way of energy or disposable income to fund community activities.

Faith communities have been a third pillar of community engagement. The last 50 years has witnessed the commercialisation and secularisation of society. Congregations have aged and declined to such an extent that many churches struggle to keep their doors open and their roofs weathertight. There is little energy for community activity and outreach.

Retreat into individualism

Faced with the failure of agency and the loss of solidarity it is not surprising there has been a retreat into individualism.

At a local level, an individual, uncertain of his or her future and seeing the costs of failure, will do all in their power to avoid being tumbled out of the system and to protect those closest to them from a similar fate. It is not surprising that those with 'pointy elbows' and inside knowledge will manipulate systems and processes for individual gain, and that cities become partitioned between neighbourhoods of well-serviced affluence and those of flight. Others, for whom flight is not a realistic option, batten down the hatches and hope to survive in quiet disengagement. This has been the strategy of many older people, who now find their plans have been overtaken by events. Their fixed incomes have not stayed in line with rising costs.

Those who are left behind and who assess, whether consciously or not, that the struggle is too great, blur the pain by retreating into food, alcohol and substance dependency. For others, noticeable for the first time among the young, depression, self-harming and suicide has been the outcome.

A retreat into self is not limited to the individual. At a national level it can give rise to greater protectionism, appeals to national values and holding at bay those who do not hold those values. Within nation states it can give rise to the re-emergence of geographical and cultural fault lines, with similar appeals to local identities, local values and distrust of the other. At a time when there is a premium on co-operation and collective action to address large scale and common threats, a myriad of individual choices and actions develop a multi-speed society and a multi-speed world, in which the divisions become wider and more entrenched and the consequences more catastrophic.

Investing in a counter-dynamic

There is something deeply comforting about the focus on social evils. Social evils are located in others. They are outside ourselves. It is government, the media, big business and religion that are held responsible for the current state of affairs. Although, the individual has choices to make, he or she is powerless in the face of the failure of existing agencies to foresee, forestall, manage or reverse these forces.

There are no benefits from acting responsibly and no penalties for acting irresponsibly. Yet the shirts on our backs and shoes on our feet, the mobile phones in our hands and the iPods in our ears, the cars that we drive and the flights that we take are all products of western hegemony, globalisation and technological change. We benefit from the products of globalisation while distancing ourselves from the negative consequences.

It is interesting that technological change, globalisation, exploitation of labour, environmental degradation and the dominance of western culture have not generated the same level of outrage against slavery, squalor and poverty that existed in Victorian Britain. Then, it was a national issue which the political and intellectual leaders felt they could control. Now it is global and beyond our control. We are not complicit. We can live the good life and the world can 'go to hell in a handcart'. This approach has served well those in western societies who have been cushioned from the consequences of their actions and inactions: until now.

