

*Community participation:  
the experience of South  
Dublin Community  
Platform*

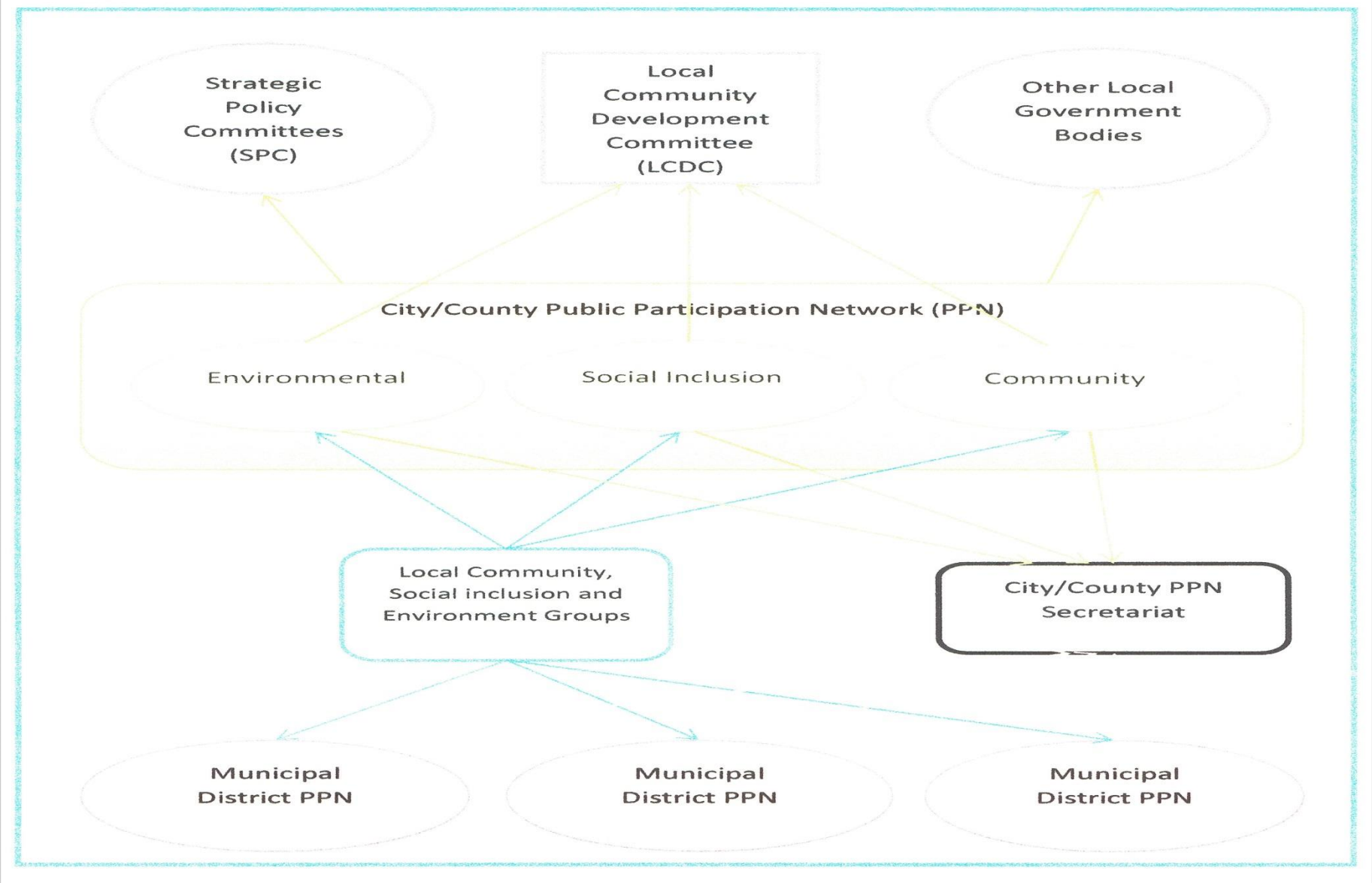
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Clondalkin, Dublin, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014  
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# Purpose, method of research

- Evaluate model of participation developed by SDCP
  - Working solution to reconcile Local Government Act, PPN with social inclusion community sector?
- Draw conclusions on impact, outcomes
- Make recommendation on PPN process
- Method:
  - Examination of documentation
  - Personal and telephone interviews with key players (14)
  - Focus group organized by platform (7)

# Context

- Process of local government reform
  - *Better local government*, 1996: SPCs, CDBs
  - *Putting people first*, 2012
  - Local Government Reform Act, 2014
  - Fresh iterations of SPCs; LCDCs
- Working Group on Civic Engagement (2014)
  - Public Participation Networks (PPNs)
  - Precise origin unclear
- Came at a time, from 2002, accelerated 2009, of radical disinvestment by state in voluntary, community infrastructure



# Scheme of PPNs

# South Dublin Community Platform

- Forums and platforms date to late 1990s
  - Provided with €1.27m resourcing annually
- In some counties, binary system of forums, platforms
  - SDCP is principal platform at this stage
  - Platforms strongest in urban areas
- Purpose of platforms: represent disadvantaged groups, communities for participation and social change
- Since 2009, no national overview of this field
- Elsewhere: forums have generally morphed into PPNs
  - Varying degrees of consultation, efficiency
  - Positive experiences some counties (e.g. Cavan), not in others (Clare)

