COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY

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While every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this book is accurate, no legal responsibility is accepted by the author or Combat Poverty for any errors or omissions. The views expressed in this publication are the author’s own and not necessarily those of Combat Poverty Agency.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................. 4
Preface ........................................................................ 5

Introduction
Background to the publication .................................. 6
Structure of the publication ....................................... 6

Section 1: Defining public policy ................................. 7
1.1 What is public policy? .......................................... 7
1.2 How is policy made? ........................................... 8
1.3 The public policy cycle ....................................... 13
1.4 Example of a community organisation’s impact on policy 16

Section 2: A community-development approach to policy making ...................................................... 18
2.1 Giving voice to excluded groups ......................... 18
2.2 Characteristics of a community-development approach 19
2.3 Value of adopting a community-development approach 21

Section 3: Influencing public policy making ................. 24
3.1 Develop a policy agenda .................................... 24
3.2 Make it an integral part of the work .................... 25
3.3 Be focused ....................................................... 25
3.4 Develop a strategy for the influence ................. 27
3.5 Understand the process of policy implementation 31
3.6 Build operational and organisational capacity ...... 31

Section 4: Issues and challenges ................................. 34
4.1 Challenges for the community sector .................. 34
4.1 Challenges for the statutory sector .................... 35

Section 5: References and useful contacts .................... 39
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As part of its role as a national community development centre, the Combat Poverty Agency provides information, advice, training and resource materials for the community and voluntary sector.

Under the current Strategic Plan 2005-07 Combat Poverty initiated the Having Your Say Programme (www.combatpoverty.ie/havingyoursay) that aims to strengthen the policy voices and practices of communities experiencing poverty. Two of the four objectives of the Programme are to:

- initiate and support work that enables people experiencing poverty, their representatives or organisations that support them to engage in the policy system
- work with policy-makers to support effective participation of excluded groups in policy-making.

Community Development and Public Policy was commissioned under these objectives. It is also the opening title in a new Combat Poverty publication series which will provide guidance on the application of community development approaches to different aspects of anti-poverty and social inclusion work. The second title in the series is on Community Development and Health. The new series follows a previous more discursive title by Combat Poverty called The Role of Community Development in Tackling Poverty (Combat Poverty, 2000).

The aim of Community Development and Public Policy is to:

- increase knowledge and understanding of community development processes
- support ‘know-how’ and practical application of community development and policy development in anti-poverty contexts
- enhance policy and community development skills and capacities of groups of people experiencing poverty, their representatives or organisations supporting them, including community, voluntary and statutory bodies.

This title is complemented by a number of other educational resources on policy published by Combat Poverty:

Integrating Policy into Work Planning (Siobhan Lynam, 2006a), also produced as part of the Having Your Say Programme

Influencing Policy Training Pack (Caroline McCamley and Quintin Oliver, 2004)


September 2006
INTRODUCTION

Background to the Publication

*Community Development and Public Policy* is published as an educational resource under the *Having Your Say Programme*, launched in November 2005 by Combat Poverty.

The four objectives of the *Having Your Say programme* are:

- To promote the right of people in poverty to participate in, and influence, public policy decisions that affect them
- To initiate or support work that enhances the policy skills and capacities of groups of people experiencing poverty, their representatives or organisations supporting them
- To work in partnership with policy-makers to increase their understanding of the issues related to, and implications of, involving people in poverty in policy making
- To strengthen the integration of anti-poverty practice by community and voluntary organisations into the policy advice role of Combat Poverty.

Structure of the Publication

Community Development and Public Policy is presented in five sections.

**Section 1** outlines and describes the policy-making process, the different actors who are engaged in this process, the different mechanisms and processes for policy making at national, local, European and international level. It presents the different stages in the policy cycle – policy design and formulation, policy implementation and policy review and evaluation. It also provides examples of how community organisations engage at different stages of the cycle.

**Section 2** defines community development and describes community development approaches in giving a voice to excluded groups, the characteristics of a community-development approach to policy making and the value of adopting such an approach.

**Section 3** details how community groups need to prepare themselves in order to influence the policy process, the steps that they need to follow in order to be focused, strategic and effective. It offers a summary checklist for community groups to support them in successfully influencing the policy-making process.

**Section 4** acknowledges the challenges that are faced by the community sector and by public servants in pursuit of an inclusive policy-making process. It offers guidelines for the statutory sector in relation to good practice in supporting the engagement of the community sector in the policy-development process.

**Section 5** provides a reference for further reading and some contacts that may be useful to community organisations wishing to influence policy development.
SECTION 1: DEFINING PUBLIC POLICY

1.1 What is Public Policy?

Policy development is one of the key functions of government. Policy making is crucial to creating the framework for:

- Developing the nation’s wealth, employment creation, maintaining economic growth and tax revenues (economic policy)
- Either controlling inflation or stimulating growth by increasing or decreasing spending or taxes (fiscal policy)
- Ensuring good health, education opportunities, equality, welfare for the population (social policy)
- Governing international relations (foreign policy).

Policy is a statement of values, aims and objectives that a government wishes to realise, together with strategies and instruments for achieving them. Public policy is commonly understood as the combination of basic decisions, laws, regulatory measures, commitments, courses of action and funding priorities that are made, in the ‘public’s’ name, by those who hold or affect government positions of authority.

In many instances these arrangements result from interactions between those who demand change or resist change, e.g. different sectors of business, church, economic, social, environmental, interest groups, those who make decisions and those who are affected by the policy in question.

Voluntary organisations and community groups have become increasingly aware of the links between decisions taken by government and the authorities on the one hand and the situation of the groups with whom they are working on the other. Poverty is directly related to the way our economic system operates and the way the resources of the state are allocated.

Poverty has much to do with who has access to power, who influences decisions and who has the resources and skills to lobby successfully and who does not. Indeed it is possible to define poverty as a group’s lack of influence over the decisions that affect it. Powerful groups in society are rarely poor.

(Harvey, 2002)
1.2 How is Policy Made?

Policy is generally made by government or initiated by government. Policy development and decision-making, however, involves a complex interplay of interests and expertise between:

- Ministers
- Key civil servants in government departments
- Politicians/political interests. The beliefs or ideology of political parties in government determine whether a government is sympathetic to particular policy changes/developments. Political party manifestos shape the programmes for government, which provide the overall policy framework for each new government
- A wide range of diverse interest groups, e.g. local or regional interests, international corporate interests, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), small and big business, cultural and religious interests.

The policy development and decision-making process also often engages semi-state agencies, local authorities/government, the social partners, expert working groups, and consultative, advisory and monitoring bodies established by government.

Influencing decision-making successfully involves working with many of these different groups.

(a) Public policy making at national level

National Agreements are a policy-influencing and policy-making mechanism at national level. National Agreements were introduced in the 1970s as a means of setting agreed wage rates and to prevent industrial and agricultural unrest. In 1987 the three-year Programme for National Recovery was agreed and launched, and heralded the first of the ‘social partnership’ agreements. These national agreements between government and the traditional social partners (employers, trade unions, farming organisations) in many respects have determined national economic policy. In 2000 community and voluntary organisations were invited to participate in talks as a fourth pillar and the remit of the Agreements was extended to cover wider economic and social issues.