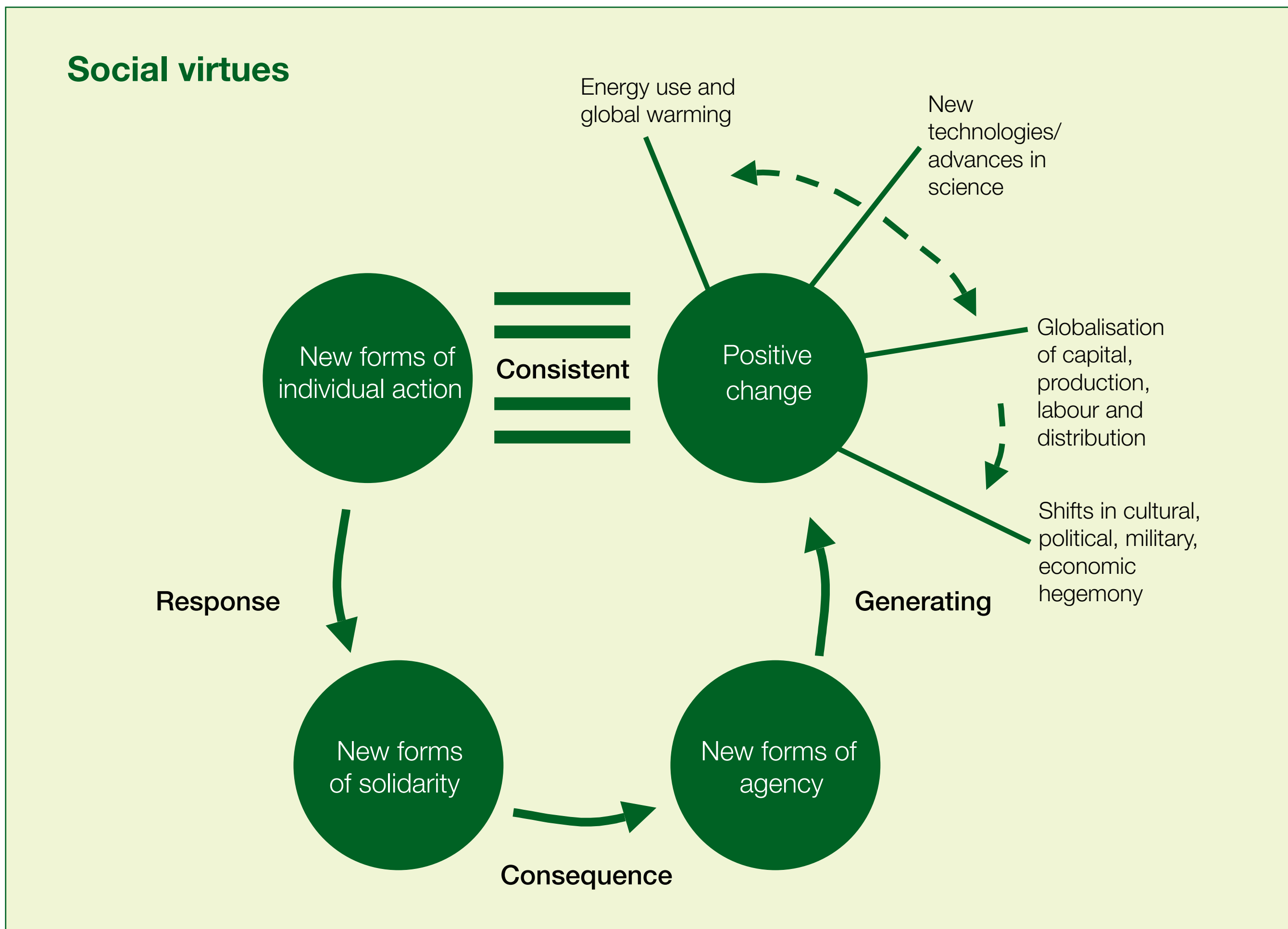
Pictures taken from Apollo 17 spacecraft in the early 1970s have provided another vision of the earth. For the first time there is an understanding that the world's resources are finite, that the consequences of polarisation of wealth domestically and globally are alienation and violence, and that the consequences of global warming wash back on everybody. Those images have led to a profound shift in outlook. For some it implies the rejection of modernism. However, we cannot turn back the clock. The advances of science cannot be undone; globalisation of communication and endeavour will continue. Instead, we need to learn to harness scientific and technological change to create equilibrium in the use of the world's resources. And we must use globalisation of production, labour and distribution as a means of understanding and respecting other cultures and traditions. We need to view the world, our behaviour and others through a universalist or cosmopolitan prism, in place of the particularist or national perspective that has held sway for the last 500 years.

Let us not underestimate the scale of the undertaking. It requires a change in outlook as radical as that epitomised by the shift from ecclesiasticism, which underpinned the medieval era, to the Enlightenment, which has underpinned the modern era. The consequences, however, of not making the transition are now all too evident.

