

People, Poverty and Participation

PEOPLE, POVERTY & PARTICIPATION

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Combat Poverty Agency
Bridgewater Centre
Conyngham Road
Islandbridge
Dublin 8

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We hope this discussion paper stimulates debate on how people and communities experiencing poverty can be supported to realise their right to have a say in decisions that affect them.

Combat Poverty
December 2008

The paper is produced as a policy discussion paper and the views expressed are not necessarily those of Combat Poverty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Terms such as ‘consultation’, ‘participation’, ‘partnership’, ‘community engagement’ and ‘community involvement’ are frequently used in Irish public administration since the implementation of the European Poverty Programmes.¹ Over time, these terms, and the concepts they imply, have on occasions been interpreted in different ways or have had their intent diluted. Nevertheless, they are still used to describe exchanges in various contexts such as:

- within communities and between communities
- between people, communities and government
- between people, communities and those who make policy
- between people, communities and organisations that work with them
- between people, communities, organisations *and* government policy-makers (the public administration system).

This policy discussion paper is primarily concerned with the latter context. Specifically, it sets out to explore if and how the Irish public administration system embraces and applies the concept of participation in decision-making. The focus is not on the extent to which community-based organisations engage with local people nor on methodologies and practical guidelines for undertaking participation. These issues, and the central role of community development in terms of strategy, approach and methodology for empowering people and communities, are dealt with in other Combat Poverty publications. For example, Combat Poverty has published a separate policy discussion paper that examines the potential of community development to

1 Three of these Programmes were administered in Ireland over a twenty-year period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. The participation of poor people in actions to combat poverty was a defining characteristic of the Poverty 1 and Poverty 2 Programmes. The Poverty 3 Programme (1989-1994) promoted participation but also used the idea of ‘partnership’ as one of its defining characteristics.

develop a 'voice' for the voiceless and to support the 'representative voice' of people experiencing poverty in the development of policy.²

This paper draws lessons from the practice of participation in Ireland and abroad. It also raises a number of discussion points with a view to strengthening opportunities in Ireland for the participation of excluded groups, particularly those experiencing poverty, in the design, formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies, programmes and services that affect them.

The policy discussion paper is structured in four chapters:

- Chapter 2 briefly discusses the relationship between participative and representative democracy. It also describes a number of participation models.
- Chapter 3 sketches aspects of the Irish and international policy contexts that support participation in decision-making by people experiencing poverty and organisations that work with them.
- Chapter 4 identifies and discusses a number of learning points from efforts to undertake participatory decision-making in Ireland and in other countries.
- Chapter 5 concludes the paper with a series of policy discussion points on supporting people and communities experiencing poverty to be at the heart of public decision-making.

2 Lee, A. (2006). *Community Development: Issues and Challenges*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

2. EXPLORING THE MEANING OF PARTICIPATION

2.1 Participative and representative democracy

Participation can be broadly defined as the process of taking part in different spheres of life.³ It operates in a number of arenas including the social (e.g. through friendships, family, communities), the economic (e.g. by being a worker or consumer), the cultural (e.g. through the arts or the practice of religion), and the political (e.g. involvement in the political process). The latter is known as participative democracy.

The focus of this paper is on participation in public policy and decision-making by people experiencing poverty and exclusion. Through participative democracy, civil society – individuals, along with community and voluntary groups – can engage in and influence decision-making by government and its agencies.

In representative or parliamentary democracy, public representatives are elected and they then represent the voice of the people in parliament. In the context of a parliamentary democracy, such as we have in Ireland, citizen and community participation in public decision-making is sometimes perceived as posing a threat to representative democracy. At the same time, there is a perception of a 'democratic deficit', suggested by falling membership of political parties, rising concern about voter participation and the realisation that between elections people, particularly people who experience poverty, disadvantage and inequality, may have limited influence on political decision-making.

3 Sidorenko, A. (2006). *Empowerment and Participation in Policy Action on Ageing*, Keynote Paper delivered to the International Design for All Conference, 2006, Rovaniemi, Finland. Available at <http://dfasuomi.stakes.fi/NR/rdonlyres/ABF1AF26-5D33-458A-ABAD-3E4E284FD85D/0/Sidorenko.pdf> (24 August 2007)

There are particular benefits to securing participation in policy-making among people experiencing poverty.⁴ Participation is linked with the right to integration and citizenship. While people in poverty experience social exclusion more strongly, they have access to fewer channels through which to exercise their rights, and meet with greater barriers to participation than other citizens. Ensuring their participation in policy-making implies their recognition as fully-fledged citizens who are capable of contributing to the development of society, especially to the design of more effective policies against poverty and social exclusion. Participation by the poor could be used as a benchmark against which government policy to strengthen government–citizen relations can be evaluated. Those measures that prove successful in engaging the poor may well be valuable in fostering greater public participation on the part of all citizens.

In the case of people experiencing poverty, the comment by participants at the First European Meeting of Citizens Living in Poverty that they were first and foremost ‘citizens’ before being ‘people in poverty’ reminds us that respect for the fundamental dignity of all human beings is a crucial value underpinning democracy.⁵ For democratic engagement to be true, the voicelessness and political powerlessness often experienced by people in poverty must be overcome.

The Irish Taskforce on Active Citizenship, which reported to the Government in 2007, outlined a specific rationale for the creation of an active citizenry. It included the idea that the quality of decision-making is enriched through high levels of civic engagement in the democratic process. A strong sense of belonging results for individuals and communities, while the democratic process itself is healthily challenged by the input of a varied range of voluntary and community organisations.⁶

4 Claey's, A. with Coussee, F., Heiden, S., Merckaert, A. and De Grande, L. (2001). ‘The Poor in Policy-Making on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Flanders (Belgium)’, in *Citizens as Partner: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy Making*. Paris: OECD

5 Lister, R. (2007). From object to subject: including marginalised citizens in policy making, *The Policy Press*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp 440

6 Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007). *Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship*. Dublin: Taskforce on Active Citizenship

Many of these arguments for participative democracy are captured by Baker (1997) who summarises them under four headings: equality, self-determination, community development and self-development.⁷

- *Equality*: Participative democracy promotes the idea that all citizens have equal status in society and supports a more equal distribution of power in collective decision-making. Different groups in society have varying abilities and resources to achieve what they want – to exercise their power. Some groups are stronger or more powerful than others. Decisions based on unequal power are more likely to benefit the power-holders.
- *Self-determination*: Participative democracy gives people control over their lives rather than others controlling them.
- *Community development*: Participative democracy helps create a sense of community and good social relationships. When people believe that their voice is being heard, they are less likely to feel excluded and more likely to feel accepted within their communities and within society.
- *Self-development*: Participative democracy helps people develop themselves as human beings and as citizens. When people fully participate in decision-making, they learn new skills, broaden their knowledge and develop relationships with others in society.

It is important that governments provide resources to enable participation in decision-making by people experiencing poverty. This is because poor people, and the organisations supporting them, are often far removed from political and civic processes, have less capacity and fewer resources to engage with such processes, and thereby risk become increasingly marginalised from public life.

For the purposes of this paper, participative democracy is understood as being a form of democratic engagement that is complementary to representative democracy. It does not replace representative democracy but rather acts as its ‘twin sister’.⁸

7 Baker, J. (1997). ‘What is participatory democracy?’, in Community Workers’ Co-operative (1997). *Strategies to Encourage Participation*. Galway: Community Workers’ Co-operative

8 Kohler-Koch, B., in Van Doosselaere, S. (2004). *Participatory Democracy, Civil and Social Dialogues*. Paper for the Fondation pour la Solidarité

2.2 The spectrum of participation

Participation is often described as spanning a range of levels – from low participation to high. Examples of low participation are: information gathering from people or communities and providing information to people or communities. Examples of high levels of participation are: taking part in referenda or involvement in fora where people actually exercise the power of decision-making.

Combat Poverty has long recognised the spectrum of participation. For example, it draws a clear distinction between *community involvement* and *community participation*.⁹ At the lower end of the spectrum, *community involvement* does not confer a decision-making capacity on the community. At the higher end of the spectrum, *community participation* enables community views to be sought and community representatives to be included in decision-making processes.

Participation and the engagement of communities is a key principle underpinning community development. In the context of an anti-poverty strategy, Combat Poverty understands community development to be a process that activates, encourages and supports groups of people experiencing poverty to join together in activities that:

- promote their common interest
- support and improve their communities
- support them in influencing and having a say in policies that affect them.

