

Policy Submission

Submission to the Task Force on Active Citizenship

September 2006



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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN TACKLING POVERTY	5
WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE... ..	6
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CITIZEN IN TODAY'S IRELAND?	10
WHAT BARRIERS ARE THERE TO 'ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP'?	12
YOUNG PEOPLE.....	14
THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND OTHER CENTRES OF LEARNING	16
VOTER PARTICIPATION	16
MEDIA.....	18
CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP.....	19
COMMUNITIES.....	20
THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS... ..	24
GLOSSARY OF TERMS.....	28

INTRODUCTION

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state advisory agency developing and promoting evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty in Ireland. Combat Poverty works for a poverty-free Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. In line with its statutory role (Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986 Section 4.2c), Combat Poverty promotes community development as a methodology to empower and support the social, economic, cultural and political participation of people in poverty.

Combat Poverty has a specific remit in relation to tackling poverty in the Border region through the implementation of a substantial part of the EU-funded Peace II Programme. This is jointly undertaken with Pobal in a partnership known as Border Action. Border Action also implements measures of the Interreg Programme with parties in Northern Ireland.

Combat Poverty believes that policies, programmes and services intended to reduce poverty or disadvantage are more likely to be efficient and effective if those with direct experience of the problems or those who live in communities affected by these problems, are involved in the design and implementation of solutions¹.

Over the last 20 years, Combat Poverty has been involved in a range of initiatives to support the participation of excluded groups in tackling poverty. These include the EU poverty programmes, the development of the national Community Development Programme and the National Anti-Poverty Networks. An independent review of Combat Poverty acknowledged this as follows:

*An area where the Agency has been very effective is in supporting the development of an anti-poverty infrastructure... The Agency has helped to develop community representatives who are able to play a full role in the various local and national bodies now operating in the policy development area.*²

¹ The Role of Community Development in Tackling Poverty, Combat Poverty Agency 2000.

² Goodbody Economic Consultants. 1996. *Review of the Combat Poverty Agency, Report to the Minister for Social Welfare*. Dublin: The Stationery Office

More recently, Combat Poverty's work includes initiatives which aim to:

- Address health inequalities through community development approaches to health;
- Inform local and regional responses to poverty through the development of local anti-poverty strategies and the promotion of the role of local government in this regard; and
- Promote work that supports the participation of people in poverty and their representative organisations to engage in the policy system, through the Having Your Say programme.

National strategies and policies recognise the need for participation of people in poverty and the importance of supports and resources to support their participation. The Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy³ and the NAP/inclusion⁴ both highlight the need to strengthen supports to volunteering, self-expression and participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the formulation of policies and measures affecting them. The White Paper on *Supporting Voluntary Activity* also highlights the need for consultation and involvement of the community and voluntary sector as a '*central feature of the development of NAPS*'.⁵ Combat Poverty sees the development of strategies to promote active citizenship as a means of encouraging economic, social and political participation of vulnerable groups. This echoes the NESC view that:

The widest participation in social life, economic activity and policy making are inseparable and fundamental requirements for the well-being of Irish society. The inclusiveness and quality of relationships in social life, communities, economic life and public governance are goals in themselves.⁶

Combat Poverty welcomes the establishment of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship and the call for submissions. It is important that the Taskforce's consultation process culminates in a report which reflects the diverse range of views, particularly those of

³ Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy - Building an Inclusive Society, February 2002

⁴ National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005

⁵ Supporting Voluntary Activity – A White Paper on the Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing

⁶ NESC. 1996. Strategy in the 21st Century. Dublin: NESC.

excluded groups and an implementation schedule of actions to support active citizenship.

The submission focuses particularly on the role and contribution of community organisations and the use of community development approaches to promote active citizenship among excluded groups and in poor communities.

The submission follows the structure of the consultation questionnaire from the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, considering the 19 questions set out. A number of questions which were felt not to be relevant to Combat Poverty have not been addressed (including questions 3, 4 and 11). The questions addressed in this submission are structured with Combat Poverty's analysis of the issue or position, followed by recommendations in response (which are also numbered based on the question being considered).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN TACKLING POVERTY

Combat Poverty recognises the continuum from informal, unstructured networks of friends and neighbours and relatives and others right up to the more formal participation in intermediary structures between agencies and the citizen, as highlighted in the NESF report on Social Capital.⁷ It recognises the link between social capital, active citizenship and community development and the right of all members of society, including the excluded to participate fully in society and in the development of policies which affect them. Combat Poverty recognises the importance of active citizenship in addressing poverty and in peace building.