# South Dublin: early stage

- South Dublin was pilot county
- SDCP: consultation, information meetings (Jan)
- Adopted position on PPNs (April)
  - Working group was not prescriptive
  - PPNs should adapt to, respect local history, arrangements
  - Not role of state to organize voluntary, community sector
  - Reservations on funding proposals, levels of representation
  - But decided to engage
- Department (May)
  - Accepted that forums did not necessarily represent social inclusion
  - Local authorities should develop representative systems
  - Flexibility: one size did not fit all

# South Dublin: mid stage

- Tripartite working group to progress PPN: forum, platform, environment (June)
- Departmental funding of platform, forum ended (July)
  - Instead, allocation to council to set up PPN
- SDCC convenes information meeting on PPNs (July)
- SDCP presents proposals:
  - Platform to organize social inclusion pillar
  - Agreed definition of social inclusion organization
  - Continued resourcing
- Council: not acceptable under departmental guidelines (September)

# South Dublin: end stage

- SDCC information meeting (September)
  - SDCCP attended, but withheld consent pending resolution
  - Intervention by councillors in Progressive Alliance
- Agreed that:
  - Platform will register organizations, others may come
  - Social inclusion definition settled
  - Platform to share management resource worker
- Election secretariat (early October)
  - Platform candidates elected
- First meeting secretariat (end October)
  - Structure, management resource worker unresolved



# Outcomes and impact

- Platform successful in:
  - Maintaining position as representative voice for social inclusion, right of sector to organize
  - Definition of social inclusion organizations
- But now unfunded, albeit share resource worker
- Success not inevitable, but due, like Cavan, to:
  - Making an early start, familiarization with documentation, briefing and consultation, time to manage a better outcome
  - *Pragmatists vs strict application* in local, national government: pragmatists won
  - Prior history positive voluntary-statutory interaction

# Issues arising

- **Consultation**
- **Contested value of community platforms**
- **Balance of colleges**
- **Secretariat and resource worker**
- **Tests: will it work?**

# Consultation

- Strong criticism of PPN: rushed, imposed, top-down
- ‘Big bang’ approach left key issues unresolved
  - Local authorities in dark too, without right skillsets
- The appropriate approach anyway?
  - Some local authorities had good practice, record
  - Real problem further up the line: SPCs, lack of broad consultative systems
- But a goodwill to support broadening of democratic base, see what good may come

# Value of platforms

- Platform based on axiom that social inclusion organizations need, have right to organize themselves, an effective way of addressing disadvantage
- Many forums insist social inclusion is well represented
- Unusual, strong antipathy to platform
  - Unrepresentative, uncollaborative, controlling
  - Unproductive, uncommunicative
  - Paid workers, poverty industry
- Difficult to interpret: a challenge to majority view on social policy, community development?

# Balance of colleges

- Seen as ‘unrepresentative’
  - Forum thousands compared to handful of social inclusion organization, tiny environmental college
- Likely to be pressure to re-order
- But:
  - Is it supposed to be strictly representative?
  - Gothenburg principle
  - Environmental sector even less resourced than community
  - Platform is active, mobilizing: accepted that platform, environment likely to be drivers
  - Issue is build them up, rather than reduce them

# Secretariat and worker

- Working group outlined role:
  - Facilitate, ensuring functioning, coordinate, communicate, disseminate, set agendas and manage resource worker
- Secretariats will be tested to:
  - Develop decision-making, line of command, recruit and manage worker (right person? Structure?)
- But current iteration:
  - Pobal FAQ 22: 'flat' structure, no chair
  - SDCC: no decision-making
  - Resource worker likely to be contracted out
  - Substantial departure from original proposal

# Resourcing

- View from 1980s that community development required modest level of resourcing
- Radical disinvestment from 2002 (CPA, CDP) and mutation to services with numerical targets (SICAP)
- Funding of forums/platforms fell -64% 2000-2014
- Prevalent sentiment against funding:
  - ‘Voluntary means voluntary’
  - ‘Welcome to participate – but you can pay for it’
  - Especial reluctance to fund paid, professional workers
- Loss of understanding that modest funding is necessary, esp. for social inclusion groups

# Tests: will PPN work?

- Working group set down test of impact but:
  - Set mainly numerical indicators
  - Proposed inappropriate evaluation mechanisms e.g. NOAC
- Goodwill toward concept, idea, 'real potential':
  - Draw in new people, groups: doing this already
  - More transparent system of nomination to SPCs etc
  - Improved interaction with local authorities
- But scepticism:
  - Will it fizzle? Especially if PPN cannot make decisions?
  - Does not change local balance of power
  - Frustration with a year spent on structures



# General conclusions

- Extraordinary, during social crisis, to spend a year on structures, but...

*Once you change who decides the policy,  
you change the policy itself*

- A confluence of policy change in local government, social policy, voluntary/statutory relationships
- Provides an opening, but addresses only bottom part of power pyramid. Lack of impact on policy/practice may be main weakness.

# Specific conclusions

- SDCP was largely successful in engagement, less so in funding area, which was departmental
- Key issues unresolved: secretariat, worker
- Most enlightened part, pillar idea, may be reopened
- Important learning:
  - Inadequate consultative process
  - Overhasty implementation. Report on pilots?
  - Local authority councillors supportive, critical to unlocking, showing participative/representative can work
  - Proposals for monitoring, evaluation inappropriate
  - Legacy issues: role of platform, resourcing social action

# Recommendations

- Need for government to consult in a meaningful, multidimensional way
- Need to address participation up the line e.g. SPCs
- Voluntary, community groups restate need to fund community infrastructure, citizen participation:
  - Local govt find ways of supporting, resourcing
  - SICAP provide meaningful assistance
  - Challenge hostile mindset
- Resolve secretariat, worker
- Meaningful, appropriate evaluation focussed on impact.

○ *Thank you for your attention!*