

SUBMISSION

BY THE

COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY

ON

THE CHARTER

FOR

VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

FOREWORD

The Combat Poverty Agency has a statutory responsibility to advise the Minister for Social Welfare on all aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty in the State. Voluntary organizations have an important role to play in the struggle against poverty. The purpose of this submission is to present the initial views of the Combat Poverty Agency on the proposed charter for voluntary organizations announced by the Minister for Social Welfare in June 1989, and on the related white paper on voluntary social services which is also in preparation.

It is the Agency's view that unless principles which underlie the relationships between voluntary organizations and the State are clear, it is not possible to develop effective structures and mechanisms of support. The first task of any charter or white paper should be to produce a clear statement of principles. Thus this submission focuses on the principles upon which voluntary - statutory relations should be guided.

In particular, the submission focuses on principles which will enhance partnerships between the statutory, voluntary and community sector; the principles of funding arrangements; the principles which guide support systems for the voluntary sector; accountability and evaluation; and the principles whereby community and voluntary organizations have a voice in the formulation of policy.

This submission first examines the broad social policy context of the charter and the white paper. It then deals with the two core issues of funding and access to policy-making. A number of specific issues concerning accountability are addressed in section 4, such as transparency, evaluation, and registration.

The Agency, in putting forward these proposals for the charter, is presenting its own views. While it has close contact with many community projects and parts of the voluntary sector and has drawn on this experience in preparing this submission, it does not claim to represent the views of any such organizations.

31st July 1992

KEY PRINCIPLES

1. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

- * *The State shall have the primary role and responsibility to meet social need, whether through its own efforts or through voluntary or private sectors.*
- * *The charter should accept that there is an important role for the State, through government, semi-State bodies, and regional and local authorities, in the identification of new social needs.*

2. FUNDING ISSUES

- * *Clear criteria for funding voluntary organizations should be established by all statutory agencies. These should be publicly available and accessible.*
- * *The charter should affirm that the funding of staff and core activities within voluntary and community organizations is at least as important as the funding of capital projects and innovation.*
- * *The charter must require statutory bodies to establish systems, values and priorities which guide their approach to funding. Procedures whereby funding is reviewed must be set down. Statutory bodies must lay down procedures whereby refusals to fund can be reconsidered or appealed. The tradition whereby particular statutory bodies declare themselves closed to funding applications from new voluntary groups or particular organizations should be renounced.*
- * *A stable funding environment is important for voluntary and community organizations to plan ahead and develop their work.*
- * *Funding for voluntary and community organizations should be multi-annual (three to five years).*
- * *Funding for voluntary and community organizations should come from a multiplicity of sources. This range should be broadened.*
- * *National Lottery funding is not an appropriate primary funding source for voluntary and community organizations. If it continues to be used, it should be depoliticized, have clear and fair criteria and not be used to replace statutory funding.*
- * *Staff and volunteers in voluntary and community organizations have the right to trained and professional management. This will mean the provision of training for management committees in the voluntary and community sector and the allocation of resources to make this possible.*

3. POLICY-MAKING

- * *Partnerships between the voluntary, statutory and private sector should be promoted as part of any strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion at a local level.*

- * *Voluntary-statutory consultation under the Local Government and Housing Acts should be endorsed by the charter, extended, and made an effective part of the process whereby services are planned and delivered.*
- * *Voluntary organizations have the right to participate in the process of planning health and social services and other services relevant to social need and poverty. This may require statutory bodies to circulate planning documents, budgets, and policy proposals to voluntary organizations and to establish consultative fora where they meet with voluntary and community organizations to plan the provision of services.*
- * *There should be a clear point of contact between each government department and the voluntary organizations relevant to its work. Each department should have a clear set of procedures or mechanisms for communicating with voluntary and community organizations, such as an annual conference or devoting part of its annual report to describing its relationships with voluntary and community organizations and the issues arising from this relationship.*
- * *The voluntary and community sector is a social partner and entitled to national representation accordingly.*
- * *Representatives of the voluntary and community sector should be appointed to the boards of relevant semi-State bodies, to the National Economic and Social Council and to the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community.*
- * *Resources must be allocated to facilitate and promote the participation of voluntary organizations in the policy process. Each statutory body and government department relevant to poverty and social need should provide resources and training that will make possible the effective participation of voluntary and community organizations in the decision-making process.*
- 4. **ACCOUNTABILITY**
- * *Voluntary organizations should be transparent in their work.*
- * *Statutory bodies and organizations should be transparent in their work, with criteria similar to those applying to voluntary and community organizations.*
- * *The work of the voluntary, community and statutory sectors should be evaluated. The charter should recognize that a multiplicity of evaluation approaches are possible and desirable; and that evaluation should not be tied exclusively to financial criteria.*
- * *Voluntary organizations should be registered and should operate under a simplified form of incorporation.*
- * *Consumers have the right to be involved in the planning and delivery of services. The charter should require publicly-funded voluntary and community organizations to take steps to ensure the greater participation of consumers within their structures, activities, and*

membership: voluntary, community and statutory organizations should be expected to provide an audit each year on the manner in which they have furthered the objective of consumer participation. Funding should be conditional on adequate levels of consumer participation.

