Enhancing Participation in Local Democracy? Opportunities and Challenges via Public Participation Networks

Dr. Matthew Donoghue

Khalil Moran

School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin

Introduction

- Project Overview

- Rationale/background

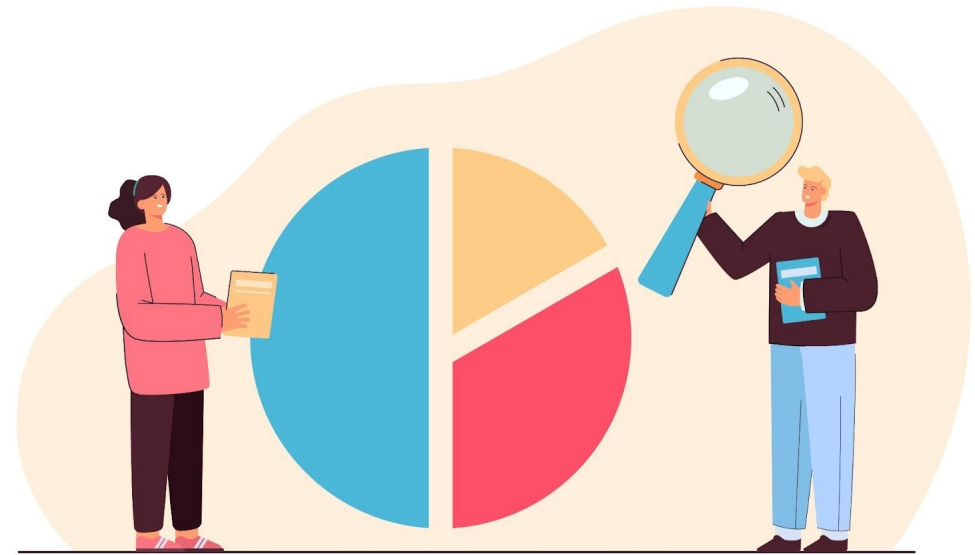- Approach

- Findings

- Takeaways

Project overview

- Small project funded by the Irish Research Council's *New Foundations* Programme (NF/2023/1324)

- Partnering with SJI

- Involved focus groups and interviews with Public Participation Networks

  - Members

  - Support/organizational staff

- And other stakeholders

  - TDs, Councillors and Advisors etc.

Rationale/Background

- PPNs can play a crucial role in local politics and community organisation

- Ideally, PPNs will enhance local (deliberative) democracy – empowering stakeholders to influence decision-making at the local level.

- By giving communities more of a voice 'democracy is made stronger, by allowing diverse views and interests to be considered as part of the decision-making process of local government' (DRCD, 2023)

- PPNs are important, though research has found that there are areas for improvement:

- 5 areas: governance, communication, coordination, training and staffing (Mazars, 2022)

- While the principles of PPNs are being implemented, and genuine dialogue taking place, this has fallen short of developing a genuine partnership between community groups and Local Authorities via PPNs (Bennett, 2021: 3)

  - Despite significant efforts by many PPNs

  - And improvement is being made consistently in some cases

Approach

- Research and analysis draws upon Interpretive Policy Analysis

  - Emphasises role of politics and dialogue in policymaking process; contestable nature of political evidence; privileges experience, perceptions and voices of actors (Wagenaar, 2015)

- The approach is particularly useful for understanding the (potentially) deliberative nature of PPNs, and accounting for different actors'/stakeholders views and perspectives

Approach
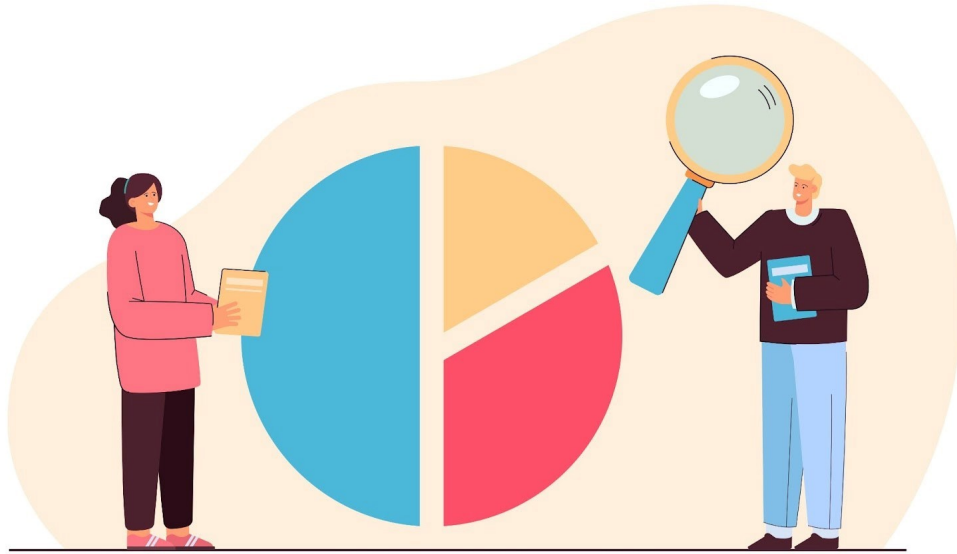
- Data: 2 PPN areas (original intention – 4)

