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## **Sharing Responsibility to Maximize Positive Outcomes: Co-Production, Community Participation and Public Services**

*Ivan Cooper*

Community participation in co-producing public services will ensure best outcomes in developing people's capabilities

Ireland faces many challenges to deliver a sustainable social and economic recovery. Reforming how we fund and deliver our public services is now generally accepted as being critical to recovery: if we can deliver reform that puts the citizen at the centre of both the design and delivery of joined up, personalised public services then we will get maximum value for money and the best possible outcomes from our limited resources. Public services are delivered by both public sector and community and voluntary organisations, and both sets of actors have big roles to play in delivering the reforms required.

### **It's all about outcomes**

Delivering the best possible outcome in a person's life should be the aim of all services, but particularly of our public services. Outcomes are experienced in people's lives and are a product of the interaction between the persons' need and the effectiveness of the service in meeting that need. Positive outcomes are the improvements in quality of life that a good service brings about.

Only the person benefiting from a service can truly know whether the service is meeting their need and how the service could be improved to better meet that need. Delivering the best possible outcome for a person or a community involves that person or community being able to secure

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for themselves - from public resources when appropriate - the service they determine is required to meet their need. That means people having an adequate choice of service configurations *or* control over the specific service they require, and ideally means both.

If providing choice is impractical then providing control is essential. Control means being able to direct the service, within practical constraints that should be recognised and agreed by users. Service-users must therefore be able to shape both the design and implementation of the service being offered if the best possible outcomes are to be delivered.

This is the essence of the *co-production approach* that *puts the person at the heart of public services*. The approach involves much more than simple consulting. It demands that public-service-providers be directed by, and be answerable to, service users. There is a big advocacy and support role for community and voluntary organisations here. It demands service users having a full understanding of their own needs and of the resource-constraints to be taken into account in delivering the required service. It demands service users being able, and being supported, to shape and control the design and implementation of the services they require.

Achieving outcome-focussed public services will therefore require a significant re-design of the structures and processes we generally use to deliver public services. The current crisis presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform public services to put people at the heart of personalised services, tailored to individual need (rather than a one-size fits all approach) that they themselves are involved in designing and monitoring.

Achieving this will require:

- Delegating authority for controlling tailored public services to local communities and to supported service-users. The responsibility to fund and ensure the availability and adequacy of those services must remain clearly with the state.
  - It does not mean dumping responsibility on local communities and
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individual service-users without sufficient public resources being available.

- Changing the whole approach to public budget setting and tax-resource allocation, with new participatory approaches being developed at all levels of government, and particularly at the community level where services should ideally be designed, delivered, monitored and governed.
- Elected public representatives recognising that it is not their role to directly provide everything for the communities that elected them. Their role is to ensure communities are supported and empowered to provide for themselves using adequate public resources made available for that purpose.
- Conversely this will mean much greater levels of responsibility being accepted locally, and comprehensive statutory supports provided to assist voluntary-and-community-led governance and local/person-centred service provision.

We also need to nurture a greater sense of obligation by individuals to the members of their communities of place and interest to participate in the work of organising community and public services.

## **Sharing responsibility to maximise positive outcomes**

Sharing responsibility in shaping the future is a big theme, about as big as they come. Importantly the theme is expressed in the present continuous and suggests that we are all participating – actively or passively - in shaping the future, whether we are aware of it or not. The challenge essentially consists in each of us accepting our duty to become more actively involved in contributing in whatever way we can to envisioning and sustaining the society that we want to live in. We have delegated that role to professional politicians for too long.

The theme begs the question as to whether we are effectively sharing responsibility in shaping the future, and if not how we can better share that responsibility. Are each of us playing our part in shaping the future

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to maximise positive outcomes for ourselves, our families, and our communities; local, national and international? And if not, what can we do to maximise our participation in shaping our collective futures to deliver the best possible outcomes?

Clearly this theme is truly all-encompassing so this paper will approach the theme from the perspective of community participation in the co-production (planning and monitoring) of public services aimed at developing people's capabilities.

I will argue that by becoming involved in community and voluntary activity we give expression to our willingness to share responsibility with each other in shaping the future for ourselves, our families, our communities and indeed for the national and international communities we are a part of. In effect, we become trustees and guardians for each other.

I will also argue that when community and voluntary activity is adequately supported by public funds it:

- nurtures and gives expression to the duty of care that we have towards one another and builds a sense of citizenship; enables us to cooperate in devising and delivering a shared vision and co-produced solutions (in the form of positive outcomes) to collectively identified community needs;
- enables delivery of person-centred public services to deliver outcomes that develop people's capabilities

## **Major themes in co-production**

Simply attempting to reduce the cost of the way we currently deliver public services and aiming to do the same things cheaper may reduce the short term deficit but will not deliver the long term reforms that are both required and possible. We should recognise that all people have capabilities which it is the duty of society, through the collaborative efforts

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of the state and communities of citizens, to nurture and develop. It starts there and is as simple as that.

If we start with a clear vision that we want our public services to develop our capabilities and those of our families, friends, colleagues and society as a whole, then we will see that - like taking a strategic approach to any challenge – it will mean involving and resourcing citizens to take ownership and control over the public-service solutions they need. In short it means co-production.

