

# The Regional Forum Annual Lecture 2009

**“The Common Good:  
How the voluntary sector changes the world”**

Julia Unwin CBE  
Chief Executive, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Monday 19th January 2009, Leeds Town Hall

This is the first of the new annual lecture programme launched by the Regional Forum.

The lectures will all follow a general theme of the voluntary and community sector's role in civil society but each one will focus on a particular aspect and on its implications for the Yorkshire and Humber region.



## Speaker Biography

### Julia Unwin CBE

Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Julia Unwin joined the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in January 2007.

She was a member of the Housing Corporation Board for 10 years and was a Charity Commissioner from 1998-2003. She was previously Deputy Chair of the Food Standards Agency and worked as an independent consultant operating within government and the voluntary and corporate sectors. In that role, she focused on the development of services and in particular the governance and funding of voluntary organisations.

Among other voluntary roles, she was chair of the Refugee Council from 1995 until 1998.

Julia is a member of the Prime Minister's Council on Social Action, a member of the Ethics Committee at the University of York and a Governor of the Pensions Policy Institute.



[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

# “The Common Good: How the voluntary sector changes the world”

## Introduction

Your invitation to give the inaugural lecture for the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum comes at perhaps the most extraordinary time in our lives - a time for which we have had no preparation, no dress rehearsal, but a time for which, I am going to argue, the voluntary sector stands ready to offer its biggest contribution. Indeed it is inevitable that the key response will come from our sector, which I will call today the voluntary and community sector, or civil society, because I don't use the term - third sector.

I want to start by saying a bit about why I think we face extraordinary times. I'll go on to talk about what I think the voluntary sector offers to the common good, and describe some of the obstacles we have to overcome, and end with what I hope will summarise the ways in which I believe local responses to global change are in the hands of the voluntary sector, the sector in which I have spent most of the thirty years of my working life.

## Joseph Rowntree Foundation

But before I start I want to say a little about the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, the organisations I am privileged to lead, to provide some context for what I want to talk about. JRF was established in 1904 by a rich businessman who left 3 incomparable assets to us, along with the undoubtedly vital endowment which allows us to be a truly independent voice today. He left us a mandate to find out, to search out the underlying causes, to ensure that we questioned and challenged, and did not just relieve the symptoms. In fact he instructed us not to try and address the symptoms. In his words, probably to the irritation of soup kitchens in York for the last century, he said that the soup kitchen in York would always get funded. Our task was to try and find out why people needed soup. And so he left a legacy of a commitment to investigation and to research, to an evidence based approach to addressing social problems that remains a central plank of what we do today. Indeed it is the first strand in our description of purpose – **to search.**

But he also left us housing to manage and develop. New Earswick, the village he built, with the help of architects Parker and Unwin, was one of the first garden villages, and with Saltaire, Port Sunlight and others became the prototype for the garden village movement which did so much to shape and inform modern planning through the twentieth century, and indeed formed a basis for the hugely influential suburban movement. To this day we run

housing, we build new housing to environmentally exacting standards, demonstrating what works, and (occasionally) demonstrating what does not. We run care homes for older people, including three retirement communities in York, Scarborough and Hartlepool, demonstrating again a different way in which people can live in communities as they age, and get the support from collective provision, as well as the autonomy and privacy we crave. As a way of addressing our inevitable vulnerability, and at the same time preserving our rights and obligations as citizens we are trying to do in practice, what so much of our research suggests must be done. Alongside this we run hostels for adults with learning difficulties and as we speak are, with so many other providers, going through the challenging, stressful and unpopular business of finding better ways for adults to live in communities in which their skills, independence and sense of self can be enhanced. And so we believe that we continue **to demonstrate**, the second stand of our purpose, as we know about the lived experience of providing housing, providing care, and engaging residents in the management and leadership of their communities. Those who accuse JRF of living in an ivory tower obviously don't read our local papers as they lambast us for some other error, or change in the management of care, support and housing.

So Joseph Rowntree left us a commitment to search, an ability to demonstrate, and urged us to do all of this in order to '*change the face of England*' (which we now translate as the whole of the UK), which we do by seeking **to influence**, the third strand of our purpose.