- * *Voluntary and community organizations should be accountable to the social needs and rights of their communities and consumers.*
- * *Voluntary and community organizations have the right to speak out on behalf of those they serve.*
- * *The evolution and progress of the charter should be monitored.*

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1. THE CONTEXT

1.1 The nature of the charter

The word 'charter' itself presents difficulties, and has caused confusion within the voluntary and community sector. The word implies that people or organizations which hitherto have not had particular rights should now have such rights. Whether this is the most useful analytical framework in which to pursue the question of voluntary-statutory relationships is questionable. It may be more useful to view the charter as the process of laying down the principles whereby voluntary-statutory relationships should be guided.

There are some expectations that the charter will 'solve' the problem of voluntary-statutory relationships in Ireland. This is too ambitious. There are many problems in the voluntary-statutory relationship, and it would be unreasonable to expect the charter to resolve them all. More realistically, the charter should lay down, within a modest framework, principles which will lead to a significant improvement in that relationship. This is the approach taken here.

1.2 The scope and scale of the community and voluntary sector

Theoretically, the voluntary sector in Ireland is very large. It includes, for example, schools and hospitals which are voluntary in their origins, character and management, although they are funded to a greater or lesser extent by the State. It is not the intention of the Agency, nor within its competence, to touch on these wider relationships. At the same time, the broad manner in which the State views these relationships is not entirely unconnected to those parts of the voluntary and community sector with which the Agency is more familiar.

Although the original statement of intent of the Minister for Social Welfare referred only to voluntary social services, the community and voluntary sector in Ireland is much wider than this limited definition. The sector includes groups and services that range from small, informal, community-based groups to large companies with substantial State subsidies providing services for thousands of people. Although most of these organizations are termed 'voluntary', and almost all rely to a greater or lesser extent on voluntary effort, significant numbers now employ professional staff.

Many people question whether there is in Ireland an identifiable 'voluntary sector' or 'community sector'. Certainly it would prove impossible at the present time to find a united voluntary or community sector with clear and cohesive views about the role of the voluntary and community sector in Irish society. At the same time, voluntary and community organizations share a number of features in common. These include a commitment to unpaid effort (though not always entirely out of choice); the use of an association (formal or informal) to pursue particular goals; and being not-profit-making in nature. In European countries, useful terms such as "associations", "non-governmental organizations" (NGOs), and the "social economy" are employed to describe this field of work.

The Combat Poverty Agency, for its part, works most closely with community groups engaged in anti-poverty work at local level, and to a lesser degree with regional and national organizations engaged in anti-poverty work. Most of these groups see themselves not merely as the providers of social services, but as agents for social change. The charter should acknowledge the scope, range, and breadth of the voluntary and community sector in Ireland.

1.3 Government departments relevant to the charter

The voluntary and community sector in Ireland comes within the remit of many different government departments. A charter which addresses the issues arising purely from the experience of voluntary and community organizations linked to the Department of Social Welfare is unlikely to make progress. Many voluntary and community organizations come under the aegis of the Departments of Health, Education, Labour, Agriculture, Environment, and Justice. It is essential that the principles adopted by the charter apply equally to all those parts of government and public administration likely to be affected.

Similarly, many voluntary organizations and community groups also deal with local authorities (for example county councils, urban district councils, or borough councils) or regional authorities (like health boards) or semi-state bodies (e.g. FAS, Udaras na Gaeltachta).

It is worth noting those governments departments which have the most significant role in the funding of the voluntary and community sector. The table lists the principal departments involved, the amount of funding, and some examples of funding involved (figures are for 1990).

Department	Amount	Examples of funding
Health & health boards	£113.33m	Section 65
Labour	£40m	FAS (SES)
Education	£26.54m	Adult education, VECs, youth services
Environment	£16.4m	Social housing, recycling
Social Welfare	£1.77m	Misc. Grants, Community Development Fund, women's groups
Justice	£1.74m	Probation services, FLAC

Source: Department of Social Welfare, 1991

The Department of Social Welfare has emerged as a funding body for the the voluntary and community sector only in the past ten years. The principal departments involved in the funding of the voluntary and community sector remain the Departments of Health (and the respective regional health boards), Labour, and Education. This context is doubly important if the charter is to win acceptance beyond the Department of Social Welfare. The implementation of the charter will require the cooperation of a range of government departments and different tiers of government, including the regional and local authorities and the semi-State bodies.

1.4 The respective roles of the State and the voluntary and community sector

The respective roles of the State and voluntary services in civil society are, in one sense, too large an issue to be addressed by the charter. These roles touch on fundamental questions of democracy, of the individual and the State, and civic responsibility. In practical terms, these roles are especially important when we examine how (i) existing and (ii) future social needs should be met.

(i) Meeting existing needs

In many respects, the role of the voluntary and community sector in Ireland conforms to a European pattern. It provides basic services, and also fulfils a niche role where it complements State services. It is distinctive insofar as it provides basic services but receives in some fields very low levels of State funding to carry out such tasks. The voluntary and community sector not only complements and supplements State provision, but in some areas is either the dominant or the sole provider of services. The voluntary and community sector in Ireland acts as a basic provider in the legal advice area, in sheltering the homeless and in child care, for example. In recent years, the volume of work of the voluntary and community sector has not only grown but extended into many new areas, such as rural underdevelopment, sexual abuse, rape, substance abuse and violence against women.