The key elements of active citizenship are summarised as follows (and are discussed in more depth in the main body of this submission):

- An understanding of active citizenship as 'participation by all in society'.
- The need for community development supports for excluded groups and communities and the need for continued resources targeted at community development infrastructure;

⁷ NESF Forum Report No.28, June 2003

- The importance of citizenship education programmes both at community level and in schools;
- The need for voter support and the roll-out of targeted programmes, such as the Vincentian Voter Education Programme, to disadvantaged areas;
- The need for resources to be made available for community groups to support and facilitate their participation (including training, care costs and networking of groups);
- Acknowledgement of the link between poverty and human rights that requires active and informed participation of people in poverty in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction programmes;
- The need for civil society to play a more active role in policy making and practice through increased dialogue and effective participation and consultation approaches between Government institutions (and local government) and community organisations⁸; and
- The need for an integrated approach to peace-building which incorporates activism, commitment and dedicated voluntary participants north and south of the border. Community development is one of the key aspects to good practice in community-based peace-building.⁹

WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE...

Question 1: For you, what does it mean to be an 'active citizen'?

For Combat Poverty, active citizenship is about all citizens, including excluded citizens being involved in groups and networks, having a say, helping to make things happen in their community and taking part in decision making. For Combat Poverty active citizenship should ensure inclusiveness and, most often, is likely to be realised at local level. Active citizenship should make it possible for everyone to take part in all aspects of society including social, cultural, economic, political and community activities.

⁸ Guidelines for Effective Involvement, Combat Poverty Agency

⁹ Good Practice in Community-Based Peace Building, Area Development Management Ltd. (now Pobal) and Combat Poverty Agency, 2005

Active citizenship is also about participation in the democratic process, engagement in political discussion and decision making, serving on juries and in public office of various kinds. It is concerned with addressing the democratic deficit, where excluded citizens are less likely to vote or participate in public / political life and it is about creating the conditions for this to change.

Combat Poverty sees a number of **benefits of active citizenship** as follows:

- For the individual, involvement in community activities and public life can create opportunities for self-expression and personal development;
- For the community, greater active citizenship can help create active vibrant communities and can improve the quality of life for members of those communities; and
- For society, active citizenship can result in greater participation in public and community life and in policy making processes, resulting in more diverse representation and more effective, targeted policies.

Combat Poverty advocates the use of community development as a means of empowering citizens and of involving excluded citizens at local level to work together to improve their economic, social and cultural circumstances. Community development is about people articulating needs, making policy arguments and seeking to be part of decisions and actions on economic and social issues that affect them. To facilitate this, there is a need to develop and support active community groups amongst excluded groups and individuals. Local community groups, community development projects and projects targeting excluded groups (including Travellers, older people, young people, lone parents, etc.) are often stepping stones for individuals to become more involved in community and public life.¹⁰

- **Recommendation 1.1:** Link active citizenship and addressing poverty (as highlighted in the NAP/inclusion and the White Paper on *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, by targeting active citizenship initiatives to people in poverty and disadvantaged communities; and

¹⁰ Active Citizenship and Community Involvement, Getting to the Roots, European Foundation for the Improvement of working and living Conditions, 1997

- **Recommendation 1.2:** Develop and support active networks of community and voluntary groups, by promoting and supporting community development approaches to enhance the social, economic and political participation of excluded groups and individuals.

Question 2: Do some people feel excluded from active citizenship and why?

It is clear from Combat Poverty's work over the years that some people are excluded from active citizenship. Combat Poverty's reports and programmes have highlighted issues for people living in poverty and socially excluded, one of which is exclusion from social participation. The Irish Government's understanding of poverty recognises this experience:

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and other resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities, which are considered the norm for other people in society.¹¹

National policy acknowledges the exclusion of some groups and suggests responses to address these. The Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 2002 – *Building an Inclusive Society*¹² recognises the need for targeted action to address poverty and social exclusion among a number of 'vulnerable groups' including children and young people, women, older people, Travellers, people with disabilities and migrants and people from minority ethnic communities. The NAP/inclusion refers to 'social participation' and says there is a need *to continue to strengthen supports to volunteering and encourage self-expression and participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the formulation of policies and measures affecting them*¹³. Combat Poverty sees the development of strategies to promote active citizenship as a means of encouraging social participation of vulnerable groups.

¹¹ www.socialinclusion.ie/ what is poverty?

¹² Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy - Building an Inclusive Society, February 2002

¹³ National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005

As well as communities excluded as a result of group characteristics, communities can also be geographically excluded. Isolation, access and transport issues can prevent them from being active citizens. This is evident for communities in the Border areas where the legacy of the conflict has had an impact on participation and the growth of community groups.

