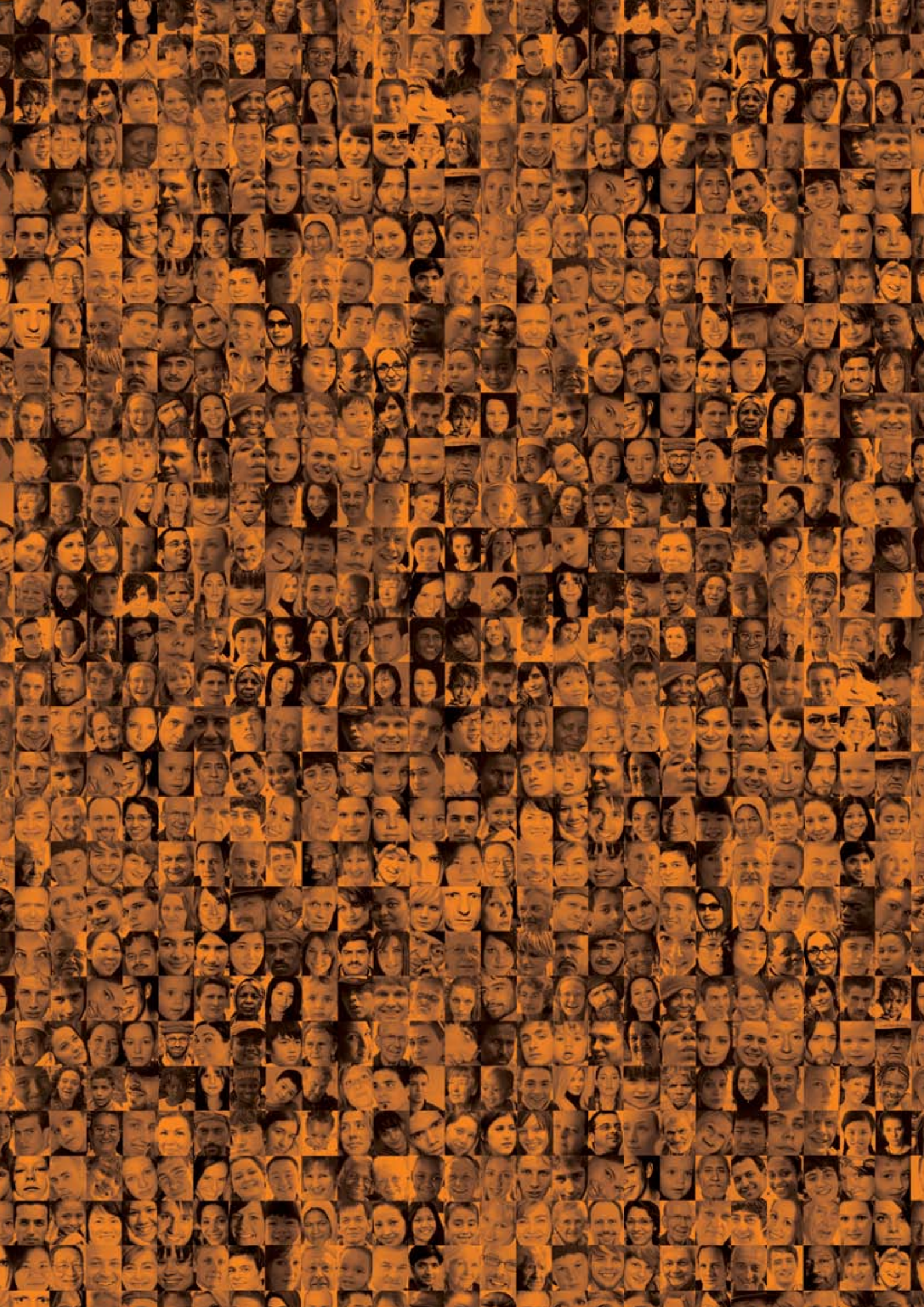**THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY**
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

The Role and Aspirations of the Non-Governmental Sector in Articulating and Representing the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality

The Role and Aspirations of the Non-Governmental Sector in Articulating and Representing the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality

Table of Contents

Part Two

Foreword

This publication arises as part of the national strategy for the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007. The strategy contained a commitment to review the current roles and aspirations of the community sector in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality and to host a seminar on this theme.

2007 was designated as European Year of Equal Opportunities for All as part of a concerted effort to promote equality and non-discrimination across the EU. The Equality Authority was the National Implementing Body for the Irish strategy. The national strategy was developed within a context of meeting three key challenges in order to establish and ensure a lasting legacy from the European Year. These were to: build on progress made in promoting equality; ensure that persistent inequalities are addressed; and pursue a new ambition for equality.

In order to effectively promote equality and combat discrimination, the voices of groups experiencing inequality must be articulated, heard and enabled to have influence. Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs), rooted in communities that experience inequality, provide an important mechanism to ensure that these voices and the interests of these communities are articulated.

These community-based organisations are the focus for this report. This is not to diminish the importance and contribution of many other NGOs that are not community-based in providing and supporting a demand for greater equality in our society. Their work and the particular barriers they face will need to be a focus of further work on the role of the sector in bringing forward the interests of people who experience inequality.

Significant and persistent inequalities continue to exist for many individuals and groups in Irish society. There are many examples of this across the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation. Lone parents experience inequalities in access to social housing; older people have uneven access to health services; partnership rights are not available to lesbian and gay people; women are significantly under-represented across all political institutions; negative stereotyping is a significant issue for young people; Travellers report low attendance at, early drop out from and low levels of attainment in education; migrant workers experience underemployment and significant levels of exploitation and discrimination at work; the employment rate for people with disabilities is significantly lower than that for non-disabled adults of working age; transsexual people do not have access to an appropriate health treatment path for Gender Identity Disorder; and there are difficulties for carers in reconciling paid employment and caring responsibilities.

Against this backdrop, the work of NGOs in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality is important. The work of NGOs:
– calls attention to situations and experiences of inequality and discrimination,
– provides knowledge, information and awareness that is key to devising effective responses to this inequality and discrimination, and
– provides the stimulus and builds the demand for change to create a more equal society.

The first section of this publication presents the results of a consultation commissioned by the Equality Authority and undertaken by Work Research Co-Operative with national and locally based NGOs representing the

interests of groups experiencing inequality from across the nine grounds named in the equality legislation (gender, age, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race and membership of the Traveller community). This consultation aimed to identify the current roles and aspirations of NGOs in representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality, to highlight the challenges and barriers in performing these roles and pursuing these aspirations to best effect and to offer recommendations on suggested ways forward.

The report of the Work Research Co-operative identifies three levels of engagement for NGOs in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality. These are:
- direct engagement with groups experiencing inequality,
- influencing policy and decision making, and
- influencing wider civil society.
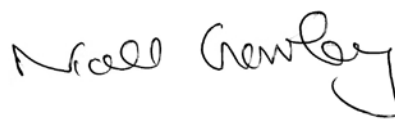
We are grateful to Carmel Duggan of Work Research Co-operative for her effective, inclusive and insightful work in organising and writing up this consultation process.

The second section of this publication presents the proceedings of a seminar hosted by the Equality Authority on the theme of community organisations articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality. This seminar invited national and locally based NGOs, including national networks, community development projects and family resource centres, to come together to voice their views on the issues currently facing the sector in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality and to suggest ways forward.

This consultation and seminar are rooted in the potential for community organisations, nationally and locally, to contribute to equality through articulating the interests of groups and individuals experiencing inequality. They are a celebration of the endeavour of these organisations in doing this work. They are an exploration of this work and the difficulties encountered with a view to building an agenda to ensure a quality to and an effectiveness for this work.

We are grateful to Rachel Mullen of the Equality Authority for her work in organising the seminar and drawing together various strands of this work in the publication. The Equality Authority looks forward to building on this work as part of our legacy action plan from the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007. In this regard we have set out a series of recommendations for further action at the start of this publication.

Niall Crowley,
Chief Executive Officer,
The Equality Authority.

Recommendations

The voice of groups experiencing inequality needs to be articulated, heard and enabled to have influence in order to effectively promote equality and combat discrimination. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) rooted in communities that experience inequality provide an important mechanism to ensure these voices and the interests of these communities are effectively articulated. This is the starting point for the research work and conference proceedings covered in this report.

During 2007 the Equality Authority commissioned Work Research Co-operative to organise and write up a consultation process within the NGO sector to:
– identify the roles and aspirations of community and voluntary organisations in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality,
– explore the importance of the roles of community and voluntary organisations in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality,
– highlight the challenges and barriers in performing these roles or pursuing these aspirations to best effect, and
– identify recommendations for change, where required.

The consultation process enabled an analysis by Work Research Co-operative which identified three arenas within which the community and voluntary sector can operate to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality across the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community, which are covered in the equality legislation. These three arenas are:

– the arena of practice, where the community and voluntary sector directly engages with groups experiencing inequality through the provision of services to those groups,
– the arena of decision making and institutional processes, where the community and voluntary sector engages with policy makers and key service providers and the other social partners, with a view to influencing their decision making by seeking to ensure policy making and service provision are informed by the experience and situation of groups experiencing inequality,
– the arena of civil and democratic society, where the community and voluntary sector engages with a wide range of organisations to ensure that the realities of inequality and discrimination are adequately reflected in public and political debate and to build a wider societal commitment to achieving equality and eliminating discrimination.

The consultation process and analysis and the seminar proceedings published in this report examine each of these arenas to identify the work being done by community and voluntary organisations in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality and to explore the challenges and barriers faced by these organisations in carrying out this work.

The Equality Authority makes the following recommendations as suggested ways forward, drawing both from the findings of the consultation undertaken by Work Research Co-operative, together with the issues raised by NGOs that participated in the seminar.

Level one area of influence: direct engagement with groups experiencing inequality.

a) Funding bodies in the statutory and private sectors should adequately resource NGOs to develop good systems of governance; systems to enhance their accountability to groups experiencing inequality; and systems to enhance their ability to negotiate on behalf of groups experiencing inequality.

b) Funding bodies in the statutory and private sectors should adequately resource NGOs to develop a diversity of approaches to engage with people experiencing inequality, particularly more marginalised and 'harder to reach' groups – e.g. people experiencing inequality from across the nine grounds covered in the equality legislation who are rurally isolated; people whose first language is not English; people in the asylum process; and people living in institutions.

c) NGOs working at national level should develop collaborative work at local and national level to agree good practice on the following aspects of their work in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality:
- strategies for negotiating the interests of groups experiencing inequality,
- approaches to agenda setting regarding issues to be brought forward and articulated, and
- communication with people whose interests are being represented.

Level two area of influence: influencing policy and decision making.
d) There is a need for independent funding for the NGO sector to commission research to:

- examine the situation and experience of different sub-sectors within the NGO sector in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality; this work would identify and explore the factors determining the capacity of organisations within the particular sub-sector to effectively represent and articulate an equality agenda on behalf of groups experiencing inequality,
- establish what kind of working relationship between community and voluntary organisations and the State sector is required to ensure that the capacity of the sector to bring forward equality issues is fully utilised within the policy context.

e) Statutory agencies working with groups experiencing inequality should put in place protocols for engaging with NGOs that would:
- acknowledge the value of the role of NGOs in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality both within the policy making and social partnership arenas and within the broader democratic space made available by civil society,
- establish systematic and mainstream processes for engaging with NGOs and facilitating NGO representation on policy fora from across all the relevant grounds covered by the equality legislation,
- commit to specific standards in terms of consultation.

f) The Community and Voluntary Pillar should implement a process to review its processes and procedures to ensure that the voice, interests and agendas for change of groups experiencing inequality from across the nine grounds emerge to best effect in the social

partnership process and are a focus for solidarity and shared understanding within the Community and Voluntary Pillar.

g) Funding bodies in the statutory and private sectors should make specific funding available to resource NGOs to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality. This funding line should be additional to any funding lines for service provision by NGOs. It should include a particular focus on individuals and groups experiencing inequality who are not organised and who do not have access to organisations to articulate and represent their interests.

Level three area of influence: influencing wider civil society.

h) The NGOs working at national level should develop collaborative links to share expertise and develop strategies to engage with the wider civil society (trades unions, the business sector, media) in seeking to progress the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

i) The trade union and business sectors should develop and enhance existing links with the NGO sector to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

j) There is a need for independent funding for the NGO sector to further develop its media expertise and its effective engagement with the media.

k) There is a need to generate a new debate on equality and inequality in Ireland. This should assist the further development of consensus and shared perspectives on equality issues within the NGO sector.

Part One

Report from a Consultation Conducted by Work Research Co-operative

Section 1
Introduction and Overview

The growth of the community and voluntary sector over the past several decades has been an international phenomenon and in many countries has been paralleled by the emergence of partnership arrangements between the sector and the State. Over the same period, the role which the sector can play in enhancing social and political progress has also been recognised and there is a body of opinion that the community and voluntary sector is an integral part of democratic systems, providing as one account puts it the connective tissue of democratic culture (Siegal and Yancy, 2004). How the sector achieves this varies across different political contexts and in specific situations such as humanitarian crisis or conflict resolution (see for example Morrissey et al., 2001). More generally, however, the functions of the sector in enhancing the democratic process include:

- creating social capital,
- improving the interface between the citizen and the State,
- ensuring that the voices of the marginalised are brought into the democratic sphere,
- contributing to civil society, and
- influencing and shaping the democratic space itself.

In Ireland, where the contemporary community and voluntary sector has evolved over the past 30 years or so, its role in contributing to the well-being of Irish society has been well documented, particularly its achievements in combating social exclusion through its transformative work and through contributing to policy development (see for example Duggan and Ronayne, 1991; Donoghue, 1998, Airey, 2006). In this paper, which was commissioned by the Equality Authority in the context of the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007, we explore

another aspect of the sector's contribution to social progress: its potential to promote a more equal society and in particular its role and aspirations in representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality.[1] The objectives of the paper are:

- to explore the importance of the roles of community and voluntary organisations in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality,
- to identify the roles and aspirations of community and voluntary sector organisations in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality,
- to highlight challenges in performing these roles or pursuing these aspirations to best effect,
- to identify barriers faced by the sector in performing these roles or pursuing these aspirations, and
- to develop recommendations for change, where required.

Methodology

In exploring these issues we used the following methodology:

a. *Review of relevant literature and policy*
Relevant literature and policy documents were reviewed in order to provide a backdrop to situating the community and voluntary sector in terms of articulating and representing the interests of those experiencing inequality.

b. *Interviews with community and voluntary organisations*
Eighteen organisations were selected to participate in in-depth interviews. These organisations were selected on the basis

---

1   These are the groups covered by the nine grounds of the equality legislation: gender, sexual orientation, disability, family status, marital status, religion, race, membership of the Traveller community and age.

of their being involved in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality and, in order to capture the diversity in the sector, they included the following:

- nine organisations working at national level and articulating and representing the interests of groups across the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation or with diverse groups experiencing inequality,
- three 'umbrella" organisations which seek to promote the interests of the sector per se, and
- six organisations working at local level, either exclusively with one of the named categories or catering for multiple categories. These were located in Meath, Kerry, Cork and Longford and two in Donegal.

c. *Focus groups*
Three focus groups were organised, one in Dublin, one in Mullingar and one in Limerick. The focus groups had a combined participation of 42 people representing 39 organisations. The organisations included those working exclusively with a specific group covered by the legislation and those working more generally with diverse groups experiencing inequality. The focus groups provided an opportunity to broaden out the range of organisations involved in the research and to assess the extent to which the issues arising from the interviews are replicated more widely throughout the sector.

d. *Interviews with funding agencies*
The final element of the methodology was interviews with three funding agencies, two in the statutory sector and one philanthropic

organisation. We had sought to speak with two philanthropic organisations but could not secure the participation of one within the timeframe of the study.

The consultation with community and voluntary organisations focused on how they work across a continuum of activities: engaging with groups experiencing inequality; identifying their interests; building critical mass within the sector; interacting with service providers; articulating concerns within the policy making process; and creating awareness of equality issues in civil society and beyond. This continuum guided our research and analysis but on the basis of the data generated, we subsequently identified three arenas within which the sector can operate to promote equality and to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality. These arenas, which are used to structure the discussion in this paper, are:

- the empirical or practice arena within which the sector has the potential to progress the interests of groups experiencing inequality through its empowering methodologies which include the provision of appropriate services in appropriate ways,

- the decision making and institutional arena, within which the sector has the potential to contribute to more effective and efficient public services and policy by seeking to ensure that these are sensitive to the circumstances of groups experiencing inequality and by pursuing institutional change, and

- the broader social and democratic arena, including civil society, within which lies the potential to ensure that the existence and reality of the experience of inequality is

adequately reflected in public and political discourse, to develop a climate supportive of greater equality in policies and resource distribution and to challenge hegemonic or dominant ideologies of society and economy.

The working of the sector in and across these three arenas confers a continuum of benefits at different levels in society: at the level of the groups experiencing inequality; at the level of the State and public policy makers; and at the level of the democratic process overall by ensuring that no voice is silenced within political discourse and that all of the realities that exist within society are fully reflected and responded to within the democratic process. Moreover, the three arenas constitute a type of triangulation in terms of the sector's potential impact such that its credibility and influence in any one sector can reinforce its credibility and influence in others. The greater the impact of the sector in identifying the interests of groups experiencing inequality for example, the more credibility it can claim in generating debate and demands around equality issues in civil society and beyond. Similarly, the greater its credibility in wider society, the more leverage it will have within the policy domain.

There is an acknowledgement within the sector of the synergies that result from working in this three-pronged way and many organisations attempt to some extent to strategise their activities across all three arenas. Establishing and maintaining credibility or legitimacy with these diverse constituencies is no easy task, however, as the following discussion shows. Moreover, as the sector has evolved, it has shifted the balance of its activity across the three arenas. Some of the difficulties in a three-pronged approach are due to the different resources, skills and even language required to

engage with groups experiencing inequality, with policy makers and with the wider public. Difficulties also derive from the contemporary social context, from the equality agenda itself and from the way the equality agenda is progressed by the sector. At this juncture, the most significant challenge currently faced by the community and voluntary sector derives from its need to negotiate, within each arena, its share of the democratic space with the State and the difficulties that it currently experiences in doing so.

Structure of the Paper

In this paper we look at how the community and voluntary sector is currently operating within these arenas, the obstacles and challenges it encounters in doing so, and its capacity to circumvent or to otherwise address these obstacles and challenges. In exploring these issues, we are conscious that we are merely lifting the lid on a topic that is vast in scope, incorporating as it does the huge diversity of the sector, the complexity of its relationship with the State and the nature of our democracy and political culture. It is completely beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues comprehensively. But we hope, through our exploration of a set of concerns which are necessarily selective, that we have provided some insights into the current situation of those organisations within the sector that work to promote equality. While also recognising that the diversity that exists within the community and voluntary sector makes a comprehensive overview difficult, we have tried to ensure that the paper provides an accurate and balanced account of the current aspirations and role of that part of the sector that is concerned with equality. We do not claim that the 57 organisations we consulted with are representative of the community and voluntary

sector per se, but they are in all probability representative of that component of the sector which works within and through an equality perspective. Thus they provide examples of how the sector can progress equality issues on behalf of those they work with, as well as allowing the barriers and challenges to this to be identified. Finally, in discussing these issues, we are mindful of three counterpoints which were stressed by organisations consulted for the paper:

- not everything that happens in the community is community development,
- not all community and voluntary organisations work on equality issues, and
- not all of those that do, do so from a broad equality perspective.

In the discussion that follows, we present in some detail the issues which the organisations raised during the consultation and we draw out the implications of these for the promotion of equality in Ireland today. In Section 2, by way of providing a backdrop to understanding the contemporary role and aspirations of the community and voluntary sector in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality, we briefly overview some of the key developments in the evolution of the sector itself, in the policy context within which it operates and in its relationship with the State. In Section 3, we present the detailed views of the organisations we consulted with in relation to their aspirations and their actual work in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality, the obstacles they encounter and the challenges they perceive as they try to progress this work. We wish to acknowledge here the frankness and honesty of those with whom we consulted and whose whole-hearted participation in the study we take as an indication of a willingness and a readiness

to engage in debate about the current difficulties experienced by the sector and its future direction. In Section 4, we provide a summary of the findings and comment on some of the implications of these for the work of the sector in addressing inequality.

Section 2
Key Developments in the Evolution of the Sector and its Context

While the community and voluntary sector has an extensive history, the origins of what can be considered the contemporary sector can be traced back to the 1970s, a watershed decade in many respects. Following directly from a period of social unrest and upheaval and ending in global recession, the 1970s saw the emergence of new forms of social organisations across Europe and further afield that spearheaded a more complex political and policy agenda than had previously existed. The post-1960s shift in social consciousness was reflected in a direct challenge to discourses of uniformity and homogeneity and a demand for self-realisation on the part of groups that experienced limited or unequal access to social, economic and political resources and ultimately led to the emergence of identity politics. Throughout Europe, North America and elsewhere, these new movements confronted social norms that categorised groups such as women, gay, lesbian and bisexual people and minority ethnic people as the problem, saw them as deficient and inadequate and portrayed them as passive victims unable to help themselves. By the mid 1970s, the demands of these groups for a greater role in securing their own well-being coincided with economic recession and elicited a State response which provided a role for the emerging sector in the implementation of social policy, particularly through the delivery of services. In many instances this ultimately led to formal relationships between the sector and the State. Ireland was no exception to this, as the following discussion briefly outlines.