The National Economic and Social Council (NESC), established in 1973, advises the Government on economic and social development. The Council is made up of representatives of government departments, nominees of the four social partners, and independently appointed members. The NESC provides lengthy and thoughtful research reports on economic and social policy questions, e.g. NESC Strategy (2006), People, Productivity and Purpose (2005); The Developmental Welfare State (2005), Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy (2004). It also defines the framework for National Agreements and the National Development Plan.

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) was established in 1993 as a means of consulting with a wider range of groups on social and economic issues. NESF monitors
and evaluates the implementation of policies and programmes designed to advance equality and social inclusion. The reports of the NESF present an analysis and make recommendations on important policy areas especially in the area of social inclusion, e.g. early school leaving, educational disadvantage, equality, social housing, older people, early childhood care and education, an inclusive labour market.

The structure of government and public administration very much determines how policies are formulated and implemented (Combat Poverty, 2006). In Ireland the system of government is highly centralised. Policy design is primarily at the national level. Implementation is entrusted to the local administrations that deliver services within the overall national policy framework. Employment training policy, for example, is decided by the Minister and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Department decides the target groups, and the focus of the policy. Implementation is the responsibility of FÁS, who operate training centres and administrative centres at regional and local level.

(b) Public policy making at local level
By international standards, the range of functions that Irish local authorities undertake is very narrow. They have no role in policing, public transport, health, or personal social services and very little in education. However, they have an important role in administering a number of essential services and are responsible for the following main areas of work:

- Housing planning and provision. Under the Planning and Development Act, 2000 local authorities must set out a strategy for meeting all the housing needs in their areas, including social housing
- Non-national roads
- Water supplies and sewage
- Fire and emergency services
- Development in general and the development plan in particular. The City/County Development Plan must be drawn up every five years and then implemented following a consideration of comments and objections.
- Environmental protection: air, water, noise pollution
- Recreation and amenities, including parks and libraries.

The locally elected councillors
- approve the estimates (the series of proposals to the city/county council that outline how the council will spend its money)
- set the level of rates and local charges
- approve the development plans
- agree bye-laws and nominations to other bodies, e.g. the Seanad, the VEC.

All other decisions are made by the city or county manager in conjunction with the senior management team.

A number of key areas are outside the responsibility of local councillors including housing
allocations, planning permissions, waste disposal policy. These are termed ‘executive’ functions and are the sole responsibility of the county manager. Councillors have limited authority to act independently because they cannot raise taxes and there are restrictions on the functions devolved to them.

In 1996, the government White Paper: Better Local Government: A Programme for Change proposed the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) as a way of enhancing the role of the local city/county councillor through greater involvement in policy discussions. The role of the SPCs is:

- To advise and assist the county/city council in the formulation and development of policy for the county in the areas in which the county council has specific duties, e.g. roads/infrastructure, cultural/heritage matters
- To give councillors an opportunity for full involvement in the policy-making process from the early stages
- To give other interests, e.g. community, business, farming sectors, an opportunity to input into policy at local level
- To provide advice to the council in the preparation of individual service plans.

Each SPC is required to meet a minimum of four times per year. The chair of the SPC is a county/city councillor who holds office for two years (renewable) and is paid to do this work. The number of SPCs is tailored to the size of each local authority. Generally there are four to six SPCs in any local authority. A Director of Services supports each SPC in its work.

The chairs of the SPCs are represented on the City/County Development Boards (CDBs). The function of the CDB is to develop and oversee the implementation of a strategy for economic, social and cultural development for their areas covering a 10-year period. CDBs have a specific remit to co-ordinate actions on social inclusion. This work is supported by the Social Inclusion Measures Committee (SIMs). (See also CWC, 2001).
A High Court decision of March 2006 in relation to the provision of Traveller accommodation provides such an example. Faced with eviction from the roadside and with nowhere to go, two Traveller families took proceedings against Limerick County Council. The High Court found that the county council had failed to address the needs of the families who were seeking halting site accommodation, and that the 1998 Traveller Accommodation Act places a statutory duty on a council to specify the provision of accommodation for Traveller families. While the case was taken by individual families, the outcomes will benefit the whole Traveller community as the High Court ruling will have far-reaching implications for county councils in the drawing up of Accommodation Programmes for Travellers.

The European Court of Justice has been used extensively to realise the rights of individuals through legal means and to promote policy change and advance Irish social policy. The Court hears cases on alleged violations of the human rights provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights taken against states by its citizens or by another state.

Ireland has had a number of cases brought against it that have resulted in subsequent changes in Irish law, e.g. to decriminalise homosexuality, acknowledge the succession rights of children born outside of marriage, acknowledge the right to contraception, acknowledge the right to civil legal aid, acknowledge the rights of persons in psychiatric hospitals.

(d) Decisions taken at EU level

Decisions taken at EU level impact on Irish social and economic policy. Decisions of the Council of Ministers, the European Commission, and other European bodies set the framework for decisions and actions by the Irish government. The impact of the EU on public policy in Ireland can also be seen in the introduction of legislation in order to transpose EU directives, e.g. the Employment Action Plan, the Race Directive, directives on water quality, the promotion of equality, etc.

(e) International legally binding treaties and agreements

When governments ratify a United Nations Convention they make a commitment to put in place legislation and policy to ensure the implementation of rights set down under the Convention. The rights set down are designed to ensure the protection of people, based on the expectation that people can enjoy rights, freedoms and social justice simultaneously.

The International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights was signed by Ireland in October 1973 and ratified in December 1989. It embodies some of the most
significant international legal provisions establishing economic, social and cultural rights to meet a person's physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs. These include non-discrimination and equality; freedom of association; rights relating to work in just and favourable conditions; social protection, an adequate standard of living including clothing, food and housing; the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, education; and the enjoyment of the benefits of cultural freedom and scientific progress.

Article 2 of the Covenant outlines the legal obligations that are incumbent on States that have ratified the Covenant. States are required to take positive steps to implement these rights, to the maximum of their resources, in order to achieve the progressive realisation of these rights, particularly through the adoption of domestic legislation.

Other important Conventions include: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified in 1985, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified in 1992, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) ratified in 2001. The Conventions, which are binding treaties, are the most highly ratified instruments in international law. They can be used by anti-poverty groups and community sector organisations to act as a lever for change.

The Irish government is required to submit a detailed report every 4/5 years on the implementation of each of the Human Rights Conventions that it has ratified. The UN Committees (International Committees of Experts), which monitor the implementation of UN Conventions, are interested in hearing from non-government organisations (NGOs) about their experiences on the ground and their insights and views on how official policy and practice is advancing the rights guaranteed under the Conventions/Covenants. In this way they can discuss these issues with the official government delegation and ask pertinent questions.

The Committee then presents its Concluding Comments, which contains its report and its recommendations on the actions that the government should take to fulfil its obligations under the Convention.


A key outcome of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001 was the commitment by participating countries to develop National Plans Against Racism. (NPAR). In January 2005, the Irish government published its National Action Plan Against Racism, Planning for Diversity. This sets out a holistic, intercultural
framework on which to approach cultural and ethnic diversity in Ireland and combat racism (Lynam, 2006b).