⁹ Craig, S. (1995). *Community Participation: A Handbook for Individuals and Groups in Local Development Partnerships*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

This understanding is underpinned by the following key principles:

- *Empowerment*: Community development involves working with people to enable them to take more control over decisions that affect them and their communities.
- *Working collectively*: Community development supports people to come together to identify the things that they want to change in their community and work together with others to achieve that change.
- *Participation*: Community development promotes the right of people to participate in decisions and structures that affect their lives.
- *Social justice and equality*: Community development is concerned with achieving social change that enables individuals, groups and communities to realise their full potential, uninhibited by unfair or discriminatory social structures and systems.

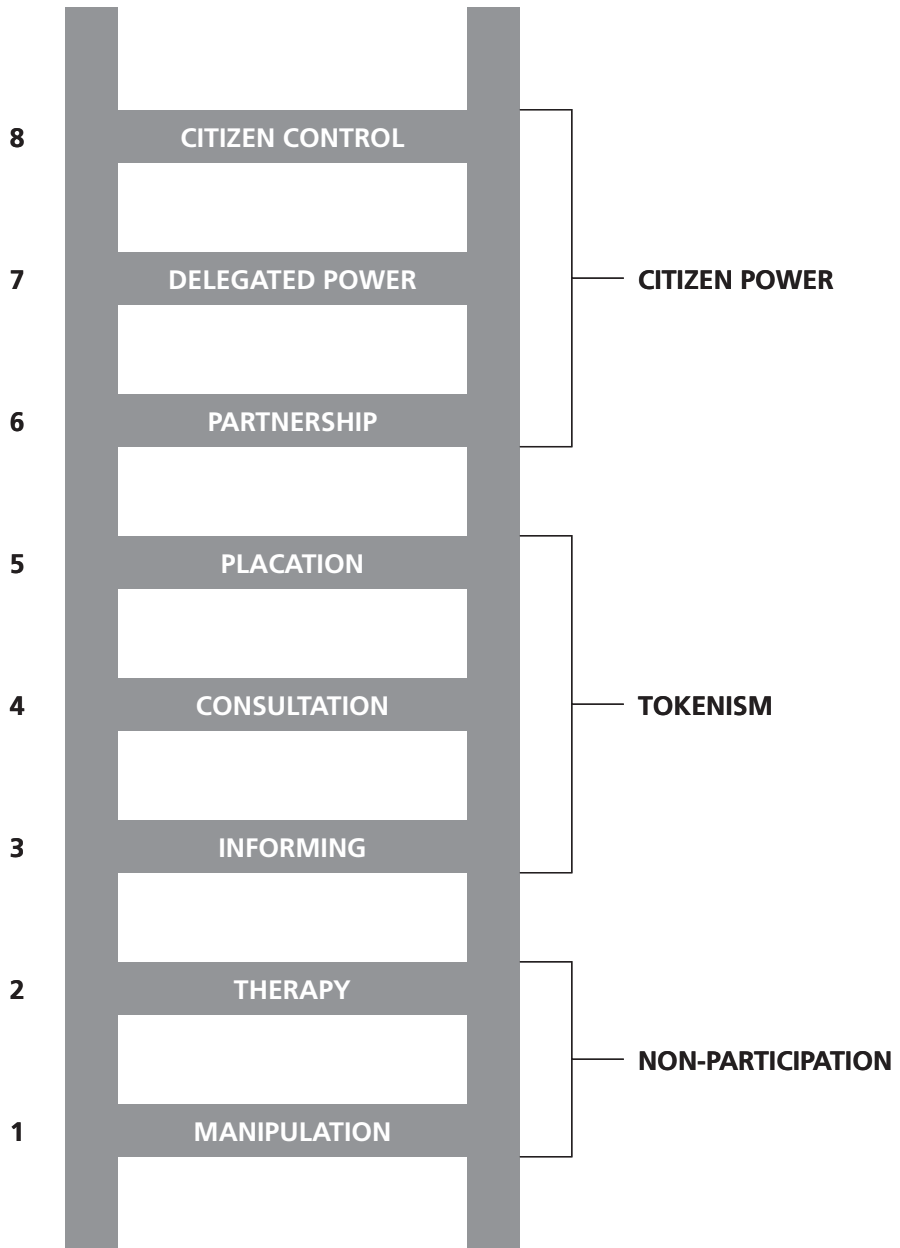
Although outlined some 40 years ago, Arnstein's ladder¹⁰ captures very well the spectrum of citizen participation. Each rung of the ladder (from the bottom up) extends the degree of participation and power of people in decision-making.¹¹ On the lower rungs of the ladder there is no participation. On the middle rungs, people are listened to but their views are not necessarily acted on, while at the top people have a degree of power in decision-making.¹²

10 Arnstein, A. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969

11 Corrigan C. (2007). *Background Paper: The Participation of Excluded Groups and their Representatives in Public Policy Structures and Decision-Making*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

12 Conroy, P., Mahon, M., Doyle, M., Reddin, S. with Byrne, E. (2008). *Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Supporting Hard to Reach Groups to Participate in Decisions that Affect their Lives*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation



- *Manipulation*: 'Participation' is viewed as a means of achieving public support for the plans of the authority.
- *Therapy*: This is non-participative and aimed at 'educating' the participants.
- *Informing*: This is a first step to participation, but with the emphasis on a one-way flow of information. There is no channel of feedback.
- *Consultation*: Attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings and public enquiries take place.
- *Placation*: This occurs through, for example, the co-option of local people on to committees. It allows citizens to advise or plan, but retains for power-holders the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice.
- *Partnership*: Power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power-holders. Planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared, for example through joint committees.
- *Delegated power*: Citizens hold a clear majority of seats on committees, with delegated powers to make decisions. They now have the power to assure accountability of the programme to themselves.
- *Citizen control*: Local people handle the entire job of planning, policy-making and managing, with no intermediaries between them and the source of funds.¹³

Arnstein's model is one of several that identifies the spectrum of participation to be one where control and decision-making shifts, to varying degrees, from authorities or 'power-holders' to the people, citizens or communities. These models suggest that more 'genuine' participation occurs at the higher levels of the ladder of participation.

Others suggest that each step towards higher levels of participation has a pre-requisite stage. So, for example, in a spectrum from the simple provision of information to joint decision-making, information is a pre-requisite for consultation; consultation is a pre-requisite for participation, and participation is a pre-requisite for joint decision-making. Therefore there cannot be consultation without information, there cannot be participation without consultation, and there cannot be joint decision-making without participation.¹⁴

13 Arnstein, A. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969

14 *Combat Poverty (2007). Submission to the OECD, Review of the Irish Public Service*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

The model devised by Bishop and Davis (2002)¹⁵ locates a range of consultation instruments along the participation spectrum (see Figure 2). So, for example, surveys are situated at the lower end of the participation spectrum, as they are a data-collection exercise. Referenda, on the other hand, are at the higher end of the spectrum, as participants exercise control over the outcome or decision.

Figure 2: Appropriate Consultation Instruments

MINIMUM PARTICIPATION		MAXIMUM PARTICIPATION		
INFORMATION	CONSULTATION	PARTNERSHIP	DELEGATION	CONTROL
Surveys	Key contacts	Advisory committees	Public enquiries	Referenda
Focus groups	Interest group meetings	Policy communities	Impact assessment studies	
Public information campaigns	Town hall meetings			
	Circulation of proposals			
	Public hearings			

Figure 2: Purpose of consultation and appropriate consultation instruments. Adapted from Bishop and Davis (2002: 21) and Shand and Arnberg (1996:21)

15 Bishop, P. and Davis, G. (2002), Mapping public participation in policy choices, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 61(1) pp 14-29, as quoted in Brackertz, N. et al (2005). *Community Consultation and the Hard to Reach: Concepts and Practice in Victorian Local Government*. Victoria: Institute for Social Research

In promoting the participation of people experiencing poverty in public decisions that affect their lives, a number of key questions emerge:

- Who decides on the appropriate level of participation?
- Who decides on the participants?
- Who decides on the level of resources to be applied in order to support participation?

In matters of public policy, such questions are typically the responsibility of government or statutory officials. These officials usually make the decision to initiate participation. The nature of the policy issue may shape the level of participation, the range of target participants and the level of resources to be applied. Consultation, a common public policy formulation instrument, is often understood as being 'top down'. In consultative exercises, the policy issues are often pre-selected by the policy-makers.

Pretty's (1995) typology of participation highlights the fact that the motive of those who practise participatory approaches is an important factor in shaping the type and nature of participation. Table 1 (next page) highlights some aspects of this typology.

Table 1: Types of participation and their characteristics¹⁶

<i>Type</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted or by answering questions. External bodies define problems and information-gathering processes and so control analysis. These types of consultative process do not concede any share in decision-making. There is no obligation to take on board people's views.
Functional participation	Participation is seen by external bodies as a way of achieving project goals, especially reduced costs. May involve shared decision-making, but tends to happen only after major decisions are already made by external bodies.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, not just the means, to achieve project goals. Groups take control of local decision-making and determine how available resources are to be used.