Such a reorientation in the way that public services are routinely produced will involve moving away from providing centrally designed and controlled services – to citizens themselves designing and monitoring the delivery of the public services they require to achieve the most positive outcomes in their own lives. This is the essence of the co-production or active-partnership approach required if we are to have services oriented around delivering positive outcomes in people's lives - rather than public services that sometimes seem more concerned to meet the needs of various interest groups and the requirements of centralised bureaucracy.

Achieving such a change won't be easy. Quite apart from the process of identifying how to change the way we want to do things – itself a very big challenge – there will be the implementation challenge. This is where Ireland has historically failed over recent years – many argue that there is no shortage of good quality reform-oriented plans and strategies already in existence, but they have all suffered the same fate: implementation-failure.

We need to recognise that there will likely be high levels of cultural resistance in all institutions (including organisations in the community and voluntary sector) that have an interest, conscious or not, in maintaining the status quo.

All of that said, we can make a start by identifying the big themes that will drive change.

## 1. Agree the vision

Firstly, we need to agree that developing people's capabilities is indeed the objective of the society that we want to create. Everything else flows from that, so if we can't agree that then it will be very difficult to change the nature of our public services.

Good work was done in developing the high level goals in the Towards 2016 national agreement and these goals remain valid and should be re-subscribed to as a starting point to develop a renewed long term vision for national development. Useful work is also being done by the *Claiming our Future* movement, the *Citizens Assembly* and the *Conversation on Democracy* initiative which could also feed into developing such a national vision for change.

### Why develop people's capabilities?

#### *Because we have needs...*

There is a grand context here: each of us are individual and unique members of humankind, a species-of-the-world that has been on a long evolutionary journey over hundreds of thousands of years from a constant struggle to secure the basic-necessities-of-being to one that has developed today the capabilities and technologies required to supply all the material goods and deliver the self-actualisation-potential of all people. Yet much of humanity still lives in poverty.

The basic necessities of being are the basic needs which we share as human beings: needs for shelter, food, clothing, belonging, and self-actualisation. We sometimes call these needs the human rights required to live life with dignity.

We are born into a world to which each of us has the same claim to belong, and from which each of us has the same claim to have the necessities of being, or our human needs met. This is a simple, but often forgotten fact.

None of us enter the world by an act of will or choice. None of us can be

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held individually responsible for the fact of our being or for the needs we experience as a result of our being: so why should we be held individually responsible for meeting these needs? Yet many societies, including our own, increasingly place responsibility on individuals to meet their needs for themselves.

While we experience the world as individuals, our very identities are not willed or chosen, but generated through the dynamic interaction between ourselves and the communities of which we are a part.

In a most profound way, we belong to one another, and we have a responsibility and a duty to ensure each other's needs are met.

*...and because we have potential*

Most of us have of a sense of our unrealised potential. We are aware of what we could have achieved for ourselves and others and could yet achieve for ourselves and others if we set our minds to it.

We are aware of the gap between who we are now and the person we could become, and have within us the potential to become. We are aware of the potential for our latent capabilities to be realised, and the corollary potential to stagnate or, worse, to be reduced or diminished. All of these are potentials.

We are also aware of the limitations, restrictions, and obstacles both within us, and in our circumstances and environment, that impede us - and the ones we love - from realising our capabilities and achieving our full developmental potential. Most of us shape our personal futures to some extent by imagining and envisioning what's possible, and then working - always reliant on others and operating within a broad social context - to achieve it.

Some of us are undoubtedly better than others at imagining our potential - or what's possible for ourselves - and then setting goals to achieve it. And many of us are either significantly advantaged or disadvantaged in achieving our potential by our situation in the unequal world we live in.

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Most people – including those living in relative prosperity and comfort - want a better future for themselves, their families, friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow citizens: a future that is in some way an improvement on the present, in terms of the material comforts they benefit from, the personal fulfilment and well-being they experience, the quality of relationships they enjoy. While perhaps not considering it in these terms, people wish to achieve their potential and fully develop their capabilities. Aristotle said that people want to be happy, and they are happy when they have achieved what is to be a human being, realising their full potential along the way.

We could perhaps reasonably say that the future we collectively want is a happier one in a society concerned to support and sustain happy people who have fully developed their capabilities.

## 2. Nurture values of public service

Once we have agreed that our ultimate objective is to develop people's capabilities then we need to work out the strategy to do this: the what and the how. Before turning to the what, let's take a quick look at the how. I would suggest that the concept of trusteeship is key here. Sharing responsibility recognises that each of us as individuals - and the communities we are a part of - belong to each other and have mutual responsibilities and obligations. Neither exists, nor can they be understood, in isolation.

It's worth reflecting a little here on what responsibility means.

If we have responsibility for a person's well-being, we have a duty to ourselves, to the person we are responsible with-and-for, and to the people who have entrusted us with that responsibility, to work together *in* a common mission to identify and serve the person's needs, and to co-account for our actions in the doing of that. Responsibility is always with-and-on-behalf-of ourselves and others in the context of an agreed overall strategy (whether stated or un-stated).

