

Report to Co. Wexford PPN Secretariat on Seminar “Spaces for Change? The Practice and Policy of Community Participation in Local Governance in Ireland” held in UCC on 29th Nov. 2018.

Messrs. David Doyle and Noel Stacey, CWPPN Secretariat attended the above seminar following approval of the Secretariat.

The seminar explored and discussed:

The practice and policy of community participation in Irish local participatory governance, or state-led uld making.

The seminar had four key aims:

1. To explore and discuss the emergence in the last ten years of a number of new forms of local and national governance in Ireland.
2. To critically examine community engagement and participation in local governance and the impacts of and opportunities for participation by Community, Voluntary and Local Development groups in structures such as Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).
3. To present and discuss initial findings of an Irish Research Council-funded research project (2017-2019) which is critically evaluating the operation of Irish local participatory governance and its implications for Community, Voluntary and Local Development Sector groups and organisations, the wider community and the State.
4. To debate whether local participatory governance can be effective in achieving key goals, including community representation and participation, democratic and deliberative engagement, and decision-making.

The seminar is being run under the auspices of the ISS21 Civil Society Research Cluster.

Three presentation papers are attached for perusal and consideration and should be referred to.

This report synthesises each presentation and issues discussed.

Paper 1: (presentation attached).

Dr. Mary Murphy, NUI, Maynooth, discussed “Civil Society and the Irish State: from Pre to Post Crisis” and explored a life lived together in a public space in the context of democracy and power.

Dr. Murphy identified three phases of society:

Origins and early days,
The “partnership” phase and
The economic crisis.

The current post crisis participation is examined in terms of social dialogue, randomocracy and technocracy.

A number of theories of power and democracy were outlined as were theories on partnership and the good, bad and ugly perceptions of it as shown by a number of commentators such as Murphy, Meade and Harvey.

At present we are involved in a number of different consultative approaches, PPN and LCDC, Citizens Juries and Assemblies and Conventions with the underlining question; who is setting and controlling the agenda in the State and is there representative power?

In examining these approaches, the markets, commodification, and other factors as well as drivers such as the EU, value for money etc. affect how consultative processes change.

In concluding, public imagination and public control are discussed. Public control can be re-energised through local democracy, the power of civil society from access to influence (the essence of PPN), participation, which is a corner stone of human rights and the placing of the citizen as user, owner and worker of public services.

Paper 2: (presentation attached).

Mr. Aidan Llyod, of the Rights Platform presented his paper on engaging with local participatory structures: Experience in South Dublin.

Mr. Lloyd outlined the changes in the relationship between state and the community from Muintir na Tire in the 1930's and 40s' to Voluntary Services Councils to Partnership and Subsidiarity in the '80's and 90's.

However from 2002 the State changed the relationship by watering down the Framework Policy and the Re-organising of the community Sector at local level.

This was done by funding reduction and Framework Structural changes which has resulted in a social movement against water charges, marriage issues etc. in a homogenous way but did not manifest itself through the Community Sector.

PPN, LCDC and LEO were vehicles to strengthen the Community Sector and Social Inclusion, by operating through the local authority, but which, he argues, continues to be ill equipped to deliver as it has:

A small range of services,
No revenue raising powers or
No legal powers to effect changes sought by the community.

Mr. Lloyd outlined the development of the South Dublin Community Platform from 1999 to date. Funding issues and moneys being re-directed to PPN, once established under the Local Government Reform Act, 2014 meant that the Platform fell. The effect was that it was not eligible for grant aid and recognition. However, it reinvented itself by refocusing and getting elected to the PPN.

He considers that the community gains under Partnership are gone. Social inclusion within local authorities is moribund due to lack of capacity and lack of services needed for proper social inclusion. Even if Local Government had the functions its revenue raising powers may not expand to raise what would be needed.

He notes also the fact that a resources community sector conflicts with local and state political forms and that participative democracy has little currency with central government.

He argues that the constitutional guarantee of freedom of association is fundamental to group formation, including community, but the State is fundamentally organising the community and voluntary sectors in terms of control of funds, degree of expansion of role, issuance of guidance to PPNs' etc. and the lack of services at local authority level as discussed above.