It is not my intention to outline a raft of initiatives that will right the wrongs. That is a 'whole world' endeavour. It does not mean that practical solutions are not necessary at every level from the individual to the global. For there to be a different dynamic we need to support and invest in a multiplicity of individual behaviour changes that can generate different forms of solidarity, which can in turn reinvigorate existing and create new forms of agency. The actions of all in this cosmopolitan world – individuals, solidarities and agencies – need to be congruent with, and contribute to, harnessing scientific and technological advance to positive ends. These actions must enable the globalisation of production and distribution to address the limitations of viewing the world from a particularist or national viewpoint.

There is the rub. We might be able to articulate the outcomes (see Figure 2), but there is less understanding of new forms of individual action, solidarity and agency and their products and their ability to manage a changed paradigm. There is an articulate and extensive debate about social evils. We need to develop a similarly comprehensive and shared debate about social virtues.

Figure 2: Developing a counter-dynamic that supports social virtues and generates positive global change



New forms of individual action

In the face of loss of solidarity, failure of agency and the retreat into individualism, we have to start from where we are. Change that brings about positive change is already taking place on or below the radar. New practices and behaviours are being established by a myriad of ordinary people every day in places where they do have control – behind front doors, on their streets and in their neighbourhoods. We need to better understand what these new practices are, support them and build on them. We learn by doing but also by sharing our experiences. It is essential that we develop a shared narrative for personal and group behaviour relevant for the twenty-first century. Without a shared narrative we cannot self-manage, and without an ability to self-manage no amount of coercion will be effective.

Countering individual excess is not just a question of addressing a social evil but of social justice and environmental sustainability. Already individuals are choosing to buy fruit and vegetables in season, eat smaller portions of meat, and set limits on the sourcing of where their food comes from. They are travelling by train rather than plane, abandoning SUVs in favour of smaller hybrid cars, choosing to share car use rather than own one, riding a bike instead of driving a car. Step by step we are learning to separate our wet from our dry waste and our vegetable from our meat waste. Many are composting their vegetable waste at source and recycling the resulting compost in their gardens and window boxes. Others are choosing low-energy appliances, switching off the electrical and stand-by facilities and running the dish- and clothes-washing machines at night rather than during the day.

Our lives can become simpler by asking ourselves simple questions. How many pairs of shoes do I need, how many suits, jackets and shirts are necessary? How many changes of sheets? Many high streets are kept alive through charity shops where unwanted clothes are recycled. 'Craig's List', Ebay and Freecycle are used for larger, more specialised unwanted goods.

Beyond the house, change takes place by people saying hello to their neighbours, even those they do not know; carrying a bag to pick up after their dog; not parking in disabled parking bays; staying within the speed limits; not overtaking on the inside; and cyclists not jumping traffic lights on red or riding on pavements where there are pedestrians.

All of this might sound sensible and obvious, but it is surprising how quickly such sustainability and courtesy agendas have come into being. They are powerful. Without the need for legislation it is accepted that there are quiet coaches on trains and that mobile phones should not be used on planes – irrespective of safety issues. It is also noticeable that the ban on smoking in public places has been implemented successfully. Concern about binge drinking has meant that the government is reviewing its stance with respect to producers and distributors, and the ban on alcohol on the London Tube has been accepted without challenge.

These changes may not attack poverty head-on but they do establish boundaries on excess. And they establish the base for communal activity and the moral authority to address examples of outrageous behaviour and consumption.

Solidarity at the local level

There are an estimated 600,000 non-profit organisations in the UK – one for every ten members of the population. They operate in the space beyond government or the private sector, and the variety of activities they get involved in is bewildering and forever changing – as they should be. They are a reflection of UK society as a whole. They range from global networks, such as the Red Cross or Oxfam, right down to a small community group that springs into action for a particular purpose and disappears once its purpose has passed. The sector includes nearly 200,000 registered charities, 15,000 social enterprises and nearly 2,000 registered social landlords. In total, they control revenue budgets of over £8 billion per annum and own capital assets valued at over £65 billion.