It is important that the charter recognize and set limits to the role of the voluntary and community sector. The voluntary and community sectors alone cannot meet the basic needs of income support, shelter, nutrition, housing and basic health care. Unreal expectations may be generated concerning the capabilities of the voluntary sector if such roles are expected of it by government and public administration.

*** Principle: the State shall have the primary role and responsibility to meet social need, whether through its own efforts or through voluntary or private sectors.**

(ii) Meeting new needs

Poverty replicates itself in new ways all the time, and new forms of poverty emerge just as others diminish or become less acute. As emerging needs are identified, various options may be considered so as to meet them. Provision by voluntary or community organizations may not necessarily be the appropriate response, particularly if voluntary organizations with the suitable combination of professionalism, experience or standards do not exist in the field.

Several voluntary and community organizations have expressed the fear that new responsibilities may be thrust upon them which they are ill-equipped to meet, particularly if they are, in effect, replacing services from which the State has withdrawn. The part replacement of statutory housing provision by voluntary and cooperative housing since 1987 gives some weight to these fears. Likewise, the provision by community groups of literacy services is an interesting question, granted that primary educational tasks are specified as a State responsibility by the

Constitution.

The identification of social need has traditionally been considered the function of the voluntary sector: indeed, community and voluntary organizations have been praised for this role. There is no necessary reason why they should hold a monopoly on this important function, and that the State has no role to play here. Whilst one can understand that the identification of new needs by the State is likely to lead to resource implications, overall social efficiency is not well served by the absence of any statutory role in the identification of new social needs.

Precedents exist for a statutory role in the identification of new social needs. For example, pioneering work was carried out in this field by the Mid-western Health Board in 1991 in its studies of new social concerns within the remit of the board's work.

***Principle: the charter should accept that there is an important role for the State, through government, semi-State bodies, and regional and local authorities, in the identification of new social needs.**

2. FUNDING ISSUES

The current arrangements for the funding of voluntary and community organizations have attracted widespread adverse criticism from voluntary and community organizations, for a number of reasons. These include:

- low levels of funding;
- lack of criteria, or the public availability of criteria;
- hidden criteria for funding;
- the lack of mechanisms for the negotiation of funding;
- short or limited duration of funding;
- the multiplicity of funding sources; and
- the role of the national lottery. Each is dealt with in turn.

2.1 The level of funding

There is no ideal level of statutory funding which a voluntary or community organization should receive. Most voluntary and community organizations expect to raise a certain amount of finance themselves, either through subscriptions, charges, donations or other private sources. Few expect, or desire, total statutory funding. Despite the constant complaints by voluntary organizations that they are under-funded, fears by statutory bodies that all voluntary organizations expect full statutory funding for all their services do not appear to be justified.

The level of funding for many voluntary organizations falls well below that which could be considered reasonable, and well below the European norm. Some voluntary organizations receive very small quantities of statutory funding. Some receive none at all, despite the considerable value of their work. At the other end of the spectrum, a very small number of voluntary organizations receive high levels of statutory funding. The charter should lay down the general principles on which statutory bodies expect to make funding available to voluntary organizations.

2.2 Criteria, and the availability of criteria

There are convincing arguments that funding systems should lay down clear criteria for allocations. Principal of these are the requirements of fairness and efficiency. The work of both voluntary organizations and public administration is devalued when it is felt that allocations are made on a unclear basis which is not open to public scrutiny. The work of voluntary organizations is inefficient if allocations are not made on the basis of need or planning, or on some similar rational basis.

Payments under s.65 of the Health Act are an important source of funding for voluntary and community organizations. Two problems concern the allocation of s.65 grants. First, criteria are generally not available explaining the basis on which funds are allocated. The Department of Health has issued no defined schemes to cover s.65 allocations. Second, in practice, payments are often used to cover end-of-year deficits incurred by voluntary organizations in the course of a year. The present use of these grants may even encourage financial irresponsibility in spending patterns by voluntary organizations. Department of Health and

health board allocations, including s.65 grants, are the most important funding source for the voluntary sector, so the reform of these funds is urgent.

***Principle: clear criteria for funding voluntary organizations should be established by all statutory agencies. These should be publicly available and accessible.**

2.3 Hidden criteria for funding

Despite the lack of publicly available criteria for the funding sources of voluntary and community organizations, criteria have nevertheless emerged. Funders show a preference for funding capital projects rather than current budgets; for funding institutional rather than community projects; for funding innovation rather than on-going work; and of being reluctant to enter long-term commitments for the provision of services.

Very few funds are employed to provide finance for staff posts, yet staffing is one of the key determinants of the quality of work of voluntary and community organizations. There are several negative consequences of the lack of funding for staff or for core funding generally. These include the inability of voluntary and community organizations to offer staff long-term contracts, with consequent insecurity and low levels of remuneration. As a result, staff turnover in many voluntary and community organizations can be high, with resulting discontinuity, inefficiency and instability for the project or organization.

***Principle: the charter should affirm that the funding of staff and core activities within voluntary and community organizations is at least as important as the funding of capital projects and innovation.**

2.4 The lack of mechanisms for the negotiation of funding

There is no sense in the voluntary sector that it negotiates a level of funding with the statutory sector. Allocations seem to be made on the basis of short-term cash-flow availability, on precedent, or on no clear basis whatsoever. It can be difficult for new organizations to attract statutory funding, even when they are clearly meeting newly-identified needs. Likewise, it is possible for funding to continue for well-established organizations long after they have ceased to carry out valuable services. There are no mechanisms whereby a refusal to provide funding can be reconsidered or appealed. Some organizations find it impossible to obtain funding for no apparent reason.