A study of active citizenship learning across the EU found that 'people need to be re-engaged as active citizens, and enabled to take informed decisions about their lives, communities and workplaces and that many people are both disengaged and lack the skills, knowledge or understanding to do so. This is particularly true for people with little formal education and most at risk of social exclusion on other grounds. Those who are already most vulnerable to social exclusion are least likely to become active citizens. Other important areas of difference, including ethnicity, disability and sexuality, interact with gender to create complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion.'¹⁴

It also found that active citizens appear in general to be more highly educated than their peers. There is therefore a danger that citizenship becomes yet another area of exclusion for those who have previously been less successful in education, and who are already more prone to exclusion. The report makes a number of recommendations to address the issue of exclusion from active citizenship. It suggests the need to use group solidarity as a basis for empowering those least inclined to put themselves forward and that despite low levels of initial education people often re-engage with formal education as a result.¹⁵

The NAP/inclusion refers to the need *to mobilize all relevant bodies* and Combat Poverty recognizes the need to provide supports and resources for poor communities and excluded groups to ensure their participation in actions to address poverty and social exclusion. Organizations and initiatives at local level provide opportunities for resources to be targeted to excluded groups and communities and

¹⁴ Engaging People in Active Citizenship, Education and Training for Active Citizenship in Europe: Analysis of adult learning and design of formal, non-formal and informal education intervention strategies, European Commission, 2004

¹⁵ New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 44 Engaging People in Active Citizenship, Education and Training for Active Citizenship in Europe: Analysis of adult learning and design of formal, non-formal and informal education intervention strategies, European Commission, December 2004

also create opportunities for excluded groups to have an input into local responses to address the causes of poverty and exclusion.

A number of recommendations are made below which aim to address the social exclusion for specific target groups in NAPS, for geographical communities and for people with little formal education.

- **Recommendation 2.1:** Encourage self-expression and participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the formulation of policies and measures affecting them;
- **Recommendation 2.2:** Provide supports and resources to organisations that target excluded groups and communities and support their participation in local initiatives (including the Community Development Support Programme, the Family and Community Services Resource Centres Programme, Local Development Social Inclusion Programme and the National Anti-Poverty Networks);
- **Recommendation 2.3:** Encourage participation in arts, social, cultural and sporting life by excluded groups and communities, which will have a positive impact on poor individuals and groups;
- **Recommendation 2.4:** Provide community education programmes targeting excluded people and communities which cover active citizenship through life-long learning approaches; and
- **Recommendation 2.5:** Facilitate and support the participation of excluded groups and people experiencing poverty in decision making and policy making structures and processes at national and local level.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CITIZEN IN TODAY'S IRELAND?

Question 5: How can active citizenship help to include newcomers in a changing Ireland?

Approximately 10% of the population or 400,000 people of the state are non-nationals. The latest census notes an increase in the population of just over 8%

since the last census in 2002¹⁶ which the Central Statistics Office attributes to migration. There is an increase in the number of people coming to the country to seek employment, study or to seek asylum all with differing rights as citizens. There are indications that immigration will continue to increase.

Ireland is clearly a multi-cultural society and this needs to be acknowledged and reflected in our policies and community activities. With the increase in the non-national population there is potential for conflict due to racism. In order for new communities to feel part of the society it is important that there is a long term approach to immigration and integration policy that encourages them to participate fully in society. Active citizenship programmes should promote and encourage the participation of new communities and active citizenship education programmes within communities and in schools should promote diversity and mutual respect for all cultures and races.

One of the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to the Irish Government, suggests that minority ethnic groups who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion should be resourced and supported¹⁷. The Committee recommends that a dedicated budget line should be made available to minority ethnic-led organisations at local and national level to ensure the participation of such groups in national policy development and the social partnership process.

➤ **Recommendation 5.1:** Develop long term policies in the area of integration and immigration as suggested by the Immigrant Council of Ireland.¹⁸ Such policies should acknowledge citizenship rights which encompass not only core civil and political rights and obligations but also social, economic and cultural rights and obligations that underpin equality of opportunity and policies on access to education, employment, health, housing and social services

¹⁶ Census 2006, Preliminary Report, CSO

¹⁷ One Year On: Comments on the Implementation by the Irish Government of the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: NGO Alliance, June 2006

¹⁸ Labour Migration into Ireland, Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2003

- **Recommendation 5.2:** Provide support and resources to new ethnic minority communities at local and national level in order to facilitate them to build links with the wider community. It is important to strengthen programmes such as the national community development project co-ordination training programme currently supported by Integrating Ireland;
- **Recommendation 5.3:** Provide resources to maximise opportunities for information provision to ethnic minority communities through services including the Citizen Information Centres and the Library Services;
- **Recommendation 5.4:** Provide active citizenship programmes which promote and encourage the participation of new communities;
- **Recommendation 5.5:** Provide active citizenship education programmes within communities and in schools which promote diversity and mutual respect for all cultures and races; and
- **Recommendation 5.6:** Continue to support peace building in the Border region through programmes and the work of government institutions.