The Good Friday Agreement is an agreement signed by the Irish and British Governments in April 1998 and endorsed by the voters of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in separate referenda in May 1998. It has particular significance given the centrality that it gives to equality and human rights. In its opening paragraphs, throughout the text and indeed in all the institutions and mechanisms established as a result of the Agreement, concerns around fairness and justice are a recurring theme. The Agreement includes a commitment by the Irish government to take steps to further strengthen the protection of human rights within its jurisdiction. It requires that the measures taken in Ireland will ensure at least an equivalent level of protection of human rights as will apply to Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland there is a statutory duty on all public authorities to promote equality. This involves drawing up equality schemes and undertaking equality impact assessments. Consideration is being given by government to the introduction of statutory ‘positive’ duties on the public sector to promote equality in line with the commitment to equivalence, north and south (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2005; Equality Authority and Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2006). This would ensure equality proofing and mainstreaming and serve to place equality as a core principle in public administration. It would have a positive impact on social inclusion, equality and anti-poverty work.

**PUBLIC POLICY MAKING** is the process by which governments, and the authorities

- Reach decisions
- Set out priorities
- Satisfy competing interests
- Lay down the underlying approach to their work

1.3 The Public Policy Cycle

(a) Policy design and formulation

Policy can be designed for a range of reasons, e.g. to give substance to a vision, to introduce reform, to deliver better quality services, to bring Ireland’s social or environmental policy into line with that of the EU.

Policy making usually begins when people perceive that a problem exists. Perceptions about a problem may emerge from the media, politicians, organisations and interest groups in civil society, or the institutions of government.

Next, ideas are formulated on how best to resolve the problem and a discussion process is
initiated which can be formal and structured, i.e. through the parliamentary process (e.g. a discussion document called a Green Paper), or conducted through media debate or a consultation exercise.

In this process, there are likely to be differences of opinion over what should be done about a particular problem and who should do it. How to deal with crime, for instance, is a case in point. There have been very many differing and conflicting views on the type of policies that should be developed by government to address crime and the underlying problems.

Different interests try to persuade government to adopt their ideas and put their solutions into practice. The process of shaping public policy usually involves efforts by competing interest groups to influence policy makers in their favour. Frequently, alternative proposals emerge.

The entire process normally involves different interests collecting and analysing data, consultation with key stakeholders, assessing consequences of alternative actions, and gathering support for one proposal or another. If government leads the process, it then makes a decision on adopting the policy and putting it into practice.

Sometimes the government minister with responsibility for the policy area in question may set up a commission, an expert advisory group or a task force, supported by civil servants, to undertake the policy design and formulation process. The minister will receive a report and recommendations from the committee when the work is completed. The minister will report to the Cabinet who will consider her/his recommendations. Then the government, in cabinet, will make a decision on adopting the policy and putting it into practice.

If the policy-making process is being led from outside government, the interest group or body proposing the policy, once it has agreed on an appropriate course of action, must persuade the appropriate government or governmental agency to adopt the policy and, of course, have the policy implemented.

With regard to the overall policy-making process, it is important to acknowledge that a decision by a public body ‘to do nothing’ is also a policy decision.

(b) Policy implementation
Policy making and policy implementation are not the same thing. Good policy making will consider and define the systems, the structures and the processes that need to be put in place to effectively implement the decision of government. It will define and outline the budget and resources that will be required to implement the policy. It will define and establish the targets to be achieved and indicate a timeframe for achieving the targets. It will also establish a monitoring system and indicate review dates to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy in practice. This will ensure that the outcomes as intended by the policy makers are being delivered upon.
The gap that often exists between policy making and policy implementation has been identified as one of the key challenges facing successful efforts to address poverty and inequality.

Implementation is very important especially in terms of social inclusion policies. These often become diluted in their implementation, by opposing or neutral interests. Traveller accommodation is a good example of where the implementation mechanism has not been strong enough. In many cases local officials and elected representatives have felt unable to implement policy in the face of opposition.

Much public policy is implemented through public bodies, e.g. local authorities, state agencies, the Health Services Executive. The state also regulates and funds a range of bodies to deliver policy initiatives, e.g. transport infrastructure, education, social housing, regeneration programmes and public-private partnership arrangements.

Community and anti-poverty groups are engaged in implementing some aspects of government policies, for instance in building the capacity and the voice of local groups to impact on the design and effective delivery of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, the Traveller Health Strategy.

They are also engaged in the implementation of the National Drugs Strategy through their participation in the Local Drugs Task Forces. Partnership arrangements between the state and community and voluntary groups also implement policy through programme delivery, e.g. Primary Care Strategy, youth services.

(c) Policy review and evaluation
Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating policy and its implementation is crucial to ensuring that the outcomes are consistent with those intended by the policy makers. Reviews are a way of keeping current issues central and introducing new concerns. Policy reviews and evaluations are intended to provide lessons for an improvement in the implementation process and to influence new policy formation.

The context framing a particular policy initiative can alter dramatically during the period of implementation. A review can point to the need to refocus objectives to produce better results from investment or establish higher-level targets and expectations from the implementation of the policy.

Many community groups are familiar with and some have engaged with mid-term reviews, e.g. of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, the Review of the NAPs, the review of the National Drugs Strategy.

Community groups have used policy reviews to influence a policy change. The National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008 is a case in point. When the strategy Building on Experience
was launched, it contained 100 actions, but none focused on families. In fact, there was no mention of families in the strategy. The Family Support Network lobbied and campaigned for families to be included in the strategy. They argued for this inclusion on two grounds: (1) families have needs and (2) families are also a resource in any drugs strategy. Following the Mid-Term Review of the National Drugs Strategy in 2005, families are now acknowledged and have been included in the strategy.

**STAGES OF A POLICY CHANGE FOR POLICY MAKERS**
- Accepting that a problem exists
- Defining what the issue is
- Considering a series of actions that responds to the problem or the issue
- Considering the legislative and resource implications
- Considering other views
- Appointing of committees, task forces, working groups, etc
- Taking the decision
- Carrying it out
- Implementing, monitoring the change.

**1.4 Example of a Community Organisation’s Impact on Policy**

The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) is a support group for migrant people. One of its activities has been the establishment of a Domestic Workers Support Group for migrant women employed in the private home. This support group enabled such women to come together and be directly involved in securing their rights.

Early in 2003 MCRI identified a trend in relation to the exploitation of migrant women employed in the private home. It also identified that the protections in place were very limited, i.e. the Employment Equality Act (EEA) exempted employment in private homes. The organisation developed a strategy to have a change in the policy and to have the legislation amended.

MCRI contacted RTÉ. At that time RTÉ was interested in covering issues in relation to migration. MCRI highlighted the experience of migrant women employed in the home. It placed emphasis on the inability of the EEA to protect these women. It succeeded in putting its agenda into the public arena and specifically focused on the need for a policy/legislative change.

The timing was good. The EEA was to be reviewed in 2003 and the EU Race Directive was also coming on stream. If government was going to amend the legislation, MRCI knew it was also an opportune time to remove the exemption.

