



Submission by CESCA on Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local & Community Development in Ireland

A brief overview of CESCA:

CESCA is a group of 14 organisations from across the community, voluntary and statutory sector in Cork city that came together last July with the aim of working together to address issues of disadvantage in the city.

What started as an informal get together to look at areas of concern has developed quickly into a significant collaboration which has already been identified both locally and nationally as a model of good practice.

Why did we come together?

Our 14 partner organisations are committed to social inclusion, equality and social justice. We came together to form CESCA because these issues seemed to have moved very far down the agenda both locally and nationally, in the last number of years.

There were a number of things happening in the community & voluntary sector that we were concerned about- gradual erosion of the sector coinciding with the economic downturn- reductions in funding, job losses, increasing centralisation, and bureaucratisation, relocation of services out of disadvantaged areas, and Equality & Inclusion matters generally slipping down the agenda.

Every community organisation in Cork has been impacted and while a number of us had been sharing concerns about this for a while, at the start of the summer and we sat down to explore what we could do together to support the clients and areas we serve.

CESCA organisations have a strong footprint on the ground in disadvantaged communities with good existing linkages and networks. There is an excellence of skills within CESCA in relation to equality work and out of this developed a collective effort to advance equality and inclusion.

Who are we?

All partners in CESCA are in receipt of public funding from a variety of Government Departments and statutory bodies and have a proven track record over many years of successfully engaging with individuals and groups that are among the most marginalised and vulnerable in Cork city.

What all of these organisations share is that we work from the margins – not the centre, as an entity CESCA is a relatively new player in the city. However, its composite members bring with them decades of experience and a strong track record

Principles of CESCA

We share a commitment to work across the nine grounds named in Equality Legislation: Gender, Civil Status, Family Status, Age, Race, Religion, Disability, Sexual Orientation, membership of Travelling Community and a tenth: Socioeconomic status.

The CESCA Alliance includes the following groups: Mayfield CDP Ltd., Meitheal Mara, Northside Community Health Initiative, Cork (NICHE), NASC, The Social and Health Education Project (SHEP), Traveller Visibility Group (TVG), Cork YMCA, HSE Social Inclusion Services, Ballyphehane Togher Community Development project Ltd, Before 5, Churchfield Community Trust, Cork Gay Community Development Company, LINC, & Mahon Community Development Project (CDP) (See appendix for more detailed information)

Building on previous successful collaborations, the fourteen diverse organisations share a common goal of social inclusion and social justice: CESCA unites these groups into one collective with a common purpose of enhancing inclusion and equality in Cork city through community development principles and practises.

As an Alliance drawn from groups with a long footprint in community development we welcome this opportunity to contribute a submission on the Framework Policy for Local & Community Development.

CESCA Response to Framework Policy for Local & Community Development in Ireland:

In the section “Evolution of Local and Community Development in Ireland” the distinct identities of each are traced, in particular the key features of the Community/Voluntary sector are noted as its autonomy, its NGO status as separate and distinct from government and public service agencies and its contribution to public and civic good,

“Though it is a highly diverse sector, the organisations generally share the following features:

- *Organised: distinguished from informal or ad hoc, purely social or familial groupings by having an institutional presence or structure;*
- *Non-profit distributing: do not return profits to a set of managers or owners;*
- *Independent: in particular from government and other public authorities;*
- *Voluntary: containing some element of voluntary or unpaid participation;*
- *Self-governing: in control of their own affairs; and*
- *Contributing to the public good: their activity aimed, at least in part, at contributing to the public good.” P5*

