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Big Society in the Middle East

Could Big Society be both cause and cure of the Arab revolutions?

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'Big Society' is one of the pillars of this current UK Government's doctrine. It is meant to be both an economic and social salve for the nation. Could it also be at the heart of the current unrest amongst the Arab nations?

During the current upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa many commentators have been looking for specific signs and causes of the discontent. Of course some of the reasons are not hard to find – harsh dictatorships and repressive regimes which have ruled in many of these Arab countries for decades; but there have also been some more subtle indicators. This article examines some of the popular indices of unrest which have been put forward recently to explain the unrest, and presents new evidence to suggest that at least some aspects of 'Big Society' may be at the centre of the Spring Revolutions. Furthermore, it is put forward that big society may also play a central role in re-establishing peaceful, prosperous and happier societies in the region.

What is Big Society?

The idea of 'Big Society' means many things to many people (and nothing to a great many more). In the context of this article I take it to be, as Debra Allcock Tyler (Chief Executive of DSC) recently defined it: "about getting individuals to take responsibility for themselves, each other and their communities." (*CIPFA South East spring conference address, 22 March*). Put more formally, it is about social capital, civic engagement and community participation which together form the building blocks of a healthy civil society.

Michael Edwards, the writer and activist, recently said that there are two sets of conditions which act as catalysts for a flourishing civil society: one is mass protests in the face of 'outright oppression and the violation of human rights'; and the second, widespread economic security (www.opendemocracy.net/michael-edwards/what-can-'big-society'-learn-from-history). Edwards suggests that civil societies nascent during the first set of conditions tend to flare up and burn out quickly, unless the second set of conditions then follow.

While the first set of conditions undoubtedly exist(ed) in the Middle East and North African region currently experiencing unrest, can this explain why the unrest happened?

The indices of unrest

It started as a trite guessing game of which one would go next, as the classic domino effect of the 'Jasmin Revolution' became the 'Arab youthquake' sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East. It culminated on the eve of the Libyan unrest with The Economist's catchily-named (if in poor taste) 'Interactive Shoe-Thrower's Index' which allowed readers to manipulate a number of 'indicators of instability' to see if they could predict both recent events and possible futures (<http://www.economist.com/node/21016281>). The indicators are the usual suspects

(GDP, corruption, democracy, years leader in power, % population under 25) plus some extras thrown in for good measure (press freedom, adult literacy and internet use).

However it was Gallup who first pointed out that some softer measures might be worth looking at when they showed that in both Tunisia and Egypt, measures of wellbeing had fallen significantly over the last year prior to the unrest, even as GDP was rising¹.

The report suggests that “leaders need to follow much more than GDP to effectively track and lead the progress of their nation.” This is particularly true where the overall GDP of a country masks the massive inequalities between rich and poor. Some of these Arab nations are ostensibly among the richest in the world, and yet in Yemen, for example, around 45% of the population live on under \$2 a day.

More than this small victory for a more psychological view of economic wellbeing, and fleeting support for David Cameron’s new measures of national wellbeing², the report clearly outlines the importance of ‘softer’ measures of a country’s wellbeing in predicting its stability. Wellbeing in Tunisia and Egypt (the precipitators of the Spring Revolution), Gallup report, is now amongst the worst in the Middle East and North Africa region, with Libya, Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Yemen, Morocco and Syria reporting similar or lower levels.

Table 1: Percentage “Thriving” in the Middle East and North Africa

Country	% Thriving	
United Arab Emirates	55	
Qatar	53	
Kuwait	46	
Saudi Arabia	43	
Jordan	30	
Bahrain	27	Thriving above average
Lebanon	21	Thriving below average
Algeria	20	
Libya	14	
Palestinian Territories	14	
Tunisia	14	
Iraq	13	
Egypt	12	
Yemen	12	
Morocco	9	
Syria	6	

¹ Wellbeing measured using Gallup’s “Thriving” index based on the [Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving ladder scale](http://www.gallup.com/poll/145883/Egyptians-Tunisians-Wellbeing-Plummets-Despite-GDP-Gains.aspx), with steps numbered from 0 to 10 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145883/Egyptians-Tunisians-Wellbeing-Plummets-Despite-GDP-Gains.aspx>

