

How Government's *Putting People First* policy will effectively put socially excluded people last

by Aiden Lloyd (January 2016)

Introduction

In 2014 government passed the Local Government (Reform) Bill which brought into force measures outlined in the White Paper *Putting People First: action programme for effective local government*. The essential elements of the White Paper, the brainchild of the former Minister of Environment, Phil Hogan, are based on a Fine Gael policy document developed prior to the 2011 election. The White Paper has two broad thrusts.

Firstly, the streamlining of the local government system including the reduction of local authorities from 114 to 31 city and county councils. This involved the abolition of existing town authorities and the unification of some existing city/county councils.

The intent of the second thrust is clearly indicated in the vision statement in the White Paper: '*Local government will lead economic, social and community development locally*' – local development and community development being two areas of social and integrated socio-economic activity operating in an accountable but relatively autonomous relationship with the state. To achieve this lead role a number of structural changes are brought into operation under the Act, namely:

- The creation of the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC), which will have management oversight of the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), formerly managed directly by the local development partnership companies. The LCDC replaces the pre-existing City/County Development Board.
- Secondly, the creation of a county wide Public Participation Network (PPN) which will serve as a forum through which community priorities will be identified and representation sought for local authority committees, including the LCDC.
- Thirdly, the creation of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) to create a one-stop-shop for business support, thus replacing the County Enterprise Board.
- Finally, the LCDC will undertake the development of a 6 year Local Economic and Community Plan for the county.

In Ireland, one needs to be wary of plans to reform local government; not because local government isn't in need of reform - Ireland has one of the most undeveloped local government systems in Europe – but because previous attempts to reform local government have either been killed off (Barrington Report 1991¹) or were largely about reorganising administrative procedures while propping up the clientalism that passes for local politics in Ireland (Better Local Government 1996²).

In Ireland, the state is highly centralised and local government is both extremely limited and stringently controlled by central government. The range of allocated responsibilities is narrow compared with European local authorities, which provide primary healthcare, childcare, transport and schooling amongst other services. There are also differences in financial autonomy. While local authorities in Europe and the USA are able to set and levy taxes, our local authorities have very

¹ Local Government Reorganisation and Reform (Barrington) Report 1991

² Better Local Government 1996

limited powers to raise revenue (mainly commercial rates). Neither does our local government system stand up to scrutiny in democratic terms. Despite having councillors that are accountable to the local electorate, most decisions are made by the county manager and their officials acting under the tutelage of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

There was some relief from the stranglehold of central government when Ireland was forced to introduce a measure of subsidiarity by a very proactive European Commission during the early structural funds era, when the state was in receipt of substantial financial supports - the creation of local partnership structures being a direct outcome. This brought an unprecedented, if limited, measure of local community participation in planning and decision making. Some optimists began to believe it heralded a new era of local democratic administration, expecting some form of amalgamation of local development and local government in due course. This was not to be.

Better Local Government was introduced in 1996 and was intended to restore matters to their pre-existing state (the exchequer had begun to regain its dominance as growth returned and Ireland's EU objective 1 status ended) while keeping the local development and community development sector sweet. It did introduce an element of participatory democracy through the creation of Strategic Policy Committees, especially the Social Inclusion Committee with a remit to feed social inclusion priorities into the City/County Development Board. While the opportunities to influence matters were limited, social inclusion participation in the SPCs was both facilitated and resourced and this enabled local community groups to develop a critical policy focus.

Preparing the ground

Long before the introduction of Hogan's changes the ground was being prepared by previous Fianna Fail dominated governments. A series of measures with bland technical titles such as *endorsement*, *integration*, *cohesion* and *alignment* were introduced to reduce and reassemble local community development and local development structures. The Community Development Programme was emasculated over time and its remnants absorbed into the local development partnerships. Pobal, the national body set up on the insistence of the European Commission (because local authorities didn't have the capacity to implement the local development elements of the original Structural Funds) was relieved both of its development support capacity and its managerial autonomy. Soon the partnerships were themselves amalgamated with the rural development Leader companies and their boundaries aligned with those of local authority. So, a whole architecture built up to deliver social inclusion through participation and local decision making was disassembled.

Finally, intent on not missing the opportunity to make the best of an economic crisis, government then squeezed the funding for remaining social inclusion initiatives, resulting in a 35% contraction in funding for the sector³ against a 7% average reduction in government spending on services.

When viewed in its entirety, this series of changes over many years could only have one conclusion: the removal of community leadership of the social inclusion process. Bottom up development had been abandoned. The introduction of *Putting People First* is the culminating factor in that long process. It shifts the focus from the community to the local authority, who now have effective ownership of local development as well as gatekeeping community participation opportunities.

³ Downsizing the Community Sector: changes in employment and services in the voluntary and community sector in Ireland 2008 – 2012. Brian Harvey for Irish Congress of Trade Unions (2012)

Responsibility and capability

Local authorities now have managerial oversight, including contracting and funding, over the local development partnership companies. They have also assumed the organising of the community sector, including the social inclusion sector, through the PPN mechanism, and they have shifted funding from the autonomous forums, networks and platforms to the PPN. In effect, social inclusion has shifted lock, stock and barrel to the local authorities.

While there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the state cannot assume the leadership of any section of civil society in a democratic society, it can be disruptive to its purpose and effectiveness. So, is the local government system capable of delivering social inclusion without the willing co-operation of the community sector? Everything suggests it is not, both in terms of its capacity to do so and in its commitment to implement actions that require some resolve - one has only to look at the failure to implement the Traveller Accommodation Strategy, despite being provided with a supportive policy framework and the resources to do so.