MCRI followed up the television and other media coverage with political lobbying. The Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform stated his intention to amend the legislation on foot of the publicity. MRCI followed up with
letters and, a few months later, it drew media attention to the lack of progress on the commitment made.

MRCI conducted evidence-based research to provide a solid basis for its arguments. It produced *Private Homes – A Public Concern* which outlined the situation of twenty domestic workers and set out concrete recommendations. The research was publicly launched and the issues in the report were covered by TV and print media. Both the Research Report and the Domestic Workers Support Group provided a basis for a campaign and a set of demands for the general improvement of the situation of female domestic workers. Other sectors, including the trade unions, were also encouraged to support the campaign. This enabled MRCI to maintain its media profile and political pressure.

A positive outcome was achieved when the Equality Act, 2004 was introduced and its remit was expanded to cover employment in the private home. The recruitment process is outside the scope of the legislation, but work continues on this issue. Progress has also being made on MRCI’s key recommendations, in particular on defining the terms and conditions of domestic work. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has committed to a Joint Labour Committee, which is currently being discussed by the social partners.

MRCI’s Report *Private Homes – A Public Concern* is often referred to in the Dáil. The trade unions have made this issue a priority. The Domestic Workers Support Group is growing in strength and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment liaises with MRCI on domestic worker issues on a regular basis.
SECTION 2: A COMMUNITY-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO POLICY-MAKING

2.1 Giving Voice to Excluded Groups

The principles and processes at the core of community development approaches distinguish it from other forms of work in, and with, local communities. For Combat Poverty, community development is characterised by:

- A focus on empowerment and participation of marginalised groups in decision-making that impacts on their lives and communities
- A collective rather than an individual approach to tackling problems
- A social analysis and understanding of the causes of poverty and disadvantage and a commitment to equality and social justice (Combat Poverty, 2000).

Community development acts from a position of solidarity with the interests of those experiencing exclusion. It recognises that those who are disadvantaged, powerless and marginalised in society need support and resources in order to identify, and be involved in, the changes necessary to improve their lives.

It deliberately sets out to target and bring together individuals and groups who are affected by poverty and who are excluded from participation in society because of prejudice, discrimination, lack of resources or power.

- It builds the capacity of groups to identify their own needs, collectively.
- At grassroots level, it engages communities in a creative educational process aimed at social change.
- It develops an awareness and understanding of the policy context in which decisions are made, how resources are allocated and services planned and delivered that impact on their lives. In this process the connection between individuals’ ‘private’ troubles and public policy is made.
- It helps groups, collectively, to develop their understanding and analysis of the issues that need to be addressed, to prioritise what needs to be done, and to develop their agenda for change.
- It builds confidence, knowledge and skills, collectively, to enable marginalised groups to develop a strong and effective voice, and to engage with statutory agencies,
governmental agencies and social partners at local and national level to advance their agenda for change.

- It strengthens the organisational capability of excluded groups, which will enable them to effectively impact on local and national policy.
- It develops innovative and creative approaches to address the economic and social problems that arise from deprivation. It seeks, in a dynamic way, to test new approaches, which ensure the involvement of local communities and enables the sharing of talents and expertise.
- It advocates for policy change, based on an analysis of the structural causes of poverty and inequality.
- It mobilises groups and communities to understand and articulate their human rights and to work collectively to realise the collective rights of groups:
  - To live free from poverty, exclusion and discrimination
  - To live in a fair and just society
  - To exercise the right to realise their creative potential
  - To participate in decision-making that affects them.
- It devises strategies to confront racism and sexism, to promote equality and interculturalism and to accommodate and celebrate diversity.

A human rights-based approach is integral to community development. This includes civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. In principle, the starting point for community development is solidarity, not charity, working with those whose rights are being denied, ignored or challenged. Solidarity also implies that the collective, be it a community group, a network or a women’s project, also supports and advocates for the rights of other collectives. Travellers or migrant workers may not be currently present in the local area, but the community organisation will take up their issues and advance their rights in broader-based strategies.

While community development projects and groups often provide services like childcare and adult education, it is done as part of a strategy to bring about change. Community groups may also engage in partnership arrangements in piloting innovative and creative responses to particular needs, to show off what innovation and appropriate responses are in practice, so that they can then be taken on and delivered by the mainstream system and service providers.

2.2 Characteristics of a Community-Development Approach

(a) Community development brings into the policy process the voice of those experiencing poverty.

It empowers and facilitates community participation and target group participation, and facilitates the contribution of the unique local expertise:

- In the identification of needs
- In the identification of the range of interconnected factors that create social exclusion
In the identification and formulation of informed, targeted and sustainable responses needed to bring about lasting change.

(b) **Community development is focused on change in favour of the most marginalised groups.**
A community development approach seeks policy outcomes that effectively address poverty, exclusion and inequalities and that produce social and economic change in favour of disadvantaged groups.

The claim for a voice in the formation of public policy is not simply for recognition as a marginalised group, or as the community sector representing its constituent groupings. It is a means to an end. It is best understood as strategic – to claim a place in the political life, in the decision-making process and thereby an influence on the distribution of resources.

(c) **Community development is focused on structural and systemic change.**
The community-development approach stems from a belief that it is not enough to treat the symptoms of poverty and exclusion but that there is a need to understand and address ‘the structural inequality which gives rise to poverty’ (Combat Poverty, 2000).

Many of the difficult problems people experience are not individual or local. They arise as a result of the inequalities that are structured into the dominant systems and institutions that we have established to organise our society, e.g. the economic system with its free market, the health system, the education system, representative government, the mass communications systems. The inequality is generated, sustained and reproduced by and within these systems and institutions and by the influence that these institutions have on people’s attitudes, preferences and prospects, e.g. within education and the labour market (Lynam, 2003).

Social and economic policies developed by government authorities have the capacity both to cause and alleviate poverty. Therefore governmental responses to poverty are of primary importance. Structural reform will alter the manner in which society is organised and contribute to a fairer distribution of wealth amongst the population. Other responses can have a limited effect.

Poverty and social exclusion are tackled by developing policies and expending resources to ensure that individuals have a right to an adequate income, access to employment, fair taxation, educational opportunities, housing, health and other services. Community development principles and activity can inform the development of such public policies.

(Combat Poverty, 2000).
(d) **Community development is participative and complements representative democracy.**

Community development gives a voice to those currently marginalised, disparaged and patronised. It enables them to be involved in thinking up and developing the appropriate policies for change. Moreover, it allows them to be recognised and respected as members of a particular group, political actors in their own right with their own specific concerns, insights and objectives.

In this empowering process those who are marginalised do not see themselves as a ‘problem’ for other social groups to resolve. They are enabled to shake off the external perceptions of what they ought to be and claim the right to define themselves. It is a profoundly democratic vision.

Participation is at the centre of a community development approach to poverty reduction. The poor can no longer be seen as passive recipients; they are strategic partners rather than target groups. This of course can be very challenging for the status quo. In a fundamental way, human rights change the relationship between service providers and service recipients.