For a long time we have considered the voluntary and community sector (VCS) as a single grouping. However it is far from homogeneous. There are 200,000 or so community-based organisations. They differ from their larger counterparts because they are smaller; they are local; they grow out of a self-help tradition; and, as they are one-offs, they are less constrained by the need to maintain internal consistency that besets larger agencies. They therefore can respond more rapidly to emerging needs and can experiment with new ways of doing things. At a local level, such organisations build social, cultural and economic capital and are active in neighbourhoods within every town and city, small or large.

Community-based organisations make an important contribution in neighbourhoods where poverty has become endemic. Here, labour markets are under severe pressure. Globalisation and technological change result in continuing export of jobs. Here, a new landscape has opened up that is beyond the reach of the public sector and outside the remit of the private sector. These are neighbourhoods and communities living with high levels of stress, whether measured on the street in terms of crime, neighbour disputes, vandalism and civil disorder, or within the home in terms of domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse or poor health.

In this difficult environment, however, there are community-based organisations – community groups, community anchor organisations, community businesses, social enterprises and micro-enterprises – making a difference. There have been countless experiments (works in progress) that have been brought to scale: in London (Coin Street, Westway, Community Links, Bromley-by-Bow); in Bradford (Royds, Action for Business Ltd); in Liverpool (Alt Valley Trust); in Sheffield (Manor and Castle, Burton Street, STEP); in Manchester (Moss Side and Hulme Community Development Trust); in Birmingham (Balsall Heath); in Belfast (Flax Trust); in Londonderry (Inner City Trust); in Hastings (Hastings Trust) and in numerous other centres of activity elsewhere up and down the country.

These agencies provide safe havens where confidences can be shared, trust can grow and healing can take place. Not least, they develop meaningful long-term relationships and partnerships within and beyond their communities. They are able to cope with variety and develop dialogues between generations and between communities. They provide a link between the formal and the 'grey' economy. They can support and provide a home for smaller community groups and small businesses. They can be a hive of activity from early hours to late at night, at weekends as well as weekdays, day in and day out, rain or shine, high days and holidays.

Communities who are developing and implementing strategies to sustain themselves and to thrive are not limited to poor neighbourhoods. They are organising themselves in other ways too, through time banks, housing co-operatives, and the co-ownership of heat and power plants and wind farms that pump surplus electricity back into the national grid. Food co-operatives too are sufficiently numerous and well-established to support their infrastructure of wholesale distribution co-operatives.

Community initiatives also extend to whole villages and towns. Hay-on-Wye has reinvented itself as the focus for a literary festival with an international reputation and reach, on the back of being a centre for the second-hand book trade. Totnes has become the UK's first 'Transition Town' – responding to peak oil and climate change – and is part of a network of similar initiatives that has spread to over 50 locations across the UK.

The task ahead is to enable these initiatives to reach and pass the tipping point where they become recognised as a market in their own right.

Implications for government

Governments have to respond urgently to the withdrawal of trust that has occurred. Without a change of culture and greater openness, transparency and honesty their legitimacy will not be returned. Without legitimacy they have not the authority to manage upstream issues of creating and managing the global infrastructures required in the twenty-first century.

There must also be a letting go: a double devolution. There are good reasons for doing so. Firstly, there are limitations to even a modernised state. At best, it is good at delivering generic services but it is not so good at dealing with the exceptional. It is better at controlling energy than it is at liberating it. It is comfortable working in silos and managing vertical relationships. It is poor at co-ordination across disciplines and managing horizontal relationships.

Secondly, the UK population is slowing down. Growth comes through net immigration. The demands in government will increase as a consequence both of an ageing population and rising expectations. The costs will have to be carried by a diminishing workforce. There are, therefore, limits to what government can be expected to shoulder. Government at all levels needs to be honest about what it is able to deliver. The corollary is that we, as individuals, cannot abrogate our responsibilities and place them on government.