The Evolution of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Throughout the 1970s, Ireland like the rest of Europe was experiencing the emergence of new social actors concerned with the unequal treatment of certain groups of people within established social and political processes and structures. By the late 1980s many such organisations concerned with unequal treatment of certain groups of people had been established. Some of these had a broad policy focus and addressed issues such as education, health or access to the labour market. Others focused on specific groups including people with disabilities, women, members of the Traveller community, gay and lesbian people and, later, immigrants. In contrast to the previous era of voluntary activity and in line with the demand for self-realisation, the objectives of these new groups were articulated in terms of social justice rather than charity and their approach included political demands, campaigning, street protests, and community mobilisation (Donoghue, 1998).

In the context of the changes to social policy in part necessitated by global recession and fiscal crisis, the Irish State (or more correctly specific agencies of the State) began to provide funding to some of these community organisations, primarily to deliver services within their own neighbourhoods. Initially, these arrangements tended to be on a bilateral basis, with State agencies outsourcing elements of service provision to specific community organisations. Later, these bilateral arrangements were complemented by a more programmatic approach to funding the emerging sector, for example through the Community Development Programme, the establishment of Family Resources Centres, and the introduction of work experience programmes which provided human resources to the sector. The impact of this funding on community organisations was significant. It allowed them to address specific needs within their communities, to develop their relationships with statutory service providers and to build their own organisational capacity and

infrastructure. It also, however, created a model of community development underpinned by the delivery of services in return for State funding.

Throughout the 1990s, the availability of EU funds brought significant resources within the reach of the sector and produced long-term effects. The Poverty Programmes and the Community Initiatives facilitated capacity building in the sector, supported the development of synergies and enhanced the interface between the sector and the policy context. Through their programmatic dimension and an emphasis on partnership, these programmes and initiatives were also instrumental in forging the multiplicity of diverse and, for the most, part stand-alone organisations into a sector, at least nominally. The sectoral dimension was further reinforced when organisations emerged which were committed to working for equality at national level. Many of these national organisations were umbrella or network organisations with affiliations from local level groups. They helped to build the infrastructure of the sector, to develop vertical linkages within it and to provide mechanisms to filter issues from the national to the local levels and vice versa. These national organisations also helped to raise the profile of the issues they were concerned with and to engage with decision making processes at a national level. Like the local organisations, some of these national organisations operated with a broadly focused anti-poverty perspective. Others among these national organisations were focused on specific groups, many of which were subsequently named under the equality legislation. Where the vertical linkages between national and local organisations were focused on specific groups, they had the effect of creating sub-sectors within the overall community and voluntary sector, which had a positive impact on bringing forward issues of concern to specific

groups but also introduced a segmentation into the sector which was reinforced by the emphasis on targeting programmes and provisions at specific groups within social policy.

Since its emergence in the 1970s, the community and voluntary sector in Ireland has continued to grow. Recent estimates suggests that there are now 19,000 community and voluntary organisations with a combined workforce of 45,000, a further 50,000 volunteers and a turnover of €2.5 billion (The Wheel, 2007). The sector has developed significant internal infrastructure with multiple horizontal and vertical linkages and in many instances a strategic synergy exists between national and local levels as well as within each level. There is considerable expertise and intellectual capacity within the sector, particularly in relation to transformative work, advocacy and policy negotiation. While these skills and expertise are not uniform across sub-sectors or organisations (and in particular the ongoing emergence of new organisations means there are always some with limited expertise), taken as a whole, what we might call the 'composite sector' is highly skilled and highly experienced. The sector has become increasingly professionalised both in terms of a greater reliance on paid rather than voluntary labour and in terms of strategic planning. Some of this development has been generated by the funding context and in particular the Strategic Management Initiative which generated greater levels of formal accountability and procedures to deliver this.

However, the sector is also diverse and complex and not easily defined. There is a lack of consensus even within the sector as to which organisations should be seen as belonging to the sector and which should belong to interlinked sectors such as that of local

development. Moreover, there are ideological and other differences between the 'voluntary' and the 'community' dimensions as well as between the various sub-sectors and even between organisations within sub-sectors. This diversity applies also to that part of the sector concerned with combating inequality. Partly as a result of this, organistions in what we might call the equality sector do not operate with a shared analysis of inequality nor within a common framework within which to develop a response. In fact, although for editorial ease we use the term 'the sector' throughout this paper, it is by no means clear that the multiple and diverse organisations that now exist constitute anything as singular as the term 'sector' implies.

Key Developments in the Policy Context

As the community and voluntary sector was evolving so too was the policy environment, and the 1990s in particular saw a whole raft of policy and institutional developments that shaped the context within which the sector operates. Some policy developments were specific to groups subsequently named under the equality legislation, for example the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women, the greater awareness of the needs of groups such as lone parents, the shift in policy thinking in relation to people with disabilities, and so on. Other relevant policy developments were more broadly focused on combating socio-economic disadvantage, including active labour market policy and local development policy. However, during the 1990s, the development and implementation of social policy was increasingly marshalled around three discrete but inter-connected principles. These principles were: an emphasis on locality in terms of the geographical space within which policy is implemented; the targeting of specific groups considered to be

most disadvantaged or marginalised as the focus of policy measures; and an emphasis on partnership in terms of the arrangements through which policy is implemented and overseen at the local level. These principles were reflected in a proliferation of local structures (including area based partnership companies, local employment services, local drug task forces and so on), in a priority focus on certain groups (including in particular members of the Traveller community, women, young people and people with disabilities) and in the involvement of community organisations in partnership arrangements at the local level. The combined result was the emergence of opportunities for organisations which had already been working for change within their communities, and particularly those working on behalf of the targeted groups, to become more formally involved in the delivery of social policy measures (Duggan, 2000).

Within this overall policy ferment, two developments were particularly significant for shaping the context within which the sector operates. The first of these was the introduction of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) in 1997. The strategy formally acknowledged the existence of poverty in Ireland and affirmed the role of the State in addressing it. It contained Government commitments to anti-poverty interventions in the areas of education, unemployment, income adequacy, urban disadvantage and rural poverty. It established targets for the reduction of poverty in these areas and it also identified a number of groups as being particularly at risk of poverty and therefore prioritised for funding, including lone parents, Travellers and people with disabilities. The NAPS also explicitly acknowledged the role of the community and voluntary sector in combating disadvantage and provided for

its consultative and participative involvement in the implementation of the strategy. The strategy provided funding for national anti-poverty networks comprised of NGOs working to combat social exclusion, including some working with groups subsequently named under the equality legislation. These networks were facilitated by the Combat Poverty Agency and they were important in enabling the participant organisations to develop shared understandings and approaches and in strengthening synergies within the anti-poverty sector.

The second important policy development directly relevant to the sector was the introduction of equality legislation and the establishment of an equality infrastructure. This first occurred with the enactment of Anti-discrimination (Pay) Act 1977. The current body of equality legislation began to be put in place with the enactment of the Employment Equality Act in 1998 and was subsequently expanded upon by the Equal Status Act in 2000 and the Equality Act 2004. The Employment Equality Acts prohibit discrimination in the workforce and vocational training on nine grounds and provide mechanisms of redress for people experiencing discrimination on these grounds. The Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education on the same nine grounds. At the same time, the Equality Authority and the Equality Tribunal were established. The Equality Authority has a mandate to promote equality of opportunity and to combat discrimination in the areas covered by the equality legislation. The Equality Tribunal is a quasi-judicial body established to investigate, hear and decide or to mediate claims under the equality legislation. This equality infrastructure has been hugely significant in providing a legal/political context for the work of organisations

seeking to promote equality on the part of groups covered by the named grounds. It has highlighted the need to address inequality, promoted awareness of equality issues, developed resources for integrated equality work and pursued cases of discrimination.

Currently, anti-poverty and equality policies provide discrete but intersecting policy frameworks for the work of the sector. But these too are difficult to reconcile at the level of analysis and action. There is a considerable overlap between the experience of inequality and the risk of poverty. Put simply, many people who experience discrimination are also at risk of poverty while those who are poor are de facto experiencing unequal access to economic resources. Within the two policy frameworks of poverty and inequality, however, there is only a partial overlap in the naming of specific groups. Some of those named under NAPS are not included within the equality framework, while some of those covered by the nine grounds are not named under NAPS. Thus the two areas of policy can be seen as having some limitations in terms of their coverage of the groups that could potentially benefit from their provisions. In particular the fact that social origin is not one of the grounds of the equality legislation is frequently cited as a limitation. Some valuable work has been done to try to provide an overarching analysis of inequality and poverty (see for example Baker, 2003), but more generally, these two policy frameworks have not been fully reconciled at the levels of discourse, analysis or action. Consequently, while in many instances organisations working to promote equality do so within an anti-poverty perspective (and vice versa) and there is almost total coincidence between the two perspectives, in other instances there can be tensions between organisations in that part of the sector that

seeks to promote equality and in that part which seeks to combat poverty.

Although it is beyond the remit of this paper, we need also to note that the current experience of inequality in Ireland is contextualised by a strong and very globalised economy. Worldwide, the impact of globalisation and the associated liberalisation of markets has been to increase inequality and the prevalence of social discourses that underpin the reproduction of inequality. In Ireland this is evidenced by the co-existence of unprecedented levels of economic growth and inequality. Some commentators have sought to explain this by arguing that the equality agenda has been sidelined within the Irish State's management of economic development given the very circumscribed policy making autonomy of small nations within the processes of globalisation. Among the more critical voices, Kirby (2002) has suggested that the State has been able to combine international competitiveness with a minimum welfare net sufficient to avoid social dissent. Other commentators refer to rigidities within the policy framework, whereby the policy responses that emerged during a period of economic crisis did not adapt to a changed socio-economic environment. Nolan et al., for example, argue that while social partnership facilitated the development of a set of policies to respond to economic crisis, it has not been able to develop a policy discourse capable of exploring the issues encountered by a wealthier but in some respects more unequal Ireland (Nolan et al., 2000). In a somewhat similar vein, Connolly (2007) has argued that the early social partnership structures absorbed an anti-poverty discourse and an 'ideational framework' associated with this, which have locked certain policy ideas into the Partnership process and which now inhibits the capacity to bring about

the changes in the macro policy environment necessary to secure social progress in the new context. This experience is not unique to Ireland: a recent critique of the role of civil society in public governance in South Africa has argued that a model of public governance which emphasises institutional participation and collegiate relations between State and civil institutions cannot challenge the dominant paradigms of development (Habib, 2007).

The implications of these analyses might suggest the need for a paradigmatic shift in Irish social policy which can generate a model of public governance incorporating a role for the community and voluntary sector which can bring policy making processes closer to the reality of people's lives and greater accountability of elites to those experiencing inequality. The implications point to the need to generate a new debate about inequality in Ireland and one which will benefit from a global analysis.

The Relationship between the Sector and the State

The evolution of the community and voluntary sector's relationship with the State can also be traced back to the 1970s. In the context of an economic and fiscal crisis, the Irish State like others sought to decrease its role in social service provision by seeking partners in a new welfare mix. State agencies began to fund what had previously been predominantly peer-led and self-help community organisations to deliver services within their own neighbourhoods. As a direct result, throughout the 1980s the sector increasingly became involved in service provision. As noted above, this led to new and increased services at local level, to the development of local community infrastructure and to the emergence

of bilateral partnership arrangements between community organisations and statutory service providers. It also led to a model of community development based on State funding rather than on autonomous action, and from an early stage, the constraints of the embryonic relationship between the State and community organisations was evident - for example, organisations with statutory funding were far less likely than those without to be involved in campaigning (Duggan and Ronayne, 1991).

The following decade saw significant new developments in the relationship between the sector and the State when first at local, then at national, level it was admitted to policy and decision making structures. The local level process started with the formation of the first area based partnership companies in 1991. Since then the array of structures which oversee or advise on social policy at the local level have involved representation by the community and voluntary sector. At national level, the developments were even more noteworthy. In 1993, when the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) was established, it allowed for representation from the national community and voluntary organisations and provided, for the first time, a national consultative role for the community and voluntary sector. Around the same time, the national representative organisations within the sector sought admission to the national social partnership structures. Their efforts were successful and in 1996 the Community and Voluntary Pillar was established (albeit with membership decided by the Government) which allowed the sector to be involved in negotiating the non-pay elements of the national agreements. The admission of the sector into partnership arrangements at local, but more especially at national level, was hugely significant in terms of the State's

formal recognition of the potential contribution of the sector to policy making. It was also important in terms of consolidating the sector's relationship with the State and in moving it beyond the receipt of funding in exchange for the provision of services, although paradoxically, the involvement of the sector in partnership and other decision making structures was rarely resourced by the State.

The admission of the sector to social partnership at national level, albeit confined to the non-pay elements of the national agreement, also meant that the civil dialogue (the dialogue between the State and civil society) and the social dialogue (that between the State, employers and trades unions) were combined. This was a development unique to Ireland at the time and potentially opened up an opportunity for the sector to engage in debate about the direction of Irish society. It also, however, introduced the risk of incorporation, a risk which was recognised by the sector itself. Writing in 1998 for example, Crowley argued that to avoid the threat of incorporation, the sector needed to ensure that it maintained 'a critical and angry voice' outside the arena of social partnership. He also noted that whereas the trades unions were bound by the national agreements to avoid strikes or other forms of industrial actions, no such clause bound the community sector. Dissent, he concluded, remained a viable and necessary option (Crowley, 1998).

The economic context has altered significantly, from recession and mass unemployment in the late 1970s and 1980s, to the boom years of the last decade. Alongside economic and employment growth, however, inequality has persisted. Against this backdrop, one author has sought to explain the current difficulties which the sector experiences in its relationship

with the State in terms of the political implications of the economic developments which have occurred since the sector emerged in the 1970s. Whereas, the inclusion of the sector in social partnership and other policy making structures at national and local levels in the mid-1990s was necessary to secure legitimacy for an economic system in crisis, in the context of economic and employment growth, the State no longer needs the sector to confer this legitimacy and can now afford, politically, to dispense with it according to this analysis (Larragy, 2006). This prompts the question that if in the mid-nineties, high levels of unemployment and disadvantage presented such a challenge to the system that it required the sector to play a role in legitimising it, why is it that, ten years later, high levels of inequality do not prompt the same response? The answers to this are complex but we would suggest that it is in part attributable to the fact that the existence of inequality and its inverse, the promotion of equality, have not achieved the kind of analytical or discursive coherence in the contemporary period as poverty and social exclusion succeeded in doing a couple of decades ago. As a result, in the context of recent economic well-being within which social exclusion discourses have been marginalised, the drive towards equality (as a political concept rather than as a piecemeal tweaking of policy) and the role of the sector within this have failed to secure a sufficient foothold within public opinion.

Potentially the most significant development in the relationship between the State and the community and voluntary sector was the publication in 2000 of the White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity. While recognising the value of service delivery by the sector, the White Paper formally acknowledged that the role of community and voluntary organisations went beyond the 'purchase of services by this or that statutory agency'. It outlined the Government's recognition of the potential contribution of the sector to policy making and it undertook to provide infrastructural supports to facilitate this. The White Paper also committed the State to respecting the autonomy and diversity of the sector and its role as a legitimate social partner. Over and above its role in providing services and contributing to policy development, the White Paper also acknowledged that the sector had a role to play in securing the well-being of society and democracy more generally: 'An active community and voluntary sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised and participative structures and fosters a climate in which the quality of life can be enhanced for all' (Government of Ireland, 2000).

The White Paper should have signalled the start of a new and progressive phase in the role of the sector in Irish society, but three years after its introduction it was clear that little progress had been made in implementing its provisions. More problematic was the fact that delays in implementing the measures of the White Paper were attributed in part to a lack of esteem for the sector on the part of the statutory personnel involved in the Implementation and Advisory Group (IAG) which was set up to oversee its implementation (Harvey, 2004). The timing of that report coincided with the emergence of difficulties for the sector in other policy making structures and processes. At national and local level, the sector's involvement in partnership was becoming problematic. The refusal of some NGOs to sign off on the 2003 agreement resulted in their being excluded from social

partnership and from all of the other policy and decision making fora linked to it. At local level the establishment of the city and county development boards (CDBs) in 2000 was seen as an attempt to the shift the balance of decision making back into the arena of representative democracy and the Cohesion Process, underway since 2003, is interpreted in a similar manner. Since 2003, there has been more progress in implementing the provisions of the White Paper and Section 34 of the national agreement Towards 2016 has renewed commitment to some of its measures. Despite this, the failure to implement its provisions fully has set the tone for the current stage in the relationship between the sector and the State and has contributed to a growing perception that the sector's role in decision making and in articulating a critical perspective is, at a minimum, being reassessed.

Conclusion

To summarise briefly before looking at the aspirations and role of the sector in promoting equality, we can note the following main points.

- Currently, the community and voluntary sector is large, complex and sophisticated. Its internal infrastructure and the existence of specific sub-sectors within it facilitates a strong and concerted focus on targeted groups, but it also introduces a segmentation which can make the development of a shared analysis or a common framework difficult,

- The policy context within which that part of the sector concerned with equality operates is well developed and reasonably robust and it also affords a role for the sector in contributing to the development and monitoring of policy. However, it is cut across

with unreconciled tensions, at the level of practice and discourse, between efforts to combat the experience of inequality and those that are aimed at combating poverty.

- The sector has considerable experience of interacting with the State and the State apparatus. Over the years this interaction has seen it evolve from campaigning, to service delivery, to involvement in policy development. While the sector can point to many successes as a result of this evolution, the current phase in its relationship with the State is more problematic and in particular its role in policy and public debate is being reined in.

Section 3
Progressing Equality: The Aspirations and Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

We have already outlined the three arenas in which the community and voluntary sector can operate in order to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality. Here we look at the aspirations and roles of organisations in the sector in relation to each of these arenas. As a preface to the discussion in this section, we can note that this is a difficult time for the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. For a number of years now, there has been a perception within the sector that the autonomy of the sector is being compromised, that its advocacy and transformative role is being reduced and that its broad-based campaigning and public awareness aspirations are being curtailed. The result is the perception among community and voluntary organisations that the sector is being reduced to a service provider for the State. This has generated some pessimism and frustration among organisations and that is very much reflected in the consultation for this paper, as was a degree of frustration with problems within the sector itself, which makes it difficult to respond to the challenge to its autonomy or the encroachment on its space.

In the following sections we present the findings of the research in relation to the three arenas as follows:
1) **Identifying** the shared interests of groups experiencing inequality,
2) **Engaging** with the policy and decision making context,
3) **Engaging** with civil and democratic society.

Under each heading we look firstly at the aspirations of the organisations, followed by an account of the actual role played and the challenges faced and finally we draw out the implications of these challenges for the well being of the sector and the pursuit of equality through each arena.

Arena One

Identifying the Shared Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality

In order to represent and articulate the interests of groups experiencing inequality, it is first necessary to engage with these groups and to identify their interests. The aspirations of the organisations consulted for this paper vary with regard to how they wish to engage with groups, although that variation occurs within the framework of an equality and community development approach and unsurprisingly therefore the actual roles they play reveal a number of common approaches and understandings. These commonalities are outlined in Box 1.

Box 1: Examples of Commonalities in the Aspirations of Organisations	
Commonality	Examples
Bring about improvement in the lives of people	An organisation in the Midlands seeks to counter the exploitation of immigrant workers by providing them with labour market advice and guidance and mediating with employers on their behalf. An organisation in the South-West that works with lone parents takes a comprehensive approach to addressing their social and economic needs, ranging from childcare to education and employment, health and housing.
Flexibility in responding to needs	An organisation working with gay men started with the aspiration of providing opportunities to socialise, then realised that personal development and sexual health programmes were required, after which the organisation became involved in advocacy.
Empower people to respond to and manage their own situations	An organisation in the Mid-West enables lesbians to act as peer educators within their own communities or settings. An organisation in West Dublin enables members of the Traveller community to provide primary health care programmes to their own communities.

The first and fundamental commonality for organisations in the sector is the aspiration to bring about an improvement in the lives of the people they work with and on behalf of and to counter their experience of inequality. For some organisations, this translates into a very specific intervention, frequently, although not always, a service. For other organisations, their aspirations to improve the lives of the people they work with is reflected in multifaceted interventions to address different levels of need and different issues pertaining to multiple aspects of their lives.

A second commonality amongst organisations is their aspiration to maintain flexibility in the way in which they respond to the needs and interests of their communities. Community and voluntary organisations aspire to being person /group focused rather than service focused. One of the consequences of this is that regardless of how they articulate their aspirations, the tendency is to develop and innovate as needs and circumstances change.

A third commonality is the empowering work of community organisations whereby, regardless of the groups they work with or the contextual circumstances, they aspire to empowering people to better understand, respond to and manage their own situations and to have a positive impact on their community. Many organisations seek to facilitate members of the groups they work with to become agents of change either for other members of their group or for their communities.

Overall, in terms of engaging with groups experiencing inequality, the aspirations of organisations can be summed up as working for serious improvement in the situation of those experiencing inequality through a flexible and person centred approach which embodies a transformative and empowering dimension in order to confer benefits at individual and community level. In general, the actual role of community and voluntary organisations in engaging with groups experiencing inequality corresponds closely to these aspirations. The following paragraphs look at the role of both local and national organisations in:

A. engaging with the interests of groups experiencing inequality,

B. amplifying the interests within the sector's own infrastructure, and

C. identifying the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

A. Engaging with the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality.

Organisations representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality do so in the first instance through their empowering work at local level, which ultimately is aimed at facilitating groups to articulate their own interests. As a prerequisite to this, organisations have to reach out to and engage with the groups. While generalising across the diversity of organisations consulted is neither easy nor wise, three broad mechanisms of engagement are commonplace. These are

a) outreaching to marginalised groups, including those which agencies are not currently reaching, through a range of activities tailored to the specific circumstances of the groups and mechanisms to enable direct access to the organisation, for example through providing help lines, information desks, drop-in facilities and so on;

b) the provision of direct interventions including services to groups, for example training courses, support groups etc; and

c) the transformative work of organisations that seek to empower groups. Examples of these are presented in the following paragraphs.

a) *Outreach and Direct Access Mechanisms*
At local level, most, but not all, organisations are involved in outreaching to very marginalised groups. The mechanisms through which they do so reflect the way the organisations operate, the circumstances of the people they are trying to reach and the resources at the organisation's disposal. Examples of such mechanisms include:
• an organisation in the Mid-West provides outreach to mothers and other family members of prisoners through operating a befriending suite in the nearby prison,
• an organisation in Dublin which works with Roma women gains access to these through their church,
• an organisation for older people in the Midlands seeks the cooperation of public health nurses in delivering information on its work to potential beneficiaries, and
• an organisation working with young disadvantaged mothers in the South-West makes neighbourhood calls directly to their houses.

