

National Social Monitor 2016

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITIES



Participation

Citizen engagement and community participation are essential for the healthy functioning of any democratic society. Participation can include being an informed voter, volunteering in a local community, expressing your views in a consultation or direct involvement in policy development and decision making.

People have a right to participate in shaping the decisions that affect them and in developing and moulding the society in which they live. They are not content to be passive recipients of policies and services, designed at a distance. Many feel disenfranchised and cynical about the political system leading to apathy and disengagement.

It is crucially important as politicians talk of recovery, that people feel engaged in this process and all voices are heard in a constructive way. Social media and other IT based methods of communication and information sharing must be harnessed, along with traditional methods to involve people in dialogue and decision-making.

The Government's draft guidelines for public consultation¹ outline a good practice framework

¹ <http://www.per.gov.ie/en/minister-for-public-expenditure-and-reform-publishes-proposed-principles-to-guide-public-consultation-2/>

which can be used by all public bodies to involve citizens in important policies.

Social Justice Ireland believes that **a new social model for Ireland must be founded on the idea of deliberative democracy** which involves all stakeholders in the framing, implementing and evaluating of policies and measures that impact on them.² This type of process would produce evidence-based policy and ensure a high level of accountability among stakeholders.

Voter Turnout

In any democracy, voting in elections is a core right. Voter turnout in Irish general elections is close to the European average of 66%, but decreased from 70% to 65% between 2011 and 2016. Traditionally rural areas have higher voter participation than cities, although this gap is narrowing. There are concerns about the participation of young people and those living in poorer areas, where both registration and turnout are low. It is also of concern that voter turnout in local elections has been on a downward trend since 1967. The local elections in 2014 saw the second lowest official turnout in Irish local elections.³

Public participation at local government level

Within local government, there are a variety of ways in which people can have an input to decision making. One key structure to facilitate this is the Public Participation Network (PPN) which has been established in every Local Authority Area. PPNs are a collective of Environmental, Social Inclusion, Community and Voluntary organisations in a city/county, which come together for information sharing, capacity building and participation in local

² See Healy and Reynolds (2011) for more on the concept of deliberative democracy.

³ Oireachtas Library and Research Services (2016) *Election Turnout in Ireland: measurement, trends and policy implications*

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policy development and decision making. PPNs are independent of their Local Authority, but work closely with it.

Decision making and policy development in Local Government involves Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) and other fora designed to bring together the perspectives of elected members, state agencies, employers, farmers, trades unions, communities and other stakeholders on a variety of issues such as economic development, social inclusion, the environment, local services etc. PPNs nominate representatives onto these bodies to bring forward the views from volunteer-led organisations on the ground, who are organised into Linkage Groups of stakeholders. These Linkage Groups give people the opportunity to put forward their opinions on specific matters which affect them.

Local Community Development Committees

Of particular interest are the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) which were initiated following the reform of Local Government in 2014. These multi stakeholder groups are involved in drawing up Local Economic and Community Plans, and in oversight of funding lines such as LEADER⁴, Town and Village renewal and the SICAP⁵ Social Inclusion Programme. PPNs have between one quarter and one third of LCDC members and through this there is a real potential for long term impact.

LEADER (€250m over 4 years nationally) is a very important programme for community

development and active citizenship in rural areas as much of its grants are made to local groups who have identified key needs within their own communities. They match the incoming monies with both cash of their own and voluntary time and labour. This process, known as Community Led Local Development is a true bottom up approach, which facilitates participation.

For the first time, within this LEADER programme there is a specific strand focussed on social inclusion, specifically seeking to enhance basic services for hard to reach communities and rural youth. In addition LEADER supports economic development and environmental sustainability.

All these development are welcome, but it is imperative that the monies are spent strategically, and in a way which genuinely addresses disadvantage and poverty, and enhances social capital, active citizenship and participation.

Policy Priorities

- Use a wide range of communication strategies, including social media to increase both registration and voting figures specifically targeted at young people and inner city areas.
- Adequately resource the PPNs to enable them to foster real deliberative democracy, and ensure that Local Authorities and their structures work effectively with the PPN to maximise participation.
- Ensure that there is real and effective monitoring and impact assessment of policy implementation using an evidence-based approach. Involve a wide range of perspectives in this process, thus ensuring inclusion of all sectors in a new deliberative process of social dialogue.

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<https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/LEADER/Pages/LEADER.aspx>

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[https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/Social%20Inclusion%20and%20Community%20Activation%20Programme%20\(SICAP\)/Pages/default.aspx](https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/Social%20Inclusion%20and%20Community%20Activation%20Programme%20(SICAP)/Pages/default.aspx)

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think tank and justice advocacy organisation that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole. Further information on this and other issues is available on our website www.socialjustice.ie

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