(e) **Community development involves all stakeholders in a cohesive and determined effort.**

A healthy community development organisation provides mechanisms for the effective recognition of the distinct voices and point of view of groups who are oppressed and disadvantaged, and establishes procedures to ensure their representation. This includes public funding and dedicated workers to enable geographic communities and communities of interest to meet, formulate their ideas, critique policy or proposed structural reforms, draw up policy proposals and then have them considered in the decision-making arenas. Groups are facilitated to effectively engage in the policy-making and decision-making process.

(f) **Community development puts emphasis on how things are done as well as what is done.**

The community-development approach to policy-making ensures that there is respect, recognition and accommodation of the diversity of experiences and cultural approaches, including gender differences. It ensures that policy-making is based on participative processes and structures. These include and empower marginalised and excluded groups within society.

**2.3 Value of Adopting a Community-Development Approach**

The following are among the benefits to be gleaned from adopting a community-based approach to public policy making.
(a) Community development enhances and promotes better governance. There is an acceptance by the state, the European Union, and a range of international organisations including the United Nations and the World Health Organisation that problems can best be solved by incorporating the active involvement of the relevant stakeholders.

(b) It results in more relevant, realistic and focused programmes. Community development ensures that poverty and inequality are raised at the local level, where they may manifest themselves, and at the national or international level at which more sustainable solutions can be designed and implemented. It can contribute to the formulation of more appropriate policy, more focused programme investments and better achievements from public spending.

(c) Participation in a problem-solving process produces better outcomes. The community development approach ensures the participation of people with poverty-experience in public policy development and decision-making. This results in policy-making being informed by local-level reality with the quality of the decision-making being enhanced. People with poverty-experience bring what has been called ‘insider expertise’ to public policy making.

Public policies intended to tackle poverty are much more likely to succeed if people and communities towards whom they are targeted are involved in how these policies are planned, carried out, and monitored and evaluated. This involvement also creates the conditions for developing more innovative responses to the challenges being faced.

Community development facilitates the definition of appropriate roles for community groups in delivering programmes that will be effective in reaching the most excluded. It also enables communities to monitor the implementation and evaluate and draw lessons about the impact of particular policies on social exclusion and poverty reduction. This feedback, through the participation and engagement of community organisations, contributes enormously to effective policy making, implementation and review.

(d) Community development produces a more equal, participatory and just society. The genuine participation of marginalised groups can itself begin to address power inequalities. It also promotes social inclusion, and places equal value on expertise that comes from experience and expertise that is traditionally privileged.

It facilitates stronger accountability of politicians and civil servants and, as such, enhances democracy.
The foundation of poverty reduction is self-organisation of the poor at the community level – the best antidote to powerlessness, a central source of poverty. Organised, the poor can influence local government and help hold it accountable. They can form coalitions with other social forces and build broader organisations to influence regional and national policy-making. What the poor most need, therefore, are resources to build their organisational capacity.

(UN Development Programme, 2000).

The democratic participation of marginalised groups needs to be strengthened both inside and outside of political decision-making structures, in a way that is unlikely to be comfortable to existing power holders. Political equality is about empowering those who are currently marginalised in terms of political influence. This is a difficult task, not least because of the capacity of those who are powerful and wealthy to use their social networks in particular to advance their interests by informal means.

(NESF, 2002).
SECTION 3: INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY MAKING

A number of ways in which community development organisations can effectively influence the policy-making process is now outlined.

3.1 Develop a Policy Agenda

Becoming familiar with how policy is made and who makes it are essential first steps to having an impact on policy making. Engaging in the policy process usually takes two forms:

- The community organisation, or a network of organisations within the community sector, can suggest alterations or amendments to draft plans and policies that are presented by officials. They may also engage in the consultation processes pertaining to policy reviews.
- The community organisation, or a network of organisations within the community sector, develops a set of policy positions and priorities that it wishes to advance. This is called agenda setting. It then brings its agenda to the table in various policy arenas including social partnership structures within which it engages.

Policy positions or policy priorities for the community organisation or the network of community organisations are usually developed and agreed with the membership. This can be appropriately done in a series of workshops or group sessions.

INFLUENCING THE POLICY PROCESS: KEY TASKS

- Set clear objectives
- Prepare information, documentation, research to make your case and to enhance your capacity to influence the decision-making process
- Define ‘who’, ‘where’, and ‘when’
- Present the case
- Persist in seeking a policy decision and an implementation strategy
- Monitor the implementation of the policy change and the outcome

MOST IMPORTANTLY ENSURE THAT

- Adequate resources have been allocated to undertake the tasks
- Feedback and accountability mechanisms have been established so that the organisation’s representatives are supported in bringing forward the common position.
3.2 Make it an Integral Part of the Work

It may be challenging but with perseverance and skill community organisations can successfully make an impact on decisions. They have insider knowledge and start off with the advantage of knowing and understanding the reality of issues on the ground. Not all policy makers carry that expertise.

If community organisations are to successfully influence the decision-making process, they must be strategic in selecting priorities, and integrate policy work into work planning associated with strategic plans, annual work plans, programme planning and practice. They must also secure resources for policy work. (See Lynam, 2006a.)

Combining with others in local networks or a community platform, and in wider regional and national networks, allows a more collective analysis of the key issues facing groups locally and a sharing of ideas and lessons in the development of policy agendas and policy positions.

3.3 Be Focused

Community organisations will need to decide on the following:

- **What precisely they want to influence.** It is very important to be clear about the area of policy that should be targeted. A profile and analysis of the needs of the group, an area profile and analysis of need all help with the social analysis process. This in turn can help to define the main issues for groups in their day-to-day work, critical areas of under-investment, the community’s most crucial short and long-term needs, and key barriers to moving a development process forward.

- **The policy change that is being sought.** Once the target policy area is identified by the organisation it will then need to define how it wants the policy in question to change, so as to have a maximum positive impact. What would make a key difference to the community’s situation? The more specific the organisation can be, the more easily it will be able to communicate the desired policy changes. It is also important to be realistic about what can be achieved and to acknowledge that change will not happen overnight.

- **Who needs to be influenced.** The range of players and actors in the policy development and decision-making process are identified in Section 2. For community organisations wishing to impact on decision making it is important to spend some time assessing who are the most critical people to address. The answer to the question ‘Who are the policy makers?’ varies according to individual circumstance. As has been stated, government generally makes policy, but policy development and the policy-making process engages a range of other actors.

It is generally accepted that for change to take place, a number of bodies must be influenced and a climate must be created where the benefits of the change proposed
are considered to outweigh the disadvantages. Political change often happens when the cost of not changing becomes greater than the cost of changing.

- **What an organisation needs to do to be effective and to have influence.** The organisation must convey the impression that the organisation is serious, that it knows what it is talking about, that it is rooted in the needs of the people it works with it and has a mandate to do so, that it can debate and discuss issues coherently and that people can do business with it.

DECISION-MAKERS SAY THEY LISTEN TO PEOPLE WHO:
- Know exactly what they want
- Make their case early in a policy process
- Recognise what can be achieved in the short, medium and long term
- Are up-to-date, know their field and are on top of their issues
- Provide regular and always accurate information
- Approach officials at the appropriate level (neither too high up nor too low down)
- Appreciate that there is another side to the argument
- Know the limits of what they can achieve
- Are to the point
- Leave a page behind each time (Harvey, 2002).