Local authorities see their constituency as the total community within their boundaries, thus they define community in very broad terms. Where they have taken a particular focus on disadvantage it has been to enact measures to calm or settle public housing complexes through estate management measures, the development of community centres and the facilitation of self-help initiatives. They have never developed the capacity to implement the type of affirmative actions required for social inclusion, partly because their community departments are subject to the cultural belief that administrative expertise trumps specialisms. As a result, they have been unable to nurture and accumulate the knowledge and skills base required for social inclusion, even if they were disposed to do so.

The PPN

The creation of the Public Participation Network, which effectively assumes the organisation of the community sector at local level, is a particularly impudent step, especially so since its development was determined by everybody but those destined to be its main target – i.e. the social inclusion focused community development sector. Representation on the government appointed *Working Group on the Public's Engagement and Participation with Local Government* (the title explains the purpose) included the Department of the Environment, local authority personnel, The Wheel (an umbrella body for the voluntary sector) and Social Justice Ireland, a church organisation with no operational experience of the local community context - the sole social inclusion voice being the European Anti-poverty Network Ireland (EAPN).

The PPN raises important ethical issues. While a democratic state bound by republican ideals has a duty to support a strong civil society, it has neither the right nor the authority to assume the organising of civil society, especially its most vulnerable segment. The PPN, in replacing previous participative structures, brings up matters that are of primary democratic importance. Those pre-existing participative channels were created to address a democratic deficit whereby marginalised groups such as those on low income, ethnic minorities, women, people with a disability and those parenting alone were effectively excluded from decision making. They were intended to augment representative democracy by providing an alternative conduit for their voice. The PPN, on the other hand, by encompassing a wider constituency within which the social inclusion sector is a minority voice, effectively doubles the access for those who already have ample representation through

elected councillors. In doing so, it further distances the marginalised from the local decision making process.

The effect of this diluted social inclusion voice will undoubtedly impact negatively on the drafting of the Local Economic and Community Plan, which will set the priority objectives of each local authority area. While the impact of this will be ameliorated by the restricted brief of local government (and the recalcitrance of regional agencies to engage with another vacuous local authority structure) it will have a severe impact on groups such as Travellers and, given the strengthened role given to local authorities under the Social Housing Strategy, those who are homeless or living in overcrowded conditions.

The final area of concern relates to the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, which is the sole programmatic intervention to address social exclusion. Implemented by the local development partnerships. The strength of this series of programme (SICAP being the latest) has always rested on the local development partnership having the independence and flexibility to mould an action plan informed by all its stakeholders, including the voice of the marginalised. That is now gone. Local authorities now have overarching management of the SICAP through the Local and Community Development Committee, including responsibility for the awarding of contracts and budgets.

In addition, it is likely that the PPN as it comes into full operational swing, will attempt to force many of its more community-focused priorities to where there is funding i.e. SICAP, thus further diluting the social inclusion focus of that programme.

Finally, the decision to move to a tendering process for delivery of SICAP, following advice from the Attorney General that there may be contravention of EU competition law, sends social inclusion towards the market place, with inevitable private sector involvement down the line, or perhaps worse, the domination of social inclusion by big corporate-language-adorned NGOs.

Conclusion

So, what is likely to be the overall effect of all this policy on community sector capabilities, on levels of social inclusion and on the future shape of Irish society?

In partnership with government, the community sector has led the social inclusion process in Ireland for the greater part of the past 3 decades. From the inception of the European Poverty Programmes, through the successor Community Development Programme and the Integrated Local Development process (the area partnerships) community development has been the approach chosen by government to eliminate social exclusion. That commitment has now gone. The sector has been systematically downsized, programmes and intermediary agencies have been emasculated and local authorities have been assigned a role they have neither the competence nor inclination to deliver on. Above all, the knowledge base of the community sector - the sum of its understanding, strategic and organisational capability – has been hugely diminished and will take a good decade or longer to restore, even were circumstance to favour such a restoration.

As a result, social exclusion, already reaching record levels under austerity measures (one third of the population live in material deprivation⁴) is likely to become an enduring feature of Irish society. Remaining measures such as the Family Resource Centre Programme (FRC), the National Drugs

⁴ SILC 2013

Strategy and the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) are likely to consolidate their social interventionist/management role, while civil society will be facilitated in its drift back to beneficence and charity. Unfortunately, little thought has been given to the reality that normalising social separation comes at a high, and perhaps unsustainable, social and economic cost.

Could it have been different and is it salvageable? The answer is yes, and it could still be turned around; but it will require some decisive action and a few radical steps. Firstly, responsibility for social inclusion and community development needs to be shifted back to a department with expertise on matters of social concern. The Department of Social Protection has that expertise, but unfortunately it is in some disarray since being assigned an employment activation role. Perhaps a home for social inclusion could be found in a reconstituted department of community and social affairs.

The community sector, despite being forcibly downsized, still has a role to play but will need to stop trying to reinvent the past and face up to new challenges. A new leadership that is more robust and inventive is required and this will need to be nurtured and facilitated by new thinking. The broader social justice sector also needs to cease their moral posturing and become actively inclusive of those fighting the coalface battles. Human rights need to be granted, not bestowed.

The state also needs to face up to a new relationship with the community sector, one that acknowledges the sector's role as an independent critical voice for the marginalised communities who cannot find expression for their needs through systems and structures that only deliver for those with power and favour. The proposed *Framework Policy for Local and Community Development* presents an opportunity to set down such a relationship. It could start by putting in place guaranteed funding for the sector (a percentage of GDP perhaps?) protected by an institutional mechanism that includes the community sector in its planning processes and disbursal strategies.

Finally, if government is seriously concerned to reform local government and prepare it for a social inclusion role it should resurrect and implement the 1991 Barrington Report (presently gathering dust on the shelves of the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government) prior to contemplating a future role in social inclusion matters. It's about time we had real local government anyway.