
Civil Society Grant Programme 2023-2024 strengthening democracy through civic engagement and participation grant programme current context

Ireland is changing. It is growing in population terms both North and South, but it is also changing in terms of the diversity of its population and the attitudes of its people. Such changes are not always comfortable, but they can be healthy in creating space for new ideas, attitudes, and the ability to interrogate established certainties that did not always serve society well. There is also the distinct possibility that there will be major constitutional change over the next two decades depending on the North-South and East-West dynamics in Northern Ireland. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement does not offer a road map, but it does provide options for the future depending on the democratic will of the electorate in the North, but also in the Republic of Ireland.

However, if change is to be for the better for all, then the specific disadvantages and inequalities that continue to persist need to be named and addressed. The role of community and voluntary groups and organisations has always been important in this context, but there is some evidence that restricted resources, an increased statutory emphasis on service provision and an over-emphasis on general busyness has blunted the necessary discussion about the nature of transformative change and the means to work towards it.

St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) is a relatively modest independent funder, but its strategy of working in partnership with other organisations that share its vision for a just and inclusive society allows it to set out an ambitious vision. This ambition, as articulated in the outcomes being sought for this grant programme, is informed by the writings of social change activists Avila Kilmurray, and Niall Crowley.¹

In an interesting contribution by Niall Crowley – [Civil Society for Equality and Environmental Sustainability: Reimagining a Force for Change \(2022\)](#) it is suggested that the gold standard for deep democracy should be a system where every citizen has a variety of accessible avenues to have their voices heard and ideas realised, and that civil society has a pivotal role to play in achieving this. In other words, Crowley argues the importance of opening up power to more people through increased participatory counterbalances to corporate and state power. He further probes the desired rationale for the deployment of countervailing power in the search for transformative change that would mobilise people behind platforms and initiatives demanding equality and environmental sustainability. Reflecting on conditions in Ireland, he draws from the Brazilian philosopher and politician Roberto Unger in arguing that 'low energy democracy involves rules and arrangements that generate low levels of political mobilisation, and that slow politics down, hindering structural change by requiring political parties to negotiate proposals for change with a small set of powerful vested interests,' (p. 16). Crowley counterposes five elements of 'high energy' democracy, based on Unger's work, as:

¹ Avila Kilmurray wrote a scoping analysis for [SSGT's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan](#) and a paper on the application of democratic principles in practice to develop SSGT's thinking on its strategic goal to strengthen democracy through civic engagement and participation. Those papers form the basis of this context, and the vision and recommendations articulated in the writings is encapsulated in the outcomes for this grant programme. Avila cites Niall Crowley - '[Civil Society for Equality and Environmental Sustainability: Reimagining a Force for Change \(2022\)](#)' as an inspiration for some of the discussion.

- Arrangements that favour a heightened, sustained, and organised level of popular engagement in politics, weakening the influence of money.
- Rapid resolution of impasses among branches of governments, breaking any deadlock through this heightened popular engagement;
- Assuring a basic stake of resources available to all citizens, taking people out of entrenched disadvantage and exclusion;
- Enabling opportunities for experimental deviation such that, as society goes down a certain path, it encourages the development of strong contrasts to the future it has provisionally chosen, as a means of hedging its bets; and
- Combining features and of both representative and direct democracy, enabling the direct engagement of local communities in the formulation and implementation of local policy outside the structure of local government by organising for popular participation in national and local decisions.

Questioning the concept of 'active citizenship' as a driver of change, he points out the exclusive terminology of 'citizen' and the varying levels of ambition informing active citizenship, from the most powerful (exercising rights, responsibilities, and influence) to the anodyne (mutual support and interdependence).

There has been considerable investment of both thought and resources in the question as to whether consultative participatory approaches can re-boot democracy. The OECD has a Project on Representative Deliberative Processes that has produced a Deliberative Democracy Toolbox drawing on 281 case studies (<https://participedia.net>). Claudia Chwalisz, the OECD Innovative Citizen Participation lead poses the question – 'how can we take public shared decisions together?' While these case studies range from the Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland to the on-line deliberative initiatives in Estonia, and from the Belgium G1000 initiative to the permanent assembly established by Madrid City Council (under attack by the increasing electoral support of VOX), there have been a number of critiques of this approach. These include the fact that many citizens' initiatives tend to individualise citizen engagement, with participation being predicated on citizens participating as individuals. That there is often an over emphasis on consensus-orientation rather than ideological power contestation; and the issues to be addressed can be overly local in nature and difficult to scale – participatory budgeting initiatives have often been critiqued on this basis, notwithstanding the often cited model developed in [Porto Alegre in Brazil](#).

However, in defence of deliberative democracy initiatives – the experience in Ireland of Citizens' Assemblies when linked to 'wicked political issues' that politicians need to frame in a broader societal context has been productive and important. The learning would seem to be that such approaches cannot be used as a default position in the quest of deepening democracy, but if properly structured and linked into an intentional influence on policy change can be very useful, particularly if the macro political system is minded to be responsive.