Reforms are required in the manner of assessing the value of work carried out by a voluntary organization applying for funding, and the pattern of funding itself. Whilst not an exhaustive list, the criteria that may be considered in assessing the value of work carried out by a voluntary or community organization could include:

- the size of the organization;
- the nature of its work;
- the target groups which it serves;
- the extent to which it evaluates its services;

- accountability to consumers;
- the manner in which it documents its work;
- the extent to which it adds to the value of existing services ('additionality');
- its staffing needs; and
- the level and commitment of volunteers.

Such criteria would introduce a sense of predictability and stability into funding, and, perhaps more importantly, a greater sense of fairness concerning allocations. Linked to these criteria, funding bodies should develop a pattern of funding. Several approaches are possible:

- the funding of core staff;
- the funding of core elements of a project;
- the funding of a set percentage of budget (20%, 40%, 60%, 80% etc).

***Principle: the charter must require statutory bodies to establish systems, values and priorities which guide their approach to funding. Procedures whereby funding is reviewed must be set down. Statutory bodies must lay down procedures whereby refusals to fund can be reconsidered or appealed. The tradition whereby particular statutory bodies declare themselves closed to funding applications from new voluntary groups or particular organizations should be renounced.**

2.5 The duration of funding

Most funding for voluntary organizations is provided on an annual basis. Two problems arise. First, annual budgeting gives voluntary organizations little opportunity, incentive or reason to plan ahead. Second, the experience of many voluntary organizations is that the grant decision is not taken until well into the year: the time and manner in which the money eventually arrives is itself uncertain. Voluntary and community organizations find themselves unable to deploy financial and human resources to the best effect. This is inefficient.

***Principle: a stable funding environment is important for voluntary and community organizations to plan ahead and develop their work.**

The British government has accepted, since 1990, the principle of multi-annual funding. Granted the basic similarities of parliamentary and accounting traditions between the UK and Ireland, a similar procedure should be possible in Ireland.

Insecure and short-duration funding has implications for the attraction and retaining of staff in voluntary and community organizations. Voluntary organizations are generally not able to offer staff rates of pay and conditions comparable to public service employment, such as pension plans.

***Principle: funding for voluntary and community organizations should be multi-annual (three to five years).**

2.6 The multiplicity of funding sources

Those parts of the voluntary and community sector which receive statutory funding rely on a variety of funding sources from a number of different departments and authorities at a number of levels. This is not of itself necessarily a problem. Indeed, it means that most voluntary organizations can eventually find at least one appropriate funding 'home' for some of their work. But it is a problem when there is no single source available for core funding, without which the other subsidiary elements cannot function. Voluntary and community organizations can devote a considerable portion of their time and energies to pursuing comparatively small pockets of money.

Would it be desirable to concentrate funding sources? Local government is a possible candidate for being the principal source of funding for the voluntary and community sector. Ireland's experience of funding seems to be different from our European neighbours, where local government is the principal source of funding for voluntary and community organizations. In Ireland, very few voluntary and community organizations receive any local authority funding. There are many cases in which local needs can best be assessed and met and their responses financed locally, and where it should be unnecessary to refer decisions to a national government department for approval. Lack of significant powers for local authorities have been cited by several community organizations as a significant problem impeding community development in Ireland.

At the same time, there is evidence that central funding for some substantial projects has enabled those projects to make a significant impact. Voluntary and community organizations have spoken positively of the difference which funds such as the community development fund and the grant scheme for women's groups have made for them.

Most voluntary and community organizations prefer to have a number of possible funding sources open to them and to see funding sources broadened. Voluntary and community organizations have expressed an interest in obtaining increased sources of funding from corporate, private and trust sources. The present tax environment provides weak incentives for the encouragement of corporate, private, or trust funding, and consideration could be given to an improvement in such incentives. VAT requirements impose considerable burdens on some voluntary organizations, and VAT relief for voluntary organizations could usefully be developed on a model similar to the UK. The Finance Acts should be amended to improve the flow of funding to the voluntary sector through tax advantages and to make voluntary and community organizations eligible for VAT relief for defined equipment.

***Principle: funding for voluntary and community organizations should come from a multiplicity of sources. This range should be broadened.**

2.7 The role of the National Lottery

Lottery funding has attracted sharp, negative and hostile comment of many voluntary organizations. The criteria for lottery allocations are, for the most part, either unclear or simply unavailable. Many voluntary and community organizations have found the process of application to the

lottery to be impenetrable. Several voluntary organizations resent the manner in which lottery funding has come to replace exchequer funding, indicating, in their view, a downgrading of the importance of social and community services. The threat of transfer to lottery funding causes fear within the voluntary sector. The belief is held - rightly or wrongly - that lottery funding is open to political influence.