  - Interviews with resources workers and support workers
  - Focus groups with people who interact with PPNs
  - Interviews with other stakeholders
    - E.g. TD, councillor, advisor/consultant
  - Original intention to collect more data from more sources, but access/availability problematic
    - Leads into a core finding – time/resource issues
    - Also impact of local elections and competing research
- **Analysis is still ongoing – so these findings and recommendations are preliminary/tentative and STC**

(Preliminary) Findings & Reflections

- An overall finding is that many of the barriers or sticking points identified in the Mazars and SJI reports (2021/2022) remain.

- This is despite focus from Dept of Rural and Community Development, including consultations and their own research.

- Findings on the next slides are broken down into the following themes:

  - Structural

  - Agential

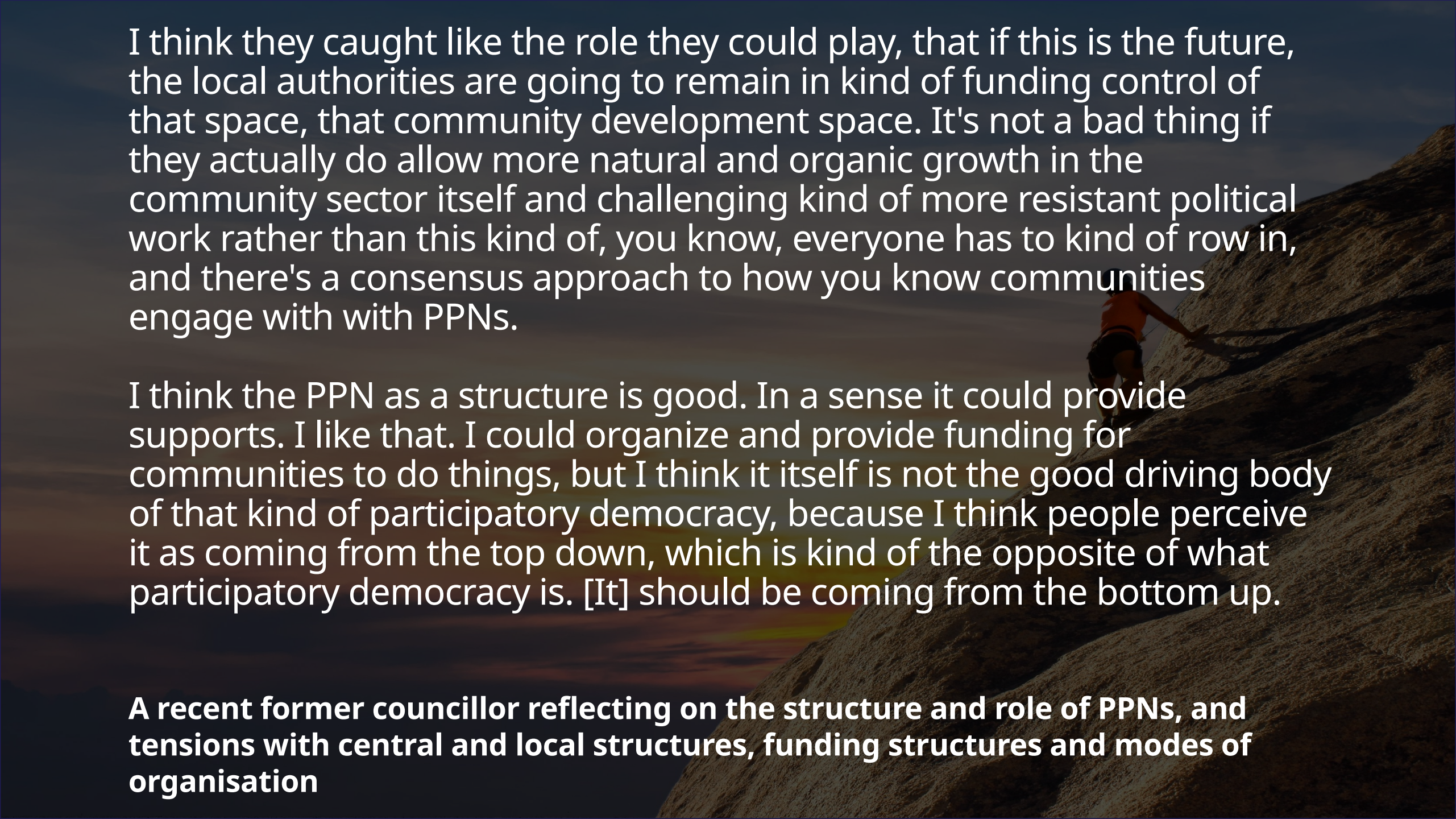 - Resources

Findings - Structural

- Competing priorities – many PPNs may end up as community organizing hubs

  - Some PPNs find themselves primarily as community resource hubs – grant writing support, publicise orgs/activities – no room for influence on policymaking?

  - Do members' needs always line up with PPNs' remit?

- Attempts to set up more meaningful national coordination has faced difficulty

  - Suggestions to have a more concrete national network to share resources, best practice, training etc.

- Some situations out of PPNs' control – e.g. priorities in Local Authorities, staffing levels, feelings towards PPNs etc.

What's really frustrating is that they're common challenges, and they're the same challenges. No matter where you go. What context you're working in. They haven't changed in 10 years [...]

I've had this conversation multiple times with the department... long-term planning for PPNs... and the conversation always starts with *XXX* apart from a centralized national structure what can we do? And I'm like the most basic solution, the one that would make [the biggest] impact is the one you're not willing to do

Participant with experience of working with PPNs in advisory and consultancy capacities (national) discussing the challenges that face PPNs nationally, and perceived inertia from government

I think they caught like the role they could play, that if this is the future, the local authorities are going to remain in kind of funding control of that space, that community development space. It's not a bad thing if they actually do allow more natural and organic growth in the community sector itself and challenging kind of more resistant political work rather than this kind of, you know, everyone has to kind of row in, and there's a consensus approach to how you know communities engage with with PPNs.

I think the PPN as a structure is good. In a sense it could provide supports. I like that. I could organize and provide funding for communities to do things, but I think it itself is not the good driving body of that kind of participatory democracy, because I think people perceive it as coming from the top down, which is kind of the opposite of what participatory democracy is. [It] should be coming from the bottom up.