Policy making is a dynamic process in which a range of actors come together to make, unmake or change a decision. Persuading appropriate people that a problem exists is a first step. The presentation of clear, quantifiable, factual information and data can support a case for change. Research is an essential element in influencing policy makers. Community organisations often forget that the nature of the problem may be very obvious to them, but is not necessarily so to others, nor is its size, scale or consequences.

This is why communities must spend time and resources explaining why their problem is a problem, what effects the problem is having on communities, how it could be overcome, and the benefits of doing so. Undertaking research can also be key to the organisation establishing for itself an understanding of how it wants policy to change.

**Research with existing knowledge is a powerful combination.**

One Parent Exchange and Network (OPEN) uses policy analysis and research in its anti-poverty work. Its research *Do the Poor Pay More?* provides an in-depth analysis of lone parents’ experience of debt. The research findings support the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions, i.e. that 31 per cent of lone-parent families experienced debt due to ordinary living expenses. More than half of the lone parents in debt had weekly incomes of €100–€200 at a time when the average industrial wage stood at €562.21 per week. Thirteen recommendations arise from the study and the report makes specific recommendations to key government departments, the Irish Financial Regulatory Authority, the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Irish Bankers Federations, among others.
3.4 Develop a Strategy for Influence

There are many different ways to influence policy making. Depending on the circumstances, groups and organisations might try:

- Engaging in social partnership arrangements
- Low-key discussions
- Policy submissions
- Advocacy campaigns
- Political lobbying
- Media campaigns
- Protests and demonstrations (CWC, 2006a).

Or they may try to use a combination of all of these. The exact nature of the issue being addressed, the attitude of policy makers and other factors should influence their choice of strategy. They should keep the following guidelines in mind.

(a) Target those participatory structures in which they can be most effective

Some of the different participation fora established over the past number of years could offer possibilities to influence policy. Not all structures that facilitate participation are open to facilitating a serious input into policy. For community groups and organisations seeking to promote social inclusion, an assessment must be made of the degree to which there is a core commitment to address inclusion concerns. Anti-poverty groups and organisations need to target key arenas. There is little point in depleting energies in a range of arenas where they may not have power.

Maximising community sector influence in local social partnership arrangements

The Community Development Projects and other local community and youth projects and organisations in the Bluebell, Rialto, Inchicore and Islandbridge & Kilmainham areas of Dublin 8 came together to form a local Community Platform across the community sector. The local Platform wanted to impact on a range of local development structures and the spend/allocation of resources for local development initiatives. They considered and reviewed the focus and concerns in their individual projects. This enabled them to become clear about the common development issues and concerns of community groups across the area and helped them to establish an agenda for action. In analysing the issues, they also discussed and considered how, collectively, they could have more of an impact on the partnership structures locally.

The Platform was approached by the local development Partnership with a view to community sector representation. The Platform reviewed the community groups’ experience of representation in the past, which hadn’t always been satisfactory. They now wanted to engage in a meaningful way with a strong voice and an agenda. The community groups collectively agreed on the best way to have their interests represented and the Platform proposed a structure to the Partnership, which was accepted. The community sector increased their representation in the partnership structures – at board...
and sub-group level. This also included the re-establishment and revitalisation of a partnership community development sub-committee.

The community groups collectively have had a very positive impact on the work of the Partnership. They have been able to insert their agenda and influence the focus of the Partnership in key areas of concern to the communities, in particular the regeneration of disadvantaged communities. They have also influenced the resource allocation within the Partnership towards the modelling of good, innovative work and practices that can then be promoted for mainstreaming. The structure for representing the interests of the community at Partnership level was reviewed recently by the Platform and is considered to be effective.

(b) Engage beyond the local to national, European and international levels
Links and exchanges between local and national organisations and networks provide valuable opportunities for exchange of information, for strengthening the social analysis, and for setting objectives and agendas for action that can then be advanced through greater collective effort.

Very often the problems that people experience in their communities cannot be resolved at local level, because of the structural nature of the problems that people experience and because of the highly centralised decision-making that exists in Ireland. Relatively few important decisions are made at a local level. This makes it very necessary for local organisations to network with others and use their collective strength to assert influence at national level, as well as at EU and international level.

Combining to influence at national level: engaging with the Social Inclusion Forum
The Community Platform is a network of national anti-poverty and equality organisations, set up in 1996 to bring a strong collective anti-poverty and equality voice into national partnership negotiations and other social policy discussions.

Having engaged in the talks leading up to the Sustaining Progress social partnership agreement in 2003, the membership of the Community Platform decided it could not endorse the latest social partnership agreement, given what it saw as a lack of serious commitment to advance anti-poverty and social inclusion agendas and a poor process of negotiation during the talks. This left the Community Platform outside the national social partnership structures. Many of the NAPS target groups, such as migrants, ethnic minorities, lone parents, Travellers and gay and lesbian people were therefore excluded from the NAPS structures.

The Community Platform was then funded under Combat Poverty’s NAPS Participation Grant scheme to hold a series of networking seminars. The seminars’ aims were to influence the various elements of the institutional framework set up under the NAPS, in particular the Social Inclusion Forum, to help people living in poverty to engage in
the Forum discussions, prepare a submission to the Forum, identify priorities, develop recommendations and contribute to setting agendas and strategies. Three seminars were held – in Galway, Cork and Dublin – and were attended by approximately 200 people.

Outcomes achieved:
- There was a very positive response to the seminars. A series of concerns were raised and documented. These presented a clear agenda for action.
- The results of the three regional seminars were compiled, submitted to the NESF and formed part of the NESF report on the Social Inclusion Forum.
- The seminars facilitated many groups to network and encouraged them to engage with the agenda of the Social Inclusion Forum.
- Forty additional seats were allocated to representatives of local groups at the Forum as a result of the initiative.

A number of organisations in the community sector have effectively used international human rights instruments to influence policy development at national level, in particular the preparation of reports to the International (monitoring) Committees. They have documented their experiences and concerns in relation to the progress being made by government in enumerating economic, social and cultural rights, and in relation to holding the state accountable for fulfilling its obligations under the legally binding agreements that it has ratified, e.g UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
**Using International Human Rights Instruments**

The Irish Government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. In essence, this is an international bill of rights for women, a legally binding agreement that addresses all forms of discrimination and promotes the implementation of special measures to bring about equality for women. The Irish Government submitted its 4th and 5th Combined Reports to the CEDAW Committee in May 2003. The Women’s Rights Alliance (WHRA) carried out a nationwide consultation process over a 12-month period (through a questionnaire survey, regional workshops and one-to-one interviews) and produced a Shadow Report in April 2004.

During 2004 Shadow Reports focusing on specific issues were produced by members of WHRA and other organisations.* In July 2005 representatives from eight NGOs travelled to the United Nations in New York for the 33rd CEDAW Session. These NGOs had an informal meeting with the CEDAW Committee, allowing them the opportunity to highlight key issues where the Government was in breach of its obligations under the CEDAW.