***Principle: national lottery funding is not an appropriate primary funding source for voluntary and community organizations. If it continues to be used, it should be depoliticized, have clear and fair criteria and not be used to replace statutory funding.**

2.8 The implications of funding reforms for the statutory sector

The difficulties of statutory organizations in handling funding processes and applications should be acknowledged. Although the voluntary and community sector may have grown in recent years, and although the number of voluntary and community organizations applying for funding may likewise have increased, it is not apparent that the resources available to statutory bodies for handling applications have increased commensurately. The handling of funding applications and negotiation with voluntary organizations require skills of analysis and evaluation; a knowledge of the voluntary sector generally; and familiarity with the issues of community development. Professional skills and abilities are required at a high level. The charter should recognize that statutory organizations require human and financial resources not just to cope with but to develop a dynamic relationship with the voluntary and community sector in the negotiation and handling of funding.

2.9 Managing staff

There are recurrent suggestions of problem areas within the staffing of voluntary organizations and community groups. A consideration is the lack of experience of the committees of voluntary organizations in employing and managing staff. Such committees are, after all, formed in order to provide services for clients, rather than to provide employment structures, although these are a necessary means toward the achievement of this end. As a result of both these factors, staff experience of voluntary organizations can be negative. Not only is this wrong in itself, but it leads to high turnover of staff: professional employees are likely to leave the voluntary and community sector, with the resultant loss of skills and expertise to the sector.

***Principle: staff and volunteers in voluntary and community organizations have the right to trained and professional management. This will mean the provision of training for management committees in the voluntary and community sector, and the allocation of resources to make this possible.**

3. ACCESS TO POLICY MAKING

Principles of consultation, partnership and participation are central to the charter. On the voluntary and community side, strong feelings have been expressed that the voluntary and community sector has not been able to make its fair contribution to policy and planning, or to discussions on the quality of service delivery. On the statutory side, there are difficulties in trying to find workable mechanisms that respond effectively to the large number of diverse voluntary organizations within their remit, and in reconciling the self-established nature of these bodies with their own well-established systems of accountability.

Mechanisms of partnership and consultation are complex because both the voluntary sector and the State sector are complex and diverse. It will be the function of the charter to guide these larger and smaller relationships. Partnership and consultation cannot simply just be declared: they must be made to happen.

There already are several instances where voluntary organizations have established close links, working arrangements and programmes with many echelons of government and the State in Ireland. But these are unusual, and may reflect the goodwill, transient interest or initiative of particular individuals in authority at a particular place at a particular moment in time. What is required is a more structured relationship that will ensure the wider involvement of voluntary and community organizations across a broader base.

It is important to define such words as 'consultation', 'partnership' and 'participation'. The three are often employed indiscriminately, each in association or confusion with the other. Consultation means the procedure whereby voluntary and community organizations are consulted by statutory bodies in the planning and implementation of legislation, measures and services of relevance to their consumers, but it leaves statutory bodies free to reject the advice given. Partnership suggests the joining together of voluntary and statutory organizations to pursue joint objectives through joint projects. Participation suggests a role for voluntary organizations in the planning of particular services with statutory bodies. This submission concentrates on the principles of consultation and partnership that will improve the access of voluntary and community organizations to the planning of services.

3.1 Partnerships

Voluntary-statutory partnership projects have limited experience in Ireland. Partnership models have been introduced through rural development programmes, COMTEC projects and through the anti-poverty programmes of the European Community. They are based on the axiom that community development and anti-poverty work must engage all the key actors of the problem, and ensure they work together to produce a common result. Recent examples to hand are the Connemara West project (1971-); the EC Poverty 3 projects (1989-94); and the twelve PESP projects (1991-3), currently developing an area-based response to long-term unemployment.

The development of an area-based partnership to tackling poverty and social need is an important development which responds to particular concerns. These include: the growing concentration of poverty and social need in particular areas, the compartmentalization and fragmentation of existing actions which hinders a multi-dimensional and multisectoral response to poverty and social exclusion; the excessive centralization of State provision; the lack of involvement of those affected by poverty in the design and implementation of solutions, the lack of adequate structures to promote community development initiatives which will empower local people. A partnership approach recognizes the different contribution that the different sectors can make. It promotes an integrated approach to development whereby a set of coordinated measures can be developed and implemented in an area so that they are reinforcing in their effects.

***Principle: partnerships between the voluntary, statutory and private sector should be promoted as part of any strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion at a local level.**

3.2 Consultation

Voluntary and community organizations have frequently expressed their frustration about their lack of access to the decision-making process. These issues are explored here at local, regional and national level. Access to policy-making is then discussed in respect of the social partners; semi-State bodies; the National Economic and Social Council; and the Economic and Social Committee of the European Communities.

(i) Local level

The relationship between local government and voluntary organizations and community groups is poorly developed in Ireland. There is a strong feeling among voluntary organizations that a closer and more dynamic relationship between the two is both possible and desirable. The process of community development has been impeded by the very limited role which local government plays in the Irish administrative and political system. The large volume of submissions by voluntary organizations to the expert advisory committee on local government (known as the Barrington committee) testify to a high level of interest in working with a reformed local government system.

A statutory framework already exists for consultation between the local authorities, voluntary organizations and consumers. It is embodied in the Local Government Acts, 1941-91, which recognize voluntary organizations and enable the local authorities to appoint representatives of voluntary and community organizations to subcommittees, and in the Housing Act, 1988 (which requires local authorities to consult with voluntary organizations when making housing assessments). Section 39 of the Local Government Act, 1991 permits non-elected representatives to be members of these committees.