A recent former councillor reflecting on the structure and role of PPNs, and tensions with central and local structures, funding structures and modes of organisation

Findings - Agential

- PPNs have committed, enthusiastic staff/officials

- However, participants in our study emphasized a number of challenges:

  - Time pressures – significant goodwill hours required, often with little recognition

  - Numerous (too many?) jobs in one role – with competing pressures and foci – e.g. Social Media, campaigns, organizing members, running events, advocacy, engaging with political actors, finance management, project management, person management etc.

- PPN success sometimes linked to working relationships with Local Authorities and their staff

- PPN members' participation is crucial – but there could be more clarity on roles, goals and processes

  - Campaigner vs politician or diplomat personality/working types

administration of the organisation, the policy development, the finances, the reporting. And then for the members it would be you know the outreach, the training, the support and policy submissions, that sort of thing. I would probably do more submissions, write more submissions" (resource worker)

"So we work in partnership on a lot, a lot of stuff. We really do, even though we don't physically work beside each other, we work in partnership on a lot of stuff. So we've got something this year we've kind of developed to try and work a bit more strategically and each of us not kind of getting pulled into everything. So a lot of the communication, a lot of maybe go a bit more contact with the actual groups, with the membership and then we both work, we both attend secretaries and work with secretaries. "

"Might be worth saying that when the department decided to fund the support work, a lot of PPNs seemed to kind of go down the administrative kind of support kind of a way, whereas here we from the get-go thought, no, we really kind of need someone who would be more like myself, would be able to do a bit of admin but would be able to do that bit of development and engagement type work as well. So we approached [the Local Authority] at the time and said, look, this is what we want to do, the department money might not cover that, will you give us some extra money so we can kind of engage someone of that calibre and [the Local Authority] was supportive and they did, so. I have to premise that by saying it's still not a massive wage" (support worker)

A PPN Resource Worker and Support Worker discussing their roles and how they approach the job (e.g. of best practice?)

Findings – resource based

- Resources (financial, time-based, knowledge/skills-based) were unsurprisingly well-represented in the research

- Many people felt time poor – which was corroborated by perspectives given by TDs/Cllrs/Consultants

  - Don't have time to properly dedicate to the job

- Multiple stakeholders mentioned or emphasized the need for some form of stipend

  - E.g. to allow PPN members to attend SPC meetings in work hours, to cover various expenses, to put towards training etc.