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A person with such responsibility can be thought of as a trustee or guardian and guardianship carries both honour (at having been held by others in the high esteem and trust required) and responsibility. The concept of trusteeship throws light on what sharing responsibility involves. Trustees are people who have accepted an invitation from a wider community to take responsibility for tending to something on behalf of that wider community and, in the spirit of maintaining that trust, to voluntarily account for the way in which they deliver on their responsibility to that wider community.

Public service is simply trusteeship by another name.

We need to identify and nurture values of public service to re-create a positive culture of public service and trusteeship amongst all those who deliver public services – both statutory and voluntary. Society has a great deal to learn from the trustees of our charities and from how they overcome the challenge of governing themselves for the benefit of others, and in particular, from the self-control and flexibility-to-innovate that they demonstrate when they do it well.

There is now an opportunity to promote and nurture a new sense of national trusteeship amongst all people in positions of public and private authority in all public and private institutions where governance lapses contributed to the demoralised position we find ourselves in.

### **3. Identify the positive outcomes we aim to deliver**

Once we have agreed the vision, and re-committed to the values of public service and trusteeship that will underpin our approach to the work (the how), we will need to identify the what: the actual positive outcomes (the positive change in quality of life) we are aiming to achieve in people's lives through our public services.

We will also need to ensure that the public servants and trustees to whom we delegate authority to deliver these outcomes have the flexibility

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required to be innovative in identifying the most effective way of delivering these outcomes.

If devolution of the governance of the provision of public services to local communities and voluntary-led organisations is to take place confidently, people will need to be assured that scarce public resources are being applied to maximum effect. Community and voluntary organisations therefore need to demonstrate a strong focus on maximising the impact and outcomes of their work for the people they serve.

Social enterprises, charities and other voluntary organisations are facing many challenges in the current difficult economic climate having to provide for increased demand for services while incomes fall from statutory grants and public donations

While achieving a strategic focus on delivering (and measuring) positive impact and outcomes presents a big challenge for well-resourced public agencies and private for-profit companies, it presents an even bigger challenge for social enterprises and voluntary non-profits that focus all their scarce energies and resources on meeting clients' immediate needs. So we need to provide our charities and voluntary groups with dedicated supports and resources to assist them to focus on improving their practice in the area of measuring impact and outcomes.

Delivering outcomes is a big challenge – because the distinction between inputs, outputs and outcomes is poorly understood in both the public and community and voluntary sectors.

Too often we account for our activities by focussing on whether we produced the action or thing we agreed we would produce (an output), rather than focussing on whether that output produced the intended positive outcome in the quality of life of the person concerned. The challenge here is to focus on outcomes rather than outputs.

As public service providers, we need to be clear about the improvements we aim to bring about through our work in the lives of the people or

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groups we serve. To do this we need to structure and govern our activities around identifying and delivering the actual improvement (the outcome) that people themselves require. Once we are implementing a strategy rooted in delivering the improvement we are trying to bring about in people lives, we will need to know whether we are actually delivering these outcomes – and to do this we need to develop outcome-indicators that allow us to measure the improvement in the quality of life, or life experience that the service has brought about. This means putting the person at the heart of our public services and working with them to identify the most appropriate indicators and ensuring that they are central to the monitoring process to ensure these outcomes are being produced.

There is a great deal of work that needs to be done to raise awareness of, and apply the skills and measurement tools necessary, to enable service providers to focus on delivering and accounting for outcomes-achieved rather than outputs-produced.

The NESO has produced some path-finding work in the form of *The Well-being Report* which identifies some outcome-measures that could be used as a basis for re-setting outcome targets for service provision. Working groups established during the implementation of *Towards 2016* also developed a suite of indicators that could be promoted as a basis for organisational re-focussing on outcomes.

Adopting measuring techniques such as SROI (Social Return on Investment) may be appropriate for large service providers, but the real challenge is to raise awareness of the many useful and appropriate tools and techniques that exist to enable all organisations, no matter how small, to measure the quality of their service and set outcome indicators and gauge progress in achieving them.

There is also much that can be learned from the private sector's application of the marketing approach which puts the identification and satisfaction of a customer's needs at the centre of the manufacturing and service-provision process.

I am not suggesting the wholesale application of the marketing approach to the delivery of public services, but when private firms do it well, when they take the time to focus on providing the customer with the experience they require, it is beyond argument that everyone benefits, customers and producers alike. Focussing on the experience is focussing on the outcome. There is learning here for all public service providers.

The marketing approach also positions the service provider as exactly that, a provider of service. Provided by a servant, maybe even a public servant. In our post-modern age we have become uncomfortable with the idea of servants, and perhaps with the very idea of service itself.

One of the challenges we face is returning dignity to the idea of service: where service is respected as a manifestation of care, and not viewed as self-serving, false and cynical at one extreme, or servile and weak at the other. Indeed, it could be argued that we would all benefit from adopting an attitude of service towards each other at all times, and that it is this attitude of service that characterises the essence of trusteeship and guardianship.