But in a sense he left us something infinitely more precious even than these fantastic assets. He urged his trustees to be alert to the 'changing necessities of the nation' for as he said 'time makes ancient goods uncouth'. And so unlike so many charities, we have written in our founding documents the instruction to keep an eye on the changing environment, to understand the way in which the world is changing – in my words, to keep current, to keep connected and to be credible.

JRF like all the organisations present today has its origins, and derives its legacy, from this region, and in our case from York. That is where we started and that is where we remain. We describe ourselves as operating across the UK but in two specific domains, York where we started and where most of our operation is based, and Bradford where we have made a ten year commitment to search, to demonstrate and to influence. Bradford shows so much of the challenges, and the opportunities, facing 21st century cities, while York illustrates the challenges that ancient cities across the country are facing as they understand their heritage, and engage with the new world. For us place matters, and as a UK wide organisation, with an insistence on being relevant in all four countries of the UK, with a global reach, the origins of our work in this region are extremely important.

So JRF is an organisation with its roots in this region. Its demonstration and its research is committed to try to be truly influential in developing practical solutions and policy responses to improve the lives of people living in poverty, to change the fate of the most disadvantaged places in the UK, the forgotten places where poverty and disadvantage thrives, and to do so in a way that maximises the impact and control that people and communities can have. And we try to do this in a way that is timely, that is based on a clear understanding of the world as it is, not as it was, or as we would like it to be, and to use these hugely precious assets to make a difference.

## 2009

But we were set up in 1904. A time of optimism, of change, a time dominated by a belief in scientific rationalism, a sense that the great inequality they faced then could be resolved by knowledge, but compassion too, but mainly by a scientific understanding and hence a better ordering of the affairs of the country. A time before the great depression, before two world wars, before the cataclysm of the Holocaust, the Cold War and the permanent tension between east and west that so dominated the lifetime of so many of us in this room. But also a time before mass immigration to the UK, before the hugely significant and powerful civil rights movements, the changing role of women, the acceptance and celebration of homosexuality, before the development of consumer rights, of global instant communication and of all the forces that so profoundly influenced the last century.

But what times we live in now! At the end of the first decade of the 21st century we face extraordinary times. Wicked issues are described as those problems we have not encountered before, where no one has documented a response that works, where we don't have a template to use. The three global challenges that I want to outline this evening are all wicked issues. They are all global changes that dramatically affect the lives of every one of us living in this region, and – I am going to argue – they are all changes where the voluntary sector has the unique ability to articulate the common good, and to mediate the impact of these seismic global changes on people living in poverty and disadvantage.

Three of these huge challenges, will – I believe - demand extraordinary things of all of us, but together, I believe the voluntary sector has the capacity to demonstrate the common good, and influence the way in which we rise to these challenges.

The first huge challenge is, to my mind, demography. I don't intend to rehearse the figures but we know a number of critical things: we are all living longer, and that is hugely to be applauded and celebrated. But fewer of us are being born, and the great boomer generation, of which I am a typical member, is thundering towards a retirement to which far too few people will be able to

*... the  
voluntary sector  
has the unique  
ability to  
articulate the  
common good*

contribute. So the demography of ageing, of increased – and welcome – life expectation, is a challenge we have not faced before. But nor too have we faced the demographic movements of people in the fluid way in which we are now encountering them. Former waves of immigrants and refugees came to this country knowing that there would be no going back. The pain and sorrow of those life choices, as well as the stories of triumph and achievement live with us all, and resonate through the decades, but the choices those people had to make was a final one. A choice in which new bonds needed to be forged, new ways of living adopted, and through the generations a mixing of cultures that, I believe has profoundly benefited our society. 21st century migration and movement follows different patterns. The internet enabled world, the much more connected world, and, even now the availability of cheap travel has shrunk the world, but it has also demanded that we all learn to live with shifting identities, changing loyalties, huge knowledge about global conflict elsewhere – and the challenge for the world therefore is that we can no longer expect national borders to protect the nation state. Pollution crosses borders easily. So too do drugs, and – as we know to our cost – money. None of these respect borders, and people increasingly cross borders, or try to do so.

Demographic change brings benefits that we must never deny. The waves of immigration to this country, have, I believe enriched and improved society in the UK in ways that we could never have imagined. So too has our ability to grow older, independently and to lead full and active lives, a huge bonus. But let's not forget it is also a challenge on a scale we have not encountered before, which will result in issues and problems – and opportunities – about which we have never thought before.