These models of consultation remain limited in scope, and have already experienced difficulties. The advisory committee on travellers within Dublin county council for example, consists of twenty councillors, three officials, and a maximum of three voluntary sector representatives. The

voluntary sector representatives are chosen by the county council, and the committee has a limited problem-solving, rather than policy-making role. Voluntary sector representatives may not vote. However, it does enable the voluntary sector to have access to information and officials in a manner that was not the case in the past. Similarly, consultation processes arising from the Housing Act have been limited. Liaison between some voluntary organizations and individual officials in the local housing authorities has improved markedly, but few round-table consultative fora have been set up between the voluntary sector and the statutory authority, despite many requests by the former.

***Principle: voluntary-statutory consultation under the Local Government and Housing Acts should be endorsed by the charter, extended, and made an effective part of the process whereby services are planned and delivered.**

(ii) Regional level

Although the Health Act, 1970, made provision for the appointment of county health advisory committees to which representatives of voluntary organizations could be appointed, the results of this measure have been meagre. The role of these county committees was and is to advise the eight regional health boards.

Many voluntary organizations have reported that their relationships with health boards have been difficult. Not only have there been difficulties regarding funding, but voluntary organizations have experienced difficulty in obtaining access to planning and finding their place in the overall context of the service provided by the health board.

For their part, it seems that health boards have not been well equipped to respond to the approaches, needs and perspectives of the voluntary sector. Neither the management structure nor management skills have facilitated the availability of time or resources for the discussion of policy with voluntary organizations.

***Principle: voluntary organizations have the right to participate in the process of planning health and social services and other services relevant to social need and poverty. This may require statutory bodies to circulate planning documents, budgets, and policy proposals to voluntary organizations; and to establish consultative fora where they meet with voluntary and community organizations to plan the provision of services.**

(iii) National level

At national level, several models exist whereby the needs of interest groups of voluntary organizations are addressed. Three examples are cited here: the position of young people, parents and women.

Young people in Ireland are represented at national level through the National Youth Council which brings together over fifty voluntary organizations working with young people. The National Youth Council is seen as having a representative role for young people in Ireland. For

that reason, the council receives grant-aid from the Department of Education. The National Parents Council presents the views of parents to the Department of Education, and contributes to the policy-formulation process of the Department. The Council for the Status of Women receives a block grant to represent the needs of women to government. The council receives an administrative grant from the Department of the Taoiseach. The council presents an interesting model, because its ninety full members cover a diverse range of opinion, organizations, and scale. Some are large, national organizations; others are small, community-based associations. The council devotes a considerable part of its work to presenting the interests of women to government departments, senior civil servants, semi-State bodies, and members of the Oireachtas. Incidentally, there is no evidence that the dependence on a State grant for funding has undermined the independence of action or views of the council.

The Agency believes that such consultative arrangements should be extended more widely through the voluntary and community sector and that mechanisms should be established whereby the voluntary and community sectors are consulted, and that the voluntary and community sector is resourced in such a way that this process is meaningful.

***Principle:** there should be a clear point of contact between each government department and the voluntary organizations relevant to its work. Each department should have a clear set of procedures or mechanisms for communicating with voluntary and community organizations, such as an annual conference or devoting part of its annual report to describing its relationships with the voluntary and community organizations, and the issues arising from this relationship.

(iv) The social partners

Significant decisions affecting economic and social planning have been taken at national level during the 1980s under the process that is referred to as 'social partnership' (*Building on Reality, the Programme for National Recovery (PNR), the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP)*). Concern has been expressed that the interests of those represented by the voluntary and community sector generally and the unemployed and those living in poverty in particular have been and are insufficiently addressed by the existing framework of social partnership which includes trade unions, employers and farmers. Such an opinion has been forcibly presented by women's groups, the unemployed, people with disabilities and by others not in the workforce. An active presence of the voluntary sector at national level would contribute to the quality of debate, discussion, planning and long-term efficiency.

The social partnership framework is mirrored in many other aspects of government planning, principally in the appointments to semi-State bodies, the National Economic and Social Committee (NESC) and the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community.

Several means could be considered to enhance the role of the voluntary sector as a social partner. These include the formal inclusion of the voluntary sector as a social partner, or the creation of a second, outer tier to the PESP. Models for this exist in several European countries.

France provides the most interesting illustration of this process, where voluntary sector representatives are appointed to the Economic and Social Council. This council functions, in effect, as a third, upper tier to the National Assembly and the Senate: it must be consulted on legislative measures and decrees in the economic and social field, and proposals may not proceed until its views have been heard.

***Principle: the voluntary and community sector is a social partner, and entitled to national representation accordingly.**

(v) Semi-State bodies

The operation and composition of the boards of semi-State agencies is a concern to voluntary organizations. The activities of several semi-State bodies (FAS being perhaps the prime example; others include IDA) impinge on the voluntary and community sector.

The boards and policies of some of these bodies reflect the perspectives of only the existing designated social partners. Voluntary and community organizations feel that some of the programmes, schemes and policies of these boards are not well attuned to the distinctive needs of the voluntary and community sectors. They also attribute this to more general difficulties they experience in approaching semi-State bodies and the lack of other opportunities available to them to present their case. For example, they are unclear whether to approach their management boards, headquarters, policy unit, or regional offices and find it extremely difficult identify where policies are devised.