² www.ons.gov.uk/well-being

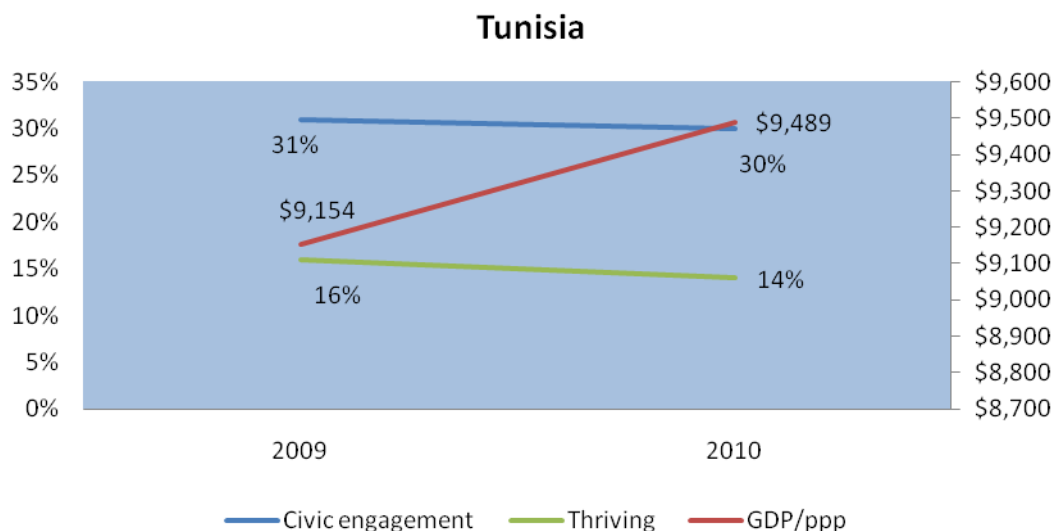
Source: Reproduced from Gallup 2011²

Table 1 is split by percentage thriving with the line being drawn at the average thriving score for the region which is 22%. It could be proposed that lower half with below average thriving scores might be more at risk of unrest.

Wellbeing – a happier society is a more engaged society

The link between wellbeing and an engaged society has been long established and this was certainly part of the Government's thinking in its pursuit of the 'Big Society' idea which holds that more people being more engaged in their communities will lead to higher personal and national wellbeing³. The following two figures show civic engagement in Egypt and Tunisia⁴ over the same period that their respective GDP went up and their wellbeing went down. As the two figures show, civic engagement - a measure of 'Big Society', correlates with wellbeing rather than GDP, and has fallen over the last year just prior to the unrest.

Figure 1: Big Society, wellbeing and GDP in Tunisia, 2009-2010



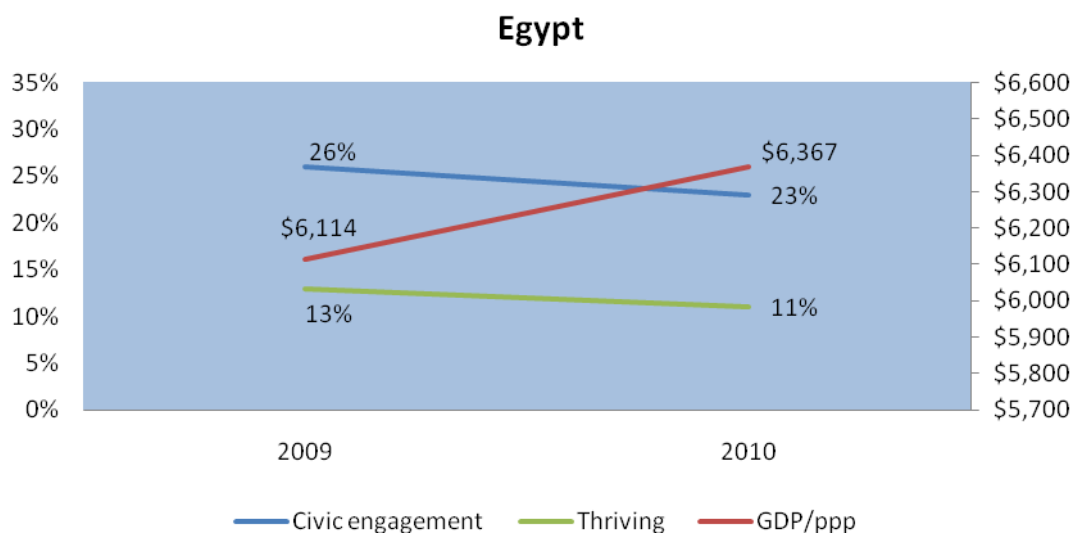
Sources: Gallup 2011¹, 'Civic engagement' figures added from Gallup WorldView 2009-2010⁵ and CAF's World Giving Index⁶

³ David Halpern – the Government's behavioural economics advisor - quotes a number of research studies which show a link between civic engagement (e.g. giving behavior, volunteering and greater social ties) and feelings of wellbeing http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/David-Halpern_1.pdf. And the ONS recently stated that: "it is now recognised that a full picture of how a country is doing – national well-being – cannot be understood by looking at a single measure such as GDP alone." (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/measuring-national-well-being/measuring-national-well-being--consultation-document.pdf>)

⁴ Civic engagement giving score calculated from Gallup WorldView (Gallup asks people which of the following three charitable acts they have undertaken in the past month: (a) donated money to an organisation? (b) volunteered time to an organisation? (c) helped a stranger, or someone they didn't know who needed help?) While this is a fairly rudimentary measure of civic engagement which might be thought of as similar to the old-fashioned concept of 'charity', we hope to build on this in future and feel that it provides indicative evidence.

