



[Doing good blog on 'The Way Ahead'](#)

[Doing good through co-production with local communities](#)

David Warner of London Funders argues that the key to doing good in the future will be putting civil society at the heart of the process.

The Future of Doing Good report and this website are timely and vital interventions. We are at a crossroads, with charities facing financial and political challenges, and even the credibility and integrity of the sector coming into question. Sonia's report rightly takes a broad view of the social sector that encompasses voluntary associations, informal groups and social enterprises alongside traditional charities. It also asks important questions about how the sector should operate in relation to government and the private sector.

At London Funders we have an interesting vantage point. Taking as our starting point that we want to improve Londoners' lives, we are concerned with a healthy funding ecology for London. We work to help funders, both public and private, to fulfil their mission to support Londoners. We also work with other non-funding organisations that share a concern for ways to help support Londoners to have better lives.

As a membership organisation we represent a range of philosophies for how to do good. We therefore need to remain, to an extent, agnostic on this question. But in practice, doing good needs to start with understanding communities' needs, and working out ways to develop this understanding in the best way.

In a recent review, commissioned by us with LVSC and Greater London Volunteering, with funding from City Bridge Trust, we set out to establish the best way to support civil society in London in the future. We defined civil society as where people take action to improve their own lives or the lives of others and act where government or the private sector don't. This includes formal organisations such as voluntary and community organisations, informal groups of people who join together for a common purpose and individuals who take action to make their community a better place to live.

Community role

Two of the questions posed in the Future of Doing Good report are 'are people and communities playing enough of a role?' and 'what can we do to get them more involved?'. Based on our review, I would say that, most of the time, communities are best placed to know what is best for them, and there are often powerful assets within the community that can be mobilised to direct change and enable people to improve their own lives.

The review's full findings are published in 'The Way Ahead', but the review process began by reviewing the latest thinking on how civil society support operates, and critiquing the way many organisations are functioning.

Unfortunately civil society organisations do not always recognise that focusing on communities' strengths is an important step in enabling people to take control of their own lives. Organisations work to their own agendas and bring their own world-views. Often the priority seems to be more to sustain organisations than to enable communities. As Sonia's report noted, doing good is 'values laden' - even ego-driven.



A better model for doing good needs to move beyond this. But how? When our team looked at how to support a better future for civil society in London, the new system proposed had at its heart the principle of co-production. In London this means working with Londoners to assess need and taking that as the starting point for helping communities to build confidence and self-reliance.

Our report argued that ‘pragmatic co-production’ needs to exist at every level within civil society. This means starting with a collaborative approach to developing an understanding of need, which then extends up to inform everything else: how funders fund, how commissioners commission, and how front-line organisations work in partnership with communities to deliver solutions to the problems they face.

Such an approach poses serious challenges to the status quo and will threaten some organisations. It argues for devolving power away from many civil society organisations and funders. In developing a truer sense of what is needed and how it should be delivered, pragmatic co-production could expose some approaches for addressing the wrong needs - possibly rendering an organisation redundant.

So why is it ‘pragmatic’? Because through a shared understanding of need it is possible to be much more targeted with funding, ensuring that support is going to the right places to do the right things, and reducing duplication.

Future support needs

Future support for civil society is key to its better operation. This will often mean supporting the process of co-production: not all communities have the capacity to identify needs, so support may be required to help them to do this. Support for what some term ‘infrastructure support’ is also critical. We need better sharing of needs data, requiring greater transparency within the sector, and an appropriate division of resources and actions between local and regional bodies. Support for evaluation and knowledge management is vital to enabling the system to survive and flourish. The system of support for civil society as a whole needs to build in a process of challenge and review so that it continually ensures that communities’ needs are met properly. And the sector needs to come together more to exert influence on government and business.

The role of funders is therefore vital. They need to adapt, to be more transparent and cooperative with each other. Their support will need to be more tailored to local needs - as defined by communities themselves. This will mean greater fragmentation, but also greater efficiency with less duplication, and a better return on investment.

With dwindling financial resources, threats to independence and the spectre of high-profile scandals of fundraising and governance, everyone who sets out to ‘do good’ needs to be prepared to adapt and work differently, to sustain the sector’s future. While it might be painful, this is best done by empowering communities to take the driving seat.