(vi) The National Economic and Social Council

The National Economic and Social Council is an important element of the framework where ideas, policies and proposals in the economic and social planning field are generated, discussed, researched and presented. Although some of its reports and proposals impinge closely on the work of the voluntary and community sector, voluntary and community organizations have not had the opportunity to present their perspective in the council, with the exception of the National Youth Council's representatives. Given the size of the council, it should be possible for its membership to include voluntary and community sector representatives.

(vii) The Economic and Social Committee of the European Communities

Nine Irish representatives are appointed by the government to the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community. Issues affecting the voluntary sector are debated in the Economic and Social Committee (for example, poverty and consumer affairs). It is worth noting that a representative of single-parent family associations was appointed by the British government to the Economic and Social Committee in 1990.

***Principle: representatives of the voluntary and community sector should be appointed to the boards of relevant semi-State bodies, to the National Economic and Social Council and to the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community.**

3.3 Resourcing access to policy-making

Although some voluntary organizations have devoted efforts to addressing their policy concerns to central government departments at national level, their number is limited. Voluntary organizations acknowledge that there is little point in gaining access to decision-makers and opinion formers at this level if they cannot make an effective case once they are there, in a context and using a language that is meaningful to those concerned. For example, groups working with the unemployed as well as many other community groups have a vital interest in economic policy, but are not well versed in the economic debate as it is currently conducted. There is an important role in narrowing the gap between the levels of skill and knowledge in some of the key bodies dealing with economic policy (for example the Review Group on Industrial Policy, or the subsequent Task Force on Jobs) and those likely to be affected by their recommendations.

The participation of voluntary organizations in the policy-formulation process involves more than the formal opening up of a number of opportunities in decision-making or opinion-forming bodies, important though this is. It requires resources, and the allocation of finance to voluntary organizations for research, policy development, information work and training. There is little evidence that these needs are recognized in existing funding schemes.

***Principle: resources must be allocated to facilitate and promote the participation of voluntary organizations in the policy process. Each statutory body and government department relevant to poverty and social need should provide resources and training that will make possible the effective participation of voluntary and community organizations in the decision-making process.**

4. ACCOUNTABILITY

The accountability of voluntary organizations has been chiefly considered in the context of their correct and honest use of public, taxpayers' money. Whilst valid and important in itself, this is a limited concept of accountability. Voluntary and community organizations are rarely made accountable for the quality of their service or their responsiveness to the needs of their consumers, or the communities in which they work. For their part, voluntary and community organizations are now prepared to see accountability in much wider terms than that merely of finance. Some of the ways in which the concept of accountability may be broadened are explored here.

4.1 Transparency in the voluntary and community sector

The European Community has introduced and developed the concept of 'transparency' - which is that an organization is what it claims to be, that it does what it claims to do, that it is accessible, and that its record and approach can be inspected - and challenged if need be. It is a useful term to use in broadening the concept of accountability. As a result of being transparent, voluntary and community organizations become more responsive, more efficient and they can be better appraised by potential funders. For example, transparency can mean making available accounts, statements of objectives, project descriptions and details of personnel responsible for key activities, and an activities report.

Transparency has resource implications. Voluntary organizations will need to devote a proportion of their time, work and financial resources to making this concept a reality. Additional resources will be necessary to make this possible.

***Principle: voluntary organizations should be transparent in their work.**

4.2 Transparency in the statutory sector

In proposing the principle of transparency for the voluntary sector, it is reasonable that standards of a similarly rigorous nature should also be applied to statutory bodies. For example, most local authorities and most health boards do not publish or make generally available annual reports and accounts. If voluntary organizations funded by them are expected to publish accounts, statements of objectives and activities reports, they should do so too. Their failure to do so is a contributory factor in making access to them by voluntary organizations difficult.

***Principle: statutory bodies and organizations should be transparent in their work, with criteria similar to those applying to voluntary and community organizations.**

4.3 Evaluation

Evaluation is linked to transparency. Evaluation is a means whereby services can be examined for their effectiveness, whereby an opportunity

can be given for services to reflect on their work and whereby measures can be taken to modify services in the light of the study of the fulfillment of their objectives. Evaluation methods and practices vary: they range from self-evaluation within projects to quantifiable, external evaluation. Evaluation is desirable in itself for it enables projects to redefine their work. The efficiency gains from the evaluation process can be considerable. It is important that the organization undergoing evaluation itself play a lead role in the evaluation process, otherwise evaluation can be a means whereby funders express their power over projects.

It is important that the evaluation process is executed in such a way as to measure the outcomes of projects. Evaluation should not be limited to narrow financial criteria: it should recognize the innovative, pioneering nature of many voluntary sector projects. Even if such projects fall short of expectations, this does not mean that innovative projects are 'failures', for much may have been learned in the process. Their outcomes are still be important.

If voluntary organizations are to be evaluated for their effectiveness, the same should also be true of services provided by statutory bodies. If this is not done, the charter will lead to higher standards in only one part of the community and social services.

***Principle: the work of the voluntary, community and statutory sectors should be evaluated. The charter should recognize that a multiplicity of evaluation approaches are possible and desirable; and that evaluation should not be tied exclusively to financial criteria.**

4.4 The registration of voluntary organizations

Voluntary and community organizations in Ireland are not required to register or to make their existence publicly known. This is unusual in Europe. Most Irish voluntary organizations and community groups operate as unofficial associations, without any form of legal status or personality.