WHAT BARRIERS ARE THERE TO 'ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP'?

Question 6: From your experience, is there less volunteering and civic engagement than in the past? What do you think are the main reasons for this?

The data which will emerge from Census 2006 will provide useful baseline national figures on volunteering levels and on the nature and type of volunteering.

Regarding civic engagement, the NESF Survey on Social Capital indicates a number of groups whose engagement in active citizenship is low. These include young adults, people living in rural and large urban areas, lower socio-economic groups and those with a disability or who are ill. These reflect a number of the excluded groups referred to in NAPS and NAP/inclusion.

A number of reasons contribute to why some lower socio-economic groups may not be engaging or participating fully in civic life. These include:

- Literacy difficulties or low levels of educational attainment that may present difficulties;

- The traditional local service organisations that required volunteers in the past may differ from those needed today. Consequently, the skills needed to participate may be new and require training or supports to be developed for participants;
- With higher levels of employment people may not have as much free time as previously;
- Many volunteers are now faced with much greater responsibilities and may not have the confidence or skills to take up such a role. Being an active member of an organisation may require participation in Boards or becoming an employer. These require a complex set of skills, with reporting and accountability arrangements. The possession of these skills by local volunteers is unrecognised in any form of re-numeration or certification;
- In communities experiencing poverty people may simply not have the time as the daily struggle of living in poverty, fulfilling caring responsibilities, etc. takes all of their attention and time;
- In communities that have suffered from violence and conflict, there may be a fear or insecurity about participating in local activities and groups, and there may be a lack of opportunity to participate because of religious segregation of community activities in some of the Border communities; and
- Working with young people and children in youth or sporting groups now requires some degree of training and support in child welfare and protection.

- **Recommendation 6.1:** Provide training and support to ensure that volunteers are up-skilled in relation to youth and child protection issues, employment and company law, etc.
- **Recommendation 6.2:** For employers, promote work-life balance which will encourage people to become active citizens and will promote the value of it; and
- **Recommendation 6.3:** Target supports and resources to disadvantaged areas and the border region in order to promote participation and the development of community activities.

Question 7: How do you think people could be encouraged and supported to be more active citizens?

As outlined previously many people may not have the confidence, skills or opportunities to become more active citizens and a number of recommendations are made in this respect. People and communities need to be supported through active citizenship programmes in their local areas. There are very few formal opportunities for people to learn how civic and political life is shaped and influenced and it is important that conditions and opportunities are presented to those experiencing poverty for effective participation in society.¹⁹

- **Recommendation 7.1:** Continue to support and strengthen community based programmes that support community participation, and that have an anti-poverty focus, both at a local level and at a national level through the National Anti-Poverty Networks;
- **Recommendation 7.2:** Ensure that excluded communities have access to facilities and venues where people can meet and participate in community life;
- **Recommendation 7.3:** Ensure that activities and services are provided or run at local venues that are appropriate to the needs of communities; and
- **Recommendation 7.4:** Provide programmes on active citizenship in schools, community education facilities and on adult education courses.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Question 8: How could we further develop a sense of active citizenship amongst young people in Ireland?

The involvement of young people as active citizens is essential to ensure that they develop their skills, knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence. Where young people are involved in the planning and development of policies they are more likely to be used and respected by young people. Being heard is part of young people's civic education and can strengthen their commitment to democracy and respect of

¹⁹ Iselut Honohan, *Active Citizenship and in Contemporary Democracy*, 2004

human rights. It can also lead to their active participation in society as adults.²⁰ It is important that children are heard in a meaningful way in relation to decisions and policies that affect them, through consultation processes by public bodies and policy makers.

- **Recommendation 8.1:** Ensure that young people are consulted in relation to the development of policies and services that affect them and their views are used to shape policy;
- **Recommendation 8.2:** Encourage schools and students to participate in the Young Social Innovators (YSI) programme by providing additional resources to schools, particularly schools in disadvantaged areas;
- **Recommendation 8.3:** Resource and support youth services, organisations and projects in areas of disadvantage or working with young people affected by poverty to develop, implement and evaluate innovative active citizenship programmes;
- **Recommendation 8.4:** Continue to support and develop Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg and ensure that they develop their potential to meaningfully involve young people affected by poverty and social exclusion; and
- **Recommendation 8.5:** Ensure inclusion of active citizenship programmes and voter education programmes in education and training centres catering for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and equip them with:
 - A knowledge of public policies affecting them
 - An understanding of the public policy making processes at national and local level; and
 - The skills to enable them to contribute effectively and to the best of their ability.

