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Social Justice Matters Policy Brief
Participation

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Social Justice Matters Policy Brief

‘Social Justice Matters Policy Brief’ is a series designed to provide independent and in-depth analysis on important social policy issues and to present policy options that should be prioritised in the coming years. This series is part of *Social Justice Ireland’s* ongoing contribution to the public policy debate to ensure it focuses on what matters most to people who are poor or vulnerable or in need. Our aim is to improve public policy in order to improve society and the lives of people.

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Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing health advice meant restrictions on movement, gathering, on being together, on taking part, on participation. However, confined to home allowed some the time to reach out and connect with neighbourhoods, local, national and international and to participate in new ways. New communities were forged both online and in “real life” as a result of looking anew at issues as diverse as access, housing, mental health, creative arts, fitness and sports, nutrition, education, digital skills and well-being.

The infrastructure, services, and policies that a country develops, and implements are determined in large part by that country’s demography, that is, the make-up of its population. Every person should have a say in how and where infrastructure is delivered, what services are required and provided and what policies are implemented to shape their communities.

Irish society has changed significantly in the last 50 years, becoming more urbanised and increasingly well educated, particularly women. Fertility rates are declining and the age at which women are having their first child has increased. Life expectancy, has increased with male life expectancy reaching 79.7 years in 2018 and female life expectancy reaching 83.4 years that same year.

The reduction in fertility levels and increased life expectancy means that Ireland’s population, while still relatively young, is getting older. The average age of the population is now 37.4, an increase of 6.3 years since 1981. The population is also becoming more diverse, with an estimated 3.4 per cent of the population (168,700 people) with a stated nationality being from outside of the EU.

Local and national Government policies affect every one of us, and we should all have our say. At a time when the very fabric of democracy is under threat across the globe, this is something we must strive to protect.

Citizen participation is key to a thriving democracy. Individuals and groups need access to relevant information and ways to engage with policy makers.

Introduction

Ensuring that people are involved in making the decisions that affect them and their communities is a key element of real democracy. True involvement requires participation that goes beyond voting (representative democracy). By definition, such a deliberative democracy approach requires a leaving aside of power differentials and making a specific effort to ensure that the voices and views of people who are not traditionally influential are heard and taken into account (Coote, 2011; Healy & Reynolds, 2011; Elster, 1998),

Although Government has engaged with members of civil society on specific issues as part of the Constitutional Convention¹, and the Citizens Assembly² such initiatives are extremely limited.

People want to be more involved and to participate in debates concerning policies, particularly those that directly affect them. The extensive use of social media as a forum for discussion and debate indicates a capacity to question the best use of State resources to develop a just and fair society. What that society might look like may vary depending on the individual and their ideology, but there is certainly appetite for debate. It is crucially important for our democracy that people feel engaged in this process and all voices are heard in a constructive way. There are many ways in which this can be done through both modern technology and personal engagement. It is imperative that those with power, recognise, engage with, and develop partnerships with people to co-create services and policy.

A forum for dialogue on civil society issues

The need for a new forum and structure for discussion of issues on which people disagree is becoming more obvious as political and mass communication systems develop. A civil society forum and the formulation of a new social contract against exclusion has the potential to re-engage people with the democratic process. Our highly centralised government, both in terms of decision-making and financially, means that citizens are represented more by professional politicians than by their local constituency representatives. While there have been some structural improvements, such as an enhanced committee structure, the introduction of Public Participation Networks (PPNs) (discussed later), better success rates for Bills led by the opposition and a budgetary oversight process, much remains to be done before Ireland has a genuinely participative decision-making structure.

The democratic process would also benefit from the development of a new social contract against exclusion and in favour of a just society. This contract would include a forum for dialogue on civil society issues. Short-term initiatives such as the Presidents Ethics Initiative,³ the Constitutional Convention and Citizens Assembly are welcome but need to be mainstreamed and reach all sections of Irish Society. *Social Justice Ireland* has always welcomed the

¹ For more information see <https://www.constitution.ie/Convention.aspx>

² For more information see <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/>

³ For further details see <http://www.president.ie/en/the-president/special-initiatives/ethics>

National Economic and Social Council (NESC), whose role is to advise the Taoiseach on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development. The annual National Economic Dialogue is a useful, though limited, model to share the perspectives of civil society, Government and the various sectors of society on key budgetary issues. However, a single, annual event is inadequate. *Social Justice Ireland* recommends that a Social Dialogue process and structure be put in place with the focus on economic, social and environmental issues and involving all major sectors in Irish society.