There is also the issue of accessible and factual information that may be made available to people in local communities, with an emphasis on those whose information is mainly drawn from social media. There was important work carried out by Community Dialogue, Northern Ireland, in the years immediately after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) in distributing information that encapsulated the terms of the Agreement in 'common sense' language. This recognized the need to make such information available to community-based activists who could then share it at a local level. Lack of access to reliable data is still an

issue – as highlighted by the current debate about the impact of the UK/EU Protocol at community-level in Northern Ireland – despite the plethora of data being generated by various academic initiatives such as ARINS – Analyzing and Researching Ireland, North and South (www.ria.ie/arins.) This initiative usefully compares systems both North and South but is currently largely restricted to academics and policy-makers. A combined approach of making such information accessible, linked to community dialogues, would help support a more informed population, with an emphasis on groups of people who may find themselves largely excluded from the exercise of democracy.

If, as Crowley points out, that ‘active citizenship’ at its best encompasses exercising rights, responsibility and influence, then there is a specific need for factual and accessible information about (i) rights and (ii) the accountability of institutions and agencies in a democratic society. Initiatives that monitor government, institutions and agencies are incredibly important, but so is the need for this information to be shared in an accessible and understandable form outside the circle of specialist, thematic organisations.

There needs to be a specific emphasis placed on monitoring those issues that can be hidden in plain sight – examples include the Mother and Baby institutions and Magdalene Laundries of past years, but the Direct Provision, Deportation Centres and treatment of people with mental health issues currently. Change – whether transformative or more modest – is dependent on public knowledge and effective policy influence, however, this in turn requires consideration of issue narrative and how to frame issues to generate broader attention and interest.

There is then the challenge of supporting accountable and democratic associations of people within civil society – the space for civil society issue that Crowley usefully re-frames as progressive civil society, based on the work of Irish academic and activist Mary Murphy². This can provide space for participation and activism, in addition to introducing people to new ideas and ways of thinking, alongside ensuring that those with power are held accountable for the decisions that they take. Clearly at one level this speaks directly to the importance of progressive community development as facilitated by organisations like Community Work Ireland which might usefully organise on an all-island basis. For example the National Women’s Council (NWC) leads on the [All-Island Women’s Forum](#) which aims to address underrepresentation of women and further develop women’s role in peacebuilding and civic society.

Currently, a good example of how Community Work Ireland is supporting inclusive and progressive approaches to community development is their collaborative work with the Hope and Courage Collective (Ireland) on how to manage division and tensions exacerbated by Far Right intervention in local communities. Some funders are currently exploring supporting this work on an all-island basis.

It is important to support the roll out of awareness raising and discussion not only south of the Border, but also in Northern Ireland, with due attention to the East-West dynamic as well as the North-South dimension.

Crowley, however, argues the importance of creating the conditions to facilitate the building of collective power by civil society that goes beyond the residential/geographic community frame, but which ‘links different power clusters to enable collaboration and coordination’ across their specific thematic interests

² Mary Murphy is also a trustee of SSGT.

and areas of work to advance transformative change. (p. 89). A number of examples in the South are cited and described. There are also examples in Northern Ireland, such as the Human Rights Consortium, the Equality Coalition and the Ad Hoc Civil Society Group on Brexit. Crowley is right to suggest that there needs to be learning from these models and approaches taken. As Crowley remarks, 'Shared agendas setting out a positive vision need to be developed and agreed. Such agendas would integrate the concerns of the different civil society sectors involved; encompass solidarity between these different sectors; and advance a new agreed model of development for achieving equality and environmental sustainability.' (pp. 89/90). If this proposition is to be taken forward it needs space and resources for discussion and planning. There also needs to be an eye on what groups/activists are included and the basis for any exclusions – possibly linked to a value frame.

Northern Ireland often has particular difficulties in building such common platforms given suspicion of leading activists based on perceived/ascribed constitutional allegiances and positions. A value framing can offer a basis for discussion, although terminology needs to be scrutinised for possible exclusionary impact.

There is also the need, and the challenge, to rekindle trust and belief in the effectiveness of activism for transformative change. This requires a combination of comprehensive visions of what such change might look like, and how it might impact on the life opportunities of the most disadvantaged, but also an understanding of what tactics and approaches have been helpful in successfully delivering change. It has repeatedly been pointed out that statutory funding, that is primarily focused on service delivery together with competitive tendering selection, has numbed the ability of many activists and civil society organisations to engage in more critical thinking. There is an urgent need for independent philanthropy to help create this space and to facilitate activists to reflect on the opportunities and challenges for transformative change.

There is a need to join up initiatives that may be taken to deepen democracy across a number of levels and to draw out the learning that becomes available. These levels might be summarised as:

- **Impacting on democratic decision making:** review of media impact and narrative framing; supporting participative/deliberative democracy initiatives where appropriate and relevant.
- **Building platforms for collective power and influence:** supporting progressive platforms for transformative thinking and advocacy; developing values-based approaches to identify elements of transformative change.
- **Creating space for participation and voice:** work which ensures the amplification of marginalised voice and participation, and which raises awareness of points of tension and divisiveness and equips activists to manage them.