

Report from EAPN Ireland Citizen's Dialogue Workshops

During March 2019 EAPN Ireland held three Citizen's Dialogue Workshops in conjunction with the European Commission. The workshops were entitled **Have your Say! "What is the role of the EU in supporting a more equal society?"**. These Workshops took place in Cork, Galway and Dublin and involved 70 participants.

The context for the workshops, while highlighting the upcoming elections for the European Parliament, focused on the wider challenges facing the EU in supporting the creation of a more equal society and leaving no-one behind. This included high levels of poverty, Brexit, migration, and climate change.

All three workshops involved opening inputs by Hugh Frazer, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University and Paul Ginnell Director in EAPN Ireland with Rosella Chiodo, European Commission providing an input in Cork. The opening inputs highlighted the current social and political challenges facing the EU, the importance of implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and of the need for the EU Treaty values of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities to be fully realised in how policies and policies of the EU. The importance of leadership in progressing a more equal society across the EU was highlighted with the European Parliament elections being a significant moment, but also the role of the Governments of the EU.

These inputs were followed by opportunities for participants to engage with each other and the issues, through for questions and answers session and a particularly through a World Café format for table discussion.



A panel then responded to these table discussions in each area. Panel members were:

- **Cork** - Fiona O'Donovan, Disability Federation of Ireland and
- Fiona Hurley NASC, Irish Immigrant Support Centre, Cork
- **Galway** - Patrick O'Riordan, European Commission representation in Ireland
- Ann Irwin, Coordinator, Galway City Community Network
- Alphonse Basogomba, Intercultural and Diversity Education Centre - Ireland
- **Dublin** - Patrick O'Riordan, European Commission representation in Ireland
- Edel McGinley, Director, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
- Alan Barrett, Director, Economic and Social Research Institute

The Citizen's Dialogues concluded with a representative from the European Parliament office in Ireland who highlighted the importance of voting in the European Parliament elections and the 'this time I'm voting' campaign.

Below are the main issues that arose during the workshops.

Issues arising from the Citizen's Dialogue discussions

Values

While the participants agreed that the EU Treaty values were important, the majority highlighted that they were not previously aware of them. There has been a failure to communicate EU values and to deliver on them or implement them in spirit. There is a need to revisit EU values and ensure they inform all EU policy. It is important that the Future of EU consultation or follow-up is done in a way that is based on EU values, including in relation to addressing migration, and gives greater focus to social progress. Policies are determined by who is elected at both European Parliament and Governmental levels, so we need to ensure we elect people who support the EU values. Our education system can play a better role in helping people develop a political awareness, including on how the EU works. Ireland needs to step forward, be a driver of positive change and give and not only take. This is particularly important with Brexit.

IMPLEMENT

It was recognised that there were many positive EU developments that could be about more equal societies but many agreed there was failure to ensure much of this policy was implemented. This includes the Europe 2020 strategy and the Traveller and Roma Integration Strategies. It was highlighted also that at times EU policy is positive e.g. Reception Directive, but that there is an opt out, a failure to implement or a selective approach by the Irish Government and to how it chooses to implement or engage with policy. There was criticism that Ireland has chosen to incorporate rules on procurement in a strict way which has been damaging for community organisations. Many called for better EU monitoring of policy implementation with penalties/sanctions for non-implementation of social policy.

EQUALITY

The role of the EU in progressing equality was recognised. This includes gender equality in the workplace and in the 1970's contributing to the lifting of the 'marriage bar' as well as much wider equality and anti-discrimination legislation across a range of grounds. The EU also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Important EU initiatives exist to promote equality, but it was recognised that there is still a long way to go to make it a reality. Gender equality must be mainstreamed across all areas and socio-economic status should be included as a ground for discrimination in EU and national legislation.

HUMAN RIGHTS and European Pillar of Social Rights

EU has promoted rights and has the Charter of Fundamental Rights and now the European Pillar of Social Rights, but how are these to be realised? It is about ensuring progressive realisation, which in many cases takes investment. Child poverty is higher than for the rest of the population and the EU needs to implement a child guarantee. The EU has been positive in highlighting the importance of Ireland developing quality, affordable and accessible childcare for many years. In delivering on rights it was emphasised that the goal should be on mainstreaming of high, not minimum social standards. The issue of housing and homelessness was a concern for many with a call for the EU to intervene to set standards all countries should achieve. There is a strong reluctance of many Governments to sign up to rights which have any implications for incurring a cost. The EU needed to play a better role in ensuring rights were delivered upon and challenge itself to achieve this.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION

While the EU was recognised as having many flaws it has not done well in communicating about itself, so where it has been responsible for introducing positive measures these are not well promoted, or known. Whether it is EU or national policy that is actually responsible for negative measures the EU often ends up being blamed for some things that are not its responsibility. Many people feel they have not benefitted and are supporting more populist type of politics.