#### **4. Create structures, systems and processes to co-produce these positive outcomes and return power to communities of place and interest**

We have recognised that positive outcomes are co-produced in service user's lives by providers and service users working together. So the next challenge is to devise structures, systems and processes that put the service user at the centre of the design and monitoring process by providing either choice, or control, and ideally both. Current reforms in the approach to designing individualised social supports around people's needs in the area of disability services and home-care packages for elderly people demonstrate that putting the person at the heart of services is an achievable objective. We have noted the marketing approach in the private sector and the work we need to do to return dignity and respect to the ideas of service.

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At the community level, involving people more thoroughly in the governance of their local communities should be aided through the local government reforms being advanced by government. Structures such as the County Development Boards, the Strategic Policy Committees and the Community Fora have underperformed in terms of involving local communities in policy making. These structures can undoubtedly be reformed and enhanced to better involve communities in community-level decision making. The *Conversation on Democracy/People Talk* initiative is, for example, proposing using innovative citizens' juries to facilitate communities to identify solution to their needs.

Census 2006 data produced by the CSO (2009) estimates that almost two-thirds (65%) of persons aged 16 and over participated in at least one community/voluntary group activity. Overall, nearly one-quarter (24%) of people participated in informal, unpaid charitable work. The most common form of group activity reported was religious (48%), followed by recreational (36%). This compares with just 4% reporting involvement in political groups (CSO, 2009). We can see the challenge: supporting people to get more involved in governing and shaping their communities at the traditionally understood "political" level.

While people and communities are clearly happy to participate in their community life, and do so in great numbers, they are not used to participating in decision-making of the political variety. Participating in this kind of decision-making can be thought of as active citizenship. Active Citizenship was flavour of the month a few years ago, and the challenge remains: what can we do to create conditions that support more active citizenship by people who want to get involved?

### **Voices from The Wheel's consultation on Active Citizenship, April 2006**

"An active citizen is someone who exercises rights as well as responsibilities and is involved in community/local life in general, such as voting and using it wisely, taking part in neighbourhood watch schemes or youth work, being involved in local/ community politics. It is a democratic way of being that should be promoted."

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“Active citizenship can only come about from people’s confidence and faith that they will be heard”

“Being an active citizen means being involved in your community from the lowest level to the highest level. Building the capacity of your community, organising / taking part / representing / raising awareness of key issues / working towards the betterment of community and civil society.”

## **5. Support community and voluntary organisations as facilitators of community involvement and active citizenship**

Community and voluntary organisations play a vital part in the life of communities, enabling people to come together for their own purposes and take part in community activity by engaging in social or leisure pursuits, helping themselves and others, or promoting a cause they feel strongly about. Voluntary and community organisations are, as a result, very important facilitators of *community involvement*.

It is a truism that it is good for society that communities be able to organise; but it is also true that some communities are better able to organise than others. There are different levels of organisational capacity in diverse communities ranging from well-connected and resourced voluntary groups in well-off urban areas to poorly resourced community groups in disadvantaged urban or rural communities, and no groups at all in areas surrounding fragmented, or ghost, housing estates.

There is a risk that unless organisational capacity is provided for all areas of society, active-citizenship will become the preserve of well-organised, relatively well-off, sections of society, ironically increasing the risk of social exclusion faced by disadvantaged people and communities.

Achieving social inclusion depends on our commitment to ensure that active citizenship embraces principles of community development. This approach will allow people to have, as of right, the opportunity to influence

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and participate in the decisions that affect them. Supporting the capacity to organise, especially in disadvantaged communities, will also have the effect of improving the level of engagement with the political process at local level thereby reducing alienation and strengthening democracy.

We need to unambiguously recognize that

“An active community and voluntary sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised and participative structures and fosters a climate in which the quality of life can be enhanced for all”<sup>54</sup>

Community and voluntary organisations:

- provide a wide range of opportunities for active citizenship to express itself: both the issues they address and their aims and objectives act as a powerful catalyst to engagement by citizens
- provide a platform for individuals - including those who are marginalised - to voice their concerns and challenge government actions and policies
- bring people together and build social capital, facilitating collective action
- transmit and develop the values that underpin democracy (such as dialogue and respect) and familiarise people with democratic processes
- provide a good entry point to active citizenship: positive experiences of involvement in the sector provide a taste for involvement and can lead to further involvement

Any attempt at creating an environment that supports and encourages people to become active citizens will involve:

- volunteer groups being listened to; empowering people; involving people in decision-making and ensuring the views of citizens are taken on board by politicians and public authorities, enabling participation

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<sup>54</sup> White Paper, Supporting Voluntary Activity, para 1.4, page 4

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- support for participation by those most disadvantaged and without voice
- women, children and young people being involved in decision-making
- financial support from government for voluntary organisations and for community development activity
- Resources for people to participate in volunteer work; providing and promoting services and supports for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations so that people know where to start if they want to participate in their communities
- active citizens not being seen by elected representatives or public servants as a nuisance, but as an asset
- reflecting on what it is to be a citizen in the state and on what type of society we would like to actively participate in, reflections in the form of a national dialogue on citizenship and an ongoing dialogue between the community and voluntary sector and the state.