Participation in Local Government - Public Participation Networks (PPNs)

In 2014, the Local Government Act was amended to introduce Public Participation Networks (PPNs). The PPN structure, focused primarily on policy-making, recognises the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social and environmental capital. It facilitates input by these organisations into local government through a structure that ensures public participation and representation on decision-making committees within local government (Department of Rural and Community, 2020). These PPNs have been established in every local authority area in Ireland. By the end of 2019, over 15,500 community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental organisations were members of a PPN. More than 920 PPN representatives were elected to over 424 committees on issues such as strategic policy, local community development, joint policing and so on.⁴

Local authorities and PPNs work together collaboratively to support communities and build the capacity of member organisations to engage meaningfully on issues that concern them. PPNs have a significant role in the development and education of their member groups, sharing information, promoting best practice and facilitating networking. Local authorities also have a vital role to play in facilitating participation through open consultative processes and active engagement. Building real engagement at local level is a developmental process that requires intensive work and investment. Following recommendations from the National Advisory Group for PPNs, *Social Justice Ireland* and others, the PPNs received an increase in resources in 2018 and 2019 to recruit a Support Worker to support better engagement in communities and ensure that the PPN can place itself as both an information ‘hub’ and advocate for policy within their area. Further support is required following the excellent work done by PPNs throughout the country in dealing with the pandemic.

Public Participation Networks provide an opportunity for real engagement between local people and the local authorities across the country on issues that are vital to the future of their communities. This engagement is critical as Ireland strives to implement the Sustainable Development Goals and well-being at a local and regional level. *Social Justice Ireland* recommends that a dialogue forum be established involving the PPN and the Local Authority in each area to discuss the Statement on Well-being that the PPNs have developed or are

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/2c4a7a-public-participation-network-annual-reports/#2019>

developing for their local areas. This Forum should become an essential part of the ongoing Local Economic and Community Plans processes and of the annual Local Authority Budget process.

Supporting the Community & Voluntary Sector

Community and Voluntary organisations have a long history of providing services and infrastructure at local and national level as was witnessed by the ‘Community Call’⁵ initiative during the pandemic. As a response to the Corona virus restrictions on movement, coupled with older and medically vulnerable people being asked to completely cocoon, the community and voluntary sector, in conjunction with local government, worked to ensure that anybody who needed assistance with shopping, fuel deliveries, prescriptions etc. received it. It was a real example of how communities and volunteers worked together to ensure the well-being of the community.

They are engaged in most, if not all, areas of Irish society. They provide huge resources in energy, personnel, finance and commitment that, were it to be sourced on the open market, would come at considerable cost to the State. They have developed flexible approaches and collaborative practices that are responsive and effective in meeting the needs of diverse target groups. There are an estimated 189,000 employees in registered charitable organisations in Ireland. Over half of all registered charities have between one and 20 volunteers, with three per cent having 250 or more. It is estimated that the value of this volunteering work, using the minimum wage, is €648.8 million per year (this increases to €1.5 billion when applying the average income) (Indecon, 2018). It is important to note, however, that this report is based on those charities that are required to register with the Charities Regulator, which accounts for approximately 300,536 volunteers. The CSO put the number of volunteers much higher at near one million, when sporting, human rights, religious and political organisations are included.

During the recession following the bank crash of 2008, Government funding for the Community and Voluntary sector was reduced dramatically and this has not, as yet, been restored in full. It is essential that Government appropriately resource this sector into the future and that it remains committed to the principle of providing multi-annual statutory funding. The introduction of the Charities Regulatory Authority, the Governance Code and the Lobbying Register in recent years is intended to foster transparency and improve public trust. However, it is essential that the regulatory requirements are proportional to the size and scope of organisations, and do not create an unmanageable administrative burden which detracts from the core work and deters volunteers from getting involved.

In August 2019, the Department of Rural and Community Development published *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024* (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019). This Strategy sets out the vision for community and voluntary sector development over this period.