⁵ <https://worldview.gallup.com/>

Figure 2: Big Society, wellbeing and GDP in Egypt, 2009-2010



Sources: Gallup 2011¹, ‘Civic engagement’ figures added from Gallup WorldView 2009-2010⁵ and CAF’s World Giving Index⁷

While this does not prove any causal link, the fact that civic engagement and ‘charity’ varies with wellbeing far more than GDP is an important finding⁶ as both the UK and the Middle East strive to find the roots and strengths of their civil societies in order to grow in ways which boost their populations’ wellbeing and not just the economy’s strength.

But how do these findings help us to interpret the ongoing situation in the Middle East?

Table 2 shows how wellbeing⁷ and civic engagement have varied in these countries over the last two years. Those countries whose wellbeing and civic engagement declines over the two year period are highlighted in bold. The Table also shows each county’s current status regarding unrest in the Middle East (measured mid-April 2011), and provides UK figures for comparison.

⁶ This was highlighted in CAF’s “World Giving Index 2010” (<http://www.cafonline.org/pdf/WorldGivingIndex28092010Print.pdf>)

⁷ Gallup’s WorldView measures “Life satisfaction” by asking how people feel about their lives by asking the following: “Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time, assuming that the higher the step the better you feel about your life, and the lower the step the worse you feel about it? Which step comes closest to the way you feel?” This measure was used as “Thriving” scores for all countries were not available for 2009.

Table 2: Wellbeing and civic engagement over two years as a predictor of risk of unrest?

Country	Current status ⁸ (April 12 2011)	Thriving 2010 ⁹ (%)	Wellbeing 2009 (x/10)	Wellbeing 2010 (x/10)	Civic engagement 2009 (%)	Civic engagement 2010 (%)	
United Arab Emirates		55	6.9	7.2	36	37	
Qatar		53	6.4	6.8	45	45	
Kuwait	Minor protests	46	6.6	6.8	42	36	
Saudi Arabia	Minor protests	43	6.1	6.2	28	39	
Jordan	Major protests	30	6	5.5	20	15	Thriving
Bahrain	Major protests	27	5.7	6.4	36	32	> average
Lebanon	Minor protests	21	5.2	5.2	37	36	Thriving
Algeria	Major protests	20	5.6	5.2	25	22	< average
Libya ¹⁰	Civil war	14		4.9			
Palestinian Territory ¹¹		14	4.5	4.6	21	20	
Tunisia	Revolution	14	5.2	4.8	31	30	
Iraq	Major protests	13	4.8	5.3	25	23	
Egypt	Revolution	12	5.1	4.9	26	23	
Yemen	Major protests	12	4.8	4.6	26	26	
Morocco	Minor protests	9	4.7	4.9	40	-	
Syria	Major protests	6	5	4.6	35	29	
UK figures for comparison							
UK	-	54	5.6	7.0	53	57	

Sources: Gallup 2011⁶, 'Civic engagement' and wellbeing figures added from Gallup WorldView 2009-2010³ and CAF's World Giving Index⁶; "-" = missing data

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_revolutions_2011 accessed 12th April 2011

⁹ Reproduced from Gallup 2010

¹⁰ It is notoriously difficult to gather data from some countries. Libya is one such country which makes national comparisons of this sort very difficult.

¹¹ The Palestinian Territory may have averted protests by acting quickly: On 14 February, the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and his Cabinet resigned amid pan-Arab calls for reform.

Table 2 shows that five countries in the Middle East and North Africa show declining wellbeing and civic engagement over the last two years: Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Jordan where civil unrest has already taken place in Spring 2011 (also in this bracket is Yemen whose civic engagement has stagnated over the last year while wellbeing has dropped, and which has also experienced unrest).

There are far more countries (including Iraq and Bahrain) which show declines in civic engagement which may precede a fall in wellbeing¹², and could also be viewed as 'at risk' – especially those below the average level of thriving.

Conclusions

While there are, of course, a myriad other factors at play here, the indications strongly suggest that some measure of “Big Society” (indicated here by levels of civic engagement) and wellbeing play an important part in the peace and unrest of a nation.

Table 2 suggests that those countries at the very top of the table may have more immunity in the current climate of unrest thanks to their high levels of thriving, wellbeing and civic engagement. However, it should be of some concern that civic engagement seems to be largely in decline across the Arab region.

While the beginnings of the Arab Spring youthquake were largely without widespread bloodshed, the current (beginning May) situations in Libya and Syria show that there may be a long way to go in the region before levels of wellbeing and civic engagement in a 'big society' sense are restored. As Michael Edwards has suggested civil societies nascent during times of mass protests and discontent tend to flare up and burn out quickly, unless widespread economic security ensues relatively quickly. The world waits expectantly to see what will happen next.

What relevance does this have to us here in the UK charity sector? For starters it shows the power of “big society” (not David Cameron's idea of what it is, but the reality on the ground – citizen engagement) and how, amongst other indicators, civic engagement and wellbeing are extremely important predictors and measures of a happy, and peaceful, society and should be taken very seriously.

¹² At this juncture this is only a supposition based on the evidence presented in this paper, however to my knowledge no causal link has been established in the literature between levels of wellbeing and civic engagement and it may well be that the opposite is true or that there is no causal link.