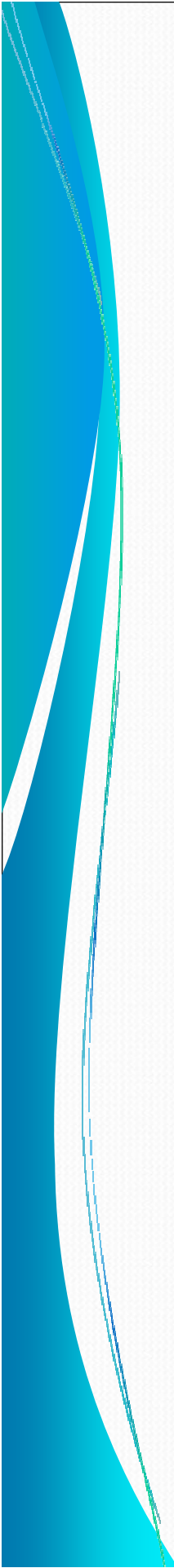


Civil Society, Community Development & Participation

– reimagining a more
'democratic' democracy

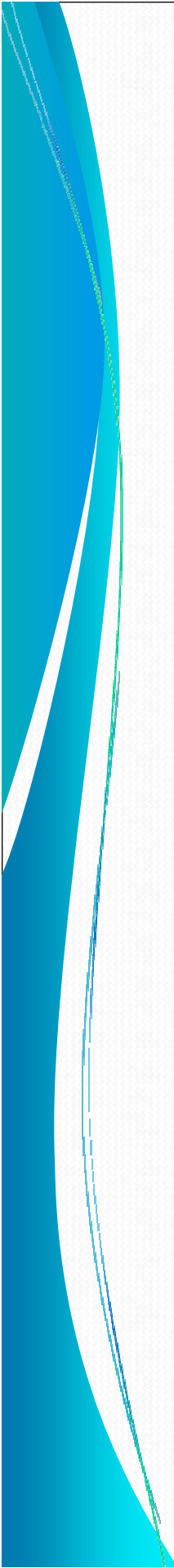
Ann Irwin, National Co-ordinator
Community Workers' Co-operative
Ireland

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- Established in 1981, the Community Workers Co-operative (CWC) is a national organisation that promotes and supports community work as a means of achieving social change that will contribute to the creation of a more just, sustainable and equal society.
 - For us, community development is *an activity composed of a task and a process. The task is the achievement of social change linked to equality and social justice; the process is the application of the principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision making...*



Empowerment & Democracy

- I was asked to speak about participation – which I thought would be relatively easy, since I strongly believe that participation is a key principle.
- However, the more I thought about it in preparation for today, the more complex the notion of participation became....

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- The general theme of this morning's conversation is **empowerment and democracy**
 - For the CWC, democracy, civil society and community development are intrinsically linked.
 - We believe that **civil society** - which is the independent, self organising sector of organisations, usual motivated by a sense of social justice - is crucial to **democracy** and can provide a counter balance to other influences on the political system
 - **Community development** is then crucial for supporting the participation of those most disadvantaged and marginalised from the political and other systems
 - Ironically, in Ireland, the independent community sector, so crucial for an independent civil society and democracy, is being dismantled by the State



Community Workers'
Co-operative



Types of democracy

- Many believe that there is only one form of democracy – in fact there are many.
- The CWC would be critical of the type of democracy that characterises Irish, and may other, democracies.
- In Ireland, as in much of Europe and the Western World, we operate a restrictive form of **representative democracy**.
- Our main participation in the democratic process is in the act of electing what are overwhelming middle aged, middle class men to represent us
- Do they really represent what are increasingly diverse and varied societies and populations?





Participatory Democracy

- Participatory democracy, on the other hand, argues for a much greater role for ‘citizens’ (I use this term in its loosest sense as it is a term that is being increasingly used to exclude those who do not fall under the narrow definitions of citizenships in Ireland and, I am sure, elsewhere).



Community Development

- Participation is one of the key principles of community development
- We believe that community development is the key mechanism that supports, facilitates and empowers people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to ‘find their voice’
- We argue that policy making, at local, regional, national and international levels, is only effective if it is influenced by the participation of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion



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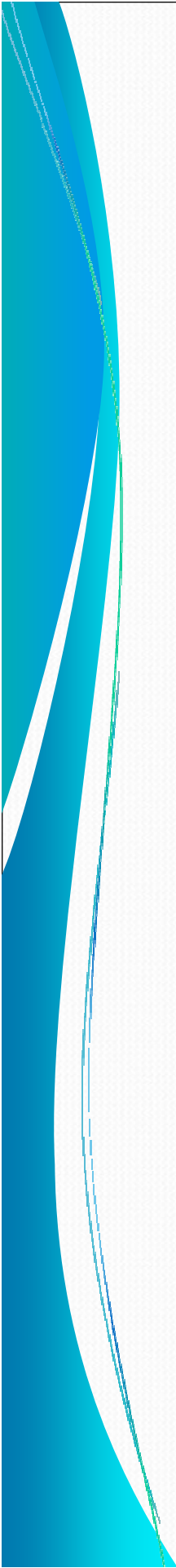
Why participate?

