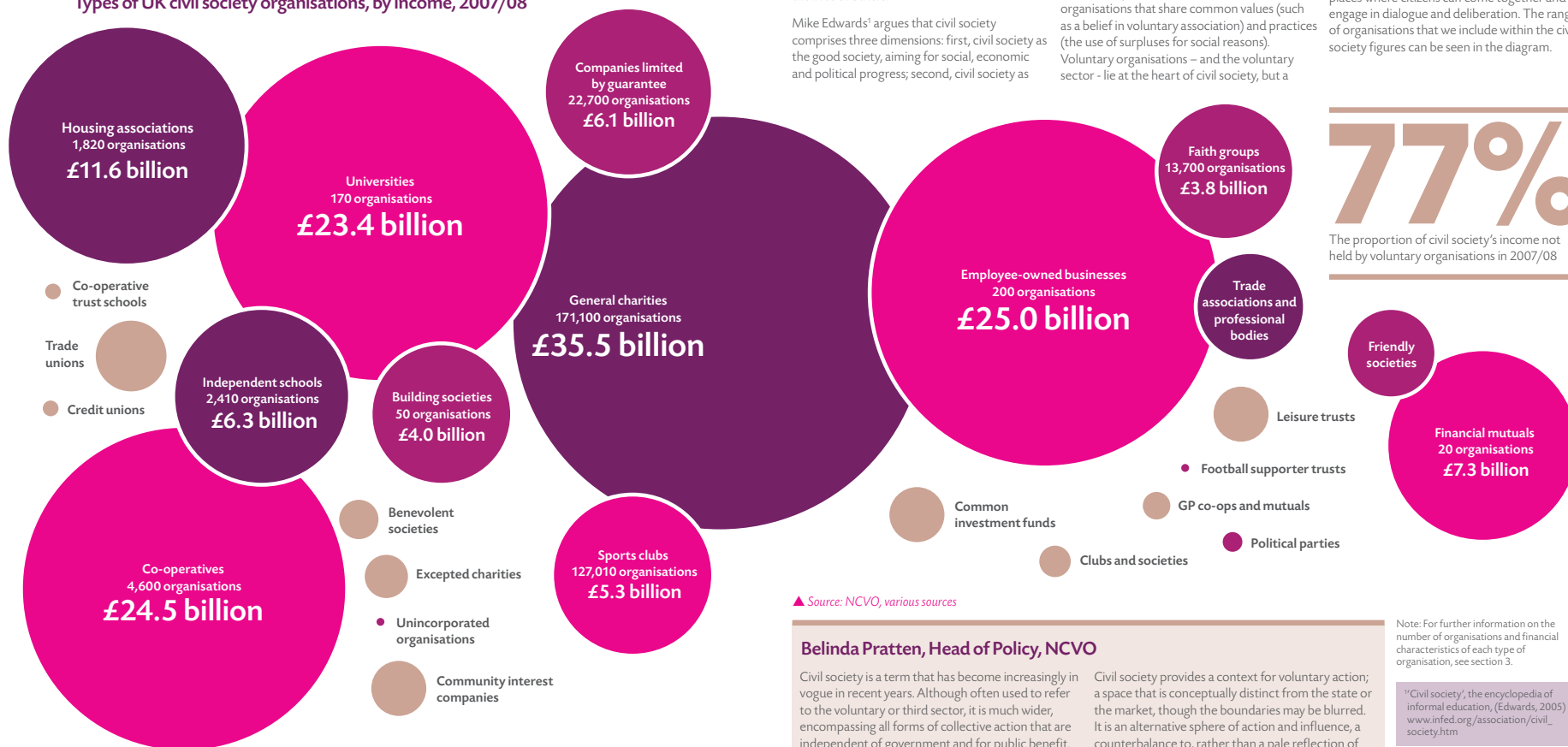


What is civil society?

Types of UK civil society organisations, by income, 2007/08



77%

The proportion of civil society's income not held by voluntary organisations in 2007/08

900,000

The number of civil society organisations in 2007/08

Overview

Civil society is a contested term and the subject of continuing academic debate and political interest. Our working definition of civil society is that it is about people acting together, independently of the state or the market, to make a positive difference to their lives and/or the lives of others.

Mike Edwards' argues that civil society comprises three dimensions: first, civil society as the good society, aiming for social, economic and political progress; second, civil society as

associational life, providing opportunities for people to act together and an environment where civic values and skills are developed; and thirdly, civil society as the public sphere, a space for argument and deliberation, in which citizens can express their different viewpoints and negotiate a sense of the common interest.

Within this publication we focus on the organisations that share common values (such as a belief in voluntary association) and practices (the use of surpluses for social reasons). Voluntary organisations – and the voluntary sector – lie at the heart of civil society, but a

much broader range of organisations are accepted as part of civil society. They share common characteristics: they have a formal legal identity; they operate independently of the state; and they seek to maximise community benefit rather than stakeholder value. To return to Mike Edwards' definition, we believe they also aim to build the good society, and provide places where citizens can come together and engage in dialogue and deliberation. The range of organisations that we include within the civil society figures can be seen in the diagram.

▲ Source: NCVO, various sources

Belinda Pratten, Head of Policy, NCVO

Civil society is a term that has become increasingly in vogue in recent years. Although often used to refer to the voluntary or third sector, it is much wider, encompassing all forms of collective action that are independent of government and for public benefit. The scale and scope of such action is highly diverse, ranging from small informal groups to large co-operatives. One reason for using the term civil society is that it better reflects this diversity and focuses on what connects this wide range of organisations: their motivation and purpose; their relationship to communities.

Civil society provides a context for voluntary action; a space that is conceptually distinct from the state or the market, though the boundaries may be blurred. It is an alternative sphere of action and influence, a counterbalance to, rather than a pale reflection of government or commerce. In so doing it opens up new ways of thinking about social issues. Rebalancing the relationships between civil society and the state and the market in favour of civil society, would therefore strengthen society as a whole.

Note: For further information on the number of organisations and financial characteristics of each type of organisation, see section 3.

"Civil society", the encyclopedia of informal education, (Edwards, 2005) www.infed.org/association/civil_society.htm

Find out more

Civil society: a framework for action (NCVO, 2009) www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/about-vision-civil-society-framework-action

Abbeyfield Societies, Advocacy Groups, Air Ambulance Services, Animal Protection, Armed Forces Charities, Benevolent Societies, Brass Bands, Building Societies, Care Services, Churches, Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Civic Societies, Common Investment Funds, Community Development,

Community Foundations, Community Interest Companies, Companies Limited by Guarantee, Community Transport, Consumer Groups, Co-operatives, Co-operative Trust Schools, Councils for Voluntary Service, Credit Counsellors, Credit Unions, Disaster and Famine Relief, Emergency and Relief Services, Exempt Charities, Excepted Charities