



Community Workers'
Co-operative

Submission to the Review by the
Committee on Economic, Social and
Cultural Rights on Ireland's Compliance
with the International Covenant on
Economic Social and Cultural Rights

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1st – 19th June 2015

by the
Community Workers' Co-operative

May 2015

About the CWC

Established in 1981, the Community Workers' Co-operative (CWC) is the leading national organization that promotes and supports community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and ultimately as a means of achieving social change that will contribute to the creation of a more just, sustainable and equal society.

The CWC has in excess of 800 individual and organisational members.

Reporting Organisation

Established in 1981, the Community Workers' Co-operative (CWC) is a national organization that promotes and supports community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and ultimately as a means of achieving social change that will contribute to the creation of a more just, sustainable and equal society. CWC is a membership organisation. There are currently approximately 800 individual and organisational members of the CWC. For further information please log on to www.cwc.ie or email info@cwc.ie

Community work or community development involves a long term process of analysis of social and economic situations and collective action for change in favour of those who benefit least from national and global social and economic developments based on that analysis. It is centred on a series of principles that seek to go beyond consultation to participation and beyond capacity building to consciousness raising and empowerment. It recognises the changing and often hidden nature of the structural inequalities based on 'race', class, gender and disability to name but a few. It seeks to be transformative rather than conforming and empowering rather than controlling. It seeks to challenge the causes of poverty and disadvantage and to offer new opportunities for those lacking choice, power and resources.¹

- **Collective Action:** Community work is based on working with and supporting groups of people. It enables them to develop knowledge, skills and confidence so that they can develop an analysis, identify priority needs and issues and address these through collective action.
- **Empowerment:** Community development is about the empowerment of individuals and communities, and addressing the unequal distribution of power. It is about working with people to enable them to become critical, creative, liberated, and active participants, allowing and enabling them to take more control of the direction of their lives, their communities and their environment. It aims to effect a sharing of power to create structures that provide genuine participation and involvement. It is a process based on mutual respect and equal and genuine partnership between all those involved to enable a sharing of talents, experiences and expertise
- **Social Justice:** The active pursuit of social justice is an essential element of community work and makes an important contribution towards a socially cohesive society. Community work is based on a belief that every person and every community can play an active role in creating conditions for a just and equal society where human rights are promoted and all forms of oppression or discrimination are challenged. The pursuit of social justice involves
 - identifying and seeking to alleviate structural disadvantage and advocating strategies for overcoming disadvantage, discrimination and inequality. It entails the promotion of policies and practices that are just and equitable. In effect it means working to promote human rights for all.
 - **Equality and Anti-Discrimination:** In working for equality community development works from the starting point that while people are not the same, they are all of equal worth and importance and are therefore equally worthy of respect and acknowledgement. Community development challenges the oppression and exclusion of individuals and groups by institutions and society that leads to discrimination against people based on ability, age, culture, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, nationality, skin colour, racial or ethnic group, sexual orientation, political or religious beliefs. Community work is particularly concerned to address the specific and historical inequalities experienced by women in all cultures.
 - **Participation:** Participation is about the involvement of groups who experience social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination in decision-making, planning and action at different levels, from the local to the global. It can be viewed as a continuum of activity that can start from information sharing through capacity building and empowerment to active engagement and meaningful participation in democratic processes. It recognises that people have the right to participate in decisions and structures that affect their lives. In working to promote participation it is vital that inherent power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed. Ultimately the participation of marginalised and disadvantaged communities should contribute towards bringing about social change through appropriately informed policies and processes, to the benefit of all².

¹ Submission by the Community Workers' Co-operative to Our Communities a Framework Document on Local and Community Development in Ireland April 2015

² Towards Standards for Quality Community Work <http://www.cwc.ie/2010/09/towards-standards/>

Summary of Issues

Significant changes for independent civil society at local level

The reform of local government process, in progress in Ireland since the publication of the policy document, *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government* in 2012, has brought about significant changes for independent civil society at local level. The vision outlined in *Putting People First* is that local government will be the main vehicle of governance and public services at local level – leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.

The aspirations outlined in *Putting People First* were enacted by the Local Government Reform Act 2014. The Act provides for the establishment of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in each local authority area. The LCDCs comprise representatives of local authorities and other State agencies, local and community interests, civil society and economic and social partners. The LCDCs are vested with responsibility for the co-ordination, governance, planning and oversight of all publicly funded local and community development interventions at local level including national and European funded work.

These responsibilities were previously those of independent community organisations that formed an essential element of civil society at local level and have now been transferred to local government.