White (1996) developed a model that draws attention to conflicting ideas about why or how participation is being used and to differences in what it may mean to those implementing it and those on the receiving end.

¹⁶ Adapted from Pretty, J. (1995), in Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking 'participation' models, meaning and practices, *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 272

Table 2: Typology of interests¹⁷

<i>Form of participation</i>	<i>What participation means to implementing body</i>	<i>What participation means to those on the receiving end</i>	<i>What participation is for</i>
Nominal	Recognises the fact that they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display or ‘show’
Instrumental	Efficiency; limits funders’ input, draws on community contributions and makes projects more cost-effective	Cost – time spent working on project and related activities	Means to achieve cost-effectiveness and acquire local facilities
Representative	Sustainability; avoids creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape of the project	Gives people a voice in their development
Transformative	Empowerment; enables people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	A means and an end. A continuing dynamic

Treseder (1997) devised a model that describes five degrees of participation. This model suggests that each type is a different but equal form of participation and that no one type is better than another. The degree of

¹⁷ Adapted from White, S. (1996), in Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking ‘participation’ models, meaning and practices, *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 273

participation employed depends on the context, the nature of the activity, group, situation, etc. It also draws attention to the idea of 'initiation'. This is significant because the initiator is a key influence on how much power or control (participation) is to be allowed to others. Theseder's model¹⁸ was developed in relation to children and young people. Its key elements are as follows:

- *Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults*: Children/young people come up with the ideas and come to adults for advice, discussion and support. Adults do not direct but offer their expertise for young people to consider.
- *Child-initiated and directed*: Children/young people come up with the ideas. Adults are available but do not take charge.
- *Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children*: Adults come up with the ideas but children/young people are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. Children's views are considered and children are involved in making the decisions.
- *Children assigned but informed*: Adults decide on project/activity and children/young people volunteer to participate in it. Children/young people understand the project, they know who decided to involve them and why. Adults respect young people's **views**.
- *Children consulted and informed*: Adults design the project/activity but children/young people are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their opinion is taken seriously.

2.3 Valuing empowerment

To value the expertise of people living in poverty and to value their participation in decision-making that affects them is to empower them to act on their own behalf. It is a recognition that without their participation, other forms of knowledge or expertise are the privilege of an elite in decision-making processes, resulting in power inequalities being reinforced.

18 Treseder, P. (1997). *Empowering Children and Young People*. London: Children's Rights Office/ Save the Children

As has been observed, 'it is important not to presume that public participation always leads to empowerment.'¹⁹

Three concepts of empowerment illustrate differences in perceptions of empowerment:²⁰

- *De jure empowerment*: The formal rights attached to citizenship, such as the right to vote. This form of empowerment exists as a fundamental right.
- *De facto empowerment*: Exercising control or influence over a decision, e.g. through participating in a ballot in order to change or do something. By taking part in such a ballot people will have de facto exercised their power, even if they are unaware of the relationship between this and the outcome. In this way, de facto empowerment is independent of perception.
- *Subjective empowerment*: The feeling, or perception, of being able to influence, control or affect a situation. This is understood as a psychological state that does not need to be linked to actual power. People can have subjective power even if they do not have de facto power. This occurs if people feel that they have power over things that they cannot, in fact, influence. The opposite is also true in that when people believe they do not have power, even if this is not the case, they experience subjective disempowerment.

The above outline helps explain how different opportunities for public participation can affect power relationships. Public participation can increase subjective empowerment because it has the potential to redress power imbalances and social inequalities, improve public access to decision-making, and contribute to making services more responsive and appropriate to community needs.

The focus on empowerment is central for people and groups working to prevent and eliminate poverty. This is because it is understood as a transformative principle for more equal power structures, relations and processes.

19 Creasy, S., Gavelin, K. and Potter, D. (2008). *Everybody Needs Good Neighbours. A Study of the Link Between Public Participation and Community Cohesion*. London: Involve.

20 Ibid.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has briefly discussed the relationship between participative and representative democracy. It has outlined a number of participative models and typologies. Various, these illustrate the idea of a progressive dimension to participation in decision-making. Some types of participation are minimal, tokenistic or passive while others reflect more active decision-making. An incremental approach to participation is also described where, in order to advance to more active forms of participation, it is necessary to build on less active forms such as information and consultation.

Bishop and Davis' matrix illustrates the idea that specific tools to support participation can be located on the spectrum and that these then indicate the level of participation. The notion of conflicting ideas about why or how participation is used is presented in White's typology. Treseder's model of five degrees of participation is a non-hierarchical model of participation that describes different but equal forms of participation, depending on the context.

Lastly, the concept of empowerment is discussed with a particular focus on how it can contribute to redressing power imbalances and its importance as a principle in supporting change for people experiencing poverty.

3. EXPLORING THE INTERNATIONAL AND IRISH POLICY CONTEXTS FOR PARTICIPATION

As noted in the Introduction, in an Irish policy context the concept of community involvement owes much to the European Poverty Programmes that operated over twenty years from the mid-1970s to 1994. Today the move to greater public involvement in decision-making within public administration is a feature of international trends in public sector management²¹ and in improving governance. Governance refers to the rules, practices and behaviours relating to the exercise of power. Participation by people experiencing poverty in decisions that affect their lives is relevant to governance because:

- It improves the flow of information between the State and its population.
- It improves accountability between institutions and the citizens.
- It brings people and their expertise closer to State institutions.
- It gives voice to those most affected by public policies.²²

A range of international institutions uphold the value of political participation as a right or as a necessary dimension of good governance and democracy. Participation in decision-making is of concern to international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). Aspects of their commitment to this are briefly outlined below.

3.1 United Nations

The right to political participation is enshrined in a number of international conventions to which Ireland is a signatory. Under Article 25(a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, people are guaranteed

21 Brackertz, N. et al (2005). *Community Consultation and the Hard to Reach: Concepts and Practice in Victorian Local Government*. Victoria: Institute for Social Research

22 Van Doosselaere, S. (2004). *Participatory Democracy, Civil and Social Dialogues*. Paper for the Fondation pour la Solidarite

the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives.²³ The UN High Commission for Human Rights describes this provision as:

a broad concept which relates to the exercise of political power, in particular the exercise of legislative, executive and administrative powers. It covers all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at international, national, regional and local levels.²⁴

3.2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

The OECD has identified a rationale as to why people in poverty should be consulted and has outlined the benefits that accrue to governments and society:²⁵

- to improve the quality of public policy by tapping into increased sources of information, hearing various perspectives and a range of solutions in an increasingly complex policy context
- to meet the challenge of the emerging information society that requires and makes possible faster interactions with citizens and better information management
- to integrate public input into the policy-making process as citizens come to expect to have their voices heard

23 Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (1976). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 23 March 1976, in accordance with Article 49, Geneva: United Nations. www.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1996) *General Comment No. 25: The right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service (Art. 25): 12/07/96. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, General Comment No. 25 (General Comments)*. www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/d0b7f023e8d6d9898025651e004bc0eb?Opendocument

24 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1996). *General Comment No. 25: The right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service (Art. 25): 12/07/96. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, General Comment No. 25 (General Comments)*. www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/d0b7f023e8d6d9898025651e004bc0eb?Opendocument

25 OECD (2001). *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy Making*. Paris: OECD

- to respond to the demand for greater accountability and transparency in policy and decision-making
- to strengthen trust in governments and public institutions and stop the erosion in voter participation and the lack of trust in public institutions.

The OECD's understanding of participation in public policy provides for a continuum which extends from information, to consultation, to active participation:²⁶

- The first level is the one-way process of information-giving where governments provide information to citizens in a passive or active way.
- The second level involves consultation. This is defined as a two-way process in which citizens provide feedback to governments on a specific issue or range of issues through clearly delineated and specific processes.
- The highest level is that of active participation. This is based on a partnership between the government and its citizens, where both are involved in defining the process and content of policy-making.

3.3 European Union

Civic participation²⁷ has been on the European Commission's agenda for a considerable time. The participation of people experiencing poverty was a defining characteristic of the First and Second Poverty Programmes in the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The Third Poverty Programme (mid-1990s) promoted the concept of participation and partnership in decision-making. More recently, efforts across the EU to tackle poverty through the formulation of National Action Plans have also promoted and required the mobilisation of all stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty, in these action plans.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The term 'civil society' extends beyond community and voluntary organisations and other NGOs to include trade unions, employers' organisations and professional bodies, as well as individual citizens

A Commission White Paper²⁸ reflects on the contribution of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It points specifically to their role in supporting and mobilising people, including those experiencing exclusion and discrimination. It highlights their capacity to act as an early warning system for policy-makers and the policy debate.