The Irish Government was examined and the CEDAW Committee produced their Concluding Comments for Ireland. These highlight the government’s achievements, shortcomings and obstacles in implementing CEDAW. They also identify areas of concern and suggest recommendations for further action.

The WHRA continues to work at many levels to ensure the implementation of the recommendations, including supporting local groups to raise awareness of CEDAW and the Concluding Comments in their own work to advance women’s rights.

*National Traveller Women’s Forum, Pavee Point, Amnesty International, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Irish Family Planning Assoc., Women’s Aid. Shadow reports are available from these organisations. See website listing. They are a very useful alternative source for facts and analysis. The Irish Human Rights Commission also produced a Shadow Report.

(c) Engage with the political system

Working with the political system is an important element in the process of influencing policy change. At local and national level, engagement with politicians of all parties offers the potential to inform, debate and gain support for the objectives of the community group or organisation.

An example of such engagement has occurred in Co. Kerry. Childcare groups throughout the county conducted evidence-based research and engaged with the political system to advance their case. They succeeded in extending the timeframe for the allocation of staffing grants to community childcare groups in the county.

Politicians, particularly at a local level, are generally accessible to community organisations.
Politicians are keenly aware of the voting trends in many disadvantaged communities in general, local and European elections. The increase in the numbers of people in particularly disadvantaged areas who exercised their vote in the last local and general elections has focused more political attention on these areas.

In its work with communities in disadvantaged areas to promote justice and inclusion, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice facilitates an Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme. The Programme explores with people the reasons for voting and how to vote, enables people to take an informed stance on issues of concern and offers an approach to choosing candidates who are likely to pursue the issues of concern to them and their community. Many of the groups who have participated in the Programme have pursued specific issues of particular interest to their community. They have produced studies/reports which are used to raise awareness, to lobby and to effect change locally.

(d) Build alliances
At the heart of influencing policy is the development and maintenance of alliances with those who are supportive of the community organisation’s policy objectives. Alliances can be built across all sectors (CWC, 2006b). They can be formal or informal; long or short term. They can be obvious or unusual – alliances are sometimes built with unexpected organisations or individuals. In actively building alliances it is important to identify key personalities and win them over to support the objectives of the community organisation. Inevitably this is a time-consuming process and one that requires a capacity to compromise.

3.5 Understand the Process of Policy Implementation
The efforts of community groups and organisations do not always have clear-cut outcomes. Even when a policy is changed or amended, legislation passed or resources allocated, work may only be beginning. Community organisations need to follow up on how the policy is implemented in practice. They need to give attention to making sure that the policy is being implemented and producing the outcomes and the outputs that they have sought and anticipated.

Monitoring and review mechanisms are essential to evaluating outcomes. Measuring outcomes is therefore important and can be helped by having previously agreed targets and indicators that can be used to measure progress, and resources to research the impact of the change resulting from the policy decision.

3.6 Build Operational and Organisational Capacity
The community sector is disadvantaged, when compared to other sectors, in the level of resources available to it to influence policy. It promotes social change within a climate of resistance. The persistent reality of poverty, inequality and injustice is what feeds its impatience for change, but its grassroots involvement with marginalised groups does not carry great power of influence. It cannot forge the types of alliances that other sectors can make to advance priorities, e.g. alliances between trade unions, government and
employers around a model of development that is economically driven. Despite these drawbacks, the community sector has made substantial gains in policy areas.

To effectively engage in the policy-making and policy-influencing processes community organisations, supported by community workers and community activists, need to continue to build their organisational and operational capacity and maintain the community sector’s autonomy and independence.

Systems, structures and procedures need to be appropriately and adequately resourced and put in place:

- To enhance anti-poverty and community groups’ understanding of the policy context, the existing policy and legislative frameworks

- To support them to develop their analysis of inequality, e.g. using the framework presented by the NESF (2002), and to develop a vision and strategies for a more equal society in
  – The economic sphere
  – The political sphere
  – The socio-cultural sphere
  – The caring areas of human activity, including institutions and systems that will promote equality and well-being.

- To support networking and agenda setting amongst community organisations, locally and regionally

- To create community platforms where policy positions and priorities can be defined, where representatives can be nominated and mandated to bring forward the common position and negotiate on behalf of the collective of groups

- To give reports and feedback to ensure accountability to, and the inclusion of all, groups in the process.
Checklist for influencing policy

To effectively and successfully influence policy and advance the anti-poverty, equality and social inclusion agenda the following is required:

- Vision, and a commitment to a more equal society, where people are as equal as possible in relation to the central conditions of their lives and where everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life.
- An analysis of poverty, inequality and social exclusion and how they are reproduced in the various systems and structures that have been established to organise society.
- An understanding and an analysis of the issues that need to be addressed.
- On-going capacity building in community work and rights-based thinking and approaches.
- An agenda for change. There is also need for an action plan that sets out key tasks and a timeframe for achieving the objectives and that also outlines some indicators that can be used to check progress at different points along the way.
- Understanding of the policy context, the legal framework, the international obligations on the Irish state in relation to eradicating poverty, achieving equality, human rights, inclusion and interculturalism.
- Awareness of the policy commitments and responsibilities of government and statutory agencies and organisations in civil society with regard to poverty and equality proofing and mainstreaming.
- Clarity about the sites and arenas for engagement and where the community sector can be most effective, at local, national and international level.
- A strengthened community sector, with enhanced capacity, organisationally and operationally, at local, regional and national level.
- Resources to maintain the independence and autonomy of the community sector.
- Persistence, persistence and persistence (Lynam, 2004).
SECTION 4: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

4.1 Challenges for the Community Sector

The potential of community development to inform and enhance policy making and to give a voice to anti-poverty and other community groups in the policy-making process is widely accepted, e.g. by the European Commission, the World Bank, the UN Development Programme, the World Health Organisation. This role and contribution is clearly evidenced in the impact of community groups and organisations on policy development in Ireland, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Pobal, 2006).

It is also evidenced in the opportunities generated by the community sector for some of the most excluded groups in Irish society to determine their own interests, to participate in collective decision-making and collective action and to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary for exerting influence over the forces that govern their lives (CWC, 2006b).

However, advancing participatory models of development and policy making within a framework where it is not setting the agenda has always been, and will continue to be, a major challenge for the community sector. Meeting this challenge demands that the sector and its constituent groups develop its analysis, strategic focus and options for the future.

Influencing policy is a slow process, and is demanding of the resources of community groups. Engaging with the policy-making process can be frustrating, especially if policy commitments, made after a long campaign by community groups, seem to lose their priority for government. Sometimes a lot of energy is spent by groups contributing their knowledge and expertise in a range of consultative fora; then when the policy decision is made and the implementation strategy defined, it falls far short of expectations or of what is needed to have a meaningful impact on poverty or exclusion.

Another challenge within the community sector is that some community groups, concerned about the pressure placed on them to focus on the delivery of services rather than on their campaigning and advocacy roles, fear that their funding may be in jeopardy if they are over-critical of government policy. However, there is an enormous benefit to having this critical voice present in the policy-making arena. It ensures that policy is rigorously interrogated and is more effective in its implementation.
Community groups and organisations that work with a community development approach and with an anti-poverty, equality, human rights and inclusion perspective, have not only a right, but a responsibility, to influence public policy.

