

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Community Development has a long history in Ireland, but was known by other names. It was central to Irish rural life. To a large extent it was informal, but very much part of the social and economic fabric of life when times were poor and money was scarce. People shared their labour. It was known as the **meitheal** when work had to be done. The social aspect of it was known as **cooring**. Both were essential for the development of the community. Through the **meitheal** the work was done and through **cooring** local affairs were discussed. Put another way – the family, extended family, neighbourhood, townland and parish were the systems within which generations of Irish people were held together. These were the generations of people who survived the famine and stayed at home. They were the generations who were part of an Ireland that experienced the revivalist movements of the 1880's, such as the G.A.A., Gaelic League and religious revivalism, the co-operative movement of the 1890's and 1900's, the Easter Rising of 1916, Independence and Civil War of the 1920's, economic war of the 1930's, rationing of the 1940's, mass emigration of the 1950's. They were the generations who were part of the new Ireland in the 1960's – the Industrial, Communications, Education and Vatican II revolutions – the oil crisis 1970's, recession 1980's, and Celtic Tiger 1994-2007.

This brief sketch underlines the fact that up to the 1960's life for many was about survival. During most of this time what we call Community Development was, for the most part, informal. Organisations such as Muintir na Tire, Macra na Feirme, the ICA and other organisations emerged during the first half of the century, all on a voluntary basis. From the 1960's onwards, Irish society became more organisationally focused and so did community development.

Since 1958 Irish society has been busy constructing an economy, and for very good reasons. Prior to this emigration had drained the life-blood from the community with 50,000 people being forced to leave each year during the 1950's. Prior to that again, we had the decades which could be described as a period in the aftermath of a famine which left an indelible mark on generations of Irish people. It had a traumatic effect on the Irish psyche. The country lost half of its population in a few decades. The experience reverberated long after food was available again in steady supply.

So, basic survival was a good reason why people would share with one another their time and talents.

Another reason for people to be together was as a buffer to powerful influences from outside. The 20th century opened with colonialism, was then dominated by clericalism and ended with capitalism. During most of this time, community action was in many ways the one great buffer to the excesses or dominance of any one influence.

The concept of Community Development is also significant then and now as an expression of self, the civic self. It is an important expression of citizenship. The involvement of the self in community whether for idealism, functional reasons, or in giving a person a sense of solidarity, leads to a building of relationship with neighbours and with the wider community. This was particularly true at a time when government influence on peoples lives was nothing like what it came to be in the second half of the century.

Voluntarism is central to the concept of Community Development. However, for it to work effectively, a close relationship between the statutory and voluntary is essential. This happens in a diverse way in Ireland. The community or voluntary sector now comprises organisations ranging from voluntary hospitals, schools, sports organisations, associations

dealing with social services, environmental organisations, tenant's rights, traveller's rights, rural development organisations and housing associations. The sector is rarely, if ever, thought of in economic terms. Over 10 years ago, it was reckoned these organisations spent a total of €4.2 billion in cash terms – more than agriculture and fishing which spent €3.62 billion and almost twice as much as public administration and defence which spent €2.22 billion.¹ It hasn't been seen in this way because it has been associated with goodness.

This association with doing good can mean the sector's importance is only perceived as occurring at a level on a par with things that are immeasurable. However, when focussing on the sector from an economic viewpoint one can get a very different picture. This is a point that needs to be emphasised in relation to what is now known as 'the third sector' i.e. the community and voluntary sector. As state and semi-state organisations (popularly known as 'quangos') multiplied, the voluntary sector tended to be marginalised and regarded as 'do-goodery'. The real work was now going to be carried out by these bodies and highly paid executives within them. This has resulted in undermining the community development concept and at an enormous financial cost to the taxpayer.

New Era

In the mid 1990's, Ireland became part of a global market economy. Almost overnight we became the best fed, best housed, best educated, most employed generation ever to have lived in Ireland. Side by side with this major growth in the economy we witnessed an equally significant disengagement by much of the population from the supports and institutions that sustained them for generations. During these years – 1994-2007 – the period of the Celtic Tiger, we experienced serious disconnection from family and community.

