

Destabilising the Fight Against Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

Many people in Ireland live in poverty. This daily reality for countless households is evident by the large network of organisations—statutory, community, and voluntary—that seek to alleviate poverty and its pernicious effects. These organisations target an array of demographics and focus on ameliorating its specific symptoms such as unemployment or low educational attainment. It is a complex ecosystem requiring collaboration and partnership if common goals are to be achieved and progressively realised.

Collaboration and partnership are not easily achieved given the multiplicity of organisations, structures and institutions; the ever-evolving nature of the challenges; the changing environment in which they operate; and the effort and skilled leadership that is required for efficacy. However, collaboration and partnership are possible and should be aspired to, given that success in creating a more just society—where poverty and deprivation are eliminated—needs this partnership to function well.

This essay is written in a spirit of solidarity with all that seek to work towards these goals. It is in this spirit that we identify obstacles to effective collaboration which frustrate and hinder the fulfilment of our shared aims. After a brief outline of the historical and contemporary relationship between the State and the community, local development and voluntary (CLDV) sector, this paper will outline how, in practice, the policies governing the relationship between the State and the CLDV sector are antithetical to the values and principles required; respect, collaboration and subsidiarity. We will focus specifically on the experience of the community development sector in the areas of competitive tendering processes, job security, and pay disparity. In conclusion, we will outline necessary and feasible steps towards true collaboration and partnership.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND CLDV SECTOR

Historically, the State and the CLDV sector have worked together in a hybrid system to provide health and social care services. The

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State’s minimal involvement originated with the introduction of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act in 1851 and expanded with the Health Act of 1953.¹ Throughout this time and until present day, the CLDV sector has been vital in meeting the acute needs of people not being met by the State, often those most vulnerable and marginalised.² This is acknowledged by Government in the 2019 strategy *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*,³ which, for example, states that services such as the wrap-around supports provided by community development organisations to the long-term unemployed, would be nearly impossible for the State to replicate.

A core facet of CLDV organisations is their ability and willingness to respond quickly to emerging needs. It is clear the Government understands that both the State and the CLDV sector are essential to achieving our shared aims for a flourishing society, providing complementary services and supports to communities, with the difference in our structures facilitating reciprocity. However, despite this recognition in the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, the nature of the relationship between the State and the CLDV sector is impeding the realisation of this potential for complimentary modes of working.

The 2022 publication of the *Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership Working with the Community and Voluntary*

1 For a fuller account of this period in the emergence of social policy, see Chapter 1 of Fiona Dukelow and Mairéad Considine, *Irish Social Policy: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017).

2 TASC and The Wheel, ‘The Future of Public Service Delivery by the Community & Voluntary Sector: Working on the Cheap - Assessing the Need for Pay Restoration to Ensure Sustainable Services’ (Dublin: The Wheel, June 2023).

3 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland, 2019-2024’ (Dublin: Government of Ireland, 2019).



Queue for a soup kitchen in Dublin. Credit: PA Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Sector document⁴ is a welcome action taken by Government as part of the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* commitments. This document is crucial for the direction of our shared work. Without an articulation of the values and principles required, we cannot hope to achieve our shared aims. However, there are a number of key facets of the relationship between the State and the