One of the specific action points included in the White Paper is the creation of a code of conduct for consultation with civil society.²⁹ The code espouses the guiding principle that consultation is a means of giving interested parties a voice, but not a vote, i.e. it cannot replace or hinder the democratic process of governance as undertaken by elected officials.

The EU has also recognised that although NGOs play a crucial part in representing the interests of people experiencing poverty, people themselves are capable of expressing, and may desire to express, their own experiences, views and understanding of poverty issues. The European Social Inclusion Strategy (2000) contained, as an objective, the mobilisation of all relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty. Subsequently, beginning in 2001, the *European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty* has become an annual forum where people who are living in poverty meet directly with policy-makers. Although this does not entail participation in direct decision- or policy-making, it is a significant event as it highlights the desire and the capacity of people who live in poverty to articulate their own issues.

In addition to sending representatives to the EU Meeting, a number of member states have adopted the practice of holding their own national meetings of people experiencing poverty. Such a meeting has not yet taken place in Ireland, although it is under consideration by EAPN (Ireland).

28 Commission of the European Communities (2002). *Communication from the Commission: Towards a reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue – General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission*, Brussels, 11.12.2002 COM(2002) 704 final

29 Ibid.

3.4 UK policy context

Closer to home, in the UK, it has been noted that the concept of community empowerment has gained increasing prominence within central and local government.³⁰ For example, the Local Government Act 2000 included several proposals to reinforce the idea that involvement, participation and empowerment mechanisms are key to providing more responsive public services and stronger communities.

In 2007 the National Empowerment Partnership (NEP) was launched to improve the quality, co-ordination and evidence of empowerment across England. The partnership provides supports and information to the Government in its efforts to implement the vision of a truly participative society and promote the fundamental role of empowerment in achieving a more equal, cohesive and democratic society.

Subsequently, the UK Government published a White Paper entitled: *Community Empowerment, Communities in Control, Real People Real Power*.³¹ The White Paper asserts that the proposed reforms are '**designed to shift power, influence and responsibility** [emphasis in original] away from existing centres of power and into the hands of communities and citizens. These are the people who ultimately must hold power in a mature democracy.'³² The White Paper contains proposals to extend, from April 2009, a legal duty for a range of public authorities to inform, consult and involve representatives of local people (besides formally elected representatives such as councillors) in the exercise of their functions. Interestingly, the legal duty extends engagement with local populations beyond the more passive forms of participation (information and consultation) to more active involvement. Possible types of involvement include opportunities to:

30 Southeren, R., Bell, L., Coppock, S. and Woods, M. (2008). *Local Area Agreement, National Indicator For Benchmarking Exercise*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth Socio-Economic Research and Intelligence Observatory

31 Department for Communities and Local Government (2008). *Community Empowerment, Communities in Control, Real People, Real Power*. London: HMSO

32 Ibid., p. 12

- influence decisions
- provide feedback on decisions, services and policies
- co-design/work with the authority in designing policies and services
- co-produce/carry out some aspects of services for themselves
- work with the authority in assessing services.

The Duty to Involve was first laid down in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. In July 2008 official guidance to public authorities on how to discharge their duty to involve was included in the Department for Communities and Local Government's *Statutory Guidance, Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities*.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are being instituted to support the role of regional government offices and local authorities in building empowered communities. Under the LAAs there are 198 national indicators, including National Indicator 14 which will measure the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality. This will be measured annually.

3.5 Irish policy context

Having sketched some aspects of the international context for participation in public decision-making, aspects of the Irish policy context are now highlighted. There are many policy commitments and structures that underpin public involvement in decision-making and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them all. Table 3 captures some of the key initiatives relevant to the engagement of people or groups experiencing poverty and of organisations that work with them.

Table 3: Examples of policy initiatives and structures supporting the participation in policy-making of people or groups experiencing poverty and of organisations that work with them

<i>Policy initiative</i>	<i>Some participative structures</i>
National economic and social policy	A number of poverty-related groups, selected by Government, participate in the Community and Voluntary Pillar of social partnership. Through this they may participate in relevant committees and structures such as the National Economic and Social Council, the National Economic and Social Forum, Monitoring Committees related to the National Development Plan, other Committees related to the implementation of <i>Towards 2016</i> , the National Social Partnership Agreement
National Action Plan on Social Inclusion	The Social Inclusion Forum (one national event annually); periodic consultation exercises; technical advisory committees
National Drugs Strategy	Local Drugs Task Forces
Better Local Government (local government reform)	County and City Development Boards County and City Strategic Policy Committees Community fora Groups implementing Social Inclusion Measures
National Traveller Accommodation Strategy	Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees
National Primary Care Strategy and User Engagement Strategy	Local Primary Care Teams
National Homelessness Strategy	Local Fora for the Homeless

There is also a range of national programmes, supported in their implementation by local participative structures such as:

- the National Childcare Investment Programme and City/County Childcare Committees
- the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme and Integrated Local Development Companies
- the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) Programme and Area Implementation Teams (AITs)
- projects in the Family Resources Centre Programme, supported by the Family Support Agency
- projects in the National Community Development Programme.

3.5.1 National social partnership

At national policy level, the structures and processes of social partnership are a key area in which the community and voluntary sector is directly involved in national decision-making, i.e. in policy formulation. In 1996, on the invitation of the then Taoiseach, John Bruton, a number of organisations concerned with poverty, unemployment, social welfare and community development were invited to join in national talks on the development of a social partnership agreement. Since then, the Community and Voluntary Pillar has been directly involved in negotiation processes for all aspects of the social partnership agreements, with the exception of the national wage talks.

The constituent members of the Pillar are selected and agreed on by the Government. Over time its composition has changed. In part, this has resulted from the Government agreeing to broaden the interests participating in the Pillar. For example, during the past decade, the National Association of Building Co-operatives and The Carers Association were invited to participate. The composition has also changed because some members of the Pillar decided not to ratify a recent social partnership agreement, resulting in their exclusion from the Pillar. The Community and Voluntary Pillar that negotiated the current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, was comprised of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE), Congress Centres Network, CORI Justice Commission, National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), National Association of Building Co-operatives (NABCO), Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH), Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Age Action Ireland,

The Carers Association, The Wheel, The Disability Federation of Ireland, Irish Rural Link, The Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament, The Children's Rights Alliance and Protestant Aid. The Community Platform subsequently endorsed the agreement and now participates in a re-configured Community and Voluntary Pillar.

This paper does not examine the experience of participation in national partnership decision-making by interests concerned with poverty and social exclusion. However, findings from other work suggest that, within the partnership process, one of the concerns is that the community and voluntary sectors do not enjoy parity of esteem with the statutory sector.³³ Nonetheless, it has also been argued that the impact of the Community and Voluntary Pillar in moderating government economic and social policy in social partnership in the past should not be underestimated, and although its influence at present may be limited, this may increase again in the monitoring of *Towards 2016* and in future negotiations.³⁴

3.5.2 The Developmental Welfare State

One of the most influential policy analyses to emerge in recent times has been *The Developmental Welfare State*, produced by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC). The NESC is comprised of social partners including government departments, employer bodies, trade union and farming organisations and community and voluntary bodies. The *Developmental Welfare State*³⁵ affirms a policy acceptance of the need for and the benefit of engagement by a range of actors outside the public sector in efforts to respond to economic and social issues. It acknowledges the accumulated expertise of groups in civil society in addressing the needs of specific social groups and in having insights into how services should be delivered and public policies altered. It also acknowledges that the State 'shares public authority and public resources with a large number of "third parties" in order to attain public objectives'.³⁶

33 Duggan, C. et al (2008). *The Role and Aspirations of the Non-Governmental Sector in Articulating and Representing the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality*. Dublin: Equality Authority

34 Larragy, J. (2006). Origins and Significance of the Community and Voluntary Pillar in Irish Social Partnership, *Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3

35 National Economic and Social Council (2005). *The Developmental Welfare State*. Dublin: NESC

36 *Ibid.*, p. 212

3.5.3 Reaching Out Guidelines

In 2005 the Irish Government's White Paper *Regulating Better*³⁷ committed to the development of guidelines to promote better quality consultation across the public service. This resulted in the publication, in 2006, of the *Reaching Out Guidelines*.³⁸ The Guidelines are designed to be used by government departments and public bodies wishing to consult with stakeholders. Not legally binding, they incorporate a recognition that:

public policy-making can be enhanced through the active involvement and contribution of all stakeholders with an interest in particular policy developments. By ensuring that interested parties can express their views about a particular proposal, the decision-making process becomes better informed, more rigorous and more accountable.³⁹

3.5.4 White Paper: Supporting Voluntary Activity

Six years before the publication of the Guidelines, the White Paper: *Developing a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*⁴⁰ clearly recognised and articulated the right of people in poverty and those who represent them to be consulted with regard to policy, particularly in relation to decisions that directly affect them. The White Paper on Voluntary Activity stated:

Participation can be defined as an exchange between citizens and government, between those who make policy and people affected by policy choices. Participation should lead to more successful outcomes. Its precise form is shaped by the problem at hand.⁴¹

37 Government of Ireland (2005). *Regulating Better*. Dublin: Stationery Office

38 Department of An Taoiseach (2006). *Reaching Out: Guidelines on Consultation for Public Sector Bodies*. Dublin: Department of An Taoiseach

39 Ibid.

40 Government of Ireland (2000). *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*. Dublin: Stationery Office

41 Ibid.

The White Paper clearly establishes the limits of public participation in decision-making:

It is the Government that is ultimately solely responsible for making key decisions on social and economic policy issues – no matter how extensive a process of prior consultation that may have taken place [emphasis in original]. However, the context in which these constitutionally-based powers and responsibilities are exercised is increasingly one of social partnership.