And demographic change was a challenge we knew the 21st century would bring. There is nothing new about this being on our shared agenda.

So too, the second major challenge, that of the changing climate. The tipping point for reversing man-made climate change has now been passed. We now know that we face a 2 degree temperature increase, and the challenge is how to ensure that that does not reach a 4 degree (or worse) increase by 2050. The sterile debate about whether we should focus on mitigation or adaptation – to stopping it happening or get ready for change – is now entirely irrelevant. We need to do both. We need to work energetically and fast, frequently against our own interests and preferences, to stop the impact being even worse, but we also need to be ready for the change as it comes. What we do know is that every single person in this room will spend the rest of their lives in a world in which resources will be increasingly limited, and increasingly fought over. In the UK we know that the poorest people, those who contribute least to carbon emission, are the ones who suffer most, as the flooding in this region only two summers ago demonstrated so graphically. And the global devastation will affect our food prices, our fuel prices and the lives of the poorest in the world, some of whom will come to our borders.

The third global challenge, the economic crisis, was not quite so completely predictable, although clearly, with hindsight, we could all see that an economy fuelled by extraordinary levels of debt, based in much of the world on massively inflated prices, at a time when the rest of the world was growing so rapidly, and – quite rightly demanding a share in the worlds resources - was bound to end in meltdown, as it so spectacularly has in the last few months. We face a huge crisis of confidence in the market, as well as a huge crisis in the market itself. And we know that while governments are good at rescuing banks, when they have to, this crisis has taught us, if nothing else has, that neither the market nor the state can answer all our needs. Neither the state nor the market is good at shaping attitudes and behaviours, building strength and solidarity, or shaping culture.

**What does this mean for the voluntary sector?**

Global change can be simply terrifying. There is a sort of perverse pleasure in saying that we are all simply doomed. That the end of the world is nigh and that there is nothing we can do. But I was recently reminded of that wonderful line in the iconic British film, Chariots of Fire. Harold, the runner defeated in the race moans to his girlfriend:

*The opportunity to reconcile community and local need with global threat is the opportunity for which the sector exists.*

*'I am not going to run anymore, there is no point in running if I can't win'* to which she sagely replies, *'ah, but if you don't run you can't win'*.

And in a way I think that is where the voluntary sector now stands. The need to articulate the common good, and make sure that these global challenges are met has never been greater. The opportunity to reconcile community and local need with global threat is the opportunity for which the sector exists.

Margaret Mead famously said

*'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has'*.

It's a quote with which you are all probably over familiar – but when you stop to think about it, that very simple message has a rather powerful meaning today.

I want to think about the voluntary sector in two distinct ways. I want first to think about what we do. And I describe these activities as **choice, challenge and connection**. Voluntary organisations offer **choice**, not in the rather simplistic way of some of the knee jerk public service reformers who believe that simply offering alternatives will somehow result in empowered consumers who then drive quality improvements. There may be some truth in that but I am actually interested in a much more profound notion of choice,

by which I mean agency, the capacity to determine what will happen to you, however bad your circumstances. The chance to get advice which helps you navigate, and actively deploy the complex systems that serve you. The organisations that understand that mental illness may well require time in a hospital, and drug therapy, but that also, for some people at some times, sailing a boat, meeting a friend, painting a picture may also aid recovery and promote tranquillity – and all these are offered by voluntary organisations which contribute to choice. So too, we all know of elderly people who have lived in this country for decades, but who come from elsewhere, who as they age crave the smells, the tastes, the feel of home, and congregate in those centres up and down the county where they sit and chat, play games they played at home, and feel the comfort that we all derive from shaping our environment – having choice.

And as these global forces change our communities, we will become more inter dependent, and our ability as a sector – and as thoughtful and committed citizens - to generate choice, to create those spaces in which people can articulate their wants and their needs, seem to be ever more profound.

But the voluntary sector also **challenges** systems and structures. As Richard Sennet has written so powerfully, the problem with the welfare state, or public services, is not that they provide poor services, but that so often people are treated with a lack of respect, and the ways in which voluntary and community organisations foster self respect in neighbourhoods, within communities of interest, among people with particular needs is profoundly challenging to existing services, and fosters respect, and response. The anger of the coalfields communities, left behind by global forces, was articulated through powerful voluntary and community organisations, to argue for real change and practical intervention. Just as the horrors of homelessness prompted the creation of Shelter, the development of Crisis, so too the anger in communities at random and unkind (let alone wrong) deportations, has forged community strength and solidarity.