  - In addition to any funds provided by other sources (e.g. LA)

- Various stakeholders illustrated the importance of tailored training and sharing of best practice.
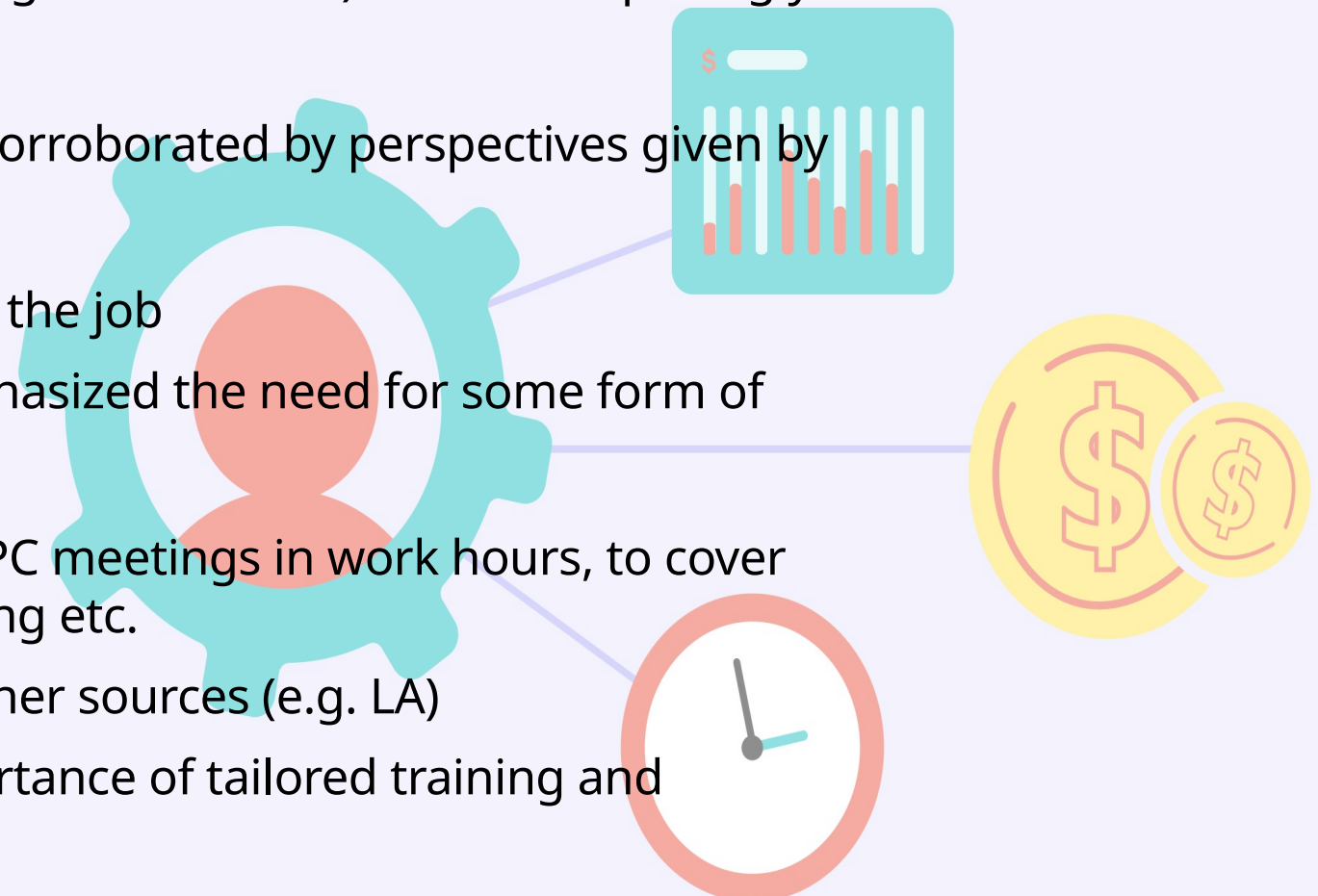
[The] local authority level is where the rubber hits the road. It's where those things are executed and implemented. You're nearly better off entering into this five-year cycle to say, here's 3 things I want to drive. Here's 3 things that they're going to be so sick of me, bringing this up at every ... SPC meeting or opportunity that they are going to act on it sometimes. What can happen is if you get a weak chair of an SPC it almost undermines the purpose of that. SPC. If you have a strong chair, who wants to drive agendas and is willing to listen, that's key to it. That's outside the control of the PPN. [...] And we see a lot of churn. We see a lot of PPN members going on to these and finishing up after a year or 2 years, and somebody else coming in. And you don't have the continuity, then it can be difficult, because those SPC meetings are during normal working hours, whereas these are volunteers.