Proof Economic policies

While there have been recent improvements the crisis years highlighted that the EU is primarily a neo-liberal institution concerned with economic priorities and is not adequately influenced or guided by social and environmental priorities, goals or values. This undermines equality. Austerity policy dominated during the crisis years and there is not an adequate social impact assessment of policies. Some thought that the fact that many people feel they have not benefitted from the current approach has led to an increase support for a more populist type of politics. The Europe 2020 Strategy ends soon and it was proposed that the UN Sustainable Development Goals should provide the overall framework of EU policy post 2020. This would bring a balanced approach to economic, social and environmental policies. All policies need to go through social and environmental proofing to assess their impact.

Workers rights

The EU has done a lot to progress working conditions and pay but need to continue to improve policies to address precarious work. There has also been an important focus and support for investment in skills and human capital. There is an ongoing need to make sure that jobs are developed in an inclusive manner.

COST OF LIVING

The need for everyone to have an income that was adequate to meet the cost of living was highlighted. This related to social welfare supports, pensions and a living wage. Young unemployed people should not be on a lower social welfare payment than other unemployed people.

Migration

The 'Fortress Europe' approach to asylum seekers and migration has dominated in the EU and for migrants there is still very negative scaremongering and negative policy at EU level This undermines EU values. There is a major need to focus on integration, and not just in the labour market, but wider society. Funding can support integration but the negative interpretation of criteria undermines positive opportunities for integration and needs to be eliminated.

FIGHT POPULISM

There is an absolute need to fight far right populism as this can undermine EU values and any moves to try to create a more equal society. If this does not happen the EU will disappear. To do this is not just about communication, but responding to genuine concerns of many.

TAX

The EU needs to address taxation, in terms of tax justice, but also in relation to the need for adequate resources to fund services, social protection systems and to address challenges for climate change. It was highlighted that Ireland has a negative approach to taxation, including corporate taxation and widening the tax base. This needs to be overcome if the necessary resources are to be available.

funding

EU funding has been positive and supported many developments. However, EU funding is not as accessible to community organisations as it was in the past and this needs to change. Similar to the wider funding landscape access to EU funding often results in organisations competing with each other for limited resources, rather than working together. Where funding is available, the application process can still be very onerous, especially for smaller organisations and needs to be more accessible.

The next round of EU funding from 2021-2027 is important in supporting policies that create more equal societies and should focus on the delivery on the Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Climate Change

The EU needs to maintain a leadership in ensuring climate change was addressed, but that the approach must be to ensure a just transition to a low carbon society and ensure that those who are most vulnerable, are protected and supported to transition.

Participants used the following words and phrases to describe the EU

Leadership, peace project - knowledge of history of war and fascism, labyrinth, removed, progress, unity, distant (lack of local knowledge and engagement), no feedback from MEPs, top down, gender equality, democracy, large, lack of inclusion-dehumanising of minority social groups, small countries dumped under austerity, complicated, capitalist, neo-liberal, rights, bureaucratic, progressive, 'Fortress Europe', agriculture/farming – weighted towards large farmers, inconsistent, economic, economic v social, values, controlling, securitisation, better travel, scapegoat, urban bias, arms industry- export war, MEPs – leadership, membership, the EU is us, predominantly male, environmental, trade as the priority, Brexit, democratic deficit, Common European home.

Additional areas where it was felt the EU has done well: Peace; free roaming charges; EU has helped make Ireland a less insular place and enhanced opportunities for engagement with and learn from others across the EU e.g. Erasmus; European health care card; infrastructure; food standards and the Euro.

The Citizen's Dialogue Workshops were held with support from the European Commission.



The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland is a network of over 170 groups and individuals which is committed to a sustainable Ireland and Europe free of poverty and social exclusion, with high levels of equality, where political, economic, social and cultural rights are respected.

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