So, communities need supports in the areas of supporting volunteering and active citizenship in all its forms.

The crisis in the public finances has placed tremendous strains on all charities with many seeing 20% to 25% plus drops in their income since 2008. Supporting charities and community and voluntary organisations to innovate in generating sustainable income sources (through for example making use of sources of social finance) has never been more important. The Wheel has made a series of recommendations for a thriving community and voluntary sector. I include these recommendations here.

### **The Wheel's recommendations for a thriving community and voluntary sector.**

#### *Why care about our community and voluntary sector?*

Every year over two-thirds of Irish adults – that's over two million people - participate in the myriad of social, sporting, cultural and humanitarian activities offered by our 19,000 community and voluntary organisations. Community and voluntary organisations

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employed over 40,000 full-time and 23,000 part-time staff in 2004<sup>3</sup> - with volunteers providing the equivalent full-time work of a further 31,000 people.

We need a coherent policy framework and a national development strategy for the community and voluntary sector. Our charities and community and voluntary organisations work constantly to improve their effectiveness in supporting the communities we serve – but this work is hampered by the fragmented nature of government policy towards the sector.

Government should take the lead and provide a coherent policy framework - including a national development strategy - for the sector. We also need to make sure that spaces for dialogue are available for discussions on sector-development issues between the sector and the State.

- Government should work with our sector to deliver a nationwide support-infrastructure so that our community and voluntary organisations receive the services and supports that are needed.
- We need a new framework for partnership working between the sector and the state, one that deepens the existing social partnership approach. Many charities and community and voluntary organisations work in partnership with Government bodies to provide essential services and supports for our people. Partnership working is complex and demanding, requiring strong shared understandings by both voluntary and statutory partners if beneficial outcomes are to be maximised for the people and communities we serve. We need a new framework for partnership working that sets out:
  - the principles that would inform the partnership-engagement when community and voluntary organisations work with statutory agencies
  - a mechanism to develop, drive implementation, and monitor/review a new agreement

- a new statutory funding regime that makes provision for multi-annual funding.
- Funding that is provided on a full-cost-recovery basis and
- Funding that includes training and pension budgets for staff.
- We need to simultaneously develop a strategy to diversify funding for the sector. Over 60% of funding for our community and voluntary organisations comes from the state – the sector needs to develop a strategy to diversify this funding mix in the context of the crisis in the public finances
- Government should involve our communities in designing our public services. Our community and voluntary organisations provide good locations for government to involve people in designing more responsive public services
- We need to make sure that the Charities Act 2009 provides supportive regulation for the community and voluntary sector, and that charities are resourced appropriately to respond to the challenges regulation will pose.
- The right of charities to engage in advocacy activity must be protected.
- Government should encourage volunteering and support voluntary trustees in their work by continuing to develop a national policy on volunteering
- Government should incentivise private-giving through extending tax relief on donations
- Government should introduce a VAT refund scheme for charities so that charities can spend all the money they get from donors on beneficiaries

## **6. Resource communities adequately from public funds**

It is widely acknowledged that Ireland's tax take is amongst the lowest in the EU. We cannot provide the social, health and welfare services we require for ourselves and our families, friends, neighbours and fellow citizens if we continue to under-tax ourselves, forcing people to secure

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what should be public services privately or to go without and endure the resulting poverty.

Ireland can and should increase its tax take to 35% of GDP (from the less than 30% it is now) to ensure that we have the public resources required to deliver outcomes in the way we have been describing. Despite all the negative economic developments in recent years, Ireland remains a wealthy country. We must make sure that private resources that are under-taxed, or not taxed at all, are brought into the tax net and that everyone makes their fair contribution to providing the public resources required.

We labour under an illusion that we are a highly taxed country: we need to acknowledge that we are not, and begin to have a mature debate about the tax-take we need to support the society that we want, and stop the interminable discussion about what we can afford. Affordability comes into play of course, but it should only come into play when we have worked out what we want, and have moved on to thinking about what our priorities should be as we work towards delivering that vision for ourselves. Instead, we seem to dispense with the vision and spend all our energies fighting over what we can afford when we don't know what we want to buy.

We must facilitate local provision by resourcing communities adequately (from public funds raised through the taxation system) and enabling local communities to link with communities nationwide and internationally to identify solutions that would be better delivered regionally, nationally or indeed internationally.

A move to universal health insurance (paid by the state for those who require support) is the single most significant initiative that could be undertaken to ensure adequate resourcing of health and social services for people – and it is essential if the necessary funds are to be available to reform health and social service provision around individual needs.

## **7. Support those we delegate to deliver these outcomes on our behalf**

To do all of this we need to change the way that public servants and trustees in community and voluntary, public-benefit organisations are held to account. We need to move from the current risk-averse system that rewards accounting for inputs expended, to one that rewards calculated risk-taking and innovation to deliver positive outcomes in people's lives.

We often associate responsibility with absolutes. We hear about people who are responsible for things having *to* carry the can if it goes wrong. We hear that we need invasive scrutiny (like some particularly gruesome radical surgery) of those responsible for delivering public services and that they should face gaol if they fail to discharge their responsibility (like explosives).