Mechanisms to facilitate direct access include:
• the provision of telephone support and confidential telephone help lines,
• drop-in information services, and
• opportunities for social interaction.

Through these and other methods, community and voluntary organisations achieve a considerable degree of reach into their target groups, which provides the basis for identifying and bringing forward their interests.

b) *Providing Services*
While not all organisations engage in outreach or provide opportunities for direct access, almost all do provide interventions, including services, directly to their constituent groups. The provision of services confers multiple benefits: it addresses a real level of need on the part of the groups concerned; it enables ongoing needs to be identified; and it underpins the empowerment and advocacy work of the sector by establishing a preliminary engagement with groups experiencing inequality. The services provided are tailored to the circumstances of the targeted group and often redress specific deficiencies that they experience in public and private sector service delivery. Examples of services provided include:
• mother and toddler groups for young lone parents,
• social opportunities for older people and for people with disabilities, and
• primary health care programmes for members of the Traveller community.

Through this very specific focus, the delivery of services, while meeting a need on the part of the user groups, also becomes a vital element of the toolkit available to community and voluntary organisations in relation to initial engagement with their user groups. Service delivery is also central to identifying interests and to enabling groups to identify their own interests. Through the provision of services directly to their constituent groups, organisations become more aware of the issues which affect these groups, such as the adverse impact of gaps and anomalies in public policy as well as issues arising from discrimination.

c) *Empowerment Work*
The identification of interests is also part of the empowerment work of the sector whereby

organisations empower people with the skills, confidence and capacity to articulate their own interests and to become active in addressing them. As with outreach mechanisms, the manner in which this empowerment is done will reflect the circumstances and capacities of groups. Various mechanisms are used to ensure that groups experiencing inequality are themselves central to articulating their interests in the first instance. These include:

• providing training in personal development and social analysis,

• using facilitated work groups to listen, record and analyse the issues brought forward by groups,

• training people to undertake participative and action research,

• training people to work as peer educators, community facilitators, etc., and

• facilitating the participation of their service users within their own structures by enabling them to become involved in management committees, etc.

B. Amplifying Interests within the Sector's Own Infrastructure

At the local level, the identification of interests is integrally bound up with ongoing engagement and interaction with groups experiencing inequality and, in a sense, the identification of interests can almost be seen as a by-product of the delivery of services in a person centered way. Organisations attempt to represent these interests within local decision making structures as discussed in the following section. However, what is equally important in bringing forward the interests of groups experiencing inequality is the amplification of these issues within the sector itself and the extent to which a critical mass of knowledge and data can be generated

both horizontally at local and national level and vertically between the local and the national levels. The internal infrastructure of the sector is important here.

Organisations at local level can work collaboratively through networks which share a focus on particular groups of people or on particular issues as well as more ad hoc collaborations for specific and sometimes short-term objectives. There are numerous examples within the sector of how such collaboration and networking can both enhance the knowledge base and work practices of organisations to the benefit of their user groups and facilitate collective efforts to represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality within the policy and other domains. Evidence of this networking and collaboration at local level include the formation of intercultural fora to provide a platform where organisations can share learning and expertise in relation to integrating new populations and the development of common practices and procedures across organisations engaging with different aspects of an individual's needs, for example, in relation to a migrant woman experiencing domestic violence.

Local to national linkages are also vitally important in enabling the sector to pursue its aspirations to articulate the interests of groups experiencing inequality. Many local organisations have links to more than one national organisation. They may be formally affiliated to some of the national organisations. An organisation working with members of the Traveller community, for example, will probably be formally linked into a national Traveller organisation. It could also input into strategies undertaken by national anti-racist NGOs, and in the context of its work with Traveller women, it may link to the National Women's Council

of Ireland, and so on. The synergies which result from these vertical linkages are well acknowledged and appreciated at both levels. Local organisations value the analysis, capacity building and information resources which national organisations can provide. National organisations value the authenticity of the voice of participative local organisations and frequently rely on their affiliated local organisations to affirm their mandate and to provide the data and information to progress their objectives. One national organisation put it succinctly: we get their views, they get our analysis. Notwithstanding this, both local and national organisations note that these synergies are not always as robust as they could be or should be, commenting, for example, that national organisations may have an inappropriate balance between engaging with local groups and engaging in the policy making context and that many issues raised at local level do not find expression at national level.

C. Identifying the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality

At national level, organisations do not always have the same degree of access to or contact with groups experiencing inequality on an ongoing basis, although there is considerable variation between them in this regard and some do provide direct services to groups through help lines or drop-in desks. Where direct contact with groups is not a feature of their work, or in order to complement such contact, national organisations engage in a range of actions to consult with groups experiencing inequality in order to identify their interests. Methods used include conducting consultation seminars, surveying their member groups, and carrying out research. In general it appears that, like

local organisations, national organisations take very robust approaches to ensure that they are capturing the interests of groups experiencing inequality as articulated by the groups themselves. A typical approach described by a number of national organisations in different sub-sectors is to:
- notice that an issue is emerging,
- take soundings from other organisations to determine the extent of the issue,
- ensure the expertise is available to the organisation to explore the issue in more detail,
- undertake consultation, research, etc. to develop good data on the issue,
- validate the data with the groups concerned,
- accept the mandate, and
- seek ways to progress the issue.

At national level there are also numerous examples of collaborative working through bilateral relationships between organisations, formal and informal networks on specific issues, strategic alliances on specific issues, and through affiliations such as the Community Platform on which currently 30 national organisations are represented.

Challenges and Barriers
While there are multiple examples of good practice in relation to identifying the interests of groups experiencing inequality, there are also multiple barriers and challenges experienced at both local and national level.

One set of obstacles to articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality derives from the seepage of problematic issues at community level into the organisations themselves. The vast majority of community organisations operate with boards

or management committees comprised of local people and this can result in the prejudices and biases which exist within neighbourhoods or communities finding their way into the organisations. In these instances, some groups fare worse than others and even within the sector some groups experienced difficulties in having their claim to equality accepted by others. Members of the Traveller community or gay people, for example, may experience direct prejudice, and other groups such as older people or people with disability can also experience insensitivity, stereotyping and discrimination. This situation makes it extremely difficult to progress an inclusive equality agenda at local level and as one participant at a focus group noted: *it means that organisations are only as good as their management committee: just because an organisation is working on equality issues does not mean it is thinking from a broad equality perspective.* This lack of a broad equality perspective also reflects the lack of integration between anti-poverty and equality agendas at local level.

A second problem relates to the fact that the experience of inequality can be compounded by inadequate or poor public services. The lack of public transport in rural areas provides an example of this: it compounds the social isolation of groups experiencing inequality and hinders their capacity to access other public services, such as health or education. Organisations trying to work with people in these areas who do not have private transport also experience many difficulties in engaging with their targeted groups and in providing services to them.

The most frequently mentioned challenge at both local and national level, however, was the difficult funding context. There were numerous problems identified in relation to funding which impinge heavily on the work of organisations and detract from their ability to address the needs and interests of the groups with which they work. These problems include the following:

(i) The lack of funding per se is an issue for both local and national organisations and severely hampers the capacity of the sector in all aspects of its work. Funding mechanisms and the priorities of funders are considered not to have kept apace of changes at community level and organisations working with immigrants and peer-led immigrant groups experience particular difficulties as there is no funding stream for this group.

(ii) The lack of core funding inhibits the work of the sector, particularly in relation to engaging with policy and in capacity building. While national organisations have been successful in drawing down funding from philanthropic organisations, in particular for policy and strategic development work, there is a growing perception that State funding is increasingly being used to confine NGOs to service delivery rather than capacity building.

(iii) The short-term and insecure nature of such funding that is available was also frequently mentioned. This makes planning difficult, leaves workers in an insecure position and absorbs a huge amount of the organisations time as they continually seek to secure funding from various sources.

(iv) The inflexibility of funding and the fact that community organisations have to tailor their work to fit with what the funding agencies are prepared to resource was also raised. There are numerous examples of this but the

following provides an insight into how funding difficulties can hamper the transformative work of the sector. An organisation in the Mid-West had secured funding from what appeared to be an innovative programme which should have facilitated flexibility and a bottom-up approach. The organisation consulted with the potential beneficiaries and on the basis of their preferences submitted a work plan which would have involved training a number of local people to deliver the project into their own communities. The funding Department, however, refused to accept this and insisted on just one worker being employed.

(v) The increasing stringency of financial accounting requirements impinging on projects was also commented upon and, related to this, the extent to which ensuring accountability had almost replaced responding to the issue of the group in some Departments' priorities. For example, an organisation working with women, stigmatised as a result of drug use in their family, commented on the fact that following the drug marches and community mobilisation in the mid 1990s, there was a rush to get funding down to local organisations. Several years later, with the drug problem as bad as ever, the same organisations find it much more difficult to secure funding and the application and accounting procedures have become much more stringent.

The difficulties in the funding context have a direct impact on the capacity of organisations to engage with groups experiencing inequality and to identify their interests. Funding difficulties result in organisations spending disproportionate amounts of time simply seeking funding and reporting on its disbursement rather than getting on with their work. One organisation put it succinctly: *it is ironic that we are doing the State a service yet we constantly have to fight for our survival.* The problematic funding context not only inhibits the work of the organisations, it also reinforces the unequal power relations between the community and voluntary sector and the State. An organisation which works with young adults with disabilities applied for funding to purchase a bus to transport the young people to services, social events etc. The organisation received a cheque for €3,000 which was insufficient to buy a bus as may have been obvious to the statutory agency. This presented the organisation with a dilemma. If it accepted the money it would still be unable to purchase the bus necessary for its activities. If it declined the cheque, it might not be successful in terms of future requests for funding.

Summary

It is possible to conclude that organisations representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality spend a very considerable amount of effort in engaging with their representative groups and identifying their interests. The community development ethos and practices of the sector are particularly effective in achieving this. This work is further facilitated by synergies between the engagement with groups experiencing inequality on the part of local organisations and development of policy analysis by organisations at national level, the mutual benefits of which are recognised by both local and national organisations. This work is important for furthering the objective of equality, and for creating awareness at local level of structural issues. It is also important for the organisations themselves, which for the most part base their legitimacy with groups experiencing inequality and with policy makers on their capacity to take their mandate from the interests of those groups. Organisations do not

claim to be representative of the groups they work with, but they do claim to be mandated on the basis of the issues that people bring to them.

In summary, in terms of reaching out to and identifying the interests of groups, the capacities within the sector include the following:
• to reach groups experiencing inequality who cannot bring forward their own interests,
• to help people explore and identify their own interests,
• to support people to avail of appropriate public services which can meet their needs,
• to address gaps in public service provision by delivering innovative services,
• to build social capital by enabling people to play a role in working with others in their community,
• to identify through various methodologies the issues which impact on the groups they represent, and
• to support people to become involved directly in the process of consultation around policy.

As a prerequisite to articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality, organisations in the sector draw on the strengths of community development practice to reach out to and engage with those groups and to identify their interests. The challenges they identified in doing so derive from contextual factors at community level and from the unfavourable funding context which impinges heavily on the day to day work of organisations. However, an additional challenge derives from the difficulties in forging 'joined-up equality practice' across the array of largely unilateral and targeted interventions in place. The example of public transport is relevant again here. For many organisations, the response to poor public transport is a unilateral effort to try to secure funding to provide their

own transport. Consequently, at any point in time there are likely to be large numbers of organisations seeking funding from a range of Government Departments or State agencies to meet the needs of their groups for transport when the interests of these groups would be better served by a policy change which recognised the role of transport in underpinning equality of access to social and economic resources. As a result, there is a huge amount of effort going into meeting the needs of groups experiencing inequality without a commensurate accumulation of sectoral knowledge in relation to inequality. The existence of horizontal and vertical linkages within the sector might be expected to help address this situation but it does not appear to do so or at least not to do so adequately, and, overall, the lack of a comprehensive analysis of inequality or of a comprehensive framework within which to respond to this reinforces this difficulty.

Despite these obstacles due to contextual factors and the unfavourable funding context, and the impediments to equality work which they impose, organisations did not perceive any threat to their credibility with the groups with and for which they work. This may be partly due to the fact that the difficulties which the sector faces in engaging with groups are largely absorbed and neutralised by the sector itself – for example through long working hours, unpaid overtime, etc. – rather than being allowed to impact on the quality of the work. It may also reflect the reality of a certain amount of demand management on the part of organisations whereby they try to maintain the demands on their resources at a level which they can address. For groups experiencing inequality however, the problematic funding context means services are insecure, patchy and inconsistent across different localities.

Arena Two

Engaging with the Policy and Decision-making Domains

The second arena in which the community and voluntary sector can operate in order to represent and articulate the interests of groups experiencing inequality is that of policy and decision-making. Here also, there is both diversity and commonality in the aspirations of organisations as well as some distinctions between local and national organisations.

- **Local Organisations**
  Local organisations wish to see policy change that is beneficial to the groups they work with but recognise that their capacity to achieve this is limited. Some aspire to influencing local decision makers and service providers and engage proactively on this issue. More frequently they work closely with national organisations to provide information and data to support evidence-based policy making and to underpin efforts to bring about policy change at national level. As one local organisation noted: *we look to the national organisations to secure policy change, and so it is important to feed into them so we can have a collective voice.* For most local organisations, working directly with groups experiencing inequality is integrally linked to transferring their interests into the policy context. The two areas of work provide a dual focus for the sector at local level.

- **National Organisations**
  The aspirations of national organisations also embody a dual focus. Firstly, capacity building within the sector is a major focus and aspiration of national organisations. Most of these organisations seek to resource local groups in relation to policy issues,

through providing analysis for example, and in some instances supporting and training local organisations in lobbying policy makers. Secondly, national organisations have serious and ambitious aspirations to bring about policy and institutional change and this is another major focus of their work. Again there is considerable diversity across organisations in relation to how they progress these aspirations and this is dependent at least in part on the existing policy context. In some cases, these aspirations and ambitions are focused on improving existing policies to serve better the interests of certain groups. For example, a lone parent organisation may seek to change aspects of the social welfare code in order to remove welfare traps. In other instances organisations are working for the introduction of new bodies of policy, as evidenced by the efforts of immigrant organisations to secure the introduction of measures to underpin the social and economic integration of new populations.

In terms of operating within the arena of decision making, therefore, the sector aspires to bringing forward the interests of groups experiencing inequality so as to ensure that quality public services can be delivered to all in a respectful way, to ensure that policy change can ameliorate the experience of inequality and that the ongoing process of policy development can deliver the redistribution of resources and alternative development models necessary to underpin the achievement of greater equality. In the following paragraphs we look at how it actually works to achieve these aspirations, noting that it does so with little or no funding from the State and with almost all national organisations relying on philanthropic funding to allow them to engage in the arena of policy and decision making.

A. The Role of Community and Voluntary Organisations in Policy and Decision Making

The evolution of the sector and its relationship with the State described above means that there are now multiple points of contact between the sector and the decision-making apparatus of the State at local and national levels. Organisations working to represent and articulate the interests of groups experiencing inequality seek to engage with different aspects of this and do so in different ways and, again, many national organisations resource their member organisations to engage actively in policy-making arenas at all levels. It is beyond the scope of this paper to document or analyse fully the extent of the sector's interface with decision-making processes and fora. Instead we concentrate here on those elements of this interface and associated issues that were raised by organisations during the consultation. Box 2 provides an overview of these elements and in the subsequent discussion we look at each of these arenas in turn, noting the challenges that were identified in relation to each.

Box 2: Main Elements of Sector's Interface with Decision-Making Processes and Structures		
Policy Arena		**Main Elements**
(a)	**Working with statutory service providers**	• Enhancing the statutory sector's capacity to engage with and provide services to vulnerable groups. • Integrated approaches with statutory service providers at local level.
(b)	**Participation in consultative and review fora**	• Participation in consultative, review and decision-making fora at local level. • Participation in fora to oversee, review and implement policy implementation at national level.
(c)	**Participation in policy consultation processes**	• Attending seminars. • Contributing to the development of submissions. • Making presentations. • Responding to Green Papers etc.
(d)	**Bilateral relationships with Government Departments and State agencies**	• Direct engagement between NGOs and specific Government Departments focused on influencing policy.
(e)	**Participation in social partnership**	• Participation in social partnership. • Committees, sub-groups, etc. within social partnership framework.

Again, we need to preface this discussion by referring to a degree of frustration with the current situation on the part of community and voluntary organisations, which is reflected here in their focus on the negative aspects of engaging with the policy-making process rather then on their achievements in this arena over the years. Consequently, the discussion here cannot claim to be a comprehensive stock-taking exercise of the pros and cons of the sector's engagement with the policy-making domain nor does it revisit the considerable and well-documented impact of the sector on policy making at local and national level over the years. What it does try to do is to highlight what organisations themselves see as the contemporary problems they experience within the policy arena and the issues that they perceive as needing to be addressed to enable them to effect policy change on behalf of the groups with and for which they work.

(a) Working with Statutory Service Providers

Many organisations are involved in building the capacity of State agencies to understand better and respond to groups experiencing inequality as service users. This includes producing statistics and data to support decision making, providing accurate information on existing policy in relation to specific issues or groups, and providing training for statutory service providers in relation to specific groups experiencing inequality. This work is necessitated by the fact that front-line personnel in the statutory agencies are not always fully appraised of the array of public policy that impinges on some groups. For example, one organisation provides training to Community Welfare Officers on the complex welfare rights situation of immigrants; another works with medical social workers to enable them provide more appropriate services to female drug users in maternity hospital settings; and a third provides sensitivity training to statutory service providers in relation to the needs of lone parents.

A second type of interaction at local level is the establishment of integrated working relationships between community organisations and statutory service providers. Sometimes these bilateral relationships occur in a funding context where the statutory provider contracts the community organisation to provide a complementary and parallel service to its own work although they may also occur outside this context. Schools, probation services, local Gardaí and health service providers are among the State agencies involved in these types of collaborations and there is also a considerable amount of this type of work taking place with the local authorities in particular around housing and in relation to social inclusion measures within the framework of the city and county development boards. There are numerous examples of how integrated approaches have resulted in greater awareness, better services and more seamless provision across the statutory and community and voluntary sectors as well as in increasing the effectiveness of the statutory service provider. For example, one project works with female repeat offenders who are under the remit of the Probation and Welfare Service, through close key-working and personal support. This project helps the women it works with to understand and address their offending behaviour and to engage more effectively with the Probation and Welfare Service.

Challenges

This level of interaction with statutory providers is an essential part of representing and articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality through equipping the statutory

sector to support these groups and to develop integrated service provision. Achieving these types of outcomes, however, is dependent on the whole-hearted co-operation of the statutory agencies and in this regard there is considerable variation across localities and across agencies. Some organisations have little or no access to the statutory providers most relevant to the groups they work with and are unable to make an impact at this level. Others have been involved in efforts to improve service delivery but believe that the result reflected tokenism on the part of the statutory agency rather than a real desire to effect positive change. Overall, the ability of the sector to impact on local service delivery is dependent on the decisions of individuals within the statutory agencies. Consequently, its capacity to promote the interests of groups in this way is not constant over time. A frequent comment from organisations was that they put a lot of effort into developing a good working relationship with a specific individual in a statutory service only to have to start all over again when that individual was replaced.

Moreover, many if not most of the examples of good practice in relation to capacity building and integrated approaches remain localised and are neither mainstreamed within the statutory sector nor assimilated into or disseminated within the community and voluntary sector itself. Despite the synergies between local and national level organisations, there appears to be a degree of 'leakage' from the sector in relation to practice. As this work is dependent on the fragile funding situation noted above, the result is that a lot of good practice at local level in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality is not adequately captured and replicated but instead becomes dissipated.

(b) Participation in Consultative Review Fora

The representation of community organisations on statutory-led or Government-initiated consultative and decision-making fora is now a well-established feature of the sector at local level and at national level. At local level, there is a multiplicity of such fora including: community and voluntary fora; social inclusion committees; area based partnership companies; local drug task forces; community policing fora; estate management committees; consumer panels and so on, all of which have representation from community organisations. Almost all of the local organisations we consulted had some level of involvement in these structures and some had a considerable amount of involvement. At national level, organisations also participate in decision-making, policy-making and policy-review fora. The national organisations consulted for this work were between them represented on such diverse fora as working groups of the National Economic and Social Council, project teams of the National Economic and Social Forum, monitoring committees of various policy measures, national advisory bodies, steering groups and so on.

Challenges

Participating in such fora at both local and national level is a time consuming activity but as well as drawing heavily on the resources of organisations, the extent to which such participation actually furthers the agenda of the sector or even the agenda of individual organisations appears to be very varied. The following points were made by organisations.

- Participation in fora which are broad in their focus and membership is frequently seen as having limited capacity to deliver results. For example, the view was frequently expressed by local organisations (although there

was not total unanimity on this issue) that community and voluntary fora are too diverse in their membership (including as they do, sports clubs, etc.) and are too under-funded to enable the equality sector to have much impact at this level.