There is some political support for the idea that public administration processes need to extend beyond 'prior consultation' to dialogue. For example, at a Combat Poverty Conference in 2007, the then Junior Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs said:

Consultation is not simply about putting an invitation in the national or local press. It must be something more, and part of an ongoing dialogue around programmes and initiatives.⁴²

This view is also held by those who support new models of governance and genuine participative processes. From this perspective, consultation is a process and not a one-off event and it needs to be negotiated, be sustainable and be strategically managed.⁴³

The White Paper on Voluntary Activity was underpinned by a number of principles that are relevant to supporting the participation in decision-making of people and communities experiencing poverty. The principles were reaffirmed most recently in the national social partnership agreement *Towards 2016*.⁴⁴

42 Minister Pat Carey TD, Combat Poverty Conference 2007

43 Cook, D. (2002). 'Consultation for a Change? Engaging Users and Communities in the Policy Process', quoted in Conroy, P. and Mahon, M. (2008). *Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Supporting Hard to Reach Groups to Participate in Decisions that Affect their Lives*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

44 Government of Ireland (2006). *Towards 2016. Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*. Dublin: Stationery Office

- *active citizenship* – the active role of people, communities and voluntary organisations in decision-making which directly affects them
- *helping people to participate in issues that affect them* by developing positive action programmes to support the marginalised to become involved in issues and concerns affecting themselves and their communities
- *promoting and strengthening social dialogue* through which individuals and communities must be facilitated to speak about the problems affecting them and be part of the practical response.

3.5.5 Taskforce on Active Citizenship

The concept of active citizenship received further attention in 2006 when the Government launched the Taskforce on Active Citizenship. This initiative recognised that formal democratic institutions and practices, such as those of the elected government, do not exhaust the parameters of active citizenship but are enhanced by it. In its paper *The Concept of Active Citizenship*⁴⁵ the following definition is provided:

Active Citizenship refers to the voluntary capacity of citizens and communities working directly together, or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social and political power in pursuit of shared goals.

3.5.6 Local Government

Ten years prior to the publication of the Government's *Reaching Out Guidelines*,⁴⁶ a programme of significant local government reform was published, in 1996.⁴⁷ This gave rise to a range of new local structures. The structures involved local elected representatives, local State agencies, the social partners, including the community and voluntary sector and local development agencies working together to implement agreed integrated economic, social and cultural strategies for county and city administrative areas.

45 Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007). *The Concept of Active Citizenship*. Dublin: Taskforce on Active Citizenship

46 Ibid.

47 Government of Ireland (1996). *Better Local Government. A Programme for Change*. Dublin: Stationery Office

It is noticeable that many of the opportunities for structured and ongoing participation are found at the local level rather than at national level. The participation of the community and voluntary sector and local communities is provided for by the legislation governing local government bodies. Consequently, for example, participation in the County Development Boards, which are direct decision-making fora, is not a choice for local authorities but a requirement on them. Further, related to the issue of clear legislation is the issue of structures. Although not direct decision-making structures, the Strategic Policy Committees in local authorities and the Social Inclusion Measures groups are somewhat closer to decision-making than many other structures because, anecdotally, it would appear that their recommendations are rarely rejected by the Corporate Policy Groups or the local Councils. These could be considered therefore to have increased access to participative structures, rather than themselves acting as participative structures.⁴⁸

Most recently, the Irish Government has published a Green Paper, a consultative document on stronger local democracy.⁴⁹ The following are amongst the options for civic participation in local decision-making:

- petition rights – enabling local communities to formally raise issues
- participatory budgeting – enabling local communities to prioritise funding
- town meetings – regular open meetings to discuss local government matters
- plebiscites – formal local votes on specific proposals.

Combat Poverty has concluded that the Green Paper proposals are very limited in building participation and democracy among people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The Paper includes no specific proposals to build their capacity to participate in decision-making. Working with disadvantaged communities and groups requires a long-term investment in human resources, new structures of participation, time, and consistency of approach by the local authorities.

48 Corrigan C. (2007). *Background Paper: The Participation of Excluded Groups and their Representatives in Public Policy Structures and Decision-Making*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

49 Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2008). *Stronger Local Democracy, Options for Change*. Dublin: Stationery Office

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter briefly sketches aspects of the international policy contexts supporting the participation in decision-making of people experiencing poverty and organisations that work with them. It provides a more discursive analysis of the Irish policy context. It concludes that the policy framework supporting participation by citizens and communities, including people experiencing poverty and the organisations that work with them, is extensive and, at the level of principle, is relatively strong.

4. FIVE LEARNING POINTS FROM PRACTICE

Drawing from a range of Irish and international experience, this chapter outlines a number of learning points about the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision-making.

4.1 The need for a shared understanding of the nature and scope of participation

The first learning point is that the experience of participation may often differ for those who initiate it and those who experience it.

Evidence from the experience of some communities involved in urban regeneration in Ireland supports this viewpoint. During participation processes associated with regeneration initiatives, communities often had far broader aims than local authorities were willing or able to concede.⁵⁰ Other research evidence⁵¹ reveals that people's motivations for engaging in participatory processes lead to different expectations and experiences. Central government departments, regional and local authorities, employers' and trade union organisations, NGOs working against poverty and social exclusion and other civil society bodies were surveyed to examine the extent of involvement of all the relevant actors in the mainstreaming of social inclusion. The survey found that, within Irish public policy, consultation, though weak, was perceived to be carried out to the highest extent while participation fell some way behind. It also highlighted clear differences between the perspectives of NGOs and others on the nature of participation of NGOs and that of people experiencing poverty. For example:

50 MacLaran, A., Clayton, V., Brudell, P. (2007). *Empowering Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas: Towards Greater Participation in Irish Urban Planning*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (www.combatpoverty.ie)

51 O'Kelly, K.P. (2007). *The Evaluation of Mainstreaming Social Inclusion in Europe*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

- The majority of respondents did not agree that the *participation and engagement* of NGOs occurred to any great extent. Central government and employer organisations differed from the majority view on this.
- Over one-third expressed the view that people living in poverty *influenced* policy either **not at all** or **to a small extent**. More strikingly, this view was held by over two-thirds of NGOs working to address poverty. With regard to the extent to which these NGOs were consulted about policy development, the majority (61 per cent) of NGOs themselves believed this happened **not at all** or **to a small extent**. This is in striking contrast to the response of central government agencies, 56 per cent of whom believed this happened to a great or very great extent.
- Only one-third of respondents believed that people experiencing poverty were *consulted* on policy developments to a 'high' extent. When asked to assess the extent to which these NGOs influenced policy development, only 8 per cent of NGOs expressed the view that this happens to a great or very great extent, as opposed to 35 per cent of government departments.

The experience of Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees (LTACC) is also relevant here. Established under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, these are comprised of elected officials, local authority staff, members of the Traveller Community and representatives of relevant housing authorities. What is significant about the establishment of the LTACCs is that, in essence, the 1998 Act enshrines in law the principles of consultation with, and participation of Travellers at local level. The establishment of the local Traveller accommodation consultative committees provides a forum for discussion, consultation and Traveller participation.⁵² The role of the LTACC, as set out in the 1998 Act, is to advise the local authority on:

- the provision and management of accommodation for Travellers
- the preparation and implementation of any accommodation programme for the functional area of the appointing local authority
- the management of accommodation for Travellers.

⁵² National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (2004). *Review of the Operation of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998. Report by the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee to the Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal*. Dublin: National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee. www.environment.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,14966,en.pdf

Within this framework there is considerable scope for Travellers to have some influence over the accommodation plans and policies that are voted on by the elected council members. While in theory this places the LTACCs beyond mere consultation,⁵³ anecdotally the reality is somewhat different.

