Solidarity

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Adapted from The Case for Universal Basic Services (2020), Polity Books, p. 44-46

The concepts of shared needs and collective responsibilities embody the idea of solidarity, and the practice of UBS, as we have defined it, has potential to develop and strengthen solidarity. We take solidarity to mean feelings of sympathy and responsibility between people that promote mutual support. It is an inclusive process, not just within well-acquainted groups but also, crucially, between people and groups who are 'strangers' to each other. It involves collective action towards shared objectives[1].

As a policy goal, UBS calls for collective policy and practice: sharing resources and acting together to deal with risks and problems that people cannot cope with alone. It is not something that can be achieved by individuals or groups simply fending for themselves and pursuing their own interests. As Durkheim observed, society is not constructed through atomised choices spontaneously generating co-operation, but by mutual regard and consideration[2].

The conviction is echoed in the EU's long-standing goal of economic and social cohesion, by which it means combining a market economy with 'a commitment to the values of internal solidarity and mutual support which ensures open access for all members of society to services of general benefit and protection'[3]. Solidarity can be undermined by market interests, especially at times of crisis, but this commitment has underpinned major programmes to redistribute funds to disadvantaged areas and promote equalities across the European Union.

Pursuing the goal of more and better public services not only requires solidarity but also contributes to it – in three main ways. First, it develops experience of shared needs and collective responsibility, which builds understanding of how people depend on each other and a commitment to retaining these interconnections. Secondly, where services bring people together from different social groups, they can provide opportunities for developing mutual sympathy and responsibility. Thirdly, the combined effects of more and better services, as we have noted, bring benefits to society as a whole and have a redistributive effect, reducing inequalities that otherwise create barriers to solidarity.

Some have argued that welfare states – and thereby public services - 'crowd out' social capital by inhibiting informal caring networks, mutual trust and social norms that favour civil commitment and trustworthiness. However, it is not the existence of public services that carries this risk, but how they work – in whose interests, under whose control and with what outcomes. There is evidence that Nordic-style welfare regimes, where there are more universal services and a stronger collective ethos, tend to have higher, rather than lower, levels of bonding and bridging social capital[4].

Much evidence and commentary relating to solidarity and public services focus on how 'calculations of individual self-interest diminish collective understanding and recognition of mutual need.'[5] Richard Titmuss famously demonstrated that a market-based blood donation service is likely to be less effective than a collective one based on voluntary donations[6]. In another much-cited case, nursery staff decided to fine parents who collected their children late, to encourage good time-keeping, but parents interpreted the fine as payment for services and felt able to 'buy themselves out of their social contract', defeating the object of the exercise[7]. There is a rich literature on the ways in which systems based on individualism, choice and competition weaken the values of social citizenship and undermines solidarity[8].

End Notes

[1]Coote, A., and Angel, J. (2014). 'Solidarity: Why it Matters for a New Social Settlement'. London: NEF Working Paper.

[2]Durkheim, E. (1984 [1893]). The Division of Labour in Society. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 154-9.

[3]European Commission. (1997). First report on economic and social cohesion 1996.

[4]Kääriäinen, J. and Lehtonen, H. (2006). 'The Variety of Social Capital in Welfare State Regimes – A Comparative Study of 21 Countries'. European Societies, 8 (1): 27-57; Oorschot, W.V. and Arts, W. (2005). 'The social capital of European welfare states: the crowding out hypothesis revisited'. Journal of European Social Policy, 15 (1): 5-26; Rothstein, B., and Stolle, D. (2003). 'Social Capital in Scandinavia'. Scandiavian Political Studies, 26 (1): 1-25.

[5]Sennett, R. (2012). 'How Markets Crowd Out Morals'. The Boston Review.

[6]Titmuss, R. et al. (1997). The gift relationship. New York: The New Press.

[7]Sandel, M. (2013). What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets. London: Penguin, p. 64-5; Dean, J. (2015). 'Volunteering, the market, and neoliberalism'. People, Place and Policy, 9 (2): 139-148.

[8]Lynch K. and Kalaitzake, M. (2018). Affective and calculative solidarity: the impact of individualism and neoliberal capitalism. European Journal of Social theory: 1-20; Brodie, J.M. (2007). 'Reforming social justice in neoliberal times'. Studies in Social Science, 1 (2).; Jayasuriya, K. (2006). Statecraft, welfare and the politics of inclusion. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.15.