²⁰ Hearing Young Voices – consulting children and young people, including those experiencing poverty and other forms of social exclusion in relation to public policy development in Ireland, Executive Summary, Children's Rights Alliance and National Youth Council of Ireland, 2002

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND OTHER CENTRES OF LEARNING

Question 9: What role can education play in promoting active citizenship and how?

The formal education system has a major role to play in shaping values and in the development of young people as informed and active citizens. An education system which incorporates the development of such values will contribute to the development of future citizens committed to social justice and intolerant of social problems such as poverty, discrimination and equality and will promote the principles of respect for diversity and mutual understanding of other cultures.

- **Recommendation 9.1:** Encourage the implementation of Poverty Awareness Education based on school / community partnerships in line with the model developed during the Poverty the Curriculum and the Classroom Project²¹;
- **Recommendation 9.2:** Resource and support the ongoing development of Student Councils and ensure that they develop their potential to meaningfully involve young people affected by poverty and social exclusion;
- **Recommendation 9.3:** Review CSPE and assess outcomes relevant to active citizenship taking account of outcomes for disadvantaged students. This is important as many of this group may not continue to senior cycle.

VOTER PARTICIPATION

Question 10: What steps do you think can be taken to promote greater participation in elections and other forms of civic engagement?

It has been commonly observed that, in Ireland, certain areas have high election turnouts generally, with those tending to be rural areas or more affluent, middle class areas of cities. Lowest turnout in Ireland tends to be found in more deprived areas of cities. Such a relationship is further complicated by the danger of such low turnout areas being marginalised from the political system as a result and being factored out of the political equation. As Lijphart (1997,1) notes '*unequal participation spells*

²¹ Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom was carried under the direction of the Curriculum Development Unit of the City of Dublin VEC and funded by the Combat Poverty Agency.

unequal influence'. The day to day business of living on low incomes and in poor conditions can make voting and other forms of civic engagement irrelevant. There is a need to promote greater political participation in elections and other forms of civic engagement with poor communities and marginalised groups in Ireland.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice runs an Active Citizenship Programme for a number of years and has recorded significant increases in voter participation in a number of disadvantaged areas through the country as a result.²²

In order to promote greater forms of other civic engagement, Combat Poverty advocates the use of consultative and participative approaches by government and public bodies, which target socially excluded communities and which successfully engage with people in poverty. These include approaches and techniques such as Planning for Real, Participatory Appraisal, Training for Transformation and community development approaches.

- **Recommendation 10.1:** Develop a pro-active approach to raising awareness of the importance of the electoral and political process, the nation and the Constitution;
- **Recommendation 10.2:** Provide a comprehensive voter education programme to be run in post primary schools, which could help children recognise themselves as citizens with rights and a sense of ownership of their country and community;
- **Recommendation 10.3:** Roll out the voter education programme, undertaken by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, on a national basis to designated disadvantaged areas and to disadvantaged schools;
- **Recommendation 10.4:** Use community media to encourage discussion and participation on voting to mobilise voters. This could include local papers, newsletters, community television and radio, local radio; and

²² Lijphart, Arend (1997), *Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma* in American Political Science Review Vol.91, No.1, pp.1-14

More information www.vpsj.ie/main_frameset.htm.

- **Recommendation 10.5:** Require government and public bodies to use participative and consultative approaches that are inclusive and give people in poverty a say in the development of policies and measures that affect them.

MEDIA

Question 12: What role can the media, including the internet and other new technologies, play in promoting active citizenship?

The media can play an important role in promoting the value and benefits of active participation, both for the individual and for the community. The internet can also complement this role as it has particular audiences that may be more difficult to reach through traditional media outlets, such as young people and ethnic minority groups. It also provides a two way communication channel allowing people in remote locations to engage interactively with other individuals and communities. Interaction is the main difference between the Internet and traditional media channels. It can provide a non-intimidating entry point, for people to seek information and access new groups, both important aspects of active citizenship.

The Internet can also help to promote active citizenship through education as it can reach groups who may have had poor experiences with education in the past, and are not likely to go back into formal education.

Media literacy is another important aspect for promoting active citizenship. This means enabling people to use the opportunities of the media, and involves four elements²³; criticism (analysis, reflection and ethics), knowledge (information about media and media skills), usage (using the media to communicate) and creation of media (creating new material). Media literacy helps to empower individuals to better understand and shape their environment as active citizens.

- **Recommendation 12.1:** Promote positive images of active citizenship in the media, both for individual citizens and for the community as a whole;

²³ Baacke about media literacy (German). Dieter Baacke. Medienpädagogik. Grundlagen der Medienkommunikation. Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1997

- **Recommendation 12.2:** Maximise access to the information communication technologies in disadvantaged rural and urban areas to promote active citizenship.
- **Recommendation 12.3:** Use national and community media to encourage discussion and participation on voting.

CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

Question 13: What role can the corporate sector (including public sector organisations) play in promoting active citizenship? How can this be encouraged and supported?

Combat Poverty sees an important role for employers and business in promoting active citizenship through corporate social responsibility, where organisations and businesses work with communities. This approach is in keeping with the notion of mainstreaming social inclusion.²⁴ Corporate social responsibility has been adopted by a number of public and private sector companies.²⁵

- **Recommendation 13.1:** Corporate social responsibility should be promoted as part of good business practice among all businesses and employers;
- **Recommendation 13.2:** Corporate volunteers could be provided to community organisations to provide specialist and technical skills such as legal skills, accountancy, etc; and
- **Recommendation 13.3:** Corporate social responsibility should be included as an explicit element of the regulatory framework for business in Ireland.

²⁴ Mainstreaming Social Inclusion is the integration of poverty and social inclusion objectives, including an equality perspective, into all areas and levels of policy-making.

²⁵ Combat Poverty's position and recommendations in relation to corporate social responsibilities were included in Making a Decisive Impact on Poverty – Submission on the NAP/inclusion, October 2005

COMMUNITIES

Question 14: What types of support do communities require to increase levels of participation and involvement?

In the White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, which was published in 2000, the Government outlines a vision of society where,

...the ability of the voluntary and community sector to provide channels for the active involvement and participation of citizens is fundamental. An active voluntary and community sector contributes to a democratic and pluralist society.

Combat Poverty's understanding of community development is as a process through which a community is empowered to develop its own agenda and analysis and build collective responses. This implies that the outcomes of community development approaches inform and relate to local statutory and community structures.

The term community usually refers to groups of people who live in geographical areas that provide some common bond or identity – a housing estate, a parish or a village, a scattered suburban area on the edge of a city or a town, a street or a town-land. But a community can also consist of a group of individuals who come together on the basis of some other interest or who have a common identity for instance, women, Travellers, lone parents, people with disabilities, lesbians and gay men, etc.²⁶ Within this understanding of community it is equally important to note that communities, geographical or interest based, are not homogenous.

A community development approach contributes to building active citizenship by:

- overcoming dependence and alienation, empowering individuals and fostering and releasing skills and creativity;
- promoting collective action to solve problems;
- building on strengths and potential and mobilising resources;
- identifying and defining problems and needs based on experience on the ground;
- emphasising rights and participation of minorities;

²⁶ The Role of Community Development in Tackling Poverty. Combat Poverty Agency, 2000

- promoting networking and communication.

Communities often come together to represent their interests and there are often inevitable tensions between the state and communities about issues relating to planning, to allocation of scarce resources and rights of access to public services. This means a challenge to develop structures and provide resources that nurture participation. This challenge is all the more urgent in disadvantaged areas where participation rates may be low and where there is more reliance on state funding.

Unlike other interests, there is very limited or no capacity within many community organisations concerned with poverty to be financially self-sustaining. Adequate state support for the range of community activity within poor communities is an essential mechanism to enhance genuine social participation and democracy.

- **Recommendation 14.1:** Programmes which support the active involvement of the most vulnerable such as the Community Development Support Programme and the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme need to be continued and further resourced;
- **Recommendation 14.2:** Community development approaches to involving the most vulnerable groups need to be acknowledged and supported;
- **Recommendation 14.3:** Resource and acknowledge the key role that organisations using community development approaches play in building the active engagement and capacity of their target group/members; and
- **Recommendation 14.4:** Resource progression routes to further education and training and development;
- **Recommendation 14.5:** Strengthen the relationship and mechanisms for linking national and local policy formulation and implementation mechanisms, specifically in regard to the NAP/Inclusion.

Question 15: How can communities be encouraged to identify the unique strengths and skills of their own members and to draw upon them for their own benefit?

Combat Poverty has worked with community organisations on a wide range of programmes and activities since it was established. Community organisations using community development approaches play a pivotal role in building the capacity of

their members and in doing so identify the strengths, skills and potential of their members.

- **Recommendation 15.1:** Community organisations which create the conditions for active involvement need to be adequately resourced in order to do the following:
- Provide the opportunities for mutual support and building relationships and networks;
 - Provide access to information, knowledge and skills;
 - Nurture and develop leadership roles within poorer communities, both geographic and interest based;
 - Support individuals/groups to engage in policy-making forums locally regionally and nationally;
 - Build confidence and self-esteem;
 - Support cultural, sexual and racial diversity, and
 - Build solidarity between people from different backgrounds.