- But it is important to ask:
 - What is participation?
and
 - Participation to what end?

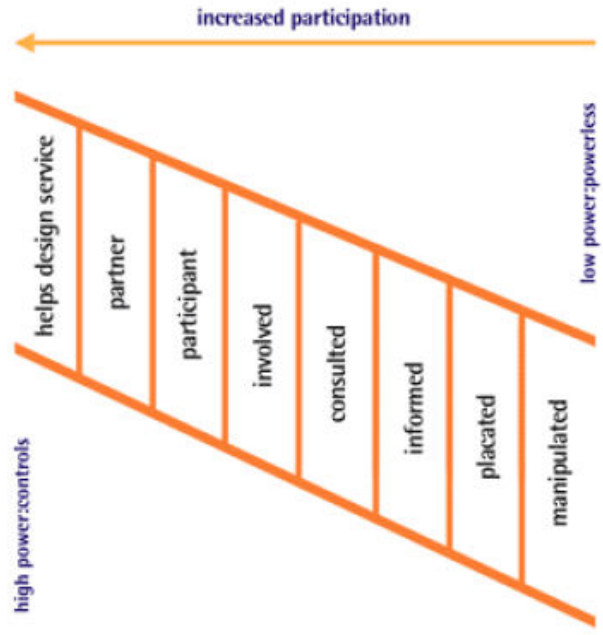


What is participation

- Participation is a continuum
- Participation can be anything from participation by telling your story in the hope that the reality will education and influence policy makers positively
- Participation can be responding when you are asked a question about something. This type of participation is generally called consultation and is a valid form of participation.



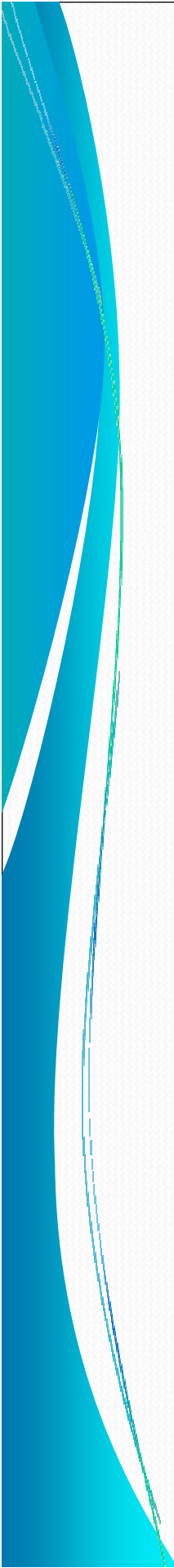
The ladder of participation



Thorburn, Lewis and Shemmings, 1995

Participation in community development

- In community development, we talk about participation - in terms of a means to an end
- The end is
 - Individual empowerment
 - Collective change

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- So, for us, participation is the first step in making real changes to individual and collective realities
 - **Community activism** is core to this. In community development people who are affected by the issue are involved at all levels of the work – for example, Traveller community activists would be involved at all levels of work and management in Traveller organisations.
 - This community activism often requires support

Participation - to what end?

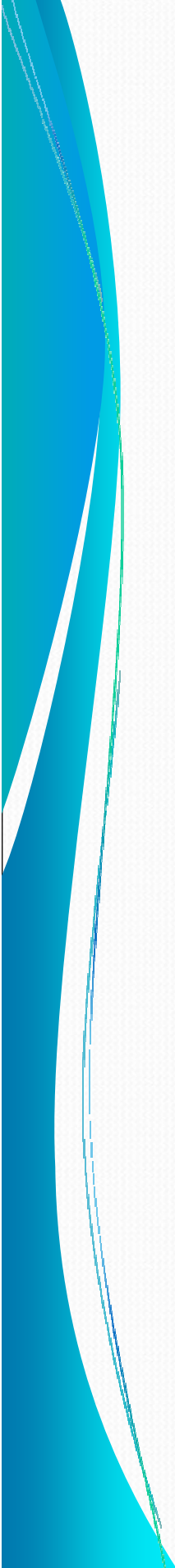
- This question is far more difficult and forces us to acknowledge that we cannot speak about participation in isolation from the political realities that frame it
- This further forces us to acknowledge that, often times, we are participating but nothing is changing as a result
 - We are telling our stories but though we are placated and told that we are doing a wonderful job, we are still left in poverty or social exclusion
 - We are being 'consulted' but rarely, if ever, see what we say reflected





Conclusion

- This is a challenge
- People often get despondent – people are often tired of being ‘consulted’

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- It is more important, therefore, to ensure that participation in civil society – community organisations, community activism – is meaningful
 - It is also important to ensure that pressure is maintained to ensure that the experience of poverty and social exclusion is a key influencer in all policies that impact on people at EU and member State level.
 - Most of all – it is important to imagine a more ‘democratic’ democracy where the experience of people in poverty and social exclusion becomes the first step in the journey **from** poverty and social exclusion – and in this 2010 Year to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion – to say to say that poverty and social exclusion are unacceptable.