We hear that we need complete transparency and absolute accountability from those responsible to us. It can sometimes seem that people who accept responsibility must prepare to be pilloried and put on the rack if they fail. Is it any wonder people shrink from positions of public responsibility? Where is the room in this model for learning from mistakes? For innovation to take place people must be free to take calculated risks.

While there is no doubt that there have been profound governance failures over the years that contributed to causing our social and economic crisis, while there are indeed people who engaged in criminal behaviour and while governance practice can undoubtedly be improved in almost every area of public and private life, I suggest the blaming everything on the failures of an irresponsible and unaccountable few misses the point.

The real issue is that we as a people have delegated more and more authority for public decision making to elected representatives and public servants without investing in the reporting-back systems that make responsible delegation possible in any other walk of life. It can be argued that our system allows us to place all responsibility for meeting (and blame

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for not meeting) our public-service needs on our elected representatives and on public servants because there is currently nowhere else to place that responsibility.

Our elected representatives report back once every five years at a general election. This is wholly inadequate in the context of the modern developmental welfare state we aspire to become. This democratic deficit lies at the heart of the governance failures we have experienced and explains in part the backlash against those perceived to have been responsible for failing in their responsibilities. Oireachtas reform, electoral reform, and reform in the way Government appointments are made are all key, but beyond the scope of consideration here.

In the meantime, co-producing public services aimed at developing people's capabilities, and returning real authority and power to local communities, will enable people to play the vital role of holding elected representatives, public servants and trustees directly accountable on an ongoing basis. It will also allow people to share in responsibility with elected representatives and public servants for ensuring positive outcomes, and make it clear that we all should be (and already are) sharing some responsibility in and for the public services available to us.

## **Rising to the Challenge**

This would be a truly bottom-up approach that puts people at the heart of public services. We have an opportunity now to ensure that the public services reform process results in improved outcomes for all users of public services - and that's all of us. Can we achieve the changes we seek?

Can we have strong communities where people lead fulfilled lives, with a sense of both authority over, and responsibility for meeting, their community and individual needs, using public resources made available as a right for that purpose?

Can we do this and still benefit from people who feel encouraged to

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innovate and who can privately benefit from the entrepreneurialism that drives so much good in human progress to date? I believe we can.

## **Where to start? What to do?**

What are the implications of the concept of sharing responsibility if we are to move in the direction indicated? Many challenges will accompany this new approach, including:

### **1. Providing the resources – raising sufficient taxation**

We have to recognise that we have a duty to raise sufficient taxation to pay for the public services that people have a right to expect. Taxation approaches based on beggar-thy-neighbour-tax-policies merely seek to reinforce the current, failed economic development model and will condemn us to repeating the failures of the past, even if we somehow manage to buy our way out of the current crisis (at a completely unacceptable price).

We have to re-forge the relationship in people's minds to taxation being one of the primary ways in which we express social solidarity by funding the services we all require to deliver the outcomes everyone has a right to expect.

### **2. Encouraging participation**

Many people have become used to non-participation in organising and governing community services. If people had a meaningful opportunity to participate in designing and monitoring the delivery of health, social and community services then they would see what is being done with the available public monies, understand the services they are entitled to, and participate in reaching shared understandings about what services should be available where, thus avoiding the unproductive reverse-nimbyism that understandably accompanies current centralised announcements regarding changes – invariably cuts - in levels of local service provision.

There are many practical things we can do to support the participation of volunteers in national life

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- Continue to develop a national policy on volunteering.
- Continue the roll out of a comprehensive, national services and supports infrastructure at local level for people who are looking to volunteer by building on the nation volunteers' centres network.
- Address the way in which the tax and benefit systems interact to create income-traps and disincentives for people who might have the time to volunteer
- Develop solutions to enable time-poor people to participate in their communities
- Ensure that the level of resources being provided to communities (whether advice/training, public funding or tax relief on private donations) takes account of the varying levels of need in different communities, so that there are genuinely equal opportunities for all to volunteer and make a difference in their own community.
- Volunteers and active citizens play an important role as agents-of-change and this inevitably involves them in challenging established ways of doing things. We must ensure that there is a change in the mindset at all levels of state bureaucracy so that people who participate are not seen as a nuisance but as essential participants if our society is to be inclusive of active citizens. It's that point about service again.

With regard to formal participation in electoral processes and local democratic structures, there is a widely shared sense of concern about the declining numbers participating in democratic processes. But again, there are practical things we can do in this area

- Charge an independent *Electoral Commission* with promoting electoral participation generally and making funding available to organisations to deliver programmes to increase voter participation - particularly participation by disadvantaged people.
  - Develop citizenship education at all levels of the education system.
  - Establish and resource a forum for dialogue on civil society issues – building on and taking into account the work of initiatives such as *Claiming our Future*, the *We The Citizens*, the *Conversation on Democracy/People Talk* project and the *Community and Voluntary Pillar*.
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- Support and resource more participative structures and processes at local level (such as the *citizens juries* approach) that put people at the heart of local planning

### **3. Providing incomes sufficient to live life with dignity**

We have already noted that people have a legitimate expectation, a right, call it what you will, to be cared for as human beings by the human society they are part of. When considered deeply, there are truly profound implications that flow from recognising this fact.