The establishment of the LCDCs and their status as contract holders for the new Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), the largest social inclusion programme in the state and a key mechanism for advancing Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Ireland, prompted the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government to seek legal advice in relation to the SICAP implementing organisations and how they were to be selected. That advice from the Attorney General stated:

There can be little doubt that the LCDC is a 'public authority' for the purposes of a contracting authority under the Procurement Directive and is therefore subject to the EU Procurement Directive for the successor programme..."As it would appear that some/all of the projects to be placed by LCDCs are covered by obligations to tender under the Procurement Directive the LCDCs would not be able to automatically have a preferential status i.e. cannot automatically be the 'preferred partner' of the LCDC.

It is the advice of the Irish Attorney General that the introduction of the LCDCs has changed resulted in a competitive tendering process being applied to select the SICAP implementing organisations, opening up a range of possibilities such as the privatisation of the delivery of social inclusion programmes, or indeed, the introduction of a profit motive.

Given that the aspirations that the LCDC will eventually assume control over all publically funded community development and local development activity, there are strong indications that there will be increasing control over civil society activities at local level by local government, with a consequent loss of autonomy and independence for civil society organisations.

The CWC has been working on the processes surrounding local government reform since late 2011. To date, we have organised or participated in over 30 workshops/seminars/conferences with local, regional and national organisations. We have published a number of Updates and Briefs that are widely used in the community sector.

Key concerns for Community Sector Organisations (Civil Society/NGOs) working to promote economic social and cultural rights in Ireland

First and foremost, there is a clear sense from all of our work that the community sector in Ireland and the community development approach it seeks to use, which challenges structural inequality and

promoting social change, social justice and the achievement of economic, social and cultural rights, has and continues to be eroded by state policies that fail to recognise the legitimacy and value of an independent civil society, particularly at local level.

There is a strong view that this erosion is having and will continue to have an extremely negative impact on individuals, families, communities and society as a whole and a particularly negative impact on those communities experiencing poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

There are significant concerns at the level of powers to be devolved to the Local Government. Many CWC members and others have voiced considerable disquiet at the notion of community development work being brought under the increasing control of local authorities.

To be successful, community development organisations and civil society in general, needs to be in a position to critique government policy at local and national level. Independence and autonomy are critical features of civil society that enable it to do this. This crucial independence has and continues to be eroded, leaving civil society in a position of being increasingly unable to criticise local and national government policy.

Government policy fails to acknowledge the power differential or the historical reality of frequently conflictual relationships that continue to exist between marginalized and poor communities and local authorities now being tasked with responsibility for community development and rights based activity.

The policy direction has also meant that civil society organisations will be increasingly contractually obliged to deliver services that have been pre-determined by central government, as opposed to being developed in consultation with the marginalised communities they serve. This means that the voice of marginalised communities in seeking to develop strategies to address the economic, social and cultural needs they have identified is being increasingly eroded.

It is clear that putting into practice the principles of participation, engagement, transparency and active citizenship require a strong effective and engaged community sector. The dismantling of the sector, renders achievement of these principles impossible despite Government rhetoric to the contrary.

In addition to fundamentally changing the relationship between civil society and the state, there has been a significant dismantling of the community sector infrastructure over the past 10 years. As part of this decision-making has been increasingly centralised and shared amongst an increasingly smaller number of people. The involvement of marginalised communities in decision-making structures that affect their lives, has been significantly eroded, resulting in a considerable reduction of the voice and role of local organisations seeking to promote human rights and empowerment of disadvantaged communities.

There is a an underling assumption underpinning this policy direction that local government has the capacity, skills and good-will necessary to assume control over community development at local level. This is not the case. The widely accepted skills knowledge and experience required in developing and implementing effective community development processes which are about true empowerment and collective action are being deliberately ignored.

Recent policy directions have been gender blind. Yet gender remains one of the underlying causes of economic, social and cultural inequality in Ireland illustrated by a range of factors including: the democratic deficit, with significantly lower numbers of women in political and other decision making arenas; poverty amongst women in particular amongst lone parents and children; and the

persistence of violence against women. The importance of mainstreaming gender equality in representative structures and in all policies and programmes developed in recognition of these persistent inequalities experienced by women in Irish society has been ignored.

Request

We respectfully request that the Committee ask the Irish Government the following;

How the Irish Government proposes to ensure and promote the sustainability and autonomy of a strong and vibrant local community sector in Ireland and stem the erosion of this sector in the interests of the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland and the promotion of social inclusion, empowerment and social, economic and cultural rights.

Further Information

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