Institutions which shaped us were finding it difficult to address a youthful and questioning culture. Exposure to the global culture was intensive. We moved into an economic system that focused on 'wants' more than 'needs'. Wants are driven by marketing. They are about 'keeping up with the Jones's and very quickly breathe a culture of borrowing and indebtedness. They suggest that people don't need people any more. They strip away the idea of saving. They fixate people on 'things' and they lead them into massive borrowings and impossible debt in acquiring these things. They remove people from the local and towards the global and the concept of globalisation.

In short, globalisation, meaning easy movement of ideas, trade, people across the world became a significant force. We no longer easily identified with the people, places, or structures which gave previous generations an identity and a feeling of belonging. And we know that life without commitment means life without responsibility to others or for others. The independent life leads to isolation and is the recipe for a very privatised society. Is it an exaggeration to suggest that we reached a stage when neighbours would not be aware or even care if we were to disappear from among them? As often as not, 'neighbour' has come to mean someone with a common address but little more.

The reality is that the market economy does not function as a community. It is a highly competitive environment as distinct from one that depends on relationships. We have invested huge resources in developing the economy. We are now challenged to make a clear distinction between market values and social values, or to at least balance them. We

¹ Freda Donoghue, Helmut K. Anheier and Lester M. Salamon, uncovering the Non Profit Sector in Ireland: Its economic value and significance, 1999.

are challenged to reflect on values that will reconnect us, which will value life and relationships.

We don't need reminding that Ireland, together with other parts of the western world, has been dealt some damaging blows in recent times. This bursting of the property bubble and the collapse of confidence in the banking system have left a crisis of confidence in institutions. We are living through a period of great upheaval. Scandals in the Church, business, banks, broken promises in politics, breaches of trust, have all led to top/down command/control type leadership being called into serious question. To where and to whom do people turn to sort out the mess?

People simply feel betrayed by big institutions.

The problems facing our society now are very different to anything we faced in the past. In a sense we have nothing in history to guide us and no language to articulate it. We have come a long way in terms of economic and social development but more particularly in terms of the cultural diversity that now characterises the country. Some of the change has been positive and some has been negative, but it has all been momentous. As we look forward it is clear that the change that has occurred to date is only the tip of the iceberg.

We are certainly at the point where power and authority have been seriously undermined, with the church, business, and the political firmament all having suffered serious reputational damage. Having seen the "pillars of authority" dismantled there is now a sense of vacuum that could lead either way.

Direction for the future

In which direction will our society evolve? This has to be the key challenge for the future. We have identified that we are coming from a period dominated by globalisation. We agree that a sense of belonging has weakened and personal freedom increased. This, in turn, has led to extreme individualism, but it could also give rise to a deeper search for community and belonging.

As the shock of the crises recedes many are looking to people on the ground for solutions. For example, more and more Catholics are turning to their local church for solutions and they are beginning to take ownership of their church. The concept of community is again becoming central to both social and economic life at local level.

The fact is that nature does not like a vacuum. But a vacuum is what occurs when people demand freedom without accepting responsibility. A question we all need to ask now is – 'is the future my responsibility? We had a powerful tradition of community living at a time when survival was all that mattered. The family and community bond held generations together – all of this in times of poverty. Can those same systems become central to finding our way into the future?

I, in my life and experiences have come to believe that people are searching for connections and if facilitated to make these they will respond. I have also come to believe that leaders in society are not sufficiently aware of the changing face of society in terms of what isolation, individualism and independency have been doing. There are clear indications that many people are conscious that they can no longer live isolated from others. The naked fact is that we are all interdependent. There seems to be a new cry for togetherness, even in the midst of affluence or the "appearances" of it. A new order is called for. So, where do we begin? Could it be with a new type of leadership; one which facilitates participation and values the place where everyone belongs?

Two concerns now lie at the heart of democracies – discontent and even anger. One is the fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our

lives. The other is the sense that, from family to neighbourhood to nation, the moral fabric of community was seriously unravelled during the Celtic Tiger years. These two fears – the loss of self-government and the erosion of community - together define the anxiety that the prevailing agenda has failed to answer or even address.

Our view of progress has been one of climbing the ladders of knowledge and power. It has been about competition – competing with others for more and more status, wealth and power. Its offer of meaning for life and living has been about these rather than inner contentment and meaningful relationships.