If groups working with people experiencing poverty interpret a process to be about decision-making while others interpret it to be about information giving or an exchange of views, false expectations and frustration are likely to emerge. If this is a common occurrence, there is a risk of institutional mistrust and cynicism. The implementation of guidelines for effective involvement are particularly relevant to minimising this risk. These guidelines are the output of a transnational project supported by the European Commission.⁵⁴ They acknowledge that, while the purpose, objective and expected outcomes of a participation process are initially undertaken by the organisation that initiates a participation process, it is also imperative that these are sufficiently flexible to allow participants to comment, advise on and agree them.

4.2 Make sure that participation takes place at the right point in the decision-making process

The second learning point is that participation is important when strategic decisions are being made. For example, the design and formulation of policies shape the subsequent implementation of various policy programmes and initiatives. Research into the experience of urban planning by communities in disadvantaged areas revealed that communities tended not to engage in strategic planning processes, as the local relevance of national, regional or city-wide plans was often not immediately relevant to them. The failure to engage at a sufficiently early stage often became a serious impediment later when potential local community impacts were more apparent, but the strategic decisions could not be revisited.⁵⁵

53 Corrigan C. (2007). *Background Paper: The Participation of Excluded Groups and their Representatives in Public Policy Structures and Decision-Making*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

54 Combat Poverty, National Anti-Poverty Strategy Unit in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, National Anti-Poverty Networks, Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, STAKES, I.O. Integrar and Odyssee. MO. *Guidelines for Effective Involvement*. Dublin: authors

55 MacLaran, A., Clayton, V., Brudell, P. (2007). *Empowering Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas: Towards Greater Participation in Irish Urban Planning*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (www.combatpoverty.ie)

Other learning from research on the policy activity of Community Development Projects, Family Resource Centres (FRCs) and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP)⁵⁶ called for these organisations to be involved in policy design and become participants in policy development rather than just being consulted at the beginning of a policy process and being merely represented in policy developments.

In Ireland, many local community and voluntary organisations working with people in poverty engage in various policy arena structures that could be said to have a stronger policy implementation function and a more limited public policy-design function. In a highly centralised political and public administrative system such as operates in Ireland, local structures may be primarily implementation bodies for national strategies. Examples include the Local Drugs Taskforces and the RAPID Area Implementation Teams.

Such bodies contribute to enhancing the participation of local people and organisations in the development, planning and implementation of local strategies and services and the allocation of some resources, but their scope to strongly determine public policy at local level is limited. NESC has observed that for area-based partnerships under the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) the greater part of the resources available to them comes through from national level and has to be used in accordance with centrally set and uniform criteria.⁵⁷

The same analysis suggests that central agencies may be inclined to regard local area-based partnerships as delivery vehicles for national programmes whose level and conditions are determined by the centre, rather than as supports to local agents to determine how to achieve the best local outcomes from public resources. However, it is also argued that while the overall framework of the LDSIP may be centrally directed, significant scope remains for local input to determine priorities, budget allocation and deployment of resources and that the LDSIP plays a significant role in building community capacity and participation.⁵⁸

56 Airey, S. (2006). *Communities, Voices and Change*, Dublin: Combat Poverty

57 National Economic and Social Council (2005). *The Developmental Welfare State*. Dublin: NESC

58 Private communication to author

4.3 Ensure that participation structures and processes provide for people and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion

A third learning point is that participation structures and processes need to ensure that they include and respect people experiencing poverty and the groups that work with them or represent them. This is especially the case when decision-making relates to the issues and interests of people experiencing poverty.

Differences in skills, resources, knowledge and levels of empowerment are amongst the underlying inequalities that can mitigate against the participation in decision-making of people living in poverty or the organisations that represent them. This can result in an imbalance in participatory structures and processes. Building the capacity of people experiencing poverty and the organisations that represent them is key to overcoming some of the barriers to participation.

ATD Fourth World in Dublin has worked to develop a dialogue with people living in poverty, underpinned by a commitment to learning from people's experience. This process started with visiting and meeting individuals and families experiencing severe and generational poverty. They included people who were homeless or living in rented accommodation of poor quality; adults and families with reading and writing difficulties or with children in care.

The dialogue ultimately led to a two-day roundtable meeting on poverty issues. This involved working with delegations of people in poverty in the UK and Belgium, meeting with officials from government departments and statutory bodies and making a submission. A key element of the project was the exploration with participants of the conditions necessary for their involvement in discussions about overcoming situations of extreme poverty. The project revealed, on the part of the participants, a widespread sense of being isolated and excluded from policy-making processes.⁵⁹

59 ATD Fourth World Activity Report (2005). Report on Practice to Policy Work (unpublished)

Similarly, other evidence reveals that those experiencing poverty believe their views do not matter and that their lives are unimportant to those in power.⁶⁰ Recent work on exploring participation in decision-making by 'hard to reach' groups identifies the significance of the role of power and authority in shaping processes experienced by poor people. Being denied access to decision-making positions renders people 'powerless'. Efforts to become organised and to participate in decision-making are affected by decisions prohibiting the free association of individuals or by the effects of other decisions such as inadequacies in basic service provision. For example, asylum seekers in direct provision accommodation are usually not allowed to form residents committees or any representation system. For people with disabilities, the lack of appropriate transport or communication technologies contributes to hampering their opportunity to participate in public policy processes and opportunities.⁶¹

Evidence from the implementation of Community Fora and the RAPID Programme suggests that, although various participation structures and processes are in place, people experiencing poverty may still remain distant from decision-making. As part of the reform of local government, a Community Forum has been established within each local authority area to represent the community and voluntary sector. The Forum is comprised of a number of clusters representing various sectors or interests, for example sport, poverty, etc. Delegates from the Community Forum participate in the County/City Development Board and related structures.

A study of anti-poverty groups on the Community Fora⁶² has revealed that in many cases, anti-poverty groups did not have the capacity, resources or experience to identify and develop common policy positions among themselves. The study also noted that some clusters on the Community Fora, such as sporting organisations or environmental groups, may have little or no interest in anti-poverty work.

60 University of Bristol (2000). *Listen, Hear. The Right to Be Heard. Report of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power*. Bristol: Policy Press and the UK Coalition against Poverty

61 Conroy, P. and Mahon, M. (2008). *Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Supporting Hard to Reach Groups to Participate in Decisions that Affect their Lives*. Combat Poverty

62 Cosgrove, S. (2006). *The Voice of People in Poverty in Local Government Structures and Processes – A Study of Community Fora*, Dublin: Combat Poverty

As a strategy to promote the needs of the socially excluded, a number of Community Platforms have been set up in local authority areas, alongside Community Fora. Two such examples are the South Dublin Community Platform and the Wicklow Community Platform. This development emerged from an awareness that an independent community platform centred on the groups concerned with social inclusion is essential to ensure that the perspective of social exclusion is properly represented.⁶³

The RAPID Programme was set up in 2001 to direct State assistance to improve living conditions in 25 designated disadvantaged areas in Ireland. It has been acknowledged that difficulties remain in reaching the most marginalised people within RAPID communities. People experiencing addiction problems, people with mental illness, members of the Traveller Community and young people and the elderly were all considered to be bypassed by mechanisms such as public meetings, liaison groups and surveys.⁶⁴ Community participation is a strong principle of the RAPID Programme. The mechanisms referred to above were described in Chapter 2 as sitting at the lower end of the participation spectrum where people are passively rather than actively engaged.

4.4 Strengthening the public sector to build effective participatory decision-making practice

Resourcing and supporting people living in poverty, in their neighbourhoods or as members of various groups and communities, to articulate their own needs and to contribute to decision-making is a focus of many public policies and programmes. It is also a key purpose of community development. There continues to be a need to support community development processes. However, in this section the focus is on a less frequently addressed issue – supporting the public sector to build the participation of community and voluntary groups in decision- and policy-making.

63 Harvey, B. (undated). *The Role of the Community Sector in Local Social Partnership*. Dublin: Area Development Management

64 Fitzpatrick Associates (2006). *Evaluation of the RAPID Programme*. Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Australia provides a good example of such efforts. In 2003 the Queensland Government introduced a strategy to improve community engagement across the public sector. It explicitly adopted the OECD engagement model (described in Chapter 2 above) and initiated a whole-of-government programme to enhance the capacity of public servants to contribute to better engagement practices with the community. The goals of this programme were:

- to plan, design, implement and evaluate community engagement activities
- to develop the tools, techniques and skills required to deliver effective community engagement outcomes
- to manage the expectations of a range of stakeholders, including interest groups, industry members and citizens
- to identify and manage risks
- to embed good community engagement practice in government planning, approval and decision-making processes.