- The actual impact the sector can achieve is perceived to depend on the chair of the forum or the manager of its overseeing agency, thus the whim of human personality again dictates the impact of the sector, rather than an explicit contract between the sector and the agencies involved.

- A more specific problem is the weak nature of local Government in Ireland. One organisation referred to the fact that a lot of time is spent lobbying within local structures, but there is in fact very little to be achieved at local level.

- A number of national organisations also noted that the business of many national consultative fora is conducted within very narrow parameters and that the approach forces the sector to operate within a framework which does not accommodate redistributive issues and consequently that it is exceedingly difficult to secure significant change within these fora.

Consequently at both local and national level it appears that a considerable amount of time, energy and resources are expended simply on being at the table, rather in achieving anything from this, with some organisations perceiving that their presence in such fora confers a legitimacy that may carry over into other parts of the policy apparatus. Conversely, others point out that certain high-level boards and policy-making and review committees are increasingly excluding representative organisations thereby reducing the sector's already limited capacity to achieve impact at this level.

(c) Participation in Policy Consultation Processes

Organisations at both local and national levels are also involved in consultation processes around specific policy and legislative developments, for example, the development of White Papers, the NAPS, the Primary Health Care Strategy and the Immigration and Residency Bill. National organisations frequently play a role in resourcing local organisations to develop policy positions in relation to these and, within sub-sectors, to develop a consolidated position. National and local organisations also resource groups experiencing inequality to participate directly in or contribute to consultative processes of this sort. Overall, it appears that the sector has very considerable capacity to bring forward the interests of those experiencing inequality into the policy domain through participation in these consultation processes and can also ensure that these groups can articulate their own interests in these processes.

Challenges

Again, however, in relation to participation in consultation processes at local and at national level, the impact of a considerable amount of effort is variable at best and there is a degree of consultation overload within the sector.

- Some organisations expressed the view that consultation processes with the community sector are no more than a cosmetic exercise by Government Departments and State agencies seeking to legitimate the ultimate outcomes which invariably do not reflect the position brought forward by the sector.

- There is also a knock-on effect on the credibility of the sector when people experiencing inequality are directly involved in the consultation process (the sector frequently uses its own resources to enable such groups to participate in consultation processes). The frustration experienced by groups experiencing inequality at the subsequent lack of progress can result in them questioning the rationale for the sector's and their own involvement in consultation.

(d) Bilateral Relationships with Government Departments and State Agencies

One of the principal elements in the strategy of national organisations to bring forward the interests of groups experiencing inequality is that of bilateral engagement with Government Departments or State agencies. The national organisations consulted for this paper were between them engaged in bilateral relationships with at least seven Government Departments. Frequently this engagement occurs in the context of an ongoing funding relationship with the Department, sometimes in the context of funding for a specific piece of work. Sometimes this engagement occurs exclusively around policy issues (often within the overall framework of social partnership). Regardless of the funding context, however, a primary focus of these bilateral relationships from the point of view of the organisations is to influence departmental policy for the benefit of groups experiencing inequality.

This was perhaps the form of interaction with the policy-making apparatus in which the greatest variation across organisations was identified. The experiences of organisations and the impact they can achieve at this level is hugely diverse

and, it seems, dependent to a very large extent on the Government Department they work with but also on the complexity of the policy issue and the existing policy context. Several organisations noted that the optimal scenario in bilateral relationships is one in which there is a clearly identified specific policy issue and a competent organisation on the one hand and a clearly defined policy target, sympathetic Minister and senior civil servants who value the NGO's input on the other. Such a scenario rarely exists and overall there is no clarity or consistency with regard to what organisations can expect in terms of access to policy-making processes at departmental level or the outcomes of such access as is achieved.

Challenges

Only two organisations believed that they were engaged in an ongoing constructive relationship with a Government Department where their input was valued, their autonomy respected and where they could point to real and ongoing progress in effecting policy change. The specific challenges faced by other organisations in working bilaterally were identified as follows.

- Many organisations perceive that some civil servants in the Departments they engaged with do not value the work of NGOs (a view shared by one of the statutory funders) and that the Ministers of their funding Departments do not wish to accord them a space within the policy-making process. In this context it was believed that no amount of effort on the part of NGOs will yield results. One organisation noted that after a systematic and strategic but failed approach to impact on the development of policy, it had been told by a senior civil servant that its approach was faultless.

- Some organisations have experienced strained relationships with senior civil servants because they perceive that the latter do not understand that there are certain principles particularly in the context of a rights based approach upon which the sector cannot compromise.

- Other organisations held the view that the institutional ethos of some funding agencies and Government Departments is incompatible with promoting equality. In general, there was a consensus among organisations involved in the consultation that organisations working with Travellers and with immigrants experience most difficulties in this regard.

In summary, the extent to which the sector can promote equality across diverse groups appears to be not so much dependent on the sector itself but on the departmental context within which it seeks to secure policy change. At different points in time, different organisations have been able to achieve some impacts through bilateral working but this appears to be diminishing. Overall, the lack of consistency in what the sector can expect from Government Departments and the lack of clarity as to what is its role in contributing to policy, is a major challenge to the ongoing work of the sector in articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

(e) Participation in Social Partnership

Almost all of the national organisations consulted with were involved in social partnership at national level. It is not surprising, therefore, that the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in national social partnership arrangements was a dominant theme, reinforced by their relatively recent involvement in the negotiation of the current national agreement. The perspective of the community and voluntary sector on the value of its participation in social partnership is consistent but complex. On the one hand, there is a broad-based consensus that participation in social partnership is time consuming, frustrating and delivers little in terms of real policy change for the groups experiencing inequality. On the other hand, social partnership acts as a portal to other fora of consultation and decision making and participation within it is seen as a prerequisite for gaining access to these other decision-making fora. In addition, the period spent out of social partnership on the part of some NGOs who did not sign up to the previous agreement highlighted the difficulties of trying to effect policy change from outside the social partnership structures. The participation of community and voluntary organisations within a specific policy context effectively legitimates the organisation (or more accurately legitimates certain organisations) within the overall policy domain.

The perspectives outlined by the organisations consulted suggest that this is a problematic context for the sector within which to expend its scarce resources. Over the ten years, however, since it was admitted to social partnership much has been learned, including the need to exploit the opportunities of social partnership without getting totally overwhelmed by it. Typical comments were:

> '*Social partnership provides a mechanism, but you get more out of working around the edges of it*'

and

> '*We don't waste time on social partnership, we just use it to get the access we want*'.

Challenges

In general, organisations consider participation in the social partnership process to yield little in the way of real progress on equality issues, a perception echoed in most third-party analysis also. The limitations of social partnership for furthering the agenda of the community and voluntary sector in relation to equality are perceived to derive from a number of factors.

- The parameters of the national agreement negotiations are set outside the partnership process itself and within a development model that the sector has limited opportunity to influence. In this context, the most the community and voluntary sector can hope for are some relatively minor adjustments to mainstream policy rather than the more fundamental shift in the policy regime that at least some organisations favour.

- The framework and institutions of social partnership impose an approach on the sector within which it must rearticulate the interests of groups experiencing inequality into a set of issues amenable to negotiation within the parameters and through the processes of social partnership. Among the implications of this is that not all of the equality issues identified at local level can be brought into the national social partnership process and those that are may have to be diluted in order to secure a foothold within the policy context.

- Some organisations have expressed the view that the sector is not taken seriously by the State within the social partnership process. The perception is that there is no parity of esteem between the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector. There is also a view that the return of the Community Platform to the partnership process occurred too soon and on terms that further weakened its position vis-à-vis the statutory sector.

- Contextual problems are not the only ones confronting the sector within the national social partnership process. The Community and Voluntary Pillar itself has experienced internal difficulties. In the opinions of those organisations consulted with, the Pillar does not present a unified voice for the sector, nor can it, given its broad base and the diversity of organisations represented within it. Organisations within the community and voluntary sector that are concerned with promoting equality, therefore, have to manoeuvre within the Pillar as much as within the overall social partnership process and moreover they frequently do so unilaterally rather than collectively. Overall, organisations were quite negative in the terms in which they assessed the capacity of the Community and Voluntary Pillar, considering it to be too ideologically diverse to allow for the development of solidarity or shared understandings. Many also noted that some organisations had become dominant within the Pillar to the detriment of its overall capacity to achieve real change in this arena.

Summary

The preceding discussion has been a necessarily brief overview of the key issues facing community and voluntary organisations as they seek to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality within the policy making domain. The potential of the sector to promote equality within the policy making arena includes:

- improving the interface between statutory service providers and groups experiencing inequality,
- identifying necessary changes to statutory service provision,
- promoting integrated service delivery across the statutory and community and voluntary sectors,
- collecting and reporting on data in relation to user groups, their interests and the impact of policy,
- inserting information unavailable from other sources into the policy making domain,
- mobilising and supporting the involvement of groups that experience discrimination and inequality in the policy consultation process, and
- bringing forward the interests of groups experiencing inequality on the basis of a clear understanding of their interests and a clear analysis of policy changes required.

The challenges faced by the sector and the barriers to achieving these types of outcomes have been discussed above. In brief, the current position can be summarised as: a lot of effort expended both at local and national level by the sector without any clarity as to what it might expect to achieve; a perception that little is in fact being achieved; and at the same time a conviction that effort must continue to be expended or nothing will be achieved.

In addition to the challenges that derive from the nature of the policy context, currently, the relationship between the sector and the State within the policy making arena is also seen as problematic. There is a concern among many organisations that the sector is being eased out of its already limited policy role and being increasingly corralled within a service delivery role. The evidence offered by organisations to support this includes:

- the cohesion process within the context of the Local Development and Social Inclusion Programme which is perceived as a threat to the involvement of the sector within local structures,
- the changes to some funding programmes and mechanisms which re-prioritise service delivery over advocacy work or core funding,
- organisations funded by the statutory sector being obliged to remove plans to engage in lobbying from their workplans,
- some organisations being told that the Minister of their funding Department did not want the involvement of NGOs in policy development, and
- the exclusion of representative groups from certain high-level policy review mechanisms.

One organisation summarised the situation as follows: *The sector achieved a fair bit in the 1990s, good legislation, good equality infrastructure, the White Paper recognised the principles of independence, there was lots of commitment to social inclusion and resources available to the sector. But since 2002, things have been shifting. The White Paper has been set aside, structures have been set aside. The sector has a sense of being silenced, of being told that articulating the voice of the marginalised was not appreciated, that we should concentrate on service delivery.*

In effect, the organisations consulted consider that, at this point in time, the interests of those experiencing inequality are not being fully reflected in policy development, and the current situation of the sector within the policy context can be summed up as follows.

- The extent of bilateral relationships between organisations in the sector and individual

State agencies and Departments has allowed some organisations, at some times, to achieve positive policy change in respect of specific issues or groups. It has not allowed, however, for the emergence of a mechanism capable of progressing over time either the collective interests of the sector per se or the collective interests of groups experiencing inequality.

- Within these bilateral relationships, organisations have to balance progressing the authentic mandate they take from the groups they work with (and thereby maintaining the legitimacy they derive from this) with the need to observe the protocols of the policy domain (thereby establishing their administrative legitimacy derived from their compliance with those protocols). Organisations have developed considerable skills in maintaining this balance, but it now appears that this is becoming much more difficult, that compliance within the policy domain is rendered into subservience and that in this context parity of esteem between the sector and the State appears impossible.

Arena Three

Engaging with Civil and Democratic Society

The third and final arena within which the sector can seek to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality is that of civil and democratic society. Through their work within this arena, community and voluntary organisations can facilitate an equality impetus within civil society, contribute to public debate and awareness on equality issues, and can help to build a climate which is both receptive to and demanding of public policies and practices to promote equality. Additionally, as noted above, the need for the sector to maintain a presence and a critical voice within the broader social arena has been acknowledged, particularly in relation to avoiding the risk of co-option within social partnership (Crowley, 1998, Kirby, 1998).

The aspirations of organisations in the sector in relation to engaging with broader democratic and civil society suggest a greater degree of diversity with regard to operating in this arena than exists in relation to other arenas. Notwithstanding the fact that at least some of the organisations involved in the consultation for this research had their origins in various campaigns and social movements, the extent of engagement with broader society varied considerably. Not all organisations seek to make an impact at this level. However, all recognise the value to their work if the sector per se is to have an engagement within this arena. A distinction can be made between the aspirations of local and national organisations.

Local organisations

At local level some organisations seek to bring about greater community consciousness and awareness in relation to equality issues and to counter the stereotyping and social exclusion of the groups with which they work:

- One organisation working with women who experience domestic violence tries to get the community to accept ownership of this problem in order to reduce the level of tolerance for domestic violence.
- A number of groups working with gay men and lesbians aspire to build awareness of their issues within the community, while organisations working with Travellers were concerned to try to build solidarity between the settled and Traveller communities.
- Disability organisations and organisations working with older people also aspired to creating greater awareness and sensitivity to their issues at local level.

National organisations

Among national organisations there are also clear aspirations to impact on civil and democratic society. The mission statements of some national organisations envisage not just promoting greater equality for the groups they work with, but also bringing about a more equal society per se and contributing to momentum in relation to this. There is also an aspiration within the sector not just to increase the opportunities for groups that experience inequality but to address also the societal factors that produce inequality in the first place.

In summary, the aspirations of community and voluntary organisations in relation to working at the broader societal level are patchy, particularly but not exclusively at local level. Some national organisations within the sector do aspire to a large project within the broader context to alter fundamentally the unequal nature of Irish society. In comparison to the coherence between aspiration and action

evident in other arenas, however, it appears that organisations seek to pursue this objective primarily through efforts to broaden the social base of support for the work of the sector within the policy context. In other words, the way the sector operates within this arena tends to be framed by objectives that are more to do with seeking policy change than with resourcing a broader debate about equality issues.

The role of the sector in engaging in Civil and Democratic Society

Below we look at four main aspects of the actual role of the sector in engaging with civil and democratic society under the following headings:

(a) inserting the interests of groups experiencing inequality into the representative democratic process,
(b) working with other actors in civil society,
(c) using and influencing the media, and
(d) engaging with the general public.

We preface this discussion by noting that just as community and voluntary sector organisations perceive that their policy space is being narrowed down, so too many of them perceive that their autonomy to operate in the broader democratic space and particularly their involvement in providing a critical voice, is also being challenged by their statutory funders.

(a) Inserting the interests of groups experiencing inequality into the representative democratic process

One of the ways in which community and voluntary organisations seek to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality is to ensure that these are brought into the representative democratic process.

In general bringing equality issues into the domain of representative democracy takes the form of providing information to opposition spokespeople, requesting public representatives to put down Dáil questions and making submissions and presentations to Dáil committees. However, the recent general election provided additional opportunities for the sector at local and national level to seek to have the interests of groups experiencing inequality reflected within the political process. Almost all of the organisations we consulted with engaged in some way with this electoral process.

- At local level, organisations provided voter education programmes, facilitated people to register to vote and on the day of the election collected people and brought them to the polling stations. Some local organisations convened public meetings to which they invited candidates. Many national organisations also resourced local organisations by providing training in lobbying candidates, etc.

- At national level, organisations, usually in consultation with their member groups, developed recommendations for political manifestos, disseminated these to political parties and sought meetings with them to discuss these. Some organisations also convened meetings throughout the country to which they invited local candidates.

In so far as they have feedback from the political parties, the role of the organisations in resourcing the political parties appears to be perceived very positively. Political parties indicated that they heard the message, valued the role of the organisations in providing data and analysis and some of the recommendations made by community and voluntary organisations

were reflected within political party manifestos. Many national organisations maintained their involvement with this process beyond the election for example through trying to influence the Programme for Government; through developing relationships with new Ministers and Ministers of State; and through providing information and statistics to political parties. In general, the national NGOs feel that these efforts are well received by the political parties, although it is difficult to ascertain with any degree of accuracy what exactly the impact is.

Most organisations believed that engagement with political parties is a legitimate area of activity for them and that it is important that they articulate the voices of the groups experiencing inequality within the political domain. Only one organisation questioned the role of the NGOs vis-à-vis the political parties when they asked: *'is the sector trying to do to much? Is it trying to take the place of political parties? Do we generate political energy or do we siphon it out of the system'?* and concluded, *'the sector sees itself as more radical than the political parties, but in reality it is not that radical at all'*.

The scope to incorporate an EU dimension to this engagement with the representative democratic process was also raised, but infrequently. One of the national organisations consulted had strong links to the EU level and was involved in briefing MEPs. In general, however, the relevance of the EU as a lobbying framework and as a context for building pressure from outside the Irish context does not appear to be generalised across the sector.

Challenges

The specific challenges or difficulties faced by the sector in engaging with representative democracy were identified as follows:

- The nature of representative democracy per se, and in particular the limited parliamentary oversight of policy making in Ireland delimits the scope for achieving impact in this arena.
- The reluctance on the part of some politicians to be associated with issues that might be perceived as controversial can inhibit interaction on these issues.
- For NGOs themselves it is also perceived as important that they are not closely associated with any one political party and this inhibits the scope for alliances on specific issues.

(b) Working with Other Actors in Civil Society

Within both the international and Irish literature, contributing to civil society is considered to be a defining role for the community and voluntary sector (see for example Zappone, 1998). Civil society is difficult to define but the Carnegie Trust (2007) has identified three dimensions as follows:

(i) **Associational life:** the space of organised activity outside the market and the State which includes the community and voluntary sector, trades unions, faith-based organisations, political parties, philanthropic organisations and social movements;

(ii) **The good society:** whereby civil society can help to achieve outcomes such as non-violence, non-discrimination, democracy, and social justice, and

(iii) **An arena of public deliberation in pursuit of common interests:** the public space in which societal differences, social problems, public policy Government action and matters of community and cultural identity are developed and debated which allow people of all ages and backgrounds to share in defining how the different visions are reconciled.

The concept of civil society as associational life raises the issue of how organisations within civil society engage in association. We have already looked at how the community and voluntary sector engage with political parties. Here we look briefly at how they interact with other elements of civil society and in particular the scope they may have to build alliances with these other elements. Within social partnership structures, community and voluntary organisations have an opportunity to interact with the trades unions. While good relations do exist and while the trade unions have sometimes been strong supporters of the Community and Voluntary Pillar, there is little common ground developed within a civil society context. Outside as well as within social partnership, some organisations have worked bilaterally with trades unions on issues of common concern and there is a view that much more collaboration of this sort could take place. Broadly speaking, a similar pattern of interaction exists between the community and voluntary sector and faith-based organisations. Some NGOs actively seek alliances amongst these faith-based organisations or seek to foster champions who, within these organisations, will speak out on issues of concern to them. There is a view, however, that some of these faith-based organisations operate within a charitable perspective which cannot reconcile with what some elements of the sector see as its more redistributive approach. The sector's interaction with the most recent generation of autonomous new social movements is also limited. Overall, it is fair to conclude that the kind of space envisaged by the Carnegie Trust for public deliberation remains underdeveloped in Ireland.

Challenges

The specific challenges which confront the sector in engaging with other actors in civil society include: the limited space for public deliberation (noted above); the ideological differences that are perceived to exist between the sector and other actors in civil society; and the fact that community organisations engage unilaterally with civil society resulting in a lack of capacity to progress issues of relevance to the sector per se in this domain. One organisation also made the point that the sector might have a better working relationship with the trades unions if the civil and social dialogue were separated.

(c) Using and Influencing the Media

Some community and voluntary organisations try to use the media to develop their credibility on the issues they speak out on, to get their message across to the general public and to progress some of their objectives particularly through addressing negative coverage and stereotyping of certain groups. A small number of national organisations also provide training to their members on using the media. Few organisations have dedicated media personnel and in general the media is considered a difficult arena in which to progress an equality agenda and there is a parallel view that the sector does not use the media very well.

Challenges

Specific challenges that were identified are as follows.
- There is a lack of media expertise on the part of the sector. One organisation noted: *"our message is complex and we often don't package it well"*.
- Organisations have to tailor their message to be more media friendly and there is at least one example of policy priorities being influenced by the type of issues likely to attract the media,
- It is perceived that the media is not interested

in equality issues from an analytical perspective, but will often cover sensational stories in a way that is not helpful to furthering an equality agenda.

- It was noted the media are not good in terms of the language they use: *"They can lead to stereotyping too and that makes our job more difficult"*.
- a final difficulty in using the media is the view among many organisations that funding bodies within the statutory sector react negatively to any critical comment generated by the NGOs. There is not a consensus on this issue, however. One organisation expressed the view that organisations that allowed themselves to be silenced were acquiescent and weak, while another suggested that receiving funding from the statutory sector did not prohibit using the media but it did mean the message had to be carefully presented.

(d) Engaging with the General Public

Finally, a common concern across organisations at local and at national levels was the need to involve the wider Irish society in the search for greater equality. This concern derives in part from the need to provide a positive and receptive context for equality work by countering apathy and tolerance of inequality on the one hand and the need to challenge directly the reproduction of prejudice against groups experiencing inequality on the other. Engaging public opinion is also seen as a way of strengthening the legitimacy of the sector within the broader social arena.

Examples of efforts to achieve these outcomes included actions to build solidarity, from local communities, with groups that experience exclusion at local level and to create ownership of issues at local level: as one organisation

noted: *we work through an empowerment model so as well as working with women directly affected, we feel it is important to recognise the role which the community has in challenging the abuse women experience, so building community responsibility is key for us. We do this by participating in the international 16 days of action against violence against women and through other awareness raising work.*

Most national organisations also perceive the need to use the experience of inequality to engender a debate about the nature of Irish society per se and to develop a comprehensive analysis that can find resonance throughout Irish society. This is a fine line to walk as they try to work towards an inclusive approach without diluting the equality mandate and it is a challenge that is well recognised as the following statements indicate.