*... we need civil society that is strong, adaptive and engaged.*

And thirdly the sector **connects**. In a society in which we are ever more divided, ever more driven by differences of generation, of ethnicity, of faith, - increasingly split within communities by global conflict – and yet needing to be ever more resilient, the power of participative democracy to bring people together in allotment societies and singing clubs, parents groups, and protest groups, local museums and housing co-operatives has never been more needed, and more vital.

Civil society operates between the state and the market to offer choice, to provide challenge and to help connections. As global forces threaten to decimate communities, destroy families and blight lives we need civil society that is strong, adaptive and engaged.

And over the decades it has proved itself to be just that. During the Second World War and in its aftermath, Britain was a country that ‘needed’. Rebuilding shattered communities, providing help and support to the desperately damaged and fractured, delivering meals, greeting refugees, fighting for a humane and appropriate welfare state. The voluntary sector responded to needs in ways that were imaginative, creative, and direct. The sector bridged the world between the state and the market responding to fundamental needs and the WRVS flourished, along with Age Concern, and the Citizens Advice Bureaux, along with countless local organisations meeting human and community need.

The decades after that period – the decades described as the ‘I want’ decades, in which communities and individuals articulated their wants and their desires, led to the growth of a self realising sector. The women’s movement which did indeed change the face of Britain, articulated the passions and ambitions of women who had felt trapped and over looked, whose talents were wasted. So too do the other parts of the civil and human rights movement, campaign vociferously, and angrily for real choice, for real change and for connection. That generation of our sector mobilised to demand change- to make sure that the forgotten areas of Britain were not overlooked in the dash for growth. They argued for integration, and for funding for black and minority ethnic groups. The mosques and temples that sprang up across the UK, supporting and supported by community and voluntary organisations flourished in the decades when we knew what we wanted, and we fought for it. Childcare and self help, the small schools movement and the Saturday schools, all came from the ‘I want ‘ generation, along with the environmental campaigners who made sure that there was still green space, still creativity and art, in the cities, towns and rural areas of our country.

But now, the day before we witness - and celebrate - the election of the first black president of the USA, a man elected on a slogan of ‘yes, we can’ the voluntary sector needs to show that it is a leading part of the ‘we can’ movement, because collective action has never been needed more – and it is – and always has been - what we do best.

I want to give three examples of where our abilities, our strengths, are in such demand.

To survive the global changes that we face we need communities that are resilient. In the future that we face, there are few certainties. But there are some things we know will happen. We know that we will face the shocks and horrors of what I call floods, flu and finance. We know that whether we adapt or mitigate, climate change will result in sudden weather shocks. Floods, hurricanes and heat waves. But we also know that we will face pandemic flu, and now we know, if we didn’t know before, that the global nature of our economy means that we are in for sudden financial shocks and reversals.

Factories and shops will close, employers will move, credit will be abundant and then disappear. In the face of floods, flu and financial uncertainty, we need communities that are resilient, in which community organisations have the strength, and the permission to devise solutions, and develop responses. Resilient communities need genuine empowerment, which enables them to work within communities to foster those habits of solidarity that always have got people through terrible times.

But we will also need alternative mechanism. At JRF we are building new housing that demonstrates the best of environmentally positive homes, aiming for zero carbon emissions. To do this people will need to share heating. We want to support communities that don't rely on the car. To do this we need to have a communal car club. We want to create a self governing community. To do this they will need to know their neighbours. It will be a community with people with different incomes of course, but we also want to build a community with people of different ages, different need, with housing that is suitable for people as they go through their lives, and not just at the moment at which they are most economically sufficient. Mutuality and common ownership will be the inevitable components of these communities, and the voluntary sector is at its best in the development and creation of mutual support and shared ownership, a model that suits the 21st century, and not one that simply looks back to an earlier age. My own view is that this is now the time to devise new models of mutualism, and to consider what new services and activities can be mutually owned.

