

Small local charities make a big difference to society

by Debra Allcock Tyler, Chief Executive, Directory of Social Change at DSC Social Change Awards 2009

Someone told me that more people vote in The X Factor than in the general election. I don't know if that's true or not – but the sad thing is I wouldn't be at all surprised if it is. And when you ask people why they don't vote they say they don't think it will make any difference. But given that most people don't vote, at least what they do do is volunteer.

Charitable endeavour is so much more than the work that you do. Your work is much, much more than the hospice, the homeless shelter, the bowl of soup.

The fact that charities exist encourages people to volunteer. And it is through volunteering – local people in local areas getting off their backsides – focussing on their responsibility to give rather than their right to receive - that is going to change society. On a macro level your effort helps to re-engage our citizens in our society.

At DSC we believe there should be more charities and community groups not less - lots of little programmes solving local problems but having a huge impact. We constantly hear from all the political parties that bigger is better – that society's problems will be solved by vast sums of money poured into vast enterprises. That if you want to change the world you have to be able to 'scale' up to make a big impact.

But, even if the economies of scale argument was a valid one, which I'm sure it is when you're talking about buying loo roll I don't believe it applies when you're working with wonderfully irrational, subjective, human relationships and emotions.

With small, local community organisations you get much more than the bed or the bowl of soup. You get empowered, committed, passionate local people making a local difference, and making mistakes, but taking responsibility for those mistakes and doing things differently next time. You get citizens thinking about their responsibility to give rather than their right to receive.

And this is not to downplay the importance of big charities – in the main they are good organisations doing good work – and we need them – not least for the way that their brands can bring attention to the work of charities in general. But they are usually already well funded and have little difficulty in attracting money from the state or the general public. And often they are unable to create the sustainable effort or personal ownership from their people that we do.

Our volunteers tend to stick around. They see their effort as delivering against a cause - not building a career.

There is no doubt that our larger campaigning charities also have the capacity to influence policy at a national level. But as many of you may be aware, we at DSC have some questions about whether the pursuit of revenue and influence is in danger of distorting what charitable endeavour is really all about? How able those organisations are to stick to their values and principles.

And those of you who are even more familiar with our organisation will know that we have some fundamental questions about the ethics of handing public services over to charities - why is no one answering the question about what the impact is on the public's understanding of what the state does and should provide, or about the independence of the organisation doing the providing?

We need to recognise that there is a fine line between being a publicly funded charity and an agent of the state. And as the public don't understand how the sector is funded – all too often some of us end up being 'secret' agents of the state.

But putting all of that to one side – here's the thing - the bigger you are the less you are able to be aware. Elephants are not as aware of the intricate nature of the ground on which they walk as the ants are. Elephants can accidentally trample on those most in need.

We ants, we small, local, community groups and grassroots charities – we know the ground intimately. We know the bumps and the rises, the holes and the obstacles in a way that those who live large in the world, despite their best intentions, will never be able to see. Pay attention. Trust us. Stop trying to change us.

And we need to start reminding ourselves and our political leaders that civil society is about individuals in communities - and communities in a nation where we are free to go our own way and do our own thing in the way we believe is best going to solve the problem – that we know intimately.

And we need to be brutally transparent – about whom we are and what we do and how effective we are – so that there are no secrets – in particular from the public, who are our taxpaying citizens, our donors, our volunteers and sometimes are also our beneficiaries.

The word charity has its root in the Latin word *caritas* – Originally in Latin the word *caritas* meant preciousness, dearness, high price. From this, in Christian theology, *caritas* became the standard Latin translation for the Greek word *agapē*, meaning an unlimited loving-kindness to all others. In other words – charity means love.

We at DSC believe that love for our fellow citizens and our communities is what creates the social change we all aspire to. As we go into a new year, let's remind ourselves that love still matters.