- *'We need to claim the conservative ground, we need to put across an inclusive approach that takes in people in all circumstances'.*
- *'We have to engage with the contemporary vision of society and put forward an alternative analysis. What can the sector say about poverty and inequality in today's Ireland? There is a role for the sector in putting forward an alternative vision of society but we have to engage with breakfast roll man too'.*
- *'We need to start a public debate, but in this country it is very hard to get a debate on the issue. The sector cannot solve the country's problems, but it can contribute to fresh thinking'.*

Challenges

The extent to which the sector has the capacity to contribute to new thinking at national level is an open question. Several organisations at local and national level were critical of the

sector's failure to bring forward this analysis or fresh thinking or to show leadership in relation to these issues – as one local organisation noted: 'the sector is brutal at leadership'. Other organisations specifically referred to the period in which the Community Platform was outside social partnership as a lost opportunity to develop an alternative vision and to build a new consensus within the sector.

Notwithstanding these sectoral problems, influencing public opinion on issues of equality per se is difficult, particularly in a benign economic climate. Against this backdrop, organisations perceive that the general public does not always understand the complexity of inequality in contemporary Ireland, that there can be a lack of empathy with groups experiencing inequality and a tendency to blame them for the difficulties they experience, and that there can be direct prejudice against these groups. Some organisations expressed the view that due to the existence of equality legislation and the equality infrastructure, there is a public perception that both the equality sector and the equality agenda are stronger than they actually are and are therefore not in need of public support.

A further difficulty is gaining access to public opinion and the mechanisms to influence this. Most organisations that seek to inform and influence public debate do so through usage of the media, with all the limitations involved as noted above. Other strategies to inform and influence public opinion – for example, awareness campaigns – are perceived as difficult and expensive. However, a number of organisations referenced the high profile campaigns which the Equality Authority has undertaken to increase public awareness of inequality as particularly beneficial to their work.

Summary
We have noted the aspirations of the community and voluntary sector in relation to its engagement with civil and democratic society. In brief these aspirations can be summarised as a desire to make Irish society more aware of issues relating to the experience of inequality; a wish to contribute to a public context and climate receptive to and supportive of pro-equality policies; and a desire to engage in and contribute to debate about the model of society which Irish people want at this juncture.

Despite these aspirations, the sector's engagement in the arena of the wider society is somewhat patchy and piecemeal. For reasons that are beyond the control of the sector, its own role in impacting on the wider society is highly constrained. To achieve real impact at this level, the sector must seek to work with organisations in other sectors. While there are numerous examples of very strategic and focused work that has been carried out with political parties and with other actors in civil society which can point to various degrees of success, more generally, the type of alliances necessary to progress an overarching equality agenda have not yet been forged. Nonetheless, the sector can point to a role in this arena in terms of the following:

- bringing information relating to the experience of inequality, unavailable from other sources, into the public domain,
- challenging assumptions and stereotypes, and
- providing a critical voice in regard to the experience of inequality and in regard to policy responses.

The challenges facing the community and voluntary sector as it seeks to engage with

civil and democratic society can be summarised as follows.

- The perceived apathy on the part of the public, which is reflected in and reproduced by the media's treatment of equality issues, presents a particularly challenging context for the work of the sector in the wider social arena.

- The complexity of the experience of inequality and the parallel complexity of the equality agenda make it difficult for the sector to communicate its message effectively and uncompromisingly. While this has an objective reality, it is exacerbated by the fact that various equality agendas that exist are not encompassed within a shared analysis, a shared language or a shared set of values.

- The lack of assurance within the sector regarding the specific space within civil society which it occupies appears to be a factor in limiting the development of collaboration with other actors in civil society.

There is one further challenge which the sector experiences in operating in the civil and democratic arena, and this derives from the relationship between the sector and the State. Most of the organisations we consulted agreed that there is a need to maintain a critical voice and to ensure that voices of the marginalised are not silenced within the politics of consensus. But they also believed that it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so due to the reaction of funding Departments. In general there is a sense (though not a consensus) that the critical voice of the sector is being silenced. One local organisation noted, once you accept funding from the State, *"you have taken the sheriff's shilling and you are compromised"*. National

organisations also felt strongly about this issue and several could point to instances where:

- they had been told by senior civil servants not to publicly criticise specific elements of Government policy,
- they were obliged to work to support interventions that they did not agree with to secure their own funding, and
- funding was reviewed, threatened and in some cases withdrawn because the organisation was seen to be overtly critical of Government policy or to have implicitly or otherwise facilitated a criticism of Government policy.

To conclude, we can note here that the overall implications of the limited and, it appears, increasingly curtailed involvement of the sector in civil and democratic society results in a situation where the equality message is fragmented within the public arena, the equality agenda has limited purchase on public opinion, and civil society is not developing alternative social models.

Section 4
Conclusions

This paper has described the current aspirations and role of community and voluntary sector organisations in articulating the interests of those experiencing inequality and the challenges they face in doing so. These challenges are significant and it appears that the sector has limited capacity to resist or circumvent them. The result is that while inequality persists in Irish society, the aspirations and potential role of the sector to be part of an effective response to this is hampered.

Overview of Findings

The evolution of the community and voluntary sector as briefly outlined in this paper notes the gradual shift in development from a group of disparate, locally derived, activist and campaigning organisations to a more sophisticated sector with local and national reach that has inserted itself into administrative and power structures with a view to influencing policy change at the highest levels in favour of equality related issues and associated target groups. There have been many positive consequences associated with the evolution of the sector, such as the development of considerable expertise and capacity to reach and engage with groups experiencing inequality and the development of the policy analysis and the negotiation skills of personnel employed in the sector. Consequently, the scope, diversity and expertise of the sector at this point in time means that community and voluntary organisations are well placed and willing to respond to issues of inequality by providing services which can meet the needs of people experiencing inequality, by increasing their capacity to participate in their communities and in society, by bringing forward the interests of these groups into policy making and decision making domains and by contributing to public awareness on equality issues. This would appear to be a win–win situation, from which the groups experiencing inequality and the statutory sector itself can benefit. Despite this, organisations operate in a funding context that frequently hampers and constrains their potential to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality rather than harnessing it for the public good and in a decision-making context that frequently ignores their contribution.

In brief, the challenges and obstacles to articulating and representing the interests of those experiencing inequality that this study identified can be summarised as follows:

- the concentration of time and effort in applying for and reporting on relatively small scale and definitively short-term funding streams with a view to delivering services that, ironically, the State itself has proved incapable of delivering – this puts obvious constraints on forward planning and the development and maintenance of capacity to engage with and respond to groups experiencing inequality,

- the concentration of intellectual effort within social partnership and other consultative mechanisms towards the achievement of what are, evidently, small-scale incremental policy and legal changes within a pre-ordained framework at the expense of the adoption of other approaches and strategies designed to achieve more fundamental change, and

- a perceived tendency on the part of the State to restrict the sector's capacity to be critical – i.e. that the State increasingly requires organisations in receipt of funding to be acquiescent with policy and political decisions, thereby limiting their advocacy role and their broader relevance to the generation of debate and to dissent within civil society.

The first critical finding of the research is that in all three of the arenas in which it seeks to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality, the legitimacy, credibility and role of the sector is increasingly being over-determined by the State. There is a sense that the power and potential of organisations within the sector (and by extension their communities and target groups) is increasingly gifted by the State and this is clearly at odds with both the sector's genesis and ethos – i.e. that of people taking (rather than being given) control over their own circumstances. At this point in time, the sector appears bedded down in a policy process that is not only yielding very little in terms of change but that is also over-determining the scope and impact of the sector's work in the other two arenas. There is a danger that the authentic mandate of the sector is being eroded and replaced by one from the State, based on compliance and the observance of policy protocols. This undermines the sector's capacity to articulate and represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality and it also undermines its claim to parity of esteem with the statutory sector.

The second critical finding is the current perception amongst organisations that the sector has little or no collective capacity to resist this infringement on its autonomy. While the contemporary community and voluntary sector is very highly skilled and has accumulated considerable expertise over the years, its skills and expertise have been largely forged within the parameters of its relationship with the State, and at national level in particular, specifically within the context of social partnership. The result is that organisations within the sector have become highly accomplished at unilateral manoeuvring within a limited space rather than on collectively resisting claims on that

space. This reflects the lack of shared or reciprocal mechanisms to progress different equality agendas in tandem and, in the view of organisations consulted for this paper, the community and voluntary sector, despite its many strengths, does not have a consensus or a shared perspective on equality issues and it lacks leadership and solidarity in relation to this.

Our research also suggests that the sector acknowledges its own 'complicity' in its acquiescence to a concentration of effort on keeping seats at the respective policy negotiation tables (with minimal return due to the technical nature of those exercises within a limited and limiting framework) rather than on the achievement of meaningful and significant equality related outcomes. Moreover, albeit from sound motivation, organisations within the sector have allowed themselves to be co-opted into significant levels of fragmented (if often high quality) service delivery based on multiple bilateral arrangements that essentially mask or salve the structural inequalities that underpin the issues they are addressing and, at the same time, remove the pressure and imperative for inclusive mainstream services and provision.

The challenges which beset the sector do not derive solely from its relationship with the State, but also from the contemporary social context and the complexity of the equality agenda itself.

In brief, we can summarise the current situation as one where the constraints impinging on the sector means that it must seek to:
- engage with groups within a very disadvantageous funding context,
- bring forward their interests in a policy context characterised by institutional conservatism,
- communicate an equality message that is

complex and on which there is not solidarity within the sector,

- engage with wider society within a limited space to do so and in the face of public complacency,
- struggle to maintain autonomy from the State in the face of increased demands for compliance, and
- work bilaterally with the State apparatus with no mechanism to allow the sector to collectively progress its interests.

References

Airey, S (2006): Communities, Voices and Change: A Report on the Policy Work of CDPs, FRCs and Partnerships. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Baker, J (2003): 'Poverty and Equality: Ten Reasons Why Anyone Who Wants to Combat Poverty Should Embrace Equality As Well'. In Poverty and Inequality: Applying an Equality Dimension to Poverty Proofing. Dublin: Equality Authority and Combat Poverty Agency.

Carnegie Trust (2007): What is Civil Society? www.democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk.

Connolly, E (2007): The Institutionalisation of Anti-Poverty Policy in the Social Partnership Process. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Crowley, N (1998): Partnership 2000: 'Empowerment or Co-option'. In P Kirby and D Jacobson (eds). In the Shadow of the Tiger, New Approaches to Combating Social Exclusion. Dublin: Dublin City University Press.

Donoghue, F (1998): Consistence and Persistence: Roles, Relationships and Resources of Irish Language Voluntary Organisations / Comhsheashmhacht agus Diansheasmhacht: Rólanna, Comhchaidrimh and Acmhainní na nEagraíochtaí Deonacha Gaeilge. Dublin: Centre for Nonprofit Management / Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge.

Duggan, C and Ronayne, T (1991): Working Partners: The State and the Community Sector. Dublin: WRC.

Duggan, C (1999): 'Locally Based Interventions to Combat Poverty and Exclusion: How Effective can they be?' In A McCashin and E O'Sullivan (eds), Irish Social Policy Review. Dublin: IPA.

Government of Ireland (2000): Supporting Voluntary Activity: A White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector. Dublin: Government Press Office.

Habib, A (2007): 'The Negotiation of Spaces in Public Governance: Conflict and Consensus in the Roles of Civil Society Organisations and Actors'. In Proceedings of the Second CNM Summer School. Dublin: Centre for Non-Profit Management, Trinity College.

Harvey, B (2003): Implementing the White Paper Supporting Voluntary Activity. Report for the CV12 Group.
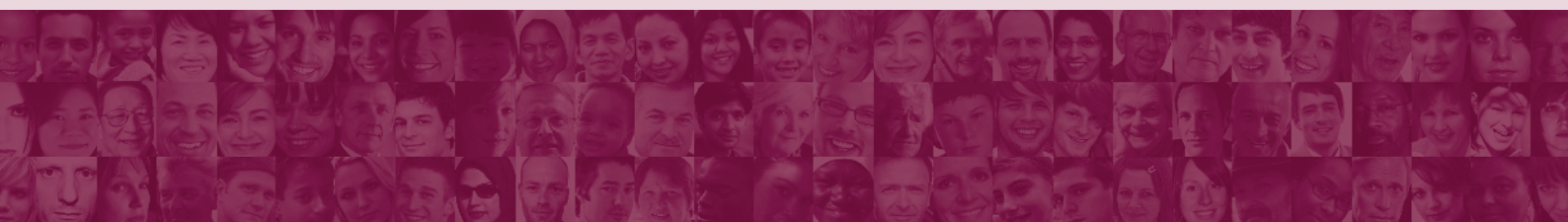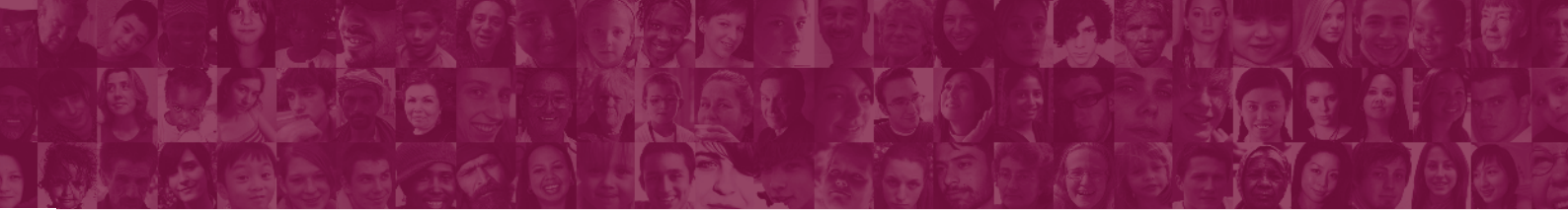
Kirby, P (1998): 'Issues Raised and Agenda for Action'. In Kirby, P and Jacobson, D (eds). In the Shadow of the Tiger, New Approaches to Combating Social Exclusion. Dublin: Dublin City University Press.

Kirby, P (2002): The Celtic Tiger in Distress: Growth with Inequality in Ireland. Palgrave.

Larragy, J (2006): 'Origins and Significance of the Community-Voluntary Pillar's Entry to Irish Social Partnership'. In Economic and Social Review, December 2006, 3.
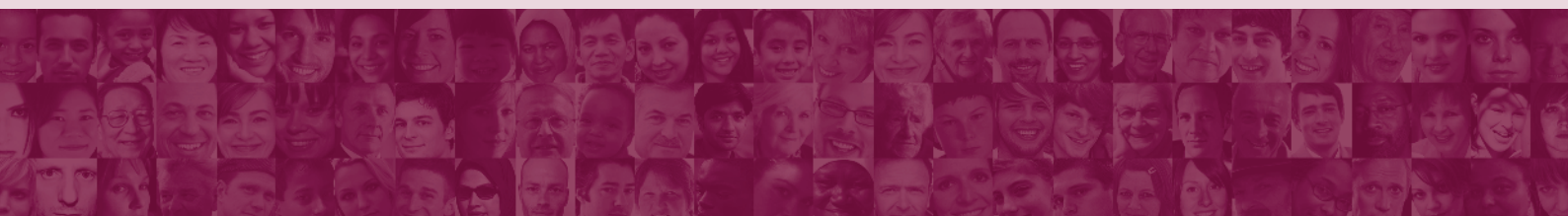
Morrissey, M, McGinn P and McDonnell B (2001): Summary of Interim Report on Research into Evaluating Community Based and Voluntary Activity in Northern Ireland, Commissioned by the Voluntary Activity Unit, Department of Social Development. Belfast: Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI).

Nolan, B, O'Connell, P, Whelan C (eds) (2000): Bust to Boom? The Irish Experience of Growth and Inequality. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Siegal, D and Yancy J (2004): Philanthropy's Forgotten Resource? Engaging the Individual Donor. California: New Visions Philanthropic Research & Development.

The Wheel (2007): Five Year Strategic Plan, 2007 – 12.

Zappone, K.E (1998): 'Top-Down or Bottom-Up: The Involvement of the Community Sector in Partnerships'. In Kirby, P and Jacobson, D (eds). In the Shadow of the Tiger, New Approaches to Combating Social Exclusion. Dublin. Dublin City University Press.

Part Two

Proceedings from a Seminar Hosted by The Equality Authority, 14 November 2007[2]

2   Work Research Co-operative also delivered a presentation on the main findings of their
    consultation paper, which is presented in full in Part One of this publication

Section 5
Welcome Address
Dr Angela Kerins, Chairperson, The Equality Authority

This conference forms part of the Equality Authority's strategy for the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All. 2007 has been designated by the EU Council and Parliament as the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All. In doing so they have emphasised a focus on:

- rights and ensuring access to information on rights under the equality legislation for groups experiencing inequality,
- representation and developing strategies to address under-representation of groups in all sectors and at all levels,
- recognition and the need to celebrate diversity in society and the contribution of different groups to society, and
- respect and the importance of building new relationships of respect between groups so as to achieve social cohesion.

The Equality Authority has sought to implement a strategy for the European Year that would do three things.

- The first objective is to celebrate the progress we have made in promoting equality, in particular the enactment of wide-ranging equality legislation and the establishment of institutions to implement the legislation. We have emphasised the need to build on this progress and further develop these mechanisms to promote equality.
- The second objective is to acknowledge the significant inequalities that persist across the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community. We have emphasised the need for positive action in policy making, employment strategies and service provision to respond to these inequalities.
- The third objective is to renew our shared ambition for equality as a society, an ambition that should encompass

achieving new opportunities, choices and outcomes for groups experiencing inequality. We have emphasised the need to ensure that this ambition is effectively pursued and widely shared.

Community and voluntary organisations have played an important role in building the success of the European Year in Ireland. They shaped the strategy for the European Year with a broad and generous participation in the consultation process. They have been to the forefront in progressing the activities planned for the European Year. In particular, community and voluntary organisations have led a set of fourteen projects to address what were identified as 'burning issues' for the European Year. These 'burning issues' are equality issues identified for each of the nine grounds as priority areas on which to achieve progress for groups experiencing inequality.

As we near the end of the European Year we are concerned to identify a longer term and practical legacy from the Year. The work of community and voluntary sector organisations on these 'burning issues' should be part of this legacy. However, the actual role and contribution of the community and voluntary sector itself in promoting equality and combating discrimination should also form part of this legacy and that is the key purpose behind today's conference.

The community and voluntary sector plays a range of roles in promoting equality and combating discrimination. The role we celebrate today and that we seek to explore is that of articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality – bringing forward the voice of groups experiencing inequality so that this voice can shape planning, policy making and programme development.

We hope that today's event will contribute to a legacy from the European Year whereby the role of community and voluntary organisations from across the nine grounds in articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality is:
– acknowledged and celebrated,
– resourced and adequately funded, and
– afforded access to the key decision-making arenas.

Opening Address

Mr Éamon Ó Cuív T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

(note from presentation made)

Minister Ó Cuív commenced by saying that inequality remains a major challenge in Ireland, and recalling that the Constitution declares all citizens to be equal before the law. While the Constitution is supplemented by Equality Acts, law on its own cannot deliver equality. Society is unequal in many ways and the Government must ameliorate this situation.

Inequality is a broad concept, therefore it is difficult to determine what public sector projects tackle it directly. However, the majority of the €0.5 billion spent by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is used in schemes related to this issue. Schemes working with those without a fair share of societal resources are contributing to equality.

The Minister commented on expressions of agreement and support for integration and equality which are not underpinned by real conviction or action. Some people are slow to implement equality legislation and procedures and even manage to justify discrimination. There is a need to fight subtle, insidious inequalities.

The concept of equal opportunity for all is not simple, noting for instance, that the availability of a grant does not provide everyone with a genuine opportunity to go to a third-level college. Where one is born has much influence on one's educational achievements and even on life expectancy, e.g. for members the Traveller community. Societal factors prevent people from exercising their rights, despite legal protection against discrimination. There is therefore a need to look at society as a whole, and to bridge the gap between Government and communities regarding subtle discrimination and inequalities.

The RAPID Programme is one which involves local people on committees as equals with State agencies to discuss development in their own area. This is fundamental to equality, and the views of local people should have a high weighting on such panels. People need a real voice and a real say in what happens in their areas. National networks and federations are receiving an extra €10 million per annum, and the Minister emphasised their importance. There is a need for inter-linkages between the delivery of services and knowing what problems need to be tackled.

With regard to partnership companies under the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, disadvantage and lack of access to services is not simply spatial. National schemes and NGOs are required to assist all those who require help, including, for instance, disadvantaged people living in affluent areas.

In relation to community development projects, Minister Ó Cuív emphasised the need to focus services in areas that require them as soon as possible, referring to the rapid social change in Ireland, especially in relation to new ethnic groups. Data can quickly become obsolete in a time of rapid change and the Minister noted that he would be using 2006 Census data to ensure services are properly focused on areas with new needs.

The Minister ended by noting that the community and voluntary sector has a vital role in determining the concerns and issues of marginalised groups and in articulating this agenda to the Government. Society should aim for true equality so that a person does not have to take a legal challenge to ensure his or her rights are upheld. However, Ireland remains some distance from that reality at this point.

The Social Partnership Process: Reflections on the Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Mr Dermot McCarthy, Secretary General, Department of An Taoiseach

(note from presentation made)

Mr McCarthy presented the challenge of globalisation as the context within which one should view social partnership. Ireland has long been part of the global economy, in particular by supplying labour to match with international capital where comparative advantage deemed it should be deployed. For decades Ireland experienced an outflow of capital and people. However, the reverse is now occurring due to technological developments and changes in the organisation of economic activity. Advances in recent decades have been due to a more benign process of globalisation from an Irish perspective, with the Celtic Tiger resulting from a range of factors, including the evolution of the EU, the development of multi-national corporations and the emergence of English as the language of business. The combination of these factors has led to the matching of capital and labour in Ireland.