Question 16: How can Government – including Local Government – work more effectively with communities to help them organise effectively?

Government, including local government, provides the framework within which disadvantaged communities operate, and makes resources and supports available for the operation and development of organisations and groups to support active citizenship.

Local government has an increasing role in the areas of promoting social capital, active citizenship and community development. The revised NAPS, *Building an Inclusive Society 2002*, states that local authorities must take account of the principles, targets and objectives set out in the NAPS when setting strategic development objectives.

Local authorities are named as one of the key players in supporting the implementation of NAP/inclusion, given their particular responsibilities and expertise in delivering national strategies at a local level, through the County/City Development Boards (CDBs). In addition to the implications of NAPS for local authorities, the reform proposed in the Programme for Local Government (Better

Local Government; A Programme for Change) included among others, local government and participative democracy being brought closer together, local government's role in the community being widened and an increased focus on tackling social exclusion.

Local authorities are inextricably linked to communities through both the representative and participative democratic processes, and have a key role in fostering linkages between both processes. Given the increased concerns regarding the involvement of poorer communities in representative democracy, local authorities can play a pivotal role in supporting participation in local decision making structures. As facilitators of the County/City Development Boards they can ensure resources are in place to support involvement of vulnerable groups in local social, economic and cultural activities. Community Fora should be a very useful structure to build participation but stronger and more targeted mechanisms are needed to ensure the most vulnerable are encouraged and supported to participate equally with more powerful and established community interests.

- **Recommendation 16.1:** National and local government should provide secure and multi-annual funding to community groups which work to support the participation of the most vulnerable in society;
- **Recommendation 16.2:** National and local government should seek, resource and value participation and involvement;
- **Recommendation 16.3:** National and local government should recognise and resource the contribution of community development and groups working from a community development approach in building active citizenship;
- **Recommendation 16.4:** National and local government should ensure consultation mechanisms and initiatives are accessible and involve meaningful participation of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion;
- **Recommendation 16.5:** Local authorities should promote greater participation in representative and participative democratic processes and target resources towards the participation of the most vulnerable;
- **Recommendation 16.6:** Local authorities should promote and provide support tenant participation and estate management initiatives particularly in poor areas;

- **Recommendation 16.7:** The Arts and Library Services in local authorities have a key contribution to make in fostering active citizenship. These services need particular resources to continue to focus on disadvantage;
- **Recommendation 16.8:** Awareness training on community development and anti-poverty work should be incorporated into all mainstream training provision directed at the public and civil service, and
- **Recommendation 16.9:** National and local government should ensure implementation of the commitments and principles outlined in the White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* (2000).
- **Recommendation 16.10:** The planning process should take account of the community and social infrastructure needs of existing and new communities

THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS...

Question 17: What are the main challenges in establishing and running a community or voluntary organisation in Ireland today?

Funding is a central issue for organisations in the community and voluntary sector, at local, regional and national level. Funding is also closely linked to the autonomy of the sector. Applying for funding has become increasingly complex and bureaucratic and is often of a short-term or once-off nature. Community and voluntary organisations need adequate funding to resource their core work and meet the different types of challenges which present themselves at different stages of the organisation's development. Funding is needed to enable groups to plan their work strategically and effectively. There are concerns within the community and voluntary sector in relation to their increased dependency on state-only funding, with many groups feeling that this reduces their flexibility and autonomy. Concerns have also been raised about the increased role of the sector in relation to service delivery on behalf of the state in order to obtain funding.

Other challenges include:

- Increased opportunities but inadequate supports for community and voluntary sector organisations to participate in a variety of structures and programmes

at local, regional and national level, for example Drugs Task Forces, County/City Development Boards (and their associated structures), RAPID, national social partnerships structures, etc. Participation in and representation on these structures requires time and particular skills and supports;

- Staff retention in a sector where there are high levels of 'burn-out';
- Greater responsibilities for volunteer management committees and boards. Members of anti poverty community groups may not have the confidence or skills to take up various roles. This is coupled with the fact that people experiencing poverty may be impeded from participating through bad health, lack of money, discrimination, lack of education etc.

- **Recommendation 17.1:** Put in place an implementation plan and schedule for outstanding commitments in the White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* with particular reference to multi-annual funding for community and voluntary groups;
- **Recommendation 17.2:** Develop alternative sources of funding for the community and voluntary sector. A multiplicity of funding sources would enable a diversity and richness to the work carried out by groups. There needs to be further exploration of community funds or trusts, particularly at a local level. In this regard local authorities should be encouraged to establish community initiative funds as outlined in The Local Government Act 2001 (Section 109); and
- **Recommendation 17.3:** Strengthen awareness of the community and voluntary sector in all government departments. This could be achieved through the provision of training particularly for those personnel whose work directly involves them with the community and voluntary sector. Community development approaches to tackling poverty and inequality needs to be emphasised through training on the underlying principles and practices of community development.