And to do this we will need different forms of governance and leadership. All the forecasters warn that government in the future will to be able to do everything and will increasingly recognise the need to devolve. The cynics among us will say that they are, as ever, throwing the really intractable problems on to the laps of those with least power, but the optimists will argue, as I do, that the resurgence of the voluntary and community sector at just this time provides just the sort of new governance that allows us intelligently to marry essential and vital representative democracy, with the much more muddled, chaotic, but essential participatory democracy that is the lifeblood of our sector. And as for power, surely if nothing else the events of 2008 have shown us all that power is not held only in the market and the state. It is consumers who have driven the retreat from the market, it is global protesters who forced change in parts of the world, and it is the voluntary sector here that has the power to make change.

*... we need communities that are resilient, in which community organisations have the strength, and the permission to devise solutions*

## From here to there

What do we need to get there?

I have tried to argue that this is our moment, and that a strong, resurgent civil society can help reconcile the huge global forces with the needs of the poorest in our communities. The mediation between the global change and the local need has always been done through our sector – and now we are called to respond.

But it would be naïve in the extreme to assume that this is straightforward. I want to close by identifying three major things that need to change if we are to make the contribution that is essential in the 21st century.

First we need to attend to our **business model**. Already we are delivering vital services, championing communities and developing resistance on a model that is, to be polite, flaky. Organisations that I have described in the past as ‘anorexic’ – funded to run projects but with no business core. Given that we know, as much as we know anything, that quality drives confidence, and we equally know that quality is entirely dependent on business strength, we need to find ways to make sure that our own funding structures, our cost control as well as our income, are designed for the challenges of this century. I say this with some hesitation, because we so frequently say that we can do nothing because of our funding, and expect others to change to provide that funding. My view is that the business model is the one we own, and we deserve the one we have. There are certainly ways in which government can change to meet our needs – and change it will need to – but we also need to devise ways of reducing our costs, sharing our costs, sweating our assets, which allow all of us to work in the sort of sector that can respond to such change. The mutual model is a different business model; just as the social enterprise one is different too. Joint purchasing clubs, using the power of individual budgets show us something. So too do the micro finance initiatives, and the resurgent, and newly confident, building societies, and the Co-op movement, for so long the sleeping giant of our sector but now major in food, in farming, in finance, and increasingly in housing and social care. None are the panacea, but at JRF we are launching a programme to look critically at the way in which transfers of assets can strengthen – or otherwise – communities. Between us we need to demonstrate the ways in which we can develop earned income, share resource and mobilise the assets within our communities, not just lament the deficits.

*The mediation between the global change and the local need has always been done though our sector – and now we are called to respond.*

Second we need a new approach to **legitimacy**. I am absolutely exasperated by the way in which government so often treats the voluntary and community

sector. As a respondent to a piece of research on this subject, done by Demos said:

*It is the Catch 22 of local participation. Either we are dismissed as unrepresentative, or we are accused of being the usual suspects.*

Governments, both local and national, need to recognise that civil society is never representative. It is never universal and it never offers equity. What it does is connect, and challenge, and bring people together to determine their own choices - and in our free, complex, and extremely challenged society that is invaluable. That is the legitimacy of our sector, and one which we must treasure, understand and articulate in meaningful, and accessible, ways. And thirdly we need to think about our own approach.

Earlier I quoted a great British film. I want to finish with a quote from Toy Story which in its own way has been equally iconic. In response to Woody's exclamation about Buzz Lightyear's flying ability, Buzz looked scornfully at his friend and said

*– This isn't flying. This is falling with style!*

It is style that we in the sector need because we need style to impress everyone that we are part of the mix, part of the 'yes we can' generation, that can really make sure that across the UK, but perhaps today particularly in this region, we can rise to the challenges that face the world, assert the common good, and prove that we can help to change the world.

**Julia Unwin CBE, 2009**



The Regional Forum provides a coherent regional voice for the voluntary and community sector in Yorkshire and the Humber. It is a member led network of networks with over 150 members. The Forum brings together voluntary and community sector organisations to ensure that the sector has the right support and structures to contribute to regional activity.

Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum  
Suite D10, Joseph's Well  
Hanover Walk  
LEEDS  
LS3 1AB

Tel: 0113 394 2300  
Fax: 0113 394 2301

[www.regionalforum.org.uk](http://www.regionalforum.org.uk)  
[office@regionalforum.org.uk](mailto:office@regionalforum.org.uk)