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/ba4e3d-covid-19-ireland-launches-the-community-call-in-major-nationwide-vol/>

It contains a series of 11 policy objectives across all stakeholders, from Public Participation Networks to civil society organisations to local and national Governments.

The Community Services Programme works to tackle disadvantage by providing supports to community-based organisations that enables them to deliver social, economic and environmental services, with a particular focus on areas that, by virtue of geographical isolation or social isolation or have too low a level of demand to satisfy market led providers. The groups in receipt of these services may not otherwise have any access.

Social Justice Ireland recommends that implementation of the five year Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy be resourced in a way that recognises the important role of the Sector, the local role of the PPNs in policy development, and the challenges of community development, and seeks to generate real partnerships between communities and agencies. We welcome the publication of the National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025 (Department of Rural and Community Development 2021). This, when coupled with the Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy and the Social Inclusion Strategy, will ensure policy coherence across all three strategies.

National Social Dialogue

Social dialogue is a critically important component of effective decision making in a modern democracy. Government needs to engage all sectors of society to develop policies that will shape the future and to ensure priority is given to well-being and the common good; to address the challenges of markets and their failures; to link rights and responsibilities. Otherwise, policy is likely to produce lop-sided outcomes that will benefit those who have access, while excluding others, most notably the vulnerable. If Government wishes the whole of society to take responsibility for producing a more viable future, then it must involve all of society.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar provides a mechanism for social dialogue that should be engaged with by Government across the range of policy issues in which the Pillar's members are deeply involved. All aspects of governance should be characterised by transparency and accountability. Social dialogue contributes to this. We believe governance along these lines can and should be developed at a deeper level in Ireland.

If Ireland is to succeed in addressing the challenges it faces, the pathway to doing so must be founded on consensus, must be well-managed, and must be properly evaluated. Reforming governance and widening participation must remain a key goal. An increased recognition of the need to include all stakeholders in the decision-making process is needed. A deliberative decision-making process, involving all stakeholders and founded on reasoned, evidence-based debate is required. To secure a new Social Contract, which is urgently needed, participation by various sectors of society is essential. One component of real participation is recognition that everyone should have the right to participate in shaping the society in which they live and the decisions that impact on them. In the 21st century this involves more than voting in elections and referenda. Ireland needs real, regular and structured deliberative democracy to ensure that all interest groups and all sectors of society can

contribute to the discussion and the decision-making on the kind of society Ireland wishes to build.

In November 2019, the President of Ireland hosted a seminar ‘Rethinking the Role of the State in Fostering a Sustainable and Inclusive Economy’ where he spoke of the need to shift the paradigm away from pure economic thinking to a more inclusive, sustainable approach stating⁶:

The task at hand – to create a sustainable society that is more equal, one in which all work is valued and all jobs are decent and fulfilling, where, as Amartya Sen put it, participation by all citizens without shame is possible, one in which the State plays a key role in improving the quality of life of its citizens – this is not an easy agenda given the current geo-political milieu and Western fixation with neoliberalism. However, work continues, but we must widen our audiences, and the political-economic concept of deliberative democracy provides us with a means with which we may engage and promote such a vision across the citizenries of Europe.

Social Justice Ireland supports the President’s call for a more inclusive dialogue towards shaping a more just society and welcomes the formation of the Social Dialogue Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach. It must work to identify how a civil society forum⁷ should be maintained and to examine how it might connect to the growing debate at European level around civil society issues. There are many issues such a forum could address including the meaning of citizenship in the 21st Century, the shape of the social model Ireland wishes to develop; how to move towards a low carbon sustainable future and so on.

Policy Priorities

Adequately resource the Public Participation Network (PPN) structures for participation in policy development at Local Authority level and ensure capacity building is an integral part of this process.
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Promote deliberative democracy and a process of inclusive social dialogue to ensure there is real and effective monitoring and impact assessment of policy development and implementation using an evidence-based approach at local and national level.

Implement the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities Strategy.
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Resource an initiative to identify how a real participative civil society debate could be developed and maintained.

⁶ <https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-hosts-seminar-rethinking-the-role-of-the-state-in-fostering-a-sustainable-and-inclusive-economy/speeches>

⁷ For a further discussion of this issue see Healy and Reynolds (2003:191-197).

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Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of 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



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