Recognition means no longer accepting that if a person does not, or cannot, earn a living (as traditionally understood through doing a paid job) then they either live in poverty or become dependent on the charity of others (or on means tested benefits). People have a right to live with dignity, and to enjoy a standard of living acceptable to all.

True shared social responsibility recognises that societies should support and maximise the autonomy of people by ensuring that everyone receives an unconditional guaranteed basic income (without any means test or work requirement) that is sufficient for them to live a life with dignity. All income earned above this level of guaranteed basic income could be taxed. To many, the idea will seem revolutionary – but it's only a logical extension of accepting the principle that everyone has a right to live autonomously, with dignity and respect.

A range of studies (including a Green Paper<sup>55</sup>) have shown that a basic income system could be introduced in Ireland and could be paid for while maintaining a competitive economy and protecting social services.

### **4. Good governance: supporting trusteeship**

Governance is the art of organisational self-control and direction-setting, and when we are controlling things that do not belong to us (such as our public institutions, large private, quoted firms - such as banks - and our voluntary and community organisations) we have an extra special duty to

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<sup>55</sup> Department of the Taoiseach (2002), *Basic Income: A Green Paper*, Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach

make sure we are applying the highest possible standards on behalf of the people who have entrusted it to our custodianship.

Clearly, delegating authority to communities and service users to put them in control of community, social and health services will involve local groups and organisations – governed by trustees – assuming a more central role in our public affairs. We need to develop a fuller appreciation of the unique position of trustees in the organisation of our collective affairs – people who have quasi-private responsibility for public assets.

Ensuring that all community organisations are governed well, are transparent in their decision-making and that they are accountable to their local communities will therefore be very important. We cannot afford to replace unaccountable, centralised state bureaucracies, which can in theory be held accountable by elected representatives, with unaccountable voluntary trustees.

We will need to maintain an intense focus on good governance practice in community and voluntary organisations. This can partly be accomplished by the pending Charities Regulatory Authority, but it will in much larger part be accomplished by encouraging and supporting voluntary organisations to adopt best governance practice in the management of the public resources entrusted to them.

The Wheel is working with colleagues in a consortium of leaders in the community and voluntary sector to develop a *Code of Governance* for voluntary organisations in Ireland. When launched it is proposed that all charities and community and voluntary organisations adopt this code. It could be proposed that all charities report on their adherence to the code (on a comply or explain basis) in the annual reports they will be required to submit to the Charities Regulator on full commencement of the Charities Act 2009.

Additionally, it is clear that ongoing support from public funding sources will be required to support a continuing focus on the good governance of charities, and it will be crucial that infrastructural supports to support the

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good governance of charities continue to be available - funded from the public purse - in the years ahead.

## **5. Frameworks for co-production and partnership**

Many community and voluntary organisations are involved in delivering publicly funded services. They often help public service commissioners to identify and understand people's needs, and at the same time enable users to have a real say in the services delivered. It is argued, however, that moves to contracts and service agreements between public funders and voluntary service-deliverers have squeezed out the full value that voluntary organisations provide.

Evidence suggests that while contracting arrangements and performance management systems have caused some voluntary and community organisations to become more professional, they have also become more bureaucratic as a consequence.

Certain positive characteristics are routinely associated with the voluntary, non-profit approach to meeting social need - characteristics that undoubtedly lead to improved outcomes for the people served. These include:

- services tailored to individual need through a person-centred approach
- innovation in service design, delivery and funding
- flexibility
- rapidity in responding to new and emergent need
- a value-for-money focus (driven by a constant need to manage scarce resources in the face of unmet need)
- involvement of users/beneficiaries in design and control
- commitment of value-driven personnel who choose to work in the sector
- empowerment (and associated well-being benefits) of people and communities involved
- high quality strategic leadership and governance provided by volunteer trustees motivated solely to deliver the highest quality outcomes to meet people's needs

If community and voluntary organisations are to preserve these positive characteristics of their approach to their work, engage productively with their statutory counterparts, and maintain the required focus on delivering the best possible outcomes in services-users lives, then high levels of mutual trust and shared understandings of the task at hand will be required.

We need to ensure that a culture of contactarianism does not come to dominate this special public-benefit space. To avoid this, we need to develop, formally adopt, and apply and implement clear frameworks and codes for partnership working to guide collaborative working by public-sector and voluntary/not-for-profit organisations when working together to deliver public-benefit outcomes.

The Wheel has worked over the last few years to develop a *New Framework for Partnership Working* - to build on the approach identified in the *White Paper Supporting Voluntary Activity* – to govern and inform working relationships between statutory agencies and voluntary organisations in Ireland.