But these values are beginning to be questioned. It is no longer good enough for economic policy simply to create wealth at the expense of the environment or people in the third world or poor people who are homeless, or people who find no meaning to life anymore. Organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and World Health Organisation, are all shifting from a purposeless approach to economic policy to one which has a purpose. And growing numbers of people are emphasising the importance of values in shaping our future - values such as truth, participation, social responsibility, a sense of the sacred. In all of this there is emerging a new vision of progress – one which is developmental, one which gives value and meaning to our lives. It will be about developing our own potential, enabling other people to do the same, and contributing to the development of our society.

This might be known as a 21st century definition of community development and presents a major challenge to finding a new definition of leadership and a new way of being leader whether in business, government or any other organisation. It also presents major challenges to enable people to take responsibility.

Direction for the future will depend very much on identifying a new vision of leadership. It is clear now that leadership of the future has to be value based. The market value without the support and influence of more noble ideals lead to self and sectional interests. Institutions and organisations will have to return to first beginnings. What are banks for? What is the Church for? How does business and community connect? Is politics about parties or people? To whom do young people turn for ideals and for a sense of meaning and purpose? What is the role of the local in the future? What kind of community/local leadership is needed if people are to participate, be creative, develop local resources, be environmentally conscious, and have a serious sense of responsibility?

Values such as trust, truth, caring, participation, responsibility and spirituality are all required as a matter of honour and decency in any civilised society. They may sound aspirational, philosophical and impractical within systems and organisations that foster the culture of pragmatism and hard-headedness but they are an integral part of the leadership of the future.

It is worth repeating that the recovery that is needed cannot be just a repetition of the past. We live at a time that proves Einstein right '***no problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it.***' Restoring the balance between local and global is now essential. Act locally – think globally is more relevant than ever.

Community development of the future will depend then on **a new vision of leadership**. It will involve sharing power and authority, building collaborative relationships, bringing people on board and allowing them personal investment and ownership. It will involve the development of a participative leadership which involves people and gives them a stake in the decisions that affect their lives. Participation releases creativity, it encourages people to use their own ingenuity in solving problems. People show greater commitment to action when they have been involved in the decision-making process. A participative leadership

style promotes co-operation and collaboration rather than competition. Working on shared goals enhances social commitment as people are more committed to each other.

The Céifin Conference of 2009 titled *'Who's in Charge: Towards a Leadership of Service'*² focused on the fact that the styles of leadership we have inherited simply have not worked in our time. It is obvious now that top/down leadership will not work in the future. This was a key message running through the conference.

For example,

Philip Lowe, in his keynote speech, 'Private Enterprise; Public Values and Civic Responsibilities', outlined how the banking crisis and the loss of trust and confidence in the financial/banking system on which a market economy so depends, came about. He asked *"isn't it time to look beyond regulation to some form of contractualisation of the relationship between banks and the rest of society..... shouldn't there be in the end recognition by the financial sector of some civic responsibilities which go along with the freedom they have to create value for their shareholders"*.

Ray Kinsella addressed the topic under the heading 'Re-imagining Community: the Céifin revolution of 2009'. He suggested that a reconnection to our spiritual heritage provides an anchor for Ireland at this time and that we need a leadership of service, with a vision that will point the way to re-imagining community.

Paula Downey suggested that *"most of the institutions of our time have completely lost their way because they have forgotten their founding ethic."* She called for *"a new leadership agenda to transform our wider social culture by transforming the culture of the institutions that shape it."*

Dearbhail McDonald in her paper 'Re-imagining Political Leadership,' said *"We need a far reaching vision of the sort of society we want to be when this crisis passes..... Nothing short of a revolution in our political culture and our collective attitude towards serving others will stop the rot that has corroded what has always been a noble calling"*.

The common thread running through this conference was the urgent need to re-imagine and redefine Community Development for our time. If trust is to be restored people will have to be facilitated to take responsibility for their future. In other words, the concept of community development will have to take on a whole new meaning.

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² Published papers from the Céifin Conference 2009 – Who's in Charge? – Towards a Leadership of Service. Edited by Harry Bohan, published by Veritas.