[...]

it can be difficult when you've got so many different organizations that you're trying to represent at that table as well. So I think I think that's where the training comes in, I think, prior to going on an SBC. It would be very helpful for the Ppn. Member to get a briefing. a good briefing now to say, Look, you're going to get frustrated. You're going to feel unlistened at times.

A TD reflecting on the operation of PPNs from their personal and political experience

Tentative recommendations

- Recommendations can be made based on the same **Agential (A), Structural (S)** and **Resource-based (R)** themes.

- Focus on relationship development **(A)**

- All LAs should provide comparable support – staff, resources, experience and political will **(S, R)**

- Increase targeted financial support – e.g. stipends for PPN members sitting on SPCs **(A, R)**

- Importance of training and briefing **(A, R)**
  - E.g. expectation management, understanding SPC processes, clarity on individual roles and the limits of the possible

- Examine overlap and differentiation of roles and tasks – internally and externally **(S, [R?])**
  - Internally (i.e. within PPN) – consider how to divide labour where possible
  - Externally (i.e. within LAs and DRCD) – consider possibility of funding additional staff positions

- Importance of joined up governance – e.g. national, centralized PPN organization to share resources, best practice, governance strategies etc. **(S)**
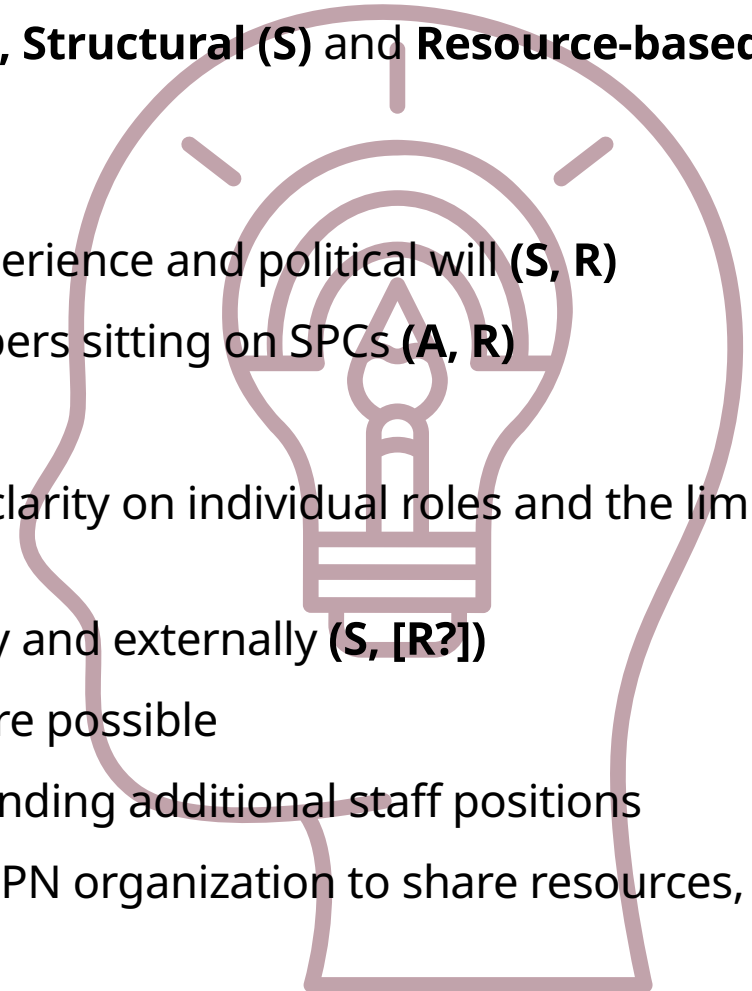
Public Participation Networks remain an important conduit in local democracy and local policymaking. Nevertheless, PPNs face barriers and struggles on various levels that can negatively impact their efficacy and effectiveness.

Not all of these are within the control of PPNs, which means a joined-up approach is needed that combines the skills, experience (and *experiences*) and resources of PPNs across the country, alongside Local Authorities and central government.

PPNs face agential, structural and resource based challenges that often overlap. However, these can be overcome with co-operation, (political and procedural) support, planning and management.

In summary

Dr. Matthew Donoghue

Assistant Professor of Social Policy, School of Social Policy, Social Work, and Social Justice

matthew.donoghue@ucd.ie

Thank you for listening