At The Wheel's May 2011 conference, Minister Phil Hogan noted "I am prepared to continue the *structured dialogue process* with the members of the Community & Voluntary Pillar that was announced by the previous Government earlier this year". That structured dialogue process committed government "*to engage with the Community and Voluntary Pillar on how to progress development of future frameworks to support the deepening of the partnership between statutory bodies and voluntary and community organisations*" and proposed the following approach:

### **Structured Dialogue with the Community & Voluntary Pillar.**

A set of principles would underpin the deepening of the relationship and inform engagements between officials and stakeholders. A number of the joint principles set out in the White Paper are particularly relevant in this context:

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- I. Both Sectors value openness, accountability and transparency in the relationships between the State and the Community and Voluntary sector.
- II. There is a shared commitment by both the State and the Sector to ensure the involvement of consumers and people who avail of services in the planning, delivery, management and evaluation of policy and programmes. This applies at all levels: national, regional and local.
- III. There is a joint commitment relating to fostering co-operation and the co-ordination within and across each Sector as well as between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector.
- IV. There is a commitment on the part of both the State and the sector to provide access to, and to share, information relevant to the pursuit of shared objectives.
- V. The State and the sector commit themselves to carrying out periodic and mutually agreed monitoring and evaluation of their individual actions, as well as joint evaluation of the experience of operating this framework.
- VI. The State and the sector each recognise their respective rights and shared objective in relation to developing and implementing effective policy, including the right to constructively critique each other's actions and policies, in a context of mutual respect.
- VII. There is a commitment to developing mutual understanding of the culture and operating principles of each Sector and to take practical steps to achieve this.
- VIII. Both Sectors commit themselves to using working methods that are flexible and efficient in the context of the growing demands and range of tasks posed by modern society.

#### *Elements for a Bilateral Engagement*

Engagements between the Department of Community, Equality & Gaeltacht Affairs and the C&V Pillar to be mutually beneficial and solutions focused. Meetings to have a consistent format, with a sharply focused agenda, which is agreed and balanced for each side. Meetings would be focused on:

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- outline plans, strategies, legislation
- information about developments
- possible mutual approaches to addressing challenges
- feedback on how actions are impacting and practical suggestions for resolving any unintended effects
- feedback on suggestions or ideas
- opportunities for improved information, integration, efficiency, etc.
- strengthening relationships

This commitment to structured dialogue from the new government is encouraging and could, if implemented (the old implementation challenge again) set a positive example for a new model for public-benefit, partnership working in the years ahead.

## **6. Encourage Advocacy**

Critical to any partnership where public funding and resource allocation is under the control of elected representatives is of course power and how it is applied and regulated. In the new dispensation we are exploring, it will be vital to ensure that advocacy by community groups and organisations is seen as a necessary part of the policy-formation process leading to better outcomes, and that it is supported and encouraged by all public authorities, with advocating organisations and communities accepting that there are responsibilities that go with effective advocacy.

The *Advocacy Initiative* is a consortium of Irish community and voluntary organisations that have come together to explore the development (amongst many other advocacy related considerations) of a Code of Good Advocacy practice to enable voluntary organisations to regulate their own advocacy practice against benchmarks and standards of advocacy practice developed by the sector for itself.

## **Conclusion: a vision to inspire**

We are all sharing responsibility in shaping the future whether we are aware of it or not. There are lots of things we can do (some of which we have identified here) to ensure that this process is more consciously

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structured and directed to improve the lives of all our people, of all the people on our finite planet and the future of our life-giving planet itself.

So let's finish with what's possible, on an inspiring note, a vision it seems reasonable to strive for.

An Ireland where individuals and their families, friends, communities, and neighbours share responsibility with government, the public and private sectors, community and voluntary organisations and civil society in a co-endeavour to realise everyone's capabilities and developmental potential.

Our new Ireland would be characterised by:

- A sense of national mission towards delivering our shared vision of the society we want for our family, friends, neighbours, fellow citizens, and people of the world
- everyone receives a basic income sufficient to live life with dignity and no one lives in poverty
- equal dignity attaches to all work and people are valued for the non-commercial caring and nurturing work they do in the home
- People derive primary satisfaction from the contribution they make to their communities rather than from the money they earn and things they can buy
- service is respected as a manifestation of a caring attitude, and not viewed as false and insincere or servile and weak
- the honour – and the responsibility – in public service being recognised
- People are encouraged to explore their aptitudes and capabilities and make work and career choices on the basis of those aptitudes and capabilities
- People give as much time and resources as they can to other people and to their communities
- People are happy to be actively involved in the governance of their local communities and their public services (a function that in longer “hived off” to professional representatives)

- social entrepreneurship becoming the norm for all entrepreneurship; the purpose of entrepreneurialism being the experience of satisfaction at having delivered positive outcomes for society, rather than to personally enrich the entrepreneur (which is a by-product of successful entrepreneurialism)
- Public services are designed around people's needs (person centeredness underpinned by an attitude of service and mutual respect)
- Economic paradigm shifts from profit-seeking perpetual growth (and recession) to developing people's capabilities in a sustainable way
- Invention and innovation continue to play a central role in human development – as a result the true motive to invent and innovate: to provide a solution people will benefit from to a shared challenge people face.
- People are rewarded for the fruits of their labour – and where people can expect to personally benefit from their entrepreneurial activity – but in a context where the level of personal benefits bears reasonable relation to equity for the community at large.
- Where the environment is seen as our nurturer, to be minded and protected from exploitation.