Question 18: Does your organisation, or do organisations in your sector, find it harder to recruit and keep volunteers than in the past? If so, why and how can this trend be reversed?

Encouraging the participation and involvement of people on a voluntary basis has become increasingly difficult for a variety of reasons:

- There are increased, education, training and employment opportunities;
- More specialised training is required in dealing with particular groups such as young people and women experiencing violence;
- Many people may not have the confidence, skills or opportunities to become more active citizens;
- A plethora of structures have emerged over the last number of years (particularly at local level) which require representation and participation of citizens. This has led to a certain degree of burn-out and fatigue in local communities;
- Due to increased employment levels there is a subsequent decrease in numbers available as volunteers; and
- There is also the fear of litigation and concern about financial risk for those participating in groups.

- **Recommendation 18.1:** In order to encourage active participation, particularly of marginalised communities, funding must be provided for expenses incurred in travel, social care costs and general costs for attending meetings, conferences, etc; and
- **Recommendation 18.2:** There is also a need to provide support to organizations in the following areas: contributing to policy formulation; research & evaluation; management & organisational development; developing relationships with statutory agencies and community development.

Question 19: How can the State support and encourage community and voluntary organisations?

The development of a strong and vibrant community and voluntary sector encourages the active participation of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised. This is a vital ingredient of a healthy democracy.

The Government recognises that to achieve its vision of society the ability of the community and voluntary sector to provide channels for the active involvement and participation of citizens is fundamental. (White Paper Supporting Voluntary Activity)

- **Recommendation 19.1:** Implement, as a matter of priority, the various outstanding actions of the Government White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* particularly the provision of multi-annual funding;
- **Recommendation 19.2:** Continue to support programmes such as the National Anti-Poverty Networks Programme; the Community Development Programme and the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme; and
- **Recommendation 19.3:** Continue to provide support to the community and voluntary sector through the national specialist support agencies working with the Community Development Programme and the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme, and
- **Recommendation 19.4:** Provide training to statutory personnel, particularly those whose work involves them in direct contact with the community and voluntary sector.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Social Capital

Resources that are based on relationships and networks of influence and support and enable people to get help from each other.

Community Development

The long-term process whereby people who are marginalised or living in poverty work together to identify their needs, create change, exert more influence in the decisions which affect their lives and work to improve the quality of their lives, the communities in which they live, and the society of which they are part.

Active Citizenship

Active citizenship aims to make it possible for everyone to take part in all aspects of society including the following areas of activity:

- Cultural
- Economic
- Political, and
- Community

When society promotes active citizenship, it aims to support:

- Personal fulfillment
- Democratic participation
- Social inclusion, and
- A job for everyone who wants it.

Active citizenship is also about the people of the country being able to:

- Make informed choices and decisions, and
- Take action on their own and with other people

Anti-Poverty Network

An Anti-Poverty Network is network with members drawn from the voluntary and community sectors, public and statutory bodies. They undertake research and disseminate information on poverty and social exclusion.

Community Development Programme (CDP)

Irish Government Programme for developing and funding local Community Development Projects

Family Resource and Community Services Programme

Set up in 1994 by the Department of Social Welfare to mark the International Year of the Family, the programme aimed to provide statutory support for community development activities focused on support for families and tackling child poverty.

Participation

Taking part or sharing in an activity such as the public decision-making processes. This is crucial for democratic stability and is also one of the basic rights of each person.

Disadvantaged Area

Geographic area where a high proportion of people are affected by poverty, unemployment and social exclusion.

Poverty

People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to exclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in Irish Society.

Consultation

The process by which all interested parties and those who are affected are included in the decision making process.

Mainstreaming Social Inclusion

The integration of poverty and social inclusion objectives, including an equality perspective, into all areas and levels of policy-making.

Community Fora

Community Fora are the mechanisms through which the community at county level can feed into the Community Development Boards to articulate their needs and issues.

Pobal

Formerly known as Area Development Management (ADM), Pobal is an independent company set up by the Irish Government and the EU to support local economic and social development. Further information available at www.pobal.ie

Peace Programme

The EU funded programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties in the Republic of Ireland. Further information available at www.borderaction.ie

Excluded Citizens

An excluded citizen is unable to participate in society because of a lack of resources that are customarily available to the general population. This is usually linked problems such as low income, poor housing, high crime environments and family problems.

Local Development Social Inclusion Programme

The Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) is a series of measures that are designed to counter disadvantage and to promote equality and social and economic inclusion. The LDSIP is managed by Pobal (formerly ADM) on behalf of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.