The Irish experience of globalisation was not always benign. For several decades following independence, Ireland experienced underdevelopment, unemployment and emigration. It could be argued that social partnership was designed, in part, to mobilise Ireland's capacity to be successful in a global environment. Competitiveness is required for countries as well as for companies, and public policy has a role to play in ensuring country competitiveness. However, a strong State does not have to be a big State, and Ireland does not have a particularly high proportion of its GNP as public expenditure. The State has a duty and an obligation to create an environment where people, businesses and civil society can develop and prosper, but also an environment which is adaptable on the basis of international developments. However, a successful national system of innovation requires wider community and society involvement. Traditional levers of

public policy no longer work in the globalised climate and Government decisions made in isolation can be weak. To succeed in a global environment, a new form of governance is required, which includes engagement with other actors.

Social partnership, which emerged in the late 1980s, was intended to create a governance process capable of mobilising resources to allow a consistent set of public policies to reinforce positive decisions about investment and behaviour by trades unions, the civil service, companies and other civil actors. An optimistic view of this process is justified, despite some disappointments, and it can be seen as the working out of the 'developmental welfare State'. It has led to a system of innovation where the ultimate goal is not just economic prosperity but true social, cultural and democratic participation. This requires clever, flexible policy around incomes, public services and private services. Targeted measures are required to enable families, communities and individuals to reach their full potential and to avoid the subtle exclusion and inequality to which Minister Ó Cuív referred.

Mr McCarthy noted that social partnership is not unique to Ireland, but has existed in other European countries for many years. Recently the EU has noted that various objectives, including those of the Lisbon Strategy to make the EU a competitive and knowledge based economy, cannot be implemented by Governments alone. EU member States are therefore being encouraged to establish national partnerships involving players in civil society. Thus, the Irish experience has parallels with the evolving EU social model.

Turning to the breadth and depth of dialogue within social partnership, Mr McCarthy noted that, up until the 1990s, social partnership had not included NGOs. As regards the breadth of dialogue, the process of social partnership will never be 'complete' – for example, a current challenge is how to bring organisations with capacity and insight regarding environmental sustainability into the process. The Irish record regarding the depth of dialogue in social partnership is more mixed. Positive effects include the development of understanding among different actors of how policy and other processes operate, the likely reactions to potential policy initiatives, and a deeper understanding of the context within which agents work and their consequent limitations. However, this process is not complete.

Social partnership is not simply about recognition of a problem but rather creating and defining a solution. Policy is about the feasible and the do-able, not the worthy, the brave or even the necessary. Thus, the focus of those working in advocacy needs to be on what is achievable, and what will be effective. Such organisations need to be explicit about their goals and to be aware of the different possible implications of policies. It is also important to identify, measure and acknowledge progress. If resources and knowledge are combined to create change, it is unlikely that there will be no effect.

Mr McCarthy also noted the importance of personal relationships in policy development and the necessity of trust within and across organisations, emphasising the need to look beyond structures and formal procedures. For all social partnership agents, it is important to build up a network of personal relationships. Social and cultural development is as important as economic development. So there is a particular requirement for those primarily involved in economic issues to think how they can contribute to the creation of a better environment for improving social goals, and equally a necessity for those involved in social and cultural projects to engage with economic issues and actors.

In his conclusion Mr McCarthy noted that Ireland has advantages regarding the pursuit of equality as there is a shared belief in the importance of inclusion and equality. There has been a record increase in social spending in Ireland, while such funding has been cut by other EU countries. Ireland has a healthy civil society due to the involvement of the social and community sector in social partnership, and a challenge is to recognise the potential that these developments create. NGOs need to draw on these strengths to face a potentially difficult period ahead.

The Importance of the Community and Voluntary Sector Within Participative Democracy

Ms Paula Clancy, Director, TASC think tank for social change

Two major pieces of TASC work – the Democracy Commission and the Democratic Audit Ireland Project – describe the environment within which NGOs struggle to find a voice, particularly those NGOs whose role and function is to articulate and advance the interests of groups experiencing inequality in Irish society.

One of the strengths of the Democracy Commission was in fact the range of voices heard, both in written submissions and in meetings and events of various kinds. In April of this year TASC published the main report of the Democratic Audit Project: ' Power to the People?: Assessing Democracy in Ireland'. It is wide-ranging, evidence-based, analytical and critical, and draws on the most up-to-date material available. In essence, it assesses the extent to which Ireland's Governmental institutions and processes embody the two basic principles of democracy:

- popular control over public decision making and decision makers, and
- equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.

I have cherry-picked from these reports a number of aspects of the public decision-making environment which together provide some insights of relevance to the voluntary sector.

Firstly, in Ireland, the governing environment is one where decisions are taken by a relatively small number of people, where the permanence of the civil service is now almost matched by the permanence of the Government, and where the structures create the conditions where all avenues for discussion, debate and ultimately decision making are controlled to a very high degree by the Taoiseach and his Cabinet.

If we look at where we are internationally, Ireland rates alongside Britain and Greece as one of the most executive-dominated parliaments in Europe. In-built Government majorities on parliamentary committees, combined with exceedingly tight party discipline over TDs, Government ability to guillotine debate and discussion of important legislation, and the transposition of EU directives into Irish law, all severely limit the opportunities for real input. Parliamentary questions are a very extensively used means of both getting information and putting issues into the public domain. However, the Government's control over the allocation of Dáil time and the rules governing the answering of Parliamentary Questions mean that they too are limited in value. Opposition parties in the Dáil can work effectively with the media and public opinion (including representative NGOs) to highlight serious policy or administrative failures but systematic scrutiny and capacity to hold to account is limited.

Traditionally, control and implementation of public policy has been finely balanced between senior civil servants and their political masters. But while there have been various efforts made to clarify the respective responsibilities of the Minister and the Secretary General of a Government Department the conclusion of the audit is that the question of relative responsibilities and, ultimately, accountability remains essentially unresolved.

The net effect of all of this, and the problem for both individual citizens and NGOs, is that the Dáil, our representative structure and direct line of access to decision making, is essentially sidelined.

Centralisation of decision-making

Along with a very concentrated degree of decision making at the centre nationally, Ireland also has one of the most centrally controlled systems of local Government. Part of the reason for this degree of centralisation may be an historical distrust of local politicians by the centre. More recently, abuses of the physical planning legislation and unwillingness at the local level to face up to waste management issues, may have reinforced this perspective. However, it remains the case that it is at local level that you find the best opportunities for participation in decision-making.

Government has acknowledged this centralisation. A range of new structures was put in place at local level under the Local Government Act of 2001, with the stated purpose of restoring real decision making to local authorities and their local residents. These include county development boards, strategic policy committees and community fora. The last 20 years have seen an emphasis at local level on the development of partnerships among the public, private and voluntary sectors which mirror the social partnership at national level. The problem is that the opportunities under these structures for actual decision making are generally held to be more illusory than real. While these structures allow for more diverse composition, many of the individuals, groups and agencies represented are not accountable to local communities. For example, Government Departments and national public agencies all take their decisions at national level. Some time ago the Department of the Environment commissioned a review of the effectiveness of county development boards. The report's overall conclusion is salutary. It notes:

'A key determinant of the ultimate success of the CDB model is commitment, support and flexibility at central Government Department and agency level. The county/ city level cannot go very far past where the central level wishes or allows it to go'.

As a result, the audit concludes that the establishment of many local development agencies has actually diluted the already limited democratic accountability of the local public policy decision making process without any clearly identifiable or quantifiable gain.

Outsourcing of Government

Paradoxically, one of the effects of increased centralisation is increased outsourcing of Government to national agencies. Responsibility to implement county and regional plans falls to these national agencies to actually deliver local or regional services.

This outsourcing of Government is a feature of the structure of the Irish State which has escaped the attention of most of us. Public bodies have grown exponentially over the last ten years, and many of these impact significantly on people's lives. We now have approximately 800 public bodies throughout the country, with in excess of 6,000 members, usually headed and run by non-elected individuals. Historically, accountability of public bodies has been poor and various calls for stronger Dáil scrutiny have been largely unsuccessful. This is actually very important to understanding how, where and by whom decisions are taken and where ultimate responsibility rests. Research we have done in TASC shows that public bodies have long since ceased to be merely an adjunct to the main work of Government. Many are extremely significant in the public functions they perform,

the scale of public expenditure they control and their sheer size as public sector employers. The HSE is probably the most significant in scale and import. The TASC research showed that the public bodies of four Departments – Health and Children; Communications; Arts and Sport; and Enterprise, Trade and Employment – account for some 40% of each Department's overall annual budget.

NGOs and participative democracy

While government refers to the traditional institutions of central and local Government, governance refers to partnerships and networks between a broad range of public and private agencies, this latter including the not-for-profit sector. This trend from government to governance, from a hierarchical structure to networks, has complicated the relationship between civil society and organs of the State. In Ireland we have a wide range of organisations in the non-profit sector of which the voluntary and community sector is a subset.

The role of the community and voluntary sector in public life has become more formalised through the social partnership process at national level and via area-based partnerships at the local level. The Irish version of social partnership is unique in Europe. One of the reasons for this is because of the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in national agreements. And since 1993, selected voluntary organisations have been chosen by Government to become full members of the National Economic and Social Forum and are also represented on the National and Economic and Social Council, where the sector has five seats. The audit concludes that in the round, this distinctive system of social partnership is a positive. It has evolved to include a wider

range of interests and organisations than would generally be the case elsewhere. A significant proportion of the Irish adult population is involved to some degree in the social partnership process. This makes it by far the most important means by which conflicting interests are reconciled and Government policy influenced.

The critical question for this audience is whether participation in social partnership provides a useful vehicle for NGOs to influence decision making. This is certainly contested territory, both within and outside the sector.

In the course of receiving submissions and meeting a whole range of groups, the Democracy Commission heard a number of very negative views about social partnership: that it has built up layers that have alienated people at the local level; that it is an attempt by the State to regulate and coordinate the community and voluntary sector; that the community and voluntary sector's independence has been eroded due to the way in which funding is delivered and the conditions attached to it; and that Governments cooperate with benign community and voluntary groups while those organisations that follow a more confrontational path risk losing funding. The Commission also heard counterviews: that the dialogue created between different players within the community and voluntary sector is positive, as is the increased access to the institutions of Government and the inclusion of the sector's issues on national agendas.

Participation by the sector certainly gives additional credibility to the social partnership process, which helps to give the sector sufficient leverage to extract some concessions. In addition, the ongoing access to Government

afforded within committees and various fora connected with partnership is prized as a means of influencing policy and making other partners aware of issues. But it is not without its problems and among them is that the capacity of the Community and Voluntary Pillar of social partnership to have real impact is dependent on the good will of the Government of the day. Trade unions and employers have considerable leverage with Government, but as former Taoiseach, John Bruton points out in 'Saving the Future' a recent book on Social Partnership, 'not all partners are equal'. Many believe that this power imbalance compromises the Community and Voluntary Pillar to an unacceptable level. For example, in the same book Mike Allen, the former general secretary of the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed, notes that involvement militates against the emergence of a 'radical, challenging, critical community sector'.

Civil Society and the New Conservatism

The points I have been making concern what might be called structural barriers to the capacity of NGOs to represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality. I want to end by raising a potentially more challenging issue and that is the question of political and public sector willingness to address these barriers. What I mean by this is that active discouragement by Government and public service of the advocacy role of NGOs is a real concern to many activists and with some reason.

Recently I came across a discussion of the way in which the State is responding to civil society. The reference was specific to Britain and Australia, but it has resonances for recent developments here in Ireland as well. The argument noted the following:

> 'although social democratic parties have a more natural affinity with civil society, it is in fact the new conservatism that has an encompassing idea of the role of civil society, and, where it is in power, is transforming civil society in accord with its own political vision. Thus, conservative Governments strongly support the role of NGOs as service providers and while sympathetic to the service delivery role of charities, the same conservative Governments are hostile to NGOs when they engage in advocacy or political engagement, because they are seen as being self-serving and lacking legitimacy'

A recent policy submission by the Combat Poverty Agency on the community development programme which is to take us to 2013 is interesting in this regard. The Agency is sufficiently concerned that the State's interpretation of the function of the community development programme is one solely of service provision that it feels it is necessary to make the argument that the State should through its funding programme:

> 'recognise and value the independence of community voices and the empowerment of local people to collectively organise to change the way current systems and approaches may reproduce poverty and disadvantage'.

To sum up, while there has been real and welcome shifts in the ways in which the State engages with the voluntary sector, at many levels the space for real representation of the interests of those who are currently marginalised is still very much in the realm of 'grace and favour' by those who hold power. The challenge is to make that space one of right rather than privilege.

The Experience of Articulating and Representing the Interests of One-Parent Families

Ms Frances Byrne, CEO, OPEN

I had a sense of unease about speaking here as I love the organisation I work for with a passion usually reserved for my children and the Dublin Senior Football team; however, it is of course the case that we don't get everything right in OPEN, so I am not here as an expert with a perfect organisation to 'showcase'. We accepted the invitation to be here because we believe that this is an important time for our sector, because we wanted to support the Equality Authority's initiative in commissioning the report on the 'Roles and Aspirations of the Sector in Articulating and Representing the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality' and in organising this event; and because we thought that it was about time that instead of giving out we stick our heads slightly above the parapet.

While I will refer to the past, it also seemed most useful to focus on our recent history, mainly because we believe that the post-2003 era when 19 national organisations effectively disengaged from social partnership was something of a (as yet under-analysed) watershed for the sector. I wish to re-emphasise that this is strictly OPEN's experience. There are groups, some of whom were consulted for the Equality Authority report, who have quite different stories to relate, groups who will have experienced exclusion from structures and fora which in any modern democracy would have naturally included them, social partnership or no social partnership. That has not been our experience. For example, when the Government introduced proposals for lone parents and others last year, we were and continue to be one of the groups consulted with both at the invitation of Government and at our request at various stages. This continues to be the case as different State agencies now grapple with the implications of what Government is proposing.

In 1994 OPEN's founding member groups identified two objectives for their national network: capacity building of local lone parent groups; and seeking to have a policy voice at national level. Therefore it was always intended that we would engage in policy work. At this stage we seek to influence and inform policy development and its implementation. From an equality perspective, it is important to emphasise that in 1994, as today, the greatest inequality facing lone parents and our children is in relation to income, therefore an anti-poverty focus has always been central to both our capacity-building and policy work. In that context, however, we have also always been focused on the recognition of family diversity, access to appropriate public services, promoting economic independence and improving the quality of life for lone parents and our children.

In preparing for today, I have been reflecting on how we go about 'actioning' these core objectives and what principles and strategies inform our work. These would include: pragmatism; opportunism; realism; expertise; mandate; and credibility.

Working with and Empowering Groups Experiencing Inequality
Outreach; Engagement; Transforming; Identifying interests

OPEN is led by a board made up of lone parents who are both nominated and elected by our member groups. Decision-making is vested with the board. We engage in a range of activities. In the last few years we have invested heavily in developing and delivering an accredited leadership/advocacy training programme within the organisation. This is a core capacity building activity for us but is intrinsically linked

with both of our core objectives. We can't be mandated, and therefore credible, without a firm membership base. The main motivation was to develop leadership at local level so that groups could be placed on a more sustainable footing. As well as the communications, advocacy and fund-raising elements of the training requested by member groups, a unit on developing coalitions of interest was also devised. This is a theme which I would like to return to later.

Sustainability is of course not only an internal challenge for organisations like ours. The angst and anxiety about receiving State funding is a 'live' issue at local and national levels.

I think that there is also a need to examine the relationship between groups and the various philanthropic bodies which now fund much of the sector's policy work at national level – perhaps this is a topic for further study? However, we should not of course assume that all of the problems we face are external in genesis. The lack or perceived lack of collective capacity is also an issue not entirely separate from the funding relationship between the sector and its supporters, but also not entirely enmeshed within it.

Engaging at Policy and Decision-making Level
Working with statutory agencies; participation in consultative and review fora; participation in policy consultation processes; bi-lateral relationships with Government Departments/ State agencies; participation in social partnership

In OPEN we seek opportunities to engage with decision-making fora: we work with statutory agencies; we participate in consultative and review fora; we participate in policy consultation processes; we have bi-lateral relationships with Government Departments and State agencies; and as of earlier this year we are participating again in social partnership. We have had some successes and given the concerns expressed across the sector, it is good to record that much of our accomplishment has come from joint projects with other organisations, where we identified both issues of common concern as well as organisations we could develop alliances with in a meaningful way. Some examples include:

- the development of the 'Out of the Traps' multi-annual study with our colleagues in the European Anti-Poverty Network – its findings influenced some significant changes in last year's Budget and the Department of Social and Family Affairs is now supporting the development of the study; and
- with Threshold, we have developed a housing and accommodation project which has encompassed both research on housing standards for one-parent families as well as a programme of work between both organisations and the Department of Environment and Local Government, which will influence the implementation of the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

Similarly, along with some other NGOs, we were invited by MANDATE to join a short, sharp and ultimately successful campaign on securing a basic cash increase for low paid workers in the 18-month review of the National Agreement, which ironically some of us could not endorse.

Engaging with Civil and Democratic Society
Impacting on the representative democratic process; contributing to civil society; using and influencing the media; engaging with the general public

Again, OPEN operates, or at least attempts to, in the spaces described in this third area. One of the advantages of the clientelist system is that our politicians are very accessible, so that's the easy bit. Our work in the other spaces is more problematic and in relation to contributing to civil society and engaging with the general public, I think we have a long, long way to go. With regard to the media, the sector is very hard on itself. Only those in receipt of private funding of one kind or another can afford to employ communications experts and given that reality, I think we actually do okay. That said, I think that organisations could be much better at playing to their strengths and there is the appearance of much duplication especially at this time of the year when we are usually so busy. The issue of engaging with the media deserves an event all to itself.

I should make it clear that some of the outputs and outcomes of which we are most proud actually cross all three arenas of influence outlined above: our debt research 'Do The Poor Pay More?' arose from ongoing consultation work (arena 1) we did with groups in the Mid-West, where the crippling debt of one-parent families was highlighted; we then identified two potential allies (arena 2) – the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and the St Vincent De Paul – who supported this work; and we adopted a communications strategy (arena 3) which resulted in unprecedented print, broadcast and web coverage for quite some time. It has also led to additional actions in all three arenas for the organisation.

Similarly, the work we are undertaking with Threshold has its roots in our member groups' identification of housing and accommodation as a major issue for one-parent families; our recently launched 'Everybody Knows…' pack

was designed primarily in response to members' needs to be able to respond locally on media, as well as in their work with local agencies etc to combat some of the myths and stereotypes about one-parent families (arena 1 and 2); and our low-level communications strategy has actually meant that we are in need of a second print run (arena 3).

So what informs the cross-cutting strategies used by or attempted by OPEN? Some of it has to do with our history as an organisation. We were tiny when we were founded and represented an under-counted, almost hidden minority. So it was a pragmatic decision to build alliances with others – we jumped on the Community Platform train at an early stage – seeing an opportunity to jump on the coat-tails of others and my predecessor and our first few boards were utterly up-front about this. We were also working as a stigmatised target group – it's easy to forget that much of what is said on late night radio shows and other places about asylum seekers now is exactly what was said about lone parents until very recently and hasn't gone away.

We joined a number of bigger national and, indeed, international organisations, in order to punch above our weight by influencing their policy agendas. We knew we were diverse although we didn't have the evidence to show this in the absence of data and research, so the ability to commission as well as conduct research was an important goal from the beginning. Our credibility as an organisation has always been based on the combination of our membership mandate and our ability to add to the evidence base about one-parent families. Capacity building to secure both our mandate and our expertise was and is a core goal of our organisation. We therefore operated from a perspective of having very low expectations.

We were facing an uphill struggle and we knew it: is that realism?

We have had successes of which we are very proud, but we have also faced frustrating, overwhelming challenges. For example, I am here today as the CEO of a national, membership-based organisation, which provides a unique set of supports and services to over 90 community-based organisations. As of yesterday, we are on our third 'extension, this year of what was promised in the White Paper on the sector as multi-annual core funding. As a national anti-poverty network, we have found ourselves in the invidious position of having the scheme which funds our work since the late 1990s ended earlier this year, following a review. The only participation OPEN and other networks had in this review was the completion of a survey. The decision to terminate the funding scheme was communicated via letter, and we have not been allowed to see the report which led to this decision, although it was of course paid for by public funds.

I assume that by putting these facts before you, we will not find ourselves the butt of threats and worse to funding which other NGOs have experienced. And of course we are not alone. It is astounding that although we now have a Government Minister dedicated to integration – a most welcome development – there is no plan to support the work of the organisations at national or local level who work in this important area. Are the advocacy, information, legal, capacity building and other vital and acknowledged needs of the immigrants who are needed to live and work here not deserving of support from the public purse? In OPEN we find that incredible.

There are of course other struggles, financial support is just one element. In the absence of secure funding, however, we are sapped by the effort to attract bits and pieces of funding for 'doing the State some service'.

This brings me to the internal challenges for organisations like OPEN and I suspect others. At the beginning of this input I cited our leadership/ advocacy training programme. An element of the programme is 'building coalitions of interest'. This, in 2003 and 2004, reflected a sense, particularly post the Community Platform's decision not to endorse the national agreement, that there was a need to re-build some joint cross-issue work as well as a comfort at local level with working in solidarity with others.