The *Managing Community Engagement* programme was designed for people in public sector management roles who deliver services and programmes direct to the community and who have responsibility for improving community engagement practices in their region, team or local area.

A range of resources, including online learning resources, was produced. The programme was developed by the Open Learning Institute of TAFE Queensland, with the support and consultation of the Community Engagement Division (CED), now in the Department of Communities, the Department of Industrial Relations and other Queensland Government agencies.⁶⁵

In Western Australia, the Civics and Citizens Unit in the Prime Minister's Department undertook an audit to examine the State government's participation and consultative practices.⁶⁶ The audit found there was little consistency across public agencies on participative practice. Where some work had been undertaken it was often in isolation and with little regard

65 <http://www.onlinelearning.qld.gov.au/materials/ce/online/ce/info/learning/guide/t4s5.htm>

66 Gillgren, C. (undated). *Embedding Community Participation in Public Sector Culture and Practice*. <http://www.engagingcommunities2005.org/abstracts/Gillgren-Christina-final.pdf>

for community expectation. Since the findings of the audit, the Western Australia Government has put in place a strategy to support people and team development, support organisational learning, implement new processes and support services and corporate controls.

In Ireland, there is limited information on the nature and extent of participative approaches as employed by public agencies or across government. Some initial scoping work, undertaken at central government level, has identified that there is some, though limited, availability of formal training, development and education on the topics of poverty, social inclusion and community development across government departments. It has also noted that the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS), operating across the civil service, does not include poverty, social inclusion or community development as core competencies.⁶⁷ In the urban regeneration field, it has been identified that urban planners should have a better sense that developers *and* communities are stakeholders in their work and that training in facilitation and mediation techniques would be beneficial to planning decision-making processes.⁶⁸

For participation to succeed, policy-makers must recognise the usefulness of participation, be willing to engage in dialogue and value the right of people in poverty to participate. Capacity must include planning for participation and ideally should employ participatory approaches. It should support and facilitate staff to engage in a participatory manner. The following core elements for good practice in participation at the level of the policy-maker have been identified:

67 Bethel Consulting (2007). *Inservice Education/Training in the Civil/Public Service. Poverty, Social Inclusion and Community Development*. Combat Poverty: unpublished

68 MacLaran, A., Clayton, V., Brudell, P. (2007). *Empowering Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas: Towards Greater Participation in Irish Urban Planning*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (www.combatpoverty.ie)

Table 4: Level Three – The Policy/Decision-Makers⁶⁹

Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a willingness to engage in dialogue • Acknowledging and valuing the right of people experiencing poverty or social exclusion to participate in decision-making • Planning for participation • Developing bottom-up approaches • Supporting and facilitating staff to engage in a participatory manner • Communicating to participants the nature of participation for a particular event: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – information sharing – consultation – agenda setting – input to decision-making – joint working on solutions • Developing feedback mechanisms
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing necessary supports to overcome barriers to involvement by people experiencing poverty or social exclusion or by organisations working with them • Developing linkages, networking and collaboration with representative groups to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – access individuals experiencing poverty/social exclusion – gather evidence – agree agendas – agree priorities – work jointly on solutions • Supporting and stimulating greater co-ordination between representative organisations • Developing working partnerships to increase understanding in both directions and to develop appropriate solutions • Engaging in negotiation to effect positive change at local, regional or national level • Seeking and providing constructive feedback

⁶⁹ Eustace Patterson Ltd (2008). *Evaluation of the Having Your Say Programme*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

4.5 Moving towards standards for community engagement

The experience of participation in decision-making processes is inconsistent and varied. A fifth key learning point is perhaps better addressed as a question. To what extent can objective measures support a more uniform and satisfactory process that delivers value to those seeking participation (both community and statutory organisations) and to those engaging in participative processes (both community and statutory organisations)? Combat Poverty has identified initiatives in Scotland and New Zealand that offer some guidance and learning in this.

National Standards for Community Engagement – the Scottish experience⁷⁰

In Scotland, the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) places a duty on local authorities to initiate, maintain and facilitate community planning and, in doing so, consult and co-operate with community bodies and other public sector bodies. The Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) was commissioned by Communities Scotland (a government agency whose role is to help deliver the policy objectives of Scottish Ministers) to work with key Scottish agencies, voluntary organisations and most importantly communities, to identify the issues that needed to be addressed in this context.

The Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement were developed with the involvement of over 500 people from communities and agencies throughout Scotland to improve the quality and process of community involvement. The aim of the Standards is to support and assist communities and agencies to work more effectively together, and to support agencies to fulfil their statutory obligation as set out in the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003). The Standards set out key principles, measure and behaviours which underpin effective engagement. They were developed to cover both formal and informal types of engagement.

The National Standards for Engagement are an effective, practical tool, providing a framework to help people influence the planning and delivery

⁷⁰ Corrigan C. (2007). *Background Paper: The Participation of Excluded Groups and their Representatives in Public Policy Structures and Decision-Making*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

of services in their local areas.⁷¹ The Standards define community engagement as:

Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community groups, to help them to both understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences.⁷²

The 10 Standards are summarised as follows:

- *Involvement*: We will identify and involve the people and organisations who have an interest in the focus of the engagement.
- *Support*: We will identify and overcome any barriers to involvement.
- *Planning*: We will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken.
- *Methods*: We will agree and use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.
- *Working together*: We will agree and use clear procedures that enable the participants to work with one another effectively and efficiently.
- *Sharing information*: We will ensure that necessary information is communicated between the participants.
- *Working with others*: We will work effectively with others who have an interest in the engagement.
- *Improvement*: We will develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of all the participants.
- *Feedback*: We will feed back the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected.
- *Monitoring and evaluation*: We will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieves its purposes and meets the National Standards for Community Engagement.⁷³

Although what is declared in the Standards is by no means new information, the legislative background that underpins them is unique, as is the high level

71 Communities Scotland (2005). *National Standards in Community Engagement*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

of commitment to their development. While the Standards themselves are not compulsory, they have been endorsed by a number of Ministers in the Scottish Executive. The extent to which they have been endorsed by key national community and voluntary organisations and public agencies is also very significant. In this sense, the Standards can be viewed as a model of best practice or as a framework to be emulated by other governments.

The Scottish experience of setting National Standards for Community Engagement is a good example of conceptual clarity and agreed performance standards against which the experience of community engagement can be assessed.

Community Engagement in Primary Health Care – the New Zealand experience⁷⁴

The New Zealand experience is situated in the area of primary health care. It highlights the idea of minimum requirements in community engagement and the targeting of specific populations for engagement. It also highlights the idea that while local variance in participatory structures is acceptable, this must be in the context of maintaining genuine community involvement in governance. Notwithstanding these guidelines, the example points to the issue of power imbalances within participatory structures and the challenge of moving beyond tokenism.

New Zealand's Primary Health Care Strategy⁷⁵ called for the establishment of local Primary Health Organisations (PHOs) that would be responsible for delivering and co-ordinating primary health care services to all of those enrolled with them.⁷⁶ Each PHO is accountable to the District Health Board (DHB) within whose jurisdiction it falls. Subsequent to the publication of the Primary Health Care Strategy, the Ministry of Health published a set of Minimum Requirements for PHOs.⁷⁷ These minimum requirements state that:

74 Neuwelt, P. (2007). Community Involvement in Primary Care Services Leads to Better Care for Vulnerable Groups in New Zealand, in *Action on Poverty Today*, Summer 2007, No.17, Dublin: Combat Poverty

75 Kinf, Hon A. (2001). *The Primary Health Care Strategy*. Wellington: Ministry of Health

76 Neuwelt. P. (2007), *op. cit.*

77 Ministry of Health (2001). *Minimum requirements for Primary Health*. Wellington: Ministry of Health

PHOs will be required to work with those groups in their populations (for example, Maori, Pacific and lower income groups) that have poor health or are missing out on services to address their needs.

and

PHOs must demonstrate that their communities and consumers are involved in their governing processes and that the PHO is responsive to its community. The DHB must be satisfied that community participation in PHO governance is genuine and gives the communities a meaningful voice. In addition, DHBs will require PHOs to show how they respond to their communities.