Topic 3: (no papers issued)

Dr. Aodh Quinlivan spoke about the history of local government and how its role has developed since the foundation of the State.

Recent transfers of L A services (SUSI and Driving Licences) continue to reduce the range of services performed by local government. While these services were being lost to local authorities, it is noteworthy and indeed the essence of the community based service argument that the local government system has a very small range of services which affect the community and therefore can be powerless in terms of what communities may require for their development.

While the PPN and LCDC were established under legislation they can be seen as re-inventions of previous systems of community engagement and that it would appear there is no political or executive appetite at national level to increase local authority roles and functions.

During the discussion the point was made that instead of Better Local Government (1996) actually improving Local Government it diminished it by imposing a time limit on Managers to hold that position without having to re- apply for their jobs. This has resulted in an inability of managers to be a strong and forceful voice for their authorities when advocating for additional services and funding.

The poor profile of local politics in comparison to national within the media was also noted. Clearly, local is a poor relation to national and this is unlikely to change anytime soon.

The political disconnect for town dwellers was compounded by the abolition of town councils and before that the transfer of water services from the urban councils and towns to the County Councils.

These state - imposed changes created a break between local administration and local representative government and this combined with a low revenue generating power locally has undermined local government with a direct effect on the effectiveness of PPN in empowering the community through its representative role.

Dr. Quinlivan considers that PPN as the body representing the community and voluntary sectors needs to engage with their Chief Executive and senior management staff in terms of them supporting requests and issues affecting communities locally. Importantly, the relationship between the elected member and PPN / community & voluntary needs to be strengthened to ensure a partnership representative role and to eliminate potential conflicts of interest.

Paper 4: (presentation attached) .

Dr. Catherine Forde presented a paper on findings from a research project, Participation in local Governance in Ireland, 2017 to 2019.

The paper is exploring what is participatory governance including its merits and issues and goes on to outline its development since the partnership era of the 1980s' as well as legislation and Government policy documents such as BLG, the White Paper Supporting Voluntary Activity, 2000 and L G Reform Act, 2014.

The reason for this research is the defence on the one hand and the critique on the other of the topic and focuses on PPN and LCDC.

Its central research questions are:

Do new and existing local participatory governance structures provide opportunities for effective community and public participation in decision-making and democratic processes?

What types of participation are provided by new and existing local participatory governance structures?

Do new local participatory structures like PPNs and LCDCs represent change or continuity in the participatory governance regime in Ireland?

What is the relationship between local participatory governance structures and local government?

Conducted interviews are

Can new and existing local participatory structures contribute to the renewal of (i) local and (ii) national democracy?

The time frame for the project was outlined and current findings results are shown on the powerpoint attached.

Emerging trends have been as follows:

Contact-making within the sector, contact-making within local and national government and seeking to gain greater influence in policy-making were the most significant reasons given for getting involved in local and national participatory governance structures and processes; organisations seek influence at both levels.

Concerns about organisational capacity to participate in participatory governance structures e.g. time, resources, skill sets.

Concerns about loss of autonomy.

Lack of willingness to cede power and control on the part of local authorities.

Issues concerning the efficacy of participatory governance structures.

Issues concerning esteem for and understanding of the CVS on the part of the state.

The interview results are on the topics as follows, each of which is as set out in its respective slide:

Membership of PPNs.

PPN functions.

PPN structures.

Forms of participation in PPNs.

Relationships between PPNs and local authorities.

Capacity to influence policy.

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).

It is noted that these local participatory governance structures are relatively recent and are still under development and expansion. Some have been in operation for about four years while others are at earlier stages of development.

Questions arising:

Sustainability: Can membership and momentum be sustained if PPNs do not have influence?

Innovative forms of working are emerging from PPNs e.g. policy networks. Will these be nurtured or will they be undermined by the relative rigidity of the structures that PPNs must observe?

Is it understood that there is much to be done locally that PPNs cannot undertake or achieve by themselves?

The research is ongoing and is due to be completed in 2019.

ends.