There was, therefore, energy and appetite at local level for joint initiatives. What's fascinating though is the parallel national situation. In March 2003, there were 26 groups in the Community Platform[3]. Representatives from nine of those groups had formed the Platform's negotiating team in the talks which culminated in 'Sustaining Progress'. Nineteen of those groups, following intensive internal as well as joint analysis and deliberations, decided that they could not support the national agreement. OPEN was one of those groups. The Platform's decision which was articulated at the time was to reject the agreement, not social partnership as such. There was talk, and even an announcement, of

---

3   Age Action Ireland; Community Action Network; Community Workers Co-operative; European Anti-Poverty Network; Forum of People with Disabilities; Gay and Lesbian Equality Network; Irish Association of Older People; Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed; Irish Penal Reform Trust; Irish Refugee Council; Irish Rural Link; Irish Traveller Movement; National Adult Literacy Agency; National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services; National Traveller Women's Forum; National Women's Council of Ireland; Older Women's Network; OPEN; Pavee Point; Rape Crisis Network Ireland; Simon Communities of Ireland; Society of St Vincent de Paul; Threshold; Vincentian Partnership for Justice; Voluntary Drug Treatment Network; Women's Aid

the formation of an equality alliance. This did not happen in spite of broad support from across the Platform as well as the wider sector. Why? The concentration of intellectual and campaigning effort was effectively, if temporarily over.

Why therefore, did the energy not switch to an equality alliance? Within months some of us did become involved in opposing efforts to roll back community employment and three platform organisations, including OPEN, later that year initiated a campaign to fight the so called 'Savage Sixteen'. But where was the collective capacity? Where was the articulation of an alternative analysis to the prevailing neo-liberal ideology? The decision not to support the national agreement and its resulting consequences for that bit of the sector which is most comfortable with the equality/anti-poverty tag is now the subject of several forthcoming doctorates. I don't meanwhile have the answer as to why such a movement did not evolve.

The fact is we didn't develop an alternative analysis and this is now hugely problematic for us. It affects our standing, for want of a better word, among policy makers. It means that there is an almost unchallenged perception that equality/poverty, etc., are 'over'. (Indeed I note at times even among our own sector that there is a notion that inequalities between men and women are resolved, as the need for gender balance on representative structures is questioned.) Worst of all, it affects the everyday lives of the individuals, families and communities who haven't just been left behind by the Celtic Tiger, but were already severely marginalised before we got rich. Of course for those who attempt to provide leadership in an unpaid or paid capacity, it also affects morale within our sector which in turn leads to reduced energy,

appetite or even interest in working together or with our natural or indeed unusual allies which, of course, then further diminishes our impact as activists and so on.

Is it all doom and gloom? I would like to suggest that we consider some options:

1. We seek a combination of State and private funding to support research on the issues raised in the report commissioned by the Equality Authority. We may not receive public funding, but we should certainly seek it.

2. Before we attempt to build a shared analysis, as suggested, that we look at current and forthcoming developments in order to engage in some collective actions – in short I think we need a few wins:

   a. There are, coinciding with the KAL case[4], opportunities for equality organisations, and others, to come together to build a campaign for equal civil marriage – why not?

   b. Thanks to the initiative of the Dublin Employment Pact , a hugely important project has been developing, which now involves more than 60 sector organisations coming together with the trade union sector at the highest levels to establish and improve employment standards and conditions as well as increase trade union membership within our sector. This represents a significant opportunity for us to further our relationships with a natural ally – why not get involved?

   c. We encourage the Equality Authority and other statutory agencies to facilitate further

---

4   The legal case initiated by Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan, to seek legal recognition of their Canadian marriage by the Irish State.

welcome opportunities like this, with a view to examining issues which we now know are of universal concern: funding; internal capacity; the expertise–mandate–credibility continuum and all of the challenges that emerge; service delivery *v* advocacy; influencing the media, to name but a few; and I hope that we also facilitate our own events.

My rationale for this approach is that we will not be able to develop anything like a coherent analysis unless we come together on relevant and universal issues. For some organisations, and let's be honest about this, we also need to re-establish trust with each other. There have been bruising disappointments – where was the voice and indeed presence of the sector when Citizen Traveller got dumped? There were no more than 30 of us outside the Department at the ensuing protest. Where were OPEN's natural allies when journalist Kevin Myers had a go at our children? Where was the unified response when Pavee Point's future was directly threatened a few months ago? Why are we not up in arms collectively about the steadfast refusal to fund through integration funding the organisations supporting immigrants?

In the absence of re-connecting with each other realistically and respectfully, we will not be able to develop an analysis and we will continue to work away in our territorial boxes doing worthwhile work but with the same frustration and fear that permeates much of the sector now and with much lost ground.

We can be opportunistic, credible and play to our strengths. Our diversity of perspective, experience and history is one of those strengths. We can take our space and place confidently and collectively and then develop a meaningful

shared analysis which informs our work and the development of our sector. Indeed the reason why we got over our reluctance to speak here today is that as a membership organisation led by people who continue to experience marginalisation, we are keen to work with like-minded organisations to build such an analysis and we are committed to working through all of the challenges which will undoubtedly emerge. OPEN, though, would emphasise that we have a bottom line, summed up in a statement contained in 'Overcoming Human Poverty', the United Nations Development Programme's Report in 2000:

> *"The foundation of poverty reduction is self-organisation of the poor at the community level – the best antidote to powerlessness, a central source of poverty. What the poor most need, therefore, are resources to build their organisational capacity."*

We look forward to hearing your bottom line.

Achieving Equality of Representation for Groups Experiencing Inequality

Mr Niall Crowley, CEO, The Equality Authority

In this European Year of Equal Opportunities for All it is important to acknowledge the significant and persistent inequalities in our society. There is evidence of these inequalities in the workplace and in access to key social goods such as education, accommodation and health.

In such a context, the voice of people and groups experiencing inequality is important. The effective promotion of equality depends on finding the means to bring forward this voice, to ensure it is heard and to enable it to have influence. Community organisations rooted in communities that experience inequality provide one important mechanism to ensure that this voice and these interests are articulated.

Today's conference is therefore rooted in the potential for community organisations, nationally and locally, to contribute to equality through articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality. It is a celebration of the endeavour of these organisations in doing this work. It is an exploration of this work and the difficulties encountered in this work, with a view to building an agenda to ensure a quality to and an effectiveness for this work.

This focus on community organisations is not to deny the importance and contribution of many other non-community based NGOs in providing and supporting a demand for greater equality in our society. Their work and the particular barriers they face in making their contribution should be the focus for attention in further work on the role of the sector in bringing forward the interests of people who experience inequality.

Equality Authority

The Equality Authority was established with a broad mandate to promote equality of opportunity and to combat discrimination in the areas covered by our equality legislation. The Employment Equality Acts prohibit discrimination in the workplace and vocational training. The Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, education and accommodation. Both Acts cover the nine grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community.

It is of note that the Equality Authority has sought to have the equality legislation further developed to include positive duties on the public sector to have due regard to equality in carrying out their functions. This type of provision could offer a valuable legal basis for a new engagement between policy makers and community organisations articulating and representing the interests of groups experiencing inequality. In Northern Ireland, where a positive duty of this kind pertains, public sector bodies are required to consult with community organisations in the preparation of equality schemes and in the conduct of equality impact assessments.

The Equality Authority has implemented its mandate to promote equality of opportunity based on a particular understanding of equality. This understanding seeks to achieve equality for individuals and groups from across the nine grounds in four interlinked fields: the economic, the cultural, the caring and the political.

The economic field is concerned with equality in access to and distribution of resources. Resources include income, employment, education, health and accommodation. The objective of economic equality will involve a significant redistribution of resources. It is concerned with people having meaningful choices and the freedom and capacity to make such choices between real options.

Cultural equality focuses on the issue of difference. Difference encompasses the identity, experience and situation shared by members of a particular group. The objective of cultural equality is about the extent to which difference is acknowledged and valued. It is about giving actual expression to this valuing of difference in terms of legislation, policy, procedure and practice that takes account of the practical implications of difference for groups across the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation.

The caring field focuses attention on the experiences of violence, of physical and verbal abuse, of isolation and lack of social contact, of disrespect and of exclusion among groups experiencing inequality. Caring equality involves equality in access to relationships of care, solidarity, respect and trust.

Finally, political equality involves access to decision making. It involves access to and participation in the democratic institutions of society – both representative and participatory – alongside a wider participation for groups experiencing inequality in decision making in the workplace and in the provision of public sector goods and services.

These four sets of equality objectives are inter-linked. Progress on any one of these sets of objectives requires progress on all four sets of objectives. Equality in the political domain, in access to decision making, is central therefore to any ambition for a more equal society.

Community groups articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality have a key role to play in this area of political equality in securing access for groups experiencing inequality to having a say in decision making. This access to decision making should:
– shape the distribution of resources at work, in public sector service provision and in budgetary planning,
– influence the terms on which these resources are made available such that the practical implications of diversity are taken into account, and
– form the basis for new relationships of respect and solidarity for individuals and groups experiencing inequality.

The achievement of equality across the nine grounds covered by our equality legislation requires that individuals and groups experiencing inequality achieve equality in access to decision making. This access requires:
– the identification of the shared needs and interests of individuals and groups experiencing inequality,
– the capacity to articulate these needs and interests and to negotiate a response to them, the participation of individuals and groups experiencing inequality in decision-making processes at work, in public sector service provision and in policy making and planning at national and local level, and
– the resources to organise and to develop and apply a capacity to participate in decision-making processes.

Community organisations are a key mechanism to achieve this access. It is clear, however, that effective access poses challenges to community organisations, to the community and voluntary sector and to a wider context of relevant institutions beyond the community and voluntary sector. I want to explore the challenges to each of these three sets of organisations.

Challenges

There are five challenges to community organisations in contributing to an effective articulation of interests of groups experiencing

inequality. These challenges relate to accountability, empowerment, capacity, independence and advocacy.

Accountability is a core responsibility to ensure that the organisation is giving a voice to communities experiencing inequality across the nine grounds. The community must be at the heart of processes to develop agendas for change that are then articulated by the community organisations. Formal and informal processes of dialogue and of feedback ensure that this agenda is renewed and kept up to date and that progress sought by the community organisation contributes to achieving this agenda of change.

Empowerment is linked to this accountability. Community organisations play a key role in building the capacity of communities to identify their shared needs and interests and to bring forward change agendas that are relevant and can achieve progress in the current context.

The capacity of the community organisation itself is also important. Does it contain the skills and knowledge to effectively communicate the needs and interests of the community and to bring these needs and interests into decision-making processes and negotiate progress on the agenda for change established? How can the community organisation develop or access such skills and knowledge to be effective in these difficult areas of communication and negotiation.

Independence is a key factor. Community organisations are often funded by institutions they seek to influence and negotiate with. Personal relationships are built through the negotiation process. This funding and these relationships are important if the community organisations are to be effective in articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

However an independence must also be prized to ensure that the core accountability to the community is not compromised.

Finally, the challenge of advocacy focuses attention on the particular but important role that can be played by community organisations in bringing forward the voices of individuals experiencing inequality through a variety of legal processes. Community organisations have effectively advanced equality and the interests of groups experiencing inequality through this advocacy. It is important, however, to ensure that the necessary skills and knowledge are available within the organisation, and that the necessary resources are secured and committed to this advocacy work.

There are three challenges then to the wider community and voluntary sector – challenges of inclusion, solidarity and ambition.

Access to decision making is increasingly mediated through structures established by or established for the community and voluntary sector. It is important to ensure that these structures are inclusive of community organisations from across the nine grounds.

Solidarity is also a challenge within such structures when representation is being organised and decided on for dialogue or negotiation processes with the statutory sector or within social partnership. Solidarity would ensure that representation includes community organisations articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality.

Finally, there is the challenge of ambition where community and voluntary sector structures develop a shared agenda to bring forward into dialogue with the statutory sector or negotiation within social partnership. Such shared agendas

inevitably involve a trading process between the organisations involved. It is important that this trading process is guided by an ambition for equality in contributing to an agenda that takes account of diversity and that can achieve change in the situation and experience of all groups experiencing inequality.

There are challenges to institutions beyond the community and voluntary sector in achieving equality of access to decision making for groups experiencing inequality, challenges to the statutory sector, but also to the other pillars of social partnership. These are challenges of recognition, resourcing and solidarity.

Recognition is a core challenge to the statutory sector. Recognition involves an appreciation of the role played by community organisations in articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality and an acceptance that this articulation of interests can involve criticism, dissent and anger. Recognition is a key starting point for an effective engagement between the statutory sector and community organisations.

Resources are central to underpinning the effectiveness of community organisations in articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality. Resources dedicated to supporting access to decision making are necessary. Resources to enhance processes of accountability and empowerment by community organisations within their communities are required. Resources that are provided in a manner that underpins the independence of the community organisations in playing this role as a voice for groups experiencing inequality are crucial. Again, this is a key challenge to the organisations within the statutory sector holding such resources and also to other independent funding sources.

Solidarity is a challenge to the other pillars of social partnership – business, trade union and farming – both at local and national level. All pillars to social partnership have identified an interest in and a commitment to equality. This should be reflected in a dialogue across the pillars involving community organisations articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality to develop a shared ambition for equality and an agreed agenda for change to ensure this shared ambition is put into effect.

Conclusion

It is clear that the development of community organisations, new structures within the community and voluntary sector, the evolution of social partnership and the ethos of partnership in the statutory sector have meant that there has been real progress in meeting many of these challenges. However, there is no room for complacency in a context of significant and persistent inequality. Action is required from a range of sectors to maintain and sustain the progress made and to further address and meet the challenges posed.

I hope that the discussion we are having today will inform and shape the action required by these challenges to secure an effective role for community organisations in articulating the interests of groups experiencing inequality. This action will need to be taken by the statutory sector, by the community and voluntary sector and by the other pillars of social partnership and by individual community organisations themselves. As part of the legacy from the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All, the Equality Authority itself will, I hope, be able to contribute in a useful way to supporting such action.

Representing the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality: The Challenges for the Community and Voluntary Sector

Gráinne Healy, Independent Consultant

I would like to reflect briefly on the challenges you have identified for the sector and then add some of my own reflections on the challenges. These reflections are based on my own experience in the community and voluntary sector in Ireland and as one of the leaders of the women's sector during the 80s and 90s. They are reflections gleaned from my work as a consultant and activist in the sector for more than 20 years. They are reflections developed through the Equal at Work project with the Dublin Employment Pact, where I have been working with my colleagues there to create an innovative set of structures which may see the creation of a more equal workplace in our sector become a reality.

The broad community and voluntary sector consists of over 25,000[5] organisations nationally. We employ more than 50,000 workers, we are a larger employment sector than agriculture or forestry. We contribute some €3.5 billion to the gross domestic product of Ireland. We provide a multitude of services in the community on behalf of the State. We advocate on behalf of those socially excluded whom we represent and we have a social change agenda which by definition means we clash from time to time with Government (our funders) and those in decision making positions (policy makers and civil servants) whom we see as progressing too slowly or introducing changes which heighten inequality rather than reduce it.

We work on justice issues for immigrants, we work on health issues for older people, we work on rights issues for gays and lesbians, we work on rights for Travellers and minority ethnic groups, we work against direct and indirect discrimination for lone parents, for people with disabilities, we support the long-term unemployed, we work with the homeless, young people, early school leavers, we work with people with drug and alcohol addiction support needs, we work with women involved in prostitution, we work to prevent violence against women, we work for women in the paid workplace, for women and men in unpaid and underpaid caring situations, we work for and provide childcare, and care for older people. Along with this day-to-day provision of services and supports, our work also contains an element of interaction on policy provision (or the gaps in policy provision) in relation to the field in which we are operating. We are the critical voice for groups experiencing inequality – those for whom the boat did not rise on the Celtic Tiger tide.

If our passion and our efforts are for social change and equality in Ireland, what do we need to do to meet the challenges and achieve equality outcomes?

There are internal organisational challenges and barriers we must overcome to be truly representative of our constituents in all their intersectionality and to enhance our capacity to work on their behalf. There are challenges external to our organisations to be addressed. I also want to speak of some imminent opportunities to unify, organise and strengthen the voice of the sector in the forthcoming social partnership processes.

When we look at the internal organisational things we need to do to allow us do our work better, we see the following.

- Ensuring meaningful consultation with members and having a clear mandate. This part of our work, while vital, is rarely resourced and can be an element that slips when we are under financial pressures. We are the critical voice for groups representing

---

5   Figure sourced from the Centre for Non-Profit Management, Trinity College Dublin, 2006.

inequality: it is vital that our grassroots are in touch with and informing our 'grass tops'.

- Empowerment of those we represent: working to support and promote self empowerment strategies; employing members of our constitutent/representative groups in our own organisations; finding ways to build the experiences and knowledge of our constitutent groups into our work plans and structures – seeing their faces amongst our staff and on our boards.

- Achieving equality outcomes: identifying the milestones you expect to pass on the journey over time and checking with all the players as to how it's going and what's next. Building the internal capacity of organisations to do this requires recourse to tools (equality audits, training and analysis development for our voluntary board members and staff, and skills building to facilitate the focus on delivery of identified equality outcomes).

- Creating an equal workplace in the community sector. Our sector has been shown to have little or no HR infrastructure, poor and uneven pension provision for staff, poor career path planning or access to up-skilling for staff, very little parity with regards to jobs of equal value with other sectors and a very uneven availability of even basic workplace standard rights like clear, modern, legal contracts of employment; training in health and safety; and wage scales.

Is it any wonder that we see a leeching of skilled and committed staff from the sector to other better structured public and private sector employment places? The recently formed Community Sector Employers Forum, (CSEF) is seeking to address the issues of creating an equal workplace for the sector by organising and creating a strong voice for employers.

The CSEF are those people within the sector with the responsibility for staffing and employees, those who need to make it clear that the staff of the sector must be treated fairly. The loyalty card cannot continue to be played – whereby the excellent mission and vision of the organisation is supposed to replace a national wage increase or a contribution to a pension fund. This card has been overplayed and the CSEF is a new structure which intends to dialogue directly with Government and trades unions in order to refuse to play the loyalty card with employees in the sector.

The CSEF recognises that there is a hidden or invisible power at play in the employment matters of the community sector. This is the funder – Government funding streams whereby the State says it is not the employer, yet by its funding streams effectively micro-manages the sector including, allowing for or not providing for pension contribution; or adopting or refusing to adopt appropriate wage scales. The CSEF, working with greater trades union activation, is set to unmask the hidden employer, the Government puppeteer, who effectively controls the community sector workplace.

We provide essential service and community needs. We are workers, and the funding programmes and their management and operation must support fair and decent terms and conditions. This matter has not been raised previously in an organised and cohesive manner in social partnership. The community and voluntary sector historically has represented its constituent groups but never overtly its workers – it is appropriate that this task be left to trades unions and employers, but it must be supported

by the wider community and voluntary sector to be successful.

The CSEF is supported in its employer network-building initiative by the growing trades union organisation of the sector. The President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Patricia McKeown has recently welcomed the CSEF and congratulated SIPTU and IMPACT for their growing numbers of members in the sector and the pressure they now know to be on them to raise our issues as workers and bring them to the social partnership tables in the coming months with the new talks about to begin.

For the first time trades unions will be fighting for an enhanced organised community sector membership and will, with CSEF, be arguing to Government that the funding of the sector for the services and activities it delivers on behalf of Government and Government Departments is one matter which historically has been dealt with by the Community Pillar and Platform in the social partnership talks. However, obvious clashes of interests have meant that no one has been overtly demanding the creation of an equal workplace for the community sector in Ireland until now.

I would ask each of you here with your employer hat on to examine how you might engage with the CSEF. As a sector we require members who will activate the newly formed structures in the community and voluntary branches and ensure that officials are clear that the creation of a more equal workplace for the sector is a priority. We require members to join and swell the ranks of the CSEF so that as employers we can show that we want to be employers of choice and we want to create equal workplaces in our organisations.

Success for us requires commitment and clarity from the employer forum and the trades unions to ensure that Government moves to provide appropriate resources so that employers in the sector can operate according to best HR practice and ensure employment equality for their staff who are working for equality.

I believe that this new initiative will help to support the sector in managing the burden of uncertain funding. There is a need to see standard templates for funding, separation of staff funding from project funding and annual and multi-annual funding streams which support the work of the sector. I believe all of these must come when a focus on the equality of employees is added to the focus already on equality outcomes for those we represent.

I would identify five external challenges. These are:

• relationships with funders (Government and private),

• parity of respect: despite several statements this parity can be best seen when we are given the resources and tools required to do the agreed work,

• believing ourselves and convincing others of our value. We do work of great value, we do work that the public service cannot and at times will not do. We must value our work, value our workers, value our potential to achieve the equality outcomes we set out clearly for ourselves. This requires more solidarity-building exercises – like this seminar today. We need to use the equality institutions and their resources to build our belief in ourselves – more seminars and conferences where we show the excellent

work we do, where we talk to each other as allies and equals,

- leadership promotion in the sector. We have many excellent leaders of community and voluntary sector organisations. How can we bring them together (the grass tops), to collaborate, agree strategy and have spokespersons who clearly represent a united sector? Many of the missed opportunities in the 80s, 90s and in this new century have been rightly blamed on Government slowness to act or poor resourcing. However, I believe that the lack of a unified sector with clear leaders has hampered our progress in the past and will continue to hamper us in the future. Let's address this elephant in the room. It may require promotion of a raft of new faces and new platforms, it may require organisations seeing the need for wider sector strategy rather than short individual organisation gain,

- building alliances. There are other organisations and sectors out there waiting to be co-opted and linked into as allies: trades unions, labour organisations, academic and training bodies, local structures, equality organisations. Building alliances is crucial for us.