The Ministry of Health released guidelines for establishing PHOs and commented at some length in these about community involvement. While acknowledging that PHOs will have different structures, this will not be considered as justification for not securing genuine community involvement in their governance. The guidelines draw on examples of existing primary care organisations that involve the Maori community in their governing structures.⁷⁸ These include:

- Health Care Aotearoa, a national network of community driven and governed primary health care services. Most of these organisations are governed by management committees comprising elected community representatives and staff representatives. Each committee sets policy and appoints a manager for the day-to-day running of the service.
- Ngati Porou Hauora, an integrated health, development and support services provider. This has a board comprised of one representative from each of the seven communities it covers, a representative of the clinic trust, a staff representative and a clinical advisor. The organisation also secures additional community input through stakeholder consultation events in each of its communities. These ensure that annual business plans reflect community need and provide a means of getting feedback about current service provision.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Corrigan C. (2007). *Background Paper: The Participation of Excluded Groups and their Representatives in Public Policy Structures and Decision-Making*. Dublin: Combat Poverty (unpublished)

⁷⁹ Ibid.

An evaluation of PHOs undertaken in 2005 considered the issue of community involvement in their governance.⁸⁰ Overall, the evaluation concluded that the community appeared to be well represented at board level in PHOs. In many districts Maori organisations provided strong representation and seemed to be leading efforts to make community participation a reality. The method by which nominations to the boards were secured varied, but many were seeking to give the community and community groups real power in decision-making and implementation. However, some concern was expressed about community representatives deferring to the medical professions on the boards.

Overall, the evaluation concluded that while community representation on PHO boards appears to be increasingly effective, in some areas a move beyond tokenism was still required.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has identified five key learning points from the practice of participation. These are highlighted because they are considered to be strategic influences on strengthening the role, experience and outcomes from participatory decision-making. The five learning points are:

- The need for shared understanding of the nature and scope of participation
- Making sure that participation takes place at the right point in the decision-making process
- Ensuring that participation structures and processes provide for people and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion
- Strengthening the public sector to build effective participatory decision-making practice
- Moving towards objective standards for community engagement.

80 Cumming, J., Raymont, A., Gribben, B., Horsburgh, M., Kent, J., McDonald, J. and Mays, N. (2005). *Evaluation of the Implementation and Intermediate Outcomes of the Primary Health Care Strategy: First Report*. Wellington: Health Services Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington

5. A WAY FORWARD

This paper has explored concepts of participation. It has examined how international and Irish public policy frames participation and has highlighted a number of key learning points from the practice of participation.

In light of these and evidence from other jurisdictions, it is clear that, at the level of accepting and promoting the principle of participation, Ireland has come a long way in the past 20 years. At national level, particularly noteworthy are: the involvement of the Community and Voluntary Pillar in national partnership negotiations; the publication of the *Reaching Out Guidelines*⁸¹ which promote consultation by public sector bodies; the range of participatory structures at local level; and the legislative underpinning of participation in some arenas.

However, it is also clear that a more in-depth commitment beyond consultation to community engagement and empowerment is in evidence elsewhere. It would appear that Ireland lags behind practice in other jurisdictions in areas such as:

- embracing active models of participation
- employing objective standards to support engagement and participation
- adopting changes in and supports for whole-organisation public sector working practices to embrace participative methods and techniques
- commitments to assessing and evaluating the experience of community engagement in public policy.

This chapter now concludes the paper by identifying a series of discussion points to stimulate debate on how to strengthen the participation in public decision-making of people in poverty and the organisations that work with them. These discussion points are framed on the premise that participatory decision-making is a 'democratic good' and that people have a right to participate in decisions that affect them.

81 Department of An Taoiseach (2006). *Reaching Out: Guidelines on Consultation for Public Sector Bodies*. Dublin: Department of An Taoiseach

5.1 Moving from passive participation towards empowerment

This paper has established that although the language of participation has taken root in Irish policy-making, many of the current policy structures and processes are characterised by elements at the lower end of the participation spectrum – consultation and exchange of information and views. The paper has also highlighted the importance of empowerment as a way of redressing power imbalances in decision-making and the significance of this for people and groups concerned with preventing and eliminating poverty. Effective participation in decision-making by people in poverty is a strategy and a process, not a stand-alone mechanism or an occasional occurrence.

A key discussion point is: How can the evident will of policy to engage in participative processes be extended to embrace, more frequently, active rather than passive participation? Is it time for the political and public administration systems to directly engage and dialogue with the promoters of participative democracy to explore how the latter can be strengthened to complement representative democracy? Would a Green Paper, independently facilitated and developed participatively, be appropriate in this context? Such an effort could build on the *Reaching Out Guidelines* operating within the public sector that provide guidance on consultation.

5.2 Developing practices and competencies for participatory decision-making

This paper has established that a number of jurisdictions outside Ireland have put in place proactive whole-of-organisation or whole-of-government strategies to strengthen practice and competency in supporting participatory decision-making.

In an Irish context, how could the public administration system acknowledge and recognise the discrete competencies required to support effective community engagement in decision-making, in particular the engagement of people and communities experiencing poverty and the organisations that work with them? Could these competencies be integrated into the professional competencies required for relevant roles within the public sector?

With a view to developing such competencies, a training and learning programme for public sector officials could be supported on a whole-organisation basis within public bodies. Similarly, working practices of public sector bodies could be reviewed with a view to embracing and ‘institutionalising’ practices that support meaningful participation.

5.3 Benchmarking and assuring participation standards

The Scottish experience of developing National Standards for Community Engagement is still embryonic. However, the process of dialogue between various sectors and communities to set out key principles, measures and behaviours which underpin effective engagement offers a model that could be employed in an Irish context. The Standards also provide a basis for ensuring some consistency in expectations around participation, approaches to participation and a way of benchmarking performance.

The development of a national indicator in Britain on subjective empowerment and its implementation from 2009 to measure levels of subjective empowerment is also embryonic. It too offers a mechanism for benchmarking people’s influence on decision-making, particularly by local statutory authorities.

In an Irish context, it could be useful for the State at local and national levels to come together with community and voluntary organisations, particularly those working to tackle poverty, to establish national standards for community engagement. This task would be independently facilitated. Performance against these standards could be independently assessed periodically and be subject to ongoing monitoring.

A related aspect of assuring high standards in participatory decision-making is to promote best practice in situations where meaningful participation is already occurring. More commitment and resources to establish an evidence base of the ‘added value’ of consultation with and participation by people in poverty and their organisations in policy- and decision-making would be useful. Such analysis could address whether this investment by all stakeholders needs to be redirected in ways that lead to greater participation in decision-making.

5.4 Strengthening the capacity of people in poverty to participate in decision-making processes

Combat Poverty has a long track-record of promoting community development as a means of supporting people in poverty to identify and articulate their own needs and to work collectively to create social change that addresses the causes of poverty and creates solutions to poverty. At local level, where people are not members of representative organisations, or are not connected to existing social services, innovative methods and resources are required to reach them and to support participation in decision-making that is relevant to them.

While strengthening community development has not been the primary focus of this discussion paper, this subject is of course centrally relevant to the topic of supporting people living in poverty to be at the heart of decision-making. A number of previous perspectives from Combat Poverty relating to community development are, therefore, reiterated here.⁸² Firstly, it is important that State funding programmes for community development recognise and value the independence of community voices, and promote the empowerment of local people to collectively organise so as to change the way current systems and approaches reproduce poverty and disadvantage. It is also important that the relationship between statutory bodies and community development groups is negotiated, and includes the willingness by State agencies to engage with community groups on issues of change resulting from community development processes.

The understanding of community development as contributing to democratic life reflects an understanding that a healthy democracy is one that accommodates analyses, experiences and proposals that may be contrary to the status quo. The Government's commitment to reduce poverty and recent commitments on active citizenship, as outlined in the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, are key policy contexts for this.

⁸² Combat Poverty (2007). *Submission on Community Development and Disadvantage and on the Community Development Programme*. Dublin: Combat Poverty

5.5 Conclusion

This paper has reviewed and discussed a number of concepts of participation relevant to citizen and community participation in public decision-making. It has been particularly concerned with the engagement of people and communities experiencing poverty and the organisations that work with them. It has explored how participation is framed in Irish public policy and has extracted a series of key learnings and examples from the experience of participation in Ireland and elsewhere.

Finally, it has concluded with a series of discussion points which may stimulate some debate on the extent to which Irish public policy is serious about meaningful participation and the challenges involved in achieving it.

Terms such as 'consultation', 'participation', 'partnership', 'community involvement', and 'community engagement' are frequently used in Irish public administration.

This paper focuses on the engagement between people, communities, organisations and government policy makers. It sets out to explore if and how the Irish public administration system embraces and applies the concept of participation in decision-making.

It draws lessons from the practice of participation in Ireland and abroad. It also raises a number of discussion points with a view to strengthening opportunities in Ireland for the participation of excluded groups, particularly those experiencing poverty in the design, formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies, programmes and services that affect them.



Bridgewater Centre, Conyngham Road, Islandbridge, Dublin 8

Tel: 01 670 6746 Fax: 01 670 6760 Email: info@combatpoverty.ie Website: www.combatpoverty.ie