Having noted the autonomy of the community sector as a vital element, the Framework subsequently proposes that community development becomes ever more answerable to government and public agencies through “co-ordination of local and community development activities” and a more “central role for local government”. The Community Sector is independent of government and public bodies (NGOs) , self organised and self regulated, this framework acknowledges that and then proposes that the sector be micro managed by the state , in particular by local authorities through the Framework

i) CESCA believes that there can and should be a positive relationship between community development and public service agencies – our own Alliance demonstrates how possible this is when a public service agency and local community organisations come together to advance progress on equality, inclusion and social justice issues. However the Framework proposes a structured relationship between state and community which ignores community contribution to “public good” in favour of a service delivery agent operating under the direction of the state. The economy rather than equality or equity seem to be the values underpinning this thinking: “It is intended that this Framework will provide a structure to help manage expectations and to set realistic targets in line with available resources” p9

ii) Having begun by recognising the distinctiveness of community development and local

development the Framework then goes on to collapse the distinctions between both and to use the term “Community and Local Development” throughout the rest of the Framework. This elides the very different contributions of each sector and the differing experiences of each under the ongoing process of alignment: alignment has taken place through local development and has created larger scale local development organisations while community development has been hugely depleted by the alignment process and supports and resources re-allocated at ever greater distances from the communities which need them. The Framework doesn’t at all address the downsizing of the community sector that has already taken place within the Alignment process and is continuing process of scaling up – creating ever larger reporting/delivery agencies and removing further from disadvantaged communities of interest, identity or geography.

iii) The Framework recognises the need to “improve democratic accountability”, a consideration included in the 2011 Programme for Government. It proposes that this should happen by positioning “local government as the primary vehicle of government and public service at local level” p9. The level of competence, capacity and skill set of local authorities in relation to community development is mixed, this is a field which is relatively new to Local Authorities. Community development is much more than a set of programmes, services and interventions, it is also about processes of social change, inclusion and empowerment: the skill set necessary to support these within Local Authorities is not adequately considered in the Framework or indeed how challenging such processes can be for public service agencies. It also ignores the strong involvement and connections other public services have to communities at local level; in many instances very positive and beneficial relationships, which enable public services to engage with those most in need of their supports.

iv) It is generally acknowledged that community sector organisations operate from participative democracy models: community based, collaborative and collective: the Framework proposes an alignment of participative and representative democracy by locating community development under the direction of Local Authorities and thus a very likely weakening of participatory democratic processes which mitigates against the Frameworks stated aim of shifting power from “the State to the Citizen”.

v) There is a strong focus within the Framework on the centrality of “citizens” and the rights attaching to citizenship - there are many who are not citizens – new communities, migrants and asylum seekers. The Traveller community advocate that citizenship needs to be aligned with recognition of ethnic identity to fully vindicate their rights as citizens. Many disadvantaged citizens feel their rights not fully vindicated because of their status– eg people with disability, lone parent families, gender or gender identity, LGBT communities, older people, those most disadvantaged within Irish society. The Framework would benefit from a broader focus not just on the rights attaching to citizenship but a broader human rights focus.

vi) The Framework discusses the contribution of the Community Sector purely in terms of service provision and ignores advocacy role eg co-production of services between state and community. Community development is mentioned mainly as a driver of economic recovery in this framework – activation etc and its work on Equality, inclusion, social justice & human rights downplayed. Again we think this is a focus on the programmatic elements of community development while ignoring the principles and processes of community development which should underpin any interventions.

Conclusion

The CESCA Alliance welcome the opportunity afforded to us to comment on the Framework Policy for Local and Community Development, we hope our submission will help influence this

Framework in development. We recognise that our concerns are shared by a wide variety of community development agencies, including the Community Workers Co-op who have also consulted with us on their submission. We would welcome a commitment within the Framework to a renewed engagement with community work and with the community sector. We also urge that the opening recognition of the community sector as an independent and autonomous voice for change be replicated throughout the Framework and form the basis of future collaboration between state and the community sector. Finally we urge that community work be acknowledged as a key process to address social exclusion, inequality and disadvantage and that the Framework commits to resourcing and supporting this work and not just the programmatic, service delivery elements of community development.



Mahon Community Development Project