>You may not always be at one with officialdom. But that’s not a bad thing at all. Creative tension, I have discovered over the years, is vital for lasting change, particularly on complex issues.

– Taoiseach Bertie Ahern TD, Feb 2002 at the launch of the Threshold Strategic Plan Housing the Future

### 4.2 Challenges for the Statutory Sector

While the state might acknowledge the expertise and the key role of the community sector in governance, it is not always very comfortable with the role of the community sector. By its nature, the role of the community sector is oppositional, pushing policy development in a particular direction, challenging existing power relations, advocating and claiming the right of groups to come in from the margins. Because community development work challenges the status quo there is an expectation of tension and resistance. However, this is an inherent element of social change processes and an indicator of effective community development approaches.

A key challenge for the state is to formally acknowledge and ensure a consistency of input from community development approaches to policy making that addresses poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Engaging in inclusive partnerships can present challenges for both community sector organisations and public servants in government departments and statutory organisations. The invisibility of groups experiencing poverty, and their normal exclusion from decision-making arenas, means that many officials are unfamiliar with their concerns and the injustices they experience. For many, engaging with the community sector as partners in a process presents a cultural challenge to traditional ways of working. It also offers enormous benefits, as outlined in Section 2, and presents new opportunities for more creative ways of doing business.

The following guidelines can be used to address some of the challenges presented and to develop good practice in supporting a community-development approach to policy making.

- Acknowledge the importance of local knowledge and expertise and the key role of communities of interest as well as of geographic communities in the policy-making process. Target community organisations focused on anti-poverty, equality and social inclusion. In developing and implementing plans, policies and programmes and making decisions about resource allocations, disadvantaged communities and their
organisations should be specifically named and concrete steps taken to ensure that they can benefit from such activity. There is a contradiction when the development of social inclusion policies does not include those for whom they are being developed.

“No-one asks our views ... But we are the real experts of our own hopes and aspirations ... We can contribute if you are prepared to give up a little power to allow us to participate as partners in our own future, and in the future of the country.

(Moraene Roberts, an activist with ATD 4th World)

- Consultation should not be mistaken for participation in decision-making, but rather as an important part of the practice of empowerment and advancing equality. Consultation can take the form of research, group discussions, questionnaire-based interviews, etc. but should essentially be seen as part of an on-going process of discussion, dialogue and inputs from anti-poverty and community groups on the issues that affect them.

- Resource the participation of community groups and the sector at all stages of the policy process. Participation must operate as a strategy, not a device, and should take place through the entire policy-making process. It should include agenda setting, monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation and outcome.

“One of the clear messages received by the UK Commission on Poverty Participation and Power (CPPP) is: people experiencing poverty see consultation without commitment, and phoney participation without the power to bring about change, as the ultimate disrespect.

(Ruth Lister, member of the CPPP)

- Provide adequate resources for capacity building and participation, including the development of confidence, knowledge and skills to engage in the policy process. The successful development of anti-poverty groups representing the concerns of those experiencing poverty, inequality and exclusion, largely depends on a commitment to providing financial and other supports from state agencies, local social partnership structures and social partners. Resources need to be provided at local, regional and national level to facilitate the community sector to engage as partners in the policy-making process. This includes finance to engage dedicated staff, to provide skills training, to undertake research, to support participation costs, including childcare and eldercare.
• Start where people are at and value their perspectives. Establish user-friendly and accessible structures that enable the involvement of the diverse groups that are comprised of those living in poverty.

• Acknowledge the autonomy and independence of anti-poverty groups in the community sector. Build upon existing structures and mechanisms facilitating community participation in decision-making and policy development. Acknowledge that the community sector and voluntary sector is not homogenous. It does not have a corporate identity – it has different interests within it. Community work and community development organisations are focused on anti-poverty and advancing equality and inclusion. This is their hallmark. Their mandate comes from their engagement with and connectedness to the poor, excluded and disadvantaged and from their commitment to social change through collective processes.

• Develop awareness of the policy context and implement policies already agreed. Awareness must be raised of the policy context, the legal framework, and action taken to implement policy commitments and the international obligations on the Irish state in relation to eradicating poverty and achieving equality, human rights and inclusion. Many of the commitments agreed at national, EU and international level, and the obligations on the Irish state as a consequence, are being ignored or not being implemented by the agencies best placed to do so.

• Provide for and resource mechanisms to develop a more participatory culture, including capacity building for officials so that they are better able to work in dialogue with community organisations and are better equipped to engage in participatory ways of working. Public service staff who have responsibility for working with the community sector in partnership initiatives or to engage them in policy consultation should be supported in their work through training, awareness raising and skills development in relation to anti-poverty, equality and intercultural practice and consultation methodologies.

• Develop and implement open and clear policies governing access and equality, e.g. anti-discriminatory codes of practice or guidelines and equality policies that will help ensure that anti-poverty and community group representatives are not coming into an unsympathetic or inaccessible environment.

• Implement the policy commitments and responsibilities of government and statutory agencies with regard to poverty and equality proofing and gender mainstreaming. Undertake an Equality Review – a process of assessing all programmes, policies and practices as well as perceptions of staff and management with regard to their impact on the promotion of equality. The process helps identify good practice within an organisation and the key steps that should be taken to enhance a focus on equality. The Equality Authority provides support in this regard.
All governmental policies are required to be poverty, equality and gender proofed. This means that government departments, local authorities and state agencies must assess all policies, programmes at design and review stages, in relation to the likely impact that they will have, or have had, on poverty and on inequalities that lead to poverty. The purpose of the exercise is to reduce poverty. The same principle applies to equality proofing in line with equality legislation, and to gender proofing in line with statutory obligations regarding gender mainstreaming.
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World Bank, *Empowerment Handbook*
Useful Contacts

Central Statistics Office (CSO) www.cso.ie

Combat Poverty Agency, Bridgewater Centre, Conyngham Road, Dublin 8. Tel: 01 6706746 www.combatpoverty.ie

Community Workers Co-operative (CWC), 1St Floor, Unit 4, Tuam Road Centre, Tuam Road, Galway. Tel: 091 779030 info@cwc.ie www.cwc.ie

Equality Authority, 2 Clonmel Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 01 4173336 Email: info@equality.ie

European Anti-Poverty Network, Ireland (EAPN), 5 Gardiner Row, Dublin 1. Tel: 01 8745737 eapn@iol.ie

National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), 3rd Floor, Jervis House, Jervis Street, Dublin 1. Tel: 01 4785777 Email: nccri@eircom.net

Pobal, Holbrook House, Holles Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 01 2400700 www.pobal.ie

National Economic and Social Council (NESC) www.nesc.ie

National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) www.nesf.ie

Details of all of the international human rights instruments are available on the Dept. of Foreign Affairs website www.irlgov.ie/iveagh/policy/hr/hrconradh.htm

Treaties and Conventions and the Reports of the UN (Monitoring) Committees to the States Parties are available in alphabetical order on www.unhcr.ch