Building Effective Consultation and Participation

Lessons and Learning from outside Ireland

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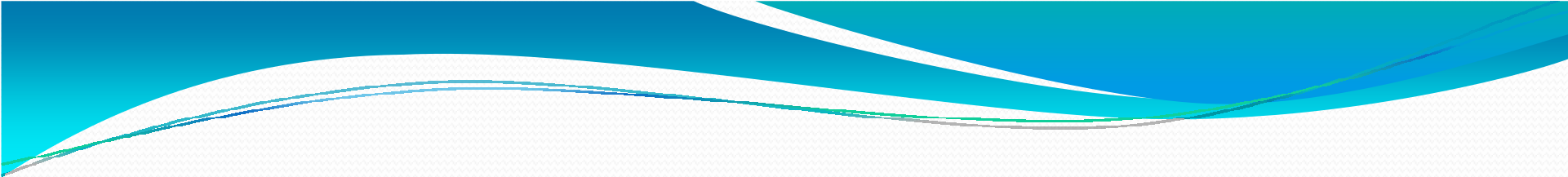Community Workers'
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Introduction

As the report states, the idea emerged as a result of the work of the Project Partners in the Ireland in Social Europe Project.

- Consultation fatigue – particularly amongst those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and inequality
- Weaknesses in consultation process, particularly in relation to being informed what happened to the information provided *and* what if any effect/impact it had on policy.
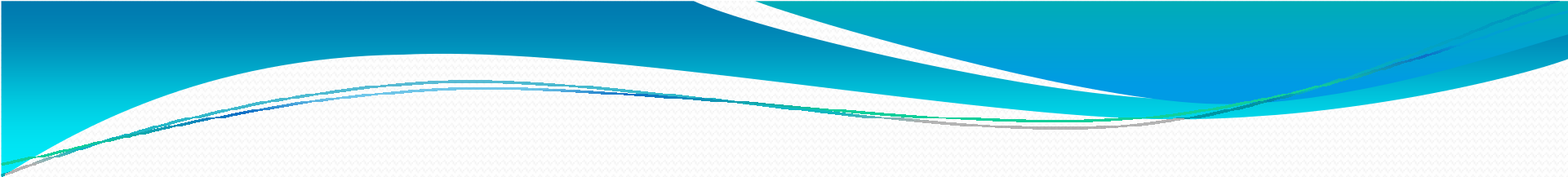
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- Instead of another guide on 'how to consult' or 'participation within consultation processes' the project partners strongly believed that we need to look elsewhere to see if there any examples of good practice that we might draw on and perhaps use as examples to influence consultation processes here.
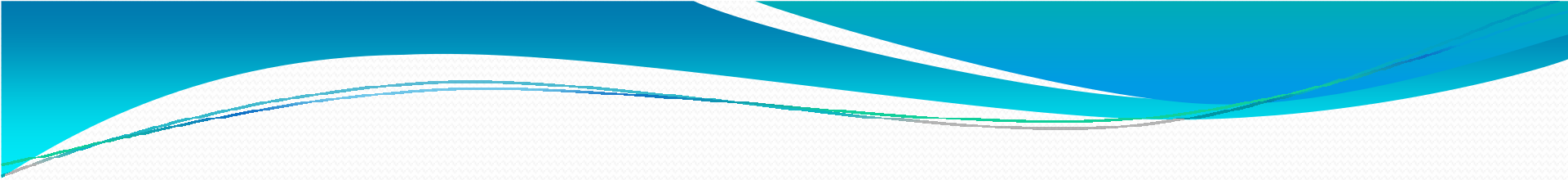
The Report

- The report went beyond that, thanks to the author, Dr. Chris McInerney
  - It examines the largely rhetorical things we say about consultation and participation and the façade that often fools onlookers into believing that there are good consultation mechanisms in Ireland such as Social Partnership and the Social Inclusion Forum
  - It concludes that the state sees consultation and participation as something that only involves formal structured relationships (largely constructed and/or defined by the state itself)between the state and its citizens and/or the organisations that represent them and misses out on a range of other networks and communities

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- It examines the international experience and concludes that fatigue and dissatisfaction are equally present in other countries
- It finds that from the perspective of politicians and officials, participation is not something that is readily embraced as being of value in its own right.

- It examines the notion of system level failures and the absence of system wide commitment to participation and suggests that if social inclusion and related elements of participation and consultation are to be enhanced, then systemic weaknesses within state institutions will need to be addressed to overcome this types of organisational resistance

- It explores the notion of creating a legislative base for consultation and though concludes that this is something that may be of value in terms of signalling to officials and public representatives that consultation and participation are to be taken seriously, it is not in itself sufficient

- What is need, the report concludes, is a more deeper commitment to consultation and participation, a more fundamental shift in attitudes and mindsets

- From the perspective of communities and civil society, the report suggests that much of the energy of civil society organisations has been expended on participation within a variety of 'invited spaces' at national and local levels, perhaps to the detriment of the creation and operation of 'popular spaces' within civil society.

- This, the report suggests, needs to be seen as one of the possible downsides of excessive engagement in consultation and participation exercises, in that it brings with it associated dangers of de-radicalising community agendas due to pressure to "behave responsibly in governance bodies"

A) CONSULTATION PROCESS

B) FEEDBACK

COAL?

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- It highlights the fact that feedback is rarely if ever given – so that people never know what happened to their information and whether it ever made a difference.

- It suggests that there is a need to focus on results and states that the creation of clear, meaningful and high level reporting requirements would enhance participatory processes and could also assist in the process of promoting attitudinal change

How to make participation work

- Being clear and consistent about the process, timescales and roles from the outset
- Taking time to develop and share understandings.
- Not expecting anyone to participate in processes that are cosmetic – participation
- needs to be real and produce outcomes.
- Recognising that everyone's time is equally valuable.
- Ensuring that all participatory processes should be informed by standards of "respect, equality of opportunity, fairness, openness, non-violence and 'positive challenge' all mutually agreed by participants at the outset of all activity".

- Being clear about communication, including record keeping and reporting back.
- Avoiding the use of jargon.
- Recognising that the involvement of people that experience poverty is complex and challenging, especially those who are described as hard-to-reach.
- To these could be added a need for commitment to honest dialogue about what is possible from a consultation process and to be realistic in advance about what can and cannot be achieved.

UK Participation Working Group (Johnson, 2009).

Possible future directions

Towards democratic renewal

- Consideration could be given to the pursuit of an agenda of democratic renewal, with deeper citizen/resident participation as a core element.

Establishing an economic and public policy rationale

- The economic and public policy rationale for consultation and participation could be developed.

Developing a legislative basis

- Advocating for the development of a legislative basis for consultation and participation.

Addressing capacity deficits

- Building capacity for consultation and participation within the public administration system and with political representatives is necessary.

Promoting effective standards

- Promote the development of standards for community engagement and participation

Reclaiming participation spaces

- For civil society, there are clear costs in continuing to devote time to processes that produce little by way of concrete, tangible results. Thus, project partners could raise awareness of the value of pre-emptive, independent and community led consultation and participation exercises and could investigate how support could be given to such initiatives.

Providing technical support

- Public bodies may simply lack the knowledge, understanding or technical expertise to manage engagement with citizens / residents. To address this, the project partners could give some consideration to exploring the establishment of a specific entity with technical capacity to support participatory processes in Ireland.

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