

Policy Submission

Stronger Local Democracy: Options for Change

Submission on the Green Paper on Local Government

July 2008



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Green Paper

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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.

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Green Paper *Stronger local democracy - options for change*. Combat Poverty has been closely involved with issues of social inclusion and local government over the past ten years and has worked closely with local government in the area of social inclusion. We particularly welcome the opportunity to comment on the role of local government in building local democracy. We focus our comments on the role of local government in involving disadvantaged communities and groups.

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 expressed 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.

Combat Poverty in the submission made to the Minister last year made the following recommendations;

- A local anti-poverty/social inclusion strategy facilitated by the local authority needs to be developed in all city/county areas.
- Commitment at corporate level needs to be strengthened to support internal processes in making adjustments to work practices, support for training etc.
- The responsibilities and roles of elected members and city/county managers should be clear. Elected members need to strengthen their strategic policy role regarding poverty and social inclusion.
- Local authority staff and elected members need continued support and training (particularly technical assistance regarding poverty impact assessments, community development, target setting) to develop their understanding of poverty and social inclusion

- Horizontal, vertical and diagonal linkages and communications systems, between and within national and local government, need to be put in place to ensure coherence in the delivery of public services at the local level. Social inclusion service provision should be embedded in this overall model
- Local authorities require a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in the delivery of public services to disadvantaged communities and groups to ensure services are tailored to their needs.

Community development and local government – progress to date

Government, including local government, provides the policy and institutional framework within which disadvantaged communities operate and makes resources and supports available for the operation and development of organisations and groups to support participation and active citizenship. Local government has a key and an increasing role in the areas of promoting social inclusion, active citizenship and community development. Building local democracy which includes those experiencing poverty and social exclusion cannot be tackled without building community infrastructure and encouraging and supporting community development activity.

Local authorities are named as one of the key players in supporting the implementation of NAPinclusion, given their particular responsibilities and expertise in delivering national strategies at a local level, through the local authorities and County/City Development Boards (CDBs). In addition to the implications of NAPinclusion 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. This involved new structures, functions and new procedures. These new structures included the establishment of City/County Development Boards (CDBs), Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Community Fora, Social Inclusion Measure (SIM) Groups and Social Inclusion Units in local

authorities¹. The Local Government Act 2001 further consolidated the role of local authorities with regard to social inclusion.

Evidence would suggest that progress made by local authorities since *Better Local Government* in developing their understanding and capacity to provide leadership at local level and adopt a strategic approach to tackling social exclusion has been very significant. Combat Poverty has commissioned a number of reports in recent years which provide more detailed considerations of the role local government is playing in addressing social inclusion. Much has been achieved over the last number of years in terms of developing an anti-poverty and social inclusion focus within local government practice and policy and there has been a keen willingness expressed by local authorities in developing and expanding their new role. However, despite these advances, recent experience would indicate that there are still many challenges to overcome in terms of embedding social inclusion within local authorities and, in particular, their capacity to support participation of those most disadvantaged in initiatives and structures which affect them.

Green Paper

We believe that the Green Paper proposals are very limited in building participation and democracy among those most removed from the democratic system. Working with these disadvantaged communities and groups requires a long-term investment in human resources, new structures of participation, time and consistency of approach by the local authorities.

Chapter 7 of the Green Paper, *Participative democracy and local government* states that 'local government is in a prime position to tackle social exclusion, a role which goes much further than just providing services and observes that councils have a 'long tradition of representing and engaging with the community'. While this is true, it is also the case that many disadvantaged communities have a negative experience in accessing local services and this experience does not contribute to their sense of inclusion. The Paper proposes new forms of participation to make 'direct,

¹ Social Inclusion Units have been established in 17 local authorities under the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness and Towards 2016*.

meaningful contact' between councils and communities and proposes a series of measures, such as participatory budgeting, petition rights, extending the use of plebiscites beyond place-naming, town or area meetings and town meetings. There are no specific proposals to build the capacity of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to participate and Combat Poverty would argue that the measures proposed will not lead to the involvement of those most excluded.

Local authorities have a key role in building active citizenship, social capital and promoting community development. Poverty and social exclusion cannot be tackled without building community infrastructure and encouraging and supporting community development activities. Expertise is generally available in local areas through local development and community development organisations which can be accessed through the city/county development board structures. Combat Poverty, as part of its statutory remit, promotes community development as a means of overcoming poverty and defines community development as;

A process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self-confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and to tackle the problems that face their community

Community development is a way of doing things that builds community infrastructure by:

- promoting collective action/responses to local problems
- designing and delivering services in partnership with those affected by poverty and social exclusion
- promoting estate management and tenant participation
- helping to build sustainable communities.

Finally, in the area of recruitment, the Green Paper refers to 'social inclusion and community building' as being a new part of 'exciting and diverse' careers within the local authorities and then discusses the opening of higher level posts to open competition. Currently, posts dealing with social exclusion and community development have largely been filled from existing local authority staff. This has closed off recruitment of experienced staff from outside existing structures who would

have a specific expertise in the areas of social inclusion and community development. Given that local authorities have only very recently been given a role regarding social inclusion, local authorities are not benefiting from the best expertise available and, in the area of social inclusion and community development, it is important that there be open competition, based on elaboration of core competencies and skills required. If local government is to play an enhanced role in this area it is critical that specific expertise is developed and nurtured.

- **Recommendation 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 2:** National and local government should seek, resource and value participation and involvement;
- **Recommendation 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; Local authorities should be resourced to promote greater participation in local democratic processes and target resources towards the participation of the most vulnerable;
- **Recommendation 4:** Local authorities should be resourced to promote and provide support for participation and build on initiatives which involve poor communities including estate management, libraries and funding for community initiatives which build capacity;
- **Recommendation 5:** Training on community development and anti-poverty work should be incorporated into all mainstream training provision directed at local authorities;
- **Recommendation 6:** Local authorities must be able to recruit externally for 'specialist' posts with a remit in social inclusion and community development.

Resourcing Local Government

Local authorities need resources to adapt local solutions to local problems, based on local knowledge and involvement of civil society in the development and implementation of strategies. In carrying out their functions, local authorities need to balance their objectives of maintaining essential services and co-ordinating activities with other bodies through the county/city development boards, promoting sustainable development and social inclusion. It is essential to build on existing opportunities to use and improve the efficiencies of the structures developed over recent years to deliver better services and enhance local democracy.

Community Fora should be a very useful structure to build participation in local democratic structures, 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. If resources are targeted in this area, this will also lend to better and more meaningful participation in SPCs, county/city development boards and in turn build better local democracy.

Appendix

Combat Poverty building participation

Since it was established in 1986, 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:

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

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

- 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 building sustainable communities
- Promote work that supports the participation of people in poverty and their representative organisations to engage in the policy system.

National strategies and policies recognise the need for participation of people in poverty and the importance of supports and resources to enable their participation. The Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy³ and the NAPinclusion⁴ both highlight the need to strengthen supports for the 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

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

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

feature of the development of NAPS'.⁵ Combat Poverty sees the development of strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion, which actively supports the involvement of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, 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

Publications link:

<http://www.combatpovertypublications.ie/>

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.