Let's go out from today knowing that we are willing to work together with each other promoting a unified voice for the sector and knowing that the workers of the sector are finally going to have their employment rights championed for them and that from our additional vantage point in social partnership we have the opportunities to better represent the interests of groups experiencing inequality.
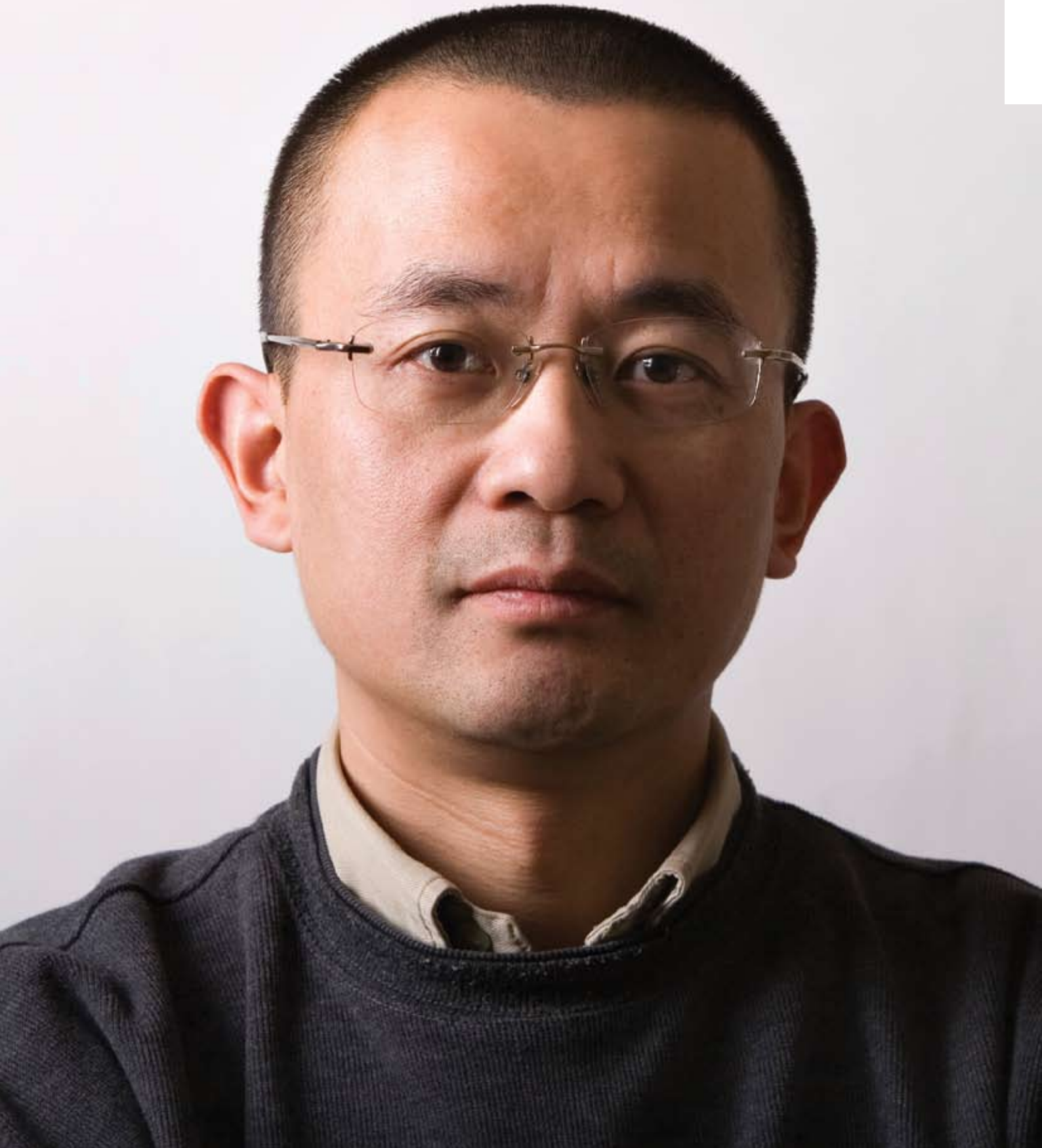
Section 6
Seminar Workshops and Feedback

In the afternoon three parallel workshops were held. Proceedings from these workshops are described in detail in the following pages.

The key themes arising from the three workshop discussions can be summarised as follows:

1. **Concerns about funding for the sector:**
   - funding is becoming more difficult to secure (especially for engaging in policy and advocacy work) and procedures for acquiring funding are becoming more bureaucratic,
   - the increased focus on ensuring adequate funding results in NGOs being diverted from the work of representing their constituent group, and
   - the autonomy of NGOs when in receipt of State funding can be undermined.

2. **Challenges regarding engaging in policy and advocacy:**
   - NGOs are being pushed towards service delivery rather than advocacy, reflecting the preference of statutory sector funders,
   - concern that policy spaces within which to advance the interests of groups experiencing inequality are disappearing, and
   - tensions exist for NGOs in maintaining their independence and critical voice while also maintaining their seat at the policy table.

3. **Concern that engaging with civil society is becoming more difficult:**
   - it is becoming harder to engage the public on equality issues as there is a perception that inequalities no longer exist in Irish society, and
   - it can be difficult to engage the media with equality issues.

4. **There are internal challenges to the sector itself:**
   - there is a need for more collective spaces for NGOs to reflect on issues of common concern and to look at new and innovative ways of doing its work, and
   - there is sometimes a lack of solidarity among NGOs.

Workshop 1
Direct Engagement with Groups Experiencing Inequality

Facilitator: Carole Sullivan, The Equality Authority

Rapporteur: Sinéad Kelleher, Hibernian Consulting

NGO Input: Enda Egan, CEO, Carers Association

Participants: Local Development Group from the South West
NGO working with immigrants
Carers Association
National network of women's groups
Family resource centre
NGO working with homeless people
NGO working with older people

Enda Egan's presentation was entitled 'Service Provision: Challenges and Barriers'. He began by providing a background to the Carers Association which was established in 1987 to put the issues of family carers on the national agenda. At that point there was no national organisation representing carers' views and in actual fact there was a lot of ambiguity around the term 'carer'.

Many of the problems and challenges facing the Carers Association today stem from insufficient and inflexible funding and resources. Mr Egan referred to the stringent rules governing the distribution and use of funds from dormant accounts. The retention and attraction of staff is also a problem for organisations in the sector as we are competing with the public and private sector for staff at all levels without being in a position to offer competitive packages.

A number of specific constraints arise from a lack of sufficient funding, e.g. the Carers Association needs but cannot afford a full-time social policy officer. It is also unable to provide an adequate information helpline service to meet the needs of family carers, despite the fact that the current helpline receives almost 2,000 calls per year from such carers. Even though the organisation is involved in social partnership, it finds it difficult to always honour commitments regarding wage increases. Furthermore, the requirements on community and voluntary organisations as regards governance and procedures are expensive to implement and most funders are mainly interested in only funding service provision.

The lack of a specific line of funding available to the HSE to provide core funding for organisations is a serious impediment to the progression and further development of the organisation. The introduction of service level agreements at local HSE level would be a major step forward in proper financial management of services but not all HSE areas will provide these.

Group discussion

The facilitator invited all present to contribute, focusing on three broad questions:

1. What challenges or barriers do you face in representing your constituent group in this area of influence (direct engagement with target group)?

2. What does the sector, or your organisation, need to fulfil its role?

3. What suggestions do you have for the ways forward?

The following points were raised by participants.

- Significant changes have occurred in recent times regarding procedures for acquiring funding and this has had a destabilising effect on the sector by reducing the ability of community and voluntary groups to make long term plans. An increased focus on financial management and funding acquisition reduces the time spent working with and empowering representative groups and the focus on funding can divert groups from their original, founding principles.

- It is difficult to plan in a long-term manner as funding is short-term in nature. Also, the bureaucratic requirements of fund application systems reduce the time that can be spent developing strategies for the future.

- This seminar was a good opportunity for NGOs to come together to form a single, unified lobby group. The voluntary and community sector provides a valuable service to the State. There is a need for staff to be paid sufficiently to ensure their expertise is not lost to organisations in other sectors.

The facilitator asked if the fact that community and voluntary groups seek funding from the Government, and then use their role as advocacy organisations to lobby the Government, creates tensions or difficulties.

- There is a fear that if community and voluntary organisations are viewed as too antagonistic, the Government could decide to outsource their jobs to the private sector.

- There is a distinct drive towards keeping community and voluntary organisations in service delivery and away from advocacy roles. It is much harder to get funding for policy development. A cost–benefit analysis on funding would show the high cost of spending so much time and resources seeking funds.

- Concern about the consequences of private sector companies providing services traditionally provided by community and voluntary organisations. In the short term, private firms may be more cost effective, but in the long term it will be difficult to manage quality. There is a concern that the private sector would not advocate on behalf of the interests of groups in the way that the community and voluntary sector does. Some community and voluntary organisations have seen their funding cut when they were too critical of the Government.

- The unwillingness of the Government to hear voices of dissent. The advocacy role of NGOs has been viewed by Government as incompatible with 'charitable status', and many community and voluntary organisations are being pushed towards service delivery alone.

- There is a difference between the private sector and the community and voluntary sector in terms of seeking to undertake work through a tendering process. A private company will expect to make a profit, but if a community and voluntary sector organisation finishes its work with an excess, this money is often taken back from another part of their funding.

- One organisation highlighted the challenge it is facing due to the perception that inequality between women and men is an obsolete concern. This issue is no longer viewed as worthy of serious consideration. There is a lack of understanding about the meaning of inequality and the rapid changes in Irish society that have taken place over recent decades have blinded women from identifying continued gender discrimination.

Workshop 2
Bringing Forward the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality to Policy and Decision-making Fora

Facilitator: Rachel Mullen, The Equality Authority

Rapporteur: Dr Kathy Walsh, KW Research

NGO Input: Siobhan O'Donoghue, CEO, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

Participants: NGO working with people with disabilities
NGO working with lone parents
NGO working with members of the Traveller community
NGO working with women experiencing domestic violence
NGO working with migrants
NGO representing women's issues
NGO campaigning for human rights
NGO working with members of the gay and lesbian community
A support agency to the Community Development Programme
A community research organisation
NGO campaigning for civil rights

Siobhan O'Donoghue gave a short input on the work of the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) and the challenges it faces in representing the interests of migrant workers living and working in situations of vulnerability. She highlighted the importance of a clear purpose and focus if progress is to be realised.

MRCI has three strands to its work:
1) A drop-in centre this enables direct engagement with migrant workers in situations of vulnerability, it generates case work and requires a case management system).

2) Community Work migrant workers are supported and empowered to take collective action that support positive social change – e.g. visa campaign or the work of the agricultural workers group.

3) Identification of Policy Priorities current priorities include trafficking for forced labour, access to social protection, integration, irregular migration.

Siobhan O'Donoghue talked of the Bridging Visa Campaign, which seeks to regularise the situation of migrants who enter the country legally but who through no fault of their own become undocumented. Such migrant workers are highly vulnerable to further exploitation and homelessness and are denied social protection. If an individual becomes undocumented it is extremely difficult to regularise their situation. While recognising that through intense negotiation with Garda National Immigration Bureau it is sometimes possible to regularise the situation of particular individuals, MRCI decided to initiate a campaign for the introduction of a Bridging Visa thereby formalising at a policy level a possible solution for such situations.

A Bridging Visa is a temporary six-month visa that would allow a person who became undocumented through no fault of their own to be regularised and facilitated to apply for a new work permit. The process of developing the concept was challenging in that it had to be limited and reasonable from a policy perspective. There was much discussion and consultation within the organisation about the limits of the visa they were calling for i.e. not everything the group wanted could go into the campaign plan.

Another challenge was to identify spokespeople who were undocumented and to enable the participation and involvement of migrant workers impacted by this issue. This is a very vulnerable group and there are obvious safety and security issues that had to be considered. Through a community-work process, a campaign group was convened made up of migrants who had been or are currently undocumented. Through the community-work process, the group were supported to develop an analysis of their situation and supported to be involved in the campaign. In parallel to the work of the campaign group, MRCI undertook a research project to examine the concept of irregular migration in Ireland and make visible the experiences of people who are undocumented. This involved undertaking 65 case studies.

The key challenges identified by Siobhan O'Donoghue included:
- developing very clear goals and rationale for particular actions/campaigns,
- anticipating and having answers to difficult questions (have good sound bites),
- consistency around key messages,
- a high level of ownership of the process by the groups experiencing the inequality/ inequalities,

- developing good relationships with others (these can only be built slowly and is a time consuming process),
- engaging policy makers and politicians, and
- identifying and working with newer allies (e.g. business interests and/or trade unions).

Group discussion

The facilitator invited all present to contribute, focusing on three broad questions:

1. What challenges or barriers do you face in representing your constituent group in this area of influence (policy and decision-making fora)?

2. What does the sector, or your organisation, need to fulfil its role?

3. What suggestions do you have for the ways forward?

The following points were raised by participants:

- The challenges associated with creating spaces where the issues and concerns of lone parents could be raised: Within the framework of social partnership, one has to be creative to find space to raise issues. There is no absence of fora to discuss issues - what is missing is a place to progress the issues and get a resolution of them. For example, lone parents have voiced concerns about the start times of FÁS courses. These issues are well known but there is no forum to seek a resolution.

- For small support programmes resources are often spread very thin. In one example, one individual juggled advocacy/case work, policy work and community work. Doing these three types of work well was very

difficult and the project had to be strategic about where it focused its efforts.

- One organisation which has been in existence for over 30 years said people are tired of listening to the same messages even though the issues are still pertinent 30 years later. A key challenge is to identify the spaces for change. Some spaces for discussion are cul de sacs that just keep groups busy and prevent them from being more radical. Many groups have been tied into the provision of services and their policy work often suffers when there is a crisis regarding service provision – e.g. seeking on-going funding.

- Political will often grows out of hearing the personal stories of people experiencing inequality. Yet, for example, women who are victims of domestic violence – and, indeed, other vulnerable groups – are often not willing to go public and tell their own story for reasons of safety and confidentiality. Digital story telling and pod-casts can be useful to assist in this process.

- It is a challenge to get women's voices to policy level. One challenge is overcoming the belief that women's equality had been achieved and fighting for a space to say that it had not been achieved. One organisation was concerned that its message is not a saleable one. An example was cited of a campaign which included a march and protest outside the Department of Finance. In The Irish Times of the next day was a picture of ten prison officers who were also protesting. There was no mention of the much larger women's protest.

- It was not difficult to get resources for service delivery but the policy posts for this sector were funded by private philanthropy and many groups do policy work out of their service delivery budget. The issue is about how resources are allocated, and whether groups can be political and do policy work.

- The focus of the Community Development Programme was on tasks and policy was often something the Community Development Projects (CDPs) saw as beyond them. CDPs working in particular areas had to engage with policy in that they needed to identify policies that were impacting on a particular area. The European Anti-Poverty Network was in the process of giving a series of presentations on why policy is important for small organisations. The difficulty is that many groups are not used to strategy development and strategic thinking.

- Family Resource Centres and Community Development Projects were seen as the delivery arm of State policy. The consequence of having State funding is that independence and autonomy have been eroded over the last 10–15 years and that the whole sector is implicated in this change.

- The State sector can seek to influence an NGO. Groups and the sector as a whole will not get parity of esteem by being compliant; they need to put their foot down about crucial issues. The difficulty is that once funding is threatened, many groups give in. There was a question raised about whether the sector is conscious enough of its responsibilities.

- Agreement that a lot of jobs and services in the sector are dependent on relationships with policy makers and the State. The sector

was delivering services that the State had failed to deliver and if these services ceased, that there would be dissatisfaction. Their is potential for collective bargaining by the sector. The sector had much to learn from the trade unions. The price of the provision of services needs to be agreed, with budgets allowed for policy work.

- There is a lack of solidarity within the sector. The sector is not confident, it has been silenced and it has silenced itself. The sector is under threat and that the only way forward is to work together as a collective. Another challenge is the tension between maintaining a seat at the decision-making table and having a more widely held collective position.

- There is a need to create collective spaces within the sector and to be clear about the role of such collective spaces. The sector needs to recognise its limitations, sometimes there is more value in assembling coalitions of interest around specific areas of work or topics. In many cases, the sector contains competing interests and organisations from different backgrounds.

- There are challenges posed by and for the Community Platform, e.g. in terms of managing expectations. The work of the platform is focused on social partnership and in the shadow of social partnership it is hard to create a dynamic space.

- Social partnership takes a lot of time. There is a need for collective action but those participating in social partnership need to be clear about who they will work with and on what. The best way of working was to remain focused but the Community Platform is very broad. Groups and indeed the sector need to work across a range of spaces including in the media, on doorsteps, and at pressure points on a number of levels.

Workshop 3

Engaging with Civil and Democratic Society to Promote the Interests of Groups Experiencing Inequality

Facilitator: Carol Baxter, The Equality Authority

Rapporteur: Ruth Pritchard, RSP Consulting

NGO Input: Martin Collins, Assistant Director, Pavee Point Traveller Centre

Participants: Development Board from the West
NGOs working with carers
NGO working with women
NGO working with members of the Traveller Community
A consultant working with the sector
A researcher working with the sector
NGO working with victims of rape and sexual violence
Human rights campaign group
NGO providing legal advice
A community development project
NGO tackling unemployment in Dublin

Martin Collins began by describing the importance of Pavee Point's adoption in the mid-80s of a human rights approach to working with Travellers. The establishment of a human rights based engagement with civil and democratic society represented a departure from previous models of work based on charity and rehabilitation. A human-rights-based approach is about recognising the importance of cultural diversity, promoting cultural rights and values, and contributing to an understanding of the nature of racism at the institutional level.

From the mid-90s, this approach helped to embed the concept of participation in decision making to a degree where it was acknowledged that any decision impacting on Travellers' lives required their participation. This concept of participation continues to underpin the role of Pavee Point in engaging in civil and democratic society.

Martin Collins described the central role that partnership has played to date in the work of Pavee Point, which works with a variety of partners, including FÁS, the HSE and other State agencies, other human rights organisations, academics, etc. Partnership is just one model of engagement and although a worthwhile one it is not a panacea. Other models, e.g. protest and demonstration, also have a role to play in effecting social change. A focus on partnership is not without its challenges, and requires continual reflection within the organisation and externally. However, in the view of Pavee Point, opting out is not an option.

Martin Collins summarised the imperative of the human rights agenda in engaging with civil and democratic society as demanding a capacity to take risks for innovative practice and

using pilot projects to 'push the boat out'. Taking risks for the sake of a human-rights-based approach has challenged the NGO to engage with diversity within its own community, sometimes controversially, on issues such as gay Traveller rights, drug-taking, or domestic violence.

In conclusion, Martin Collins endorsed the ideas emerging from the morning conference session that resonate particularly with the experience of Pavee Point, including the need to upskill for effective leadership in engaging with civil and democratic society and the value of engaging at an international level to influence national policy.

Group discussion
The facilitator invited all present to contribute, focusing on three broad questions:

1. What challenges or barriers do you face in representing your constituent group in this area of influence (engaging with civil and democratic society)?

2. What does the sector, or your organisation, need to fulfil its role?

3. What suggestions do you have for the ways forward?

The following points were raised by participants:

- There is a need to up-skill continuously within the sector for new ways of working. Finding new ways of thinking was even more of a challenge. The work of community development has evolved and changed dramatically with respect to the equality agenda, especially in the years since these community development workers originally trained in community development principles.

- The media has a role in getting the message out to civil society. There is a prevalent perspective, dominated by a 'common sense' line rehearsed by banks, economists and stockbrokers that is too often highlighted by the media. Alternate views are rarely repeated in the public media even when available. However, bringing an equality agenda into civil and democratic society would require the NGO sector to 'carry the fight' into the media, to look beyond individual organisation efforts.

- Advocacy is not perceived positively, but can be seen as aggressive – not as acceptable as a story from the point of view of the victim, which is most usually represented in the media. Another form of silencing of advocacy occurred where Government applies pressure on funded groups to stop advocating.

The facilitator asked participants to consider how we can address these issues. Are there allies? Can leadership be more effective?

- There is a need for reflective spaces to come up with new ways of engaging, away from the pull and pace of the media's dynamic of selling stories that drag NGOs into instant responses and dealing with minutiae. Time for reflective, innovative thinking should happen within the organisation and at events such as this conference.

- NGOs should look at where relevant issues are debated and be proactive rather than reactive in getting their message out. It is important to comment on wider societal issues from an equality perspective. This approach would hold editors more

accountable. For example, engaging with the Press Council could assist accountability.

- It is important that organisations should support one another more in public. This didn't always happen.

- The Irish Charities Bill represents a barrier to groups involved in promoting a political discourse centred in the equality agenda. This important issue was not being sufficiently discussed.

- Networking amongst NGOs was happening often on an ad-hoc basis-between individuals at conferences, for example, but needed to be more organised. There is a need to make time for a reflective space for the sector.

- The language of a 'human rights approach' didn't exist until recently; NGOs couldn't afford to talk about it. Now however, organisations have stated that they apply a human rights approach and this phrase was now well understood by the public. Did this then represent the common language that the sector should adopt as a unifying principle?

Participants agreed the following brief summary:

1. The participants of the workshop have identified the need to 'tell the story' of the equality agenda with a shared voice, which is unified rather than uniform.

2. Securing a reflective space both in organisations and between NGOs is key to exploring this shared story. A number of approaches were considered vital, including networking fora, research, conferences and use of internet based tools.
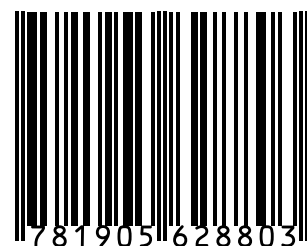
3. The purpose of reflection by the NGO sector should be to challenge the dominant messages and perceptions, for a more innovative engagement in and by civil and democratic society for the equality agenda.