The lack of a system of registration has a number of advantages, chief of which is that voluntary and community organizations can spring up and respond quickly to social need without being entangled in bureaucratic requirements. There are a number of disadvantages. First, voluntary and community organizations can operate in the public, social field, without anything be known about their membership, objectives or activities. Second, it means that little becomes known nationally about developments, trends, and activities in the voluntary and community sphere, thus limiting our level of knowledge and research. Third, individual members of an organization or group are personally legally liable for its debts.

Long-standing larger voluntary organizations generally adopt the form of incorporation termed 'a company limited by guarantee' under the Companies Acts with stated objects, management board of directors and audited account requirements and trustees. Some acquire a charity number from the revenue commissioners (this arrangement is frequently misunderstood as conferring a legal form of 'charitable status'). Voluntary and

cooperative organizations receiving capital assistance for social housing projects under the Housing Act are required to be legally incorporated. Legal incorporation is not the most suitable form of legal personality for community groups or most of the smaller voluntary organizations. It is a complicated and difficult process, one which enforces a particular structure on the voluntary organization or community group which is often entirely inappropriate.

There is a compelling case for the registration of voluntary organizations and community groups, combined with a simplified process of legal incorporation. Taken together, this would have advantages in reducing the personal liabilities of members of voluntary organizations, facilitating access to funding, broadening accountability and improving the level and nature of information about the process of voluntary and community group formation. Registration could be organized through the local authorities and the Companies Office. An amendment to the Companies Act would be required.

***Principle: voluntary organizations should be registered, and should operate under a simplified form of incorporation.**

4.5 Accountability to consumers

The involvement of the users of services provided by voluntary organizations, community groups and the State is an issue which should be addressed by the charter. There is a growing awareness of the importance of the users of services being involved in their planning, implementation and delivery. Such involvement can be argued from the viewpoint of both efficiency and social equity. Such an involvement was recognized, for example, in the *Report of the Commission on Social Welfare* (1986). The term 'consumer' will be used here, though other terms are employed elsewhere such as 'users', 'participants' or 'clients'.

It is possible to improve the access of voluntary organizations to policy making without at the same time improving the access of consumers. If this were to happen, little will have been gained.

The involvement of consumers in the planning, implementation and delivery of services provided by voluntary organizations varies. Some, especially the community-based groups, have pioneered the role of consumers, and have established tiers of participation at different points and at different levels. Others involve consumers through internal project evaluation. Some voluntary organizations, by contrast, have a poor record of consumer involvement and do not make it a priority in their work. Some consumers find voluntary organizations excessively professional in their approach, or exclusive in their decision-making. Many voluntary and community organizations struggle with consumer involvement as an issue, but find it a difficult process. Consumer involvement in community and voluntary organizations must be recognized as a long process, taking years of painstaking work.

Likewise, the involvement of consumers in the planning, implementation and delivery of services provided by statutory bodies varies. The Minister for Social Welfare has declared an interest in what are termed

'participation points' for social welfare claimants. Considerable work has been done in the UK in the development of what are termed user councils, though these have matured in the transport and utilities field more than in the social welfare field. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Social Services has established claimants' councils. Whilst such councils are not expected to give consumers control over services, they have a role in the rectification of grievances, in improving the quality of service delivery, and in improving the responsiveness of services to local needs.

***Principle: consumers have the right to be involved in the planning and delivery of services. The charter should require publicly-funded voluntary and community organizations to take steps to ensure the greater participation of consumers within their structures, activities, and membership: voluntary, community and statutory organizations should be expected to provide an audit each year on the manner in which they have furthered the objective of consumer participation. Funding should be conditional on adequate levels of consumer participation.**

4.6 Accountability to communities

Voluntary and community organizations are aware that accountable as they are to their funders, they have a strong moral accountability to those whom they were established to serve and to champion. In more recent times, voluntary and community organizations have taken on advocacy roles.

The campaigning role of voluntary and community organizations emerged in the 1960s when voluntary organizations expressed the desire not merely to provide services that would meet hitherto-unmet needs, but that would confront the root causes of those needs and other forms of social injustice. Such an advocacy role has won a general acceptance within the Irish social and political system, and has not been questioned by government (unlike in the UK). As a general rule, the adversarial work of voluntary organizations is seen as positive: it adds to the quality of debate, the generation of concepts, information and more efficient policy-formulation.

This does not mean that this role of voluntary and community organizations has been a comfortable or an easy one. By definition, it probably cannot be and should not be: exchanges between the voluntary and statutory side over policy and practice will undoubtedly arise from time to time. These may be all the more difficult to accept when statutory bodies are engaged in partnership projects or consultative roles with the very same voluntary or community organizations.

***Principle: voluntary and community organizations should be accountable to the social needs and rights of their communities and consumers. Voluntary and community organizations have the right to speak out on behalf of those they serve.**

4.7 Monitoring the charter

For the charter to be of lasting value, mechanisms must be devised to monitor the extent to which the principles enunciated are translated into

reality. It is important that monitoring be carried out by representatives of the voluntary and community sector and the statutory organizations involved, and that regular reports on their findings are issued. There may be a role for the Combat Poverty Agency to assist in this process.

***Principle: the evolution and progress of the charter should be monitored.**