

Alignment of Local/Community Development Structures

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Introduction

The Community Workers Cooperative (CWC) is a national organisation promoting community development as an action, methodology and policy approach to address issues of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination and inequality. Community development is the mechanism preferred by marginalised groups to address their needs and challenge their circumstance; it is a methodology used by professionals and agencies to move people closer to services; and it has been a policy approach used by government to address poverty and social exclusion. CWC is the only national organisation that seeks to support community work.

CWC makes the following points to the steering group established to advise the Minister of Environment, Community and Local Government on achieving a closer alignment of local development structures and local authorities.

Community Development

Community development has made a significant contribution to the modernisation of the Irish state since the inception of the Republic and has proved adaptable in meeting social priorities identified at different points in our history. Since the mid-1980s community development has been a core mechanism in the development of actions and services to address poverty, unemployment and inequality and to develop a more integrated and socially cohesive society. The rationale for community development as a response to poverty and disadvantage is rooted in a belief in collective action whereby people are enabled to become actively involved in addressing both the causes and consequences of their marginalisation. This rationale formed the basis of the Community Development Programme and was a central tenet of the Integrated Local Development Programme and its successor the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme: it is no longer the case to any significant degree in the LCDP.

Local Development

Local development organisations were originally created to deliver on European Structural Funds programmes on the basis that the Irish local government/administrative system had neither the operational capacity nor the participative coordination apparatus to fulfil the EU subsidiarity principle. These organisations continue to be used by the state to implement social inclusion and rural development programmes.

CWC believes that Local Development Companies (Partnerships) have a considerable contribution to make to the development of social and economic infrastructure in local, particularly disadvantaged, areas. Partnerships made a significant contribution to addressing the needs of the unemployed and the creation of employment and pathways to employment over the past two decades. They have been innovative and challenging in their responses and have been a formative player in the development of coordinated approaches at local level. LEADER companies made a similar

contribution in promoting business development and the development of local initiatives in rural areas. Acting together with City/County Enterprise Boards, local authorities and regional statutory agencies they have brought an enhanced perspective to regional and local development and have prompted greater levels of cooperation and collaboration. Bringing about a greater alignment of local development structures therefore can only further enhance this development and bring greater benefits to communities.

Impacts of alignment so far

The origins of the process to establish alignment of local government and local development began with the reports of the *Task Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development Systems* and with proposals outlined in *Better Local Government* (1997). More recently, there have been a number of significant changes to the local, rural and community development infrastructure. The *cohesion* process saw the merger of LEADER Companies with Partnership Companies to form new Local Development Companies. More importantly, this process also brought about the merger of community development organisations heretofore funded as independent, autonomous structures by the Community Development Programme into these re-engineered Local Development Companies.

Community development, which had such a demonstrable impact in mobilising the fight against poverty and social inclusion, has been considerably diminished by this integration/cohesion process. Priorities are no longer set by local communities, community development strategies and actions are determined through a corporate planning process and there has been a consequent loss of authenticity, relevance and ownership.. Many Local Development Companies have been allocated significant sums of LEADER money, resulting in an agenda dominated by rural development rather than social inclusion. Even in urban areas, the department imposed *articles and memoranda* has resulted in a weakened community representation and an even more diminished social inclusion presence

Steering Group for the Alignment of Local Government and Local Development

As the process of further alignment progresses, the CWC would draw attention to the fact that community development and local development are erroneously presented as being one and the same. They are not. They are in fact two distinct approaches, although they can be complimentary and both have important contributions to make in these challenging times.

Community development methods and approaches are key to maintaining the “developmental bottom up approach” of local development which the steering group lists in 1.1 of their interim report as a guiding principle for their work. Further guiding principles are listed in relation to recognising “the value of the range of local and community development programmes and supports funded by Department of Environment, Community and Local Government to support vulnerable communities through social and economic development.” A key feature, indeed an essential component of community development in achieving these and other constructive outcomes for communities, is the engagement and participation made possible through independent structures and initiatives. This independence is essential if the community sector is to play a useful role in the “development of an equitable and pluralist society”

Clearly, local government has a legitimate democratic role which, as the CWC has pointed out in previous debates on local government debates, needs to be strengthened. However, there are also democratic deficits in local authority make-up, in the focus of actions and in the methods undertaken. There is also a considerable degree of resident/citizen suspicion and mistrust, particularly from marginalised communities and minority groups. The assertion that local government taking a leading role will deliver more efficient services is a matter of conjecture, particularly in relation to social inclusion and equality where there is neither the required experience nor proven capacity for this work. There is room for strengthened relations between local government and community development. However, this needs to be in the context of support for an independent community development sector.

Clearly, democracy is strengthened by building diverse routes for participation, needs assessment and for overall decision-making - especially by those who are largely invisible through local representative systems e.g. women, disadvantaged communities, minority ethnic groups including Travellers and others. In effect, community development affords groups the only possible opportunity to realise their rights to participate in Irish society.

The following comments and suggestions are offered in this light.

The CWC believes, and experience shows, that community development requires autonomy and full participation by the marginalised communities that are its constituency if it is to contribute to addressing and reversing the outcomes and impacts of the recession. Community development does this best when resourced as an independent measure. It is grossly unfair and administratively ineffective to compromise the small bit of independence and funding autonomy required by disadvantaged communities to leverage the changes required to address their needs.

It is unclear why community or local organisations being in receipt of funding from a variety of quarters is problematic. Community organisations have always had to be enterprising in sourcing monies to address community needs. In addition, community organisations have been funded by different departments and statutory agencies to implement specific policy objectives – e.g. combating drugs, responding to poverty, unemployment, social isolation etc.

Community development has been severely undermined by the *cohesion* process, which integrated Partnerships, LEADER companies and CDPs into a new local development structure. The absorption of CDPs and the imposition of revised articles and memoranda diluted the community participation that had been built up so painstakingly over many years and further weakened the social inclusion focus of local development.¹ Community development projects were not in any real sense integrated into local development companies as their budgets were in many instances dismantled.

¹ Please see the CWC reports of the two surveys on the implementation of the Local & Community Development Programme <http://www.cwc.ie/2011/07/local-community-development-programme-reports-of-cwc-implementation-surveys/>

Despite their different purpose, focus and organising process, there is link between community development and local development. Community development was recognised by local area-based partnerships as crucial to ensuring the participation of the most marginalised in the partnership process, on the basis of their vital contribution to the identification of priority issues, the development of appropriate strategies and the monitoring of actions. This brought substantial benefits by ensuring the work of area-based partnerships was relevant, innovatory and effective.

The fact that local development initiatives were not accountable to the local authorities initially is widely acknowledged as having created the conditions which made innovation and positive impact possible. They were, however, at all times accountable both to their own structures and to national authorities and intermediaries. Links were developed during this period between local development and local government, which resulted in some capacity enhancement but the contention that local authorities have the capability to manage and control all such initiatives in their areas, either in the interests of democracy, impact or efficiency is totally erroneous.

In effect, while the interim report contains much critique overall of local development, some of which is well placed, there is little or no corresponding critical focus on the shortcomings of local authorities and the processes developed by them in the past decade, many of which substantially excluded local communities.

The rationale presented for alignment seems to be primarily concerned with cost saving and with redirecting (a small piece of) power to local authorities and away from local communities, even though it is erroneously articulated as a gap in accountability. This ignores the inherent democratic deficit in the local authority system which leaves many disadvantaged communities on the periphery of participation and sets aside the reality that there is internal accountability in local structures and a wider accountability back to government departments and intermediary agencies. In the existing local government context the recipe offered amounts to complete county manager control.