Thirdly, needs and service demands are changing faster than government can respond. There is a need for fast, specific, preventive and sometimes protective responses. This is the traditional role of civil society – the community and voluntary organisations who engage in collective action beyond the state or the market. In these changed times, the UK, if it is to be economically, socially and environmentally resilient, needs to be a vibrant civil society.

In this model, civic and civil society are seen as complementary. The role of government is to create the environment which enables communities to mobilise their latent energies to take control of their lives. This moves beyond the current agenda of enabling individuals and communities to participate in influencing the decision-making of others. It goes further than removing the barriers to community organisations taking control, to actively encouraging and resourcing them to do so. It establishes a new role for local government – a role where local councils work in partnership with others such as users and citizens, community and voluntary sector organisations, the private sector and other public sector stakeholders. They have a leadership role in co-producing strategies for their areas as well as co-ordinating, and participating in, their implementation.

However, we have taken civil society for granted. Voluntary and community organisations are endemically fragile – financially and organisationally. Most are in day-to-day survival mode and any deterioration of their situation will tip them over the edge. Although these organisations have mapped out a profoundly new space of engagement, they are however, desperately fragile. They are under-resourced and under-capitalised. They lack an effective infrastructure. There needs to be an investment in this 'third sector' similar to that which we have seen in the public sector over the last ten years and in the private sector over the last 30 years.

In July 2008, the government published its White Paper on empowerment entitled *Communities in control: real people, real power*. It recognises the importance of both civic and civil society and seeks to strengthen both. However, the majority of proposals focus on strengthening civic society. Its proposals for strengthening civil society are much weaker. The main spending commitment comes in the form of a £70 million 'Communitybuilders programme' to support community anchor organisations to become more sustainable. This is welcome but it is small change given the level of investment required.

Also, this is a responsibility that the government should not be expected to shoulder on its own. We all have an investment in and benefit from a thriving civil society. The third sector needs significant and independent income streams. We all now understand that the funds available to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) have been raided to support the 2012 Olympic Games. That cannot be undone. But once the Olympic Games are over, the BLF should be specifically charged with supporting a thriving civil society and, like the Bank of England, should be freed from central government interference. The money that a myriad of individuals give each week should not be used as a means to make good holes in government commitments.

The private sector has a role to play as well. I am pleased that the community sector has been able to break the deadlock that existed between the banks and central government about the use of dormant accounts held by the banks. This money does not belong to them but it does not belong to the government either. It belongs to untold millions of people. Every effort should be made to return it to them. Where that is not possible it should be used to invest in the third sector, not patch up the withdrawal of publicly-funded services.

It is important that the proposal from the Commission on Unclaimed Assets – to establish an independent 'Social Investment Bank' to channel these funds to the third sector through specialist intermediaries – should not be lost as the legislation makes its way onto the statute books. We will not know the scale of the funds available until further down the road, but if the Irish experience is relevant then there will be sufficient to provide a meaningful long-term income stream.

It is the responsibility of the central government to make this happen.

Conclusion

This is not intended to be a manifesto for the future but an indication of a direction of travel. In a world beset with problems beyond our immediate control, it focuses on the individual, the practical and the day-to-day: areas over which we do have some influence. The proposed direction of travel does not remove the need to tackle the long list of apparently intractable issues. It complements the initiatives that need to be taken and provide a moral authority to those tasked with the responsibility for negotiating successful outcomes.

It is a direction of travel that offers hope. By investing in communal activity, we create a support network and a point of reference between the state and the individual. It can release unrealised energies and redirect others to bring about a myriad of actions. On their own they will not solve the larger issues, but without them we will not be able to bring them to resolution. It might be that those larger issues, as some fear, have already passed beyond the capacity of human society to bring under control. If that is the case, building the social and cultural capital that will be created on the journey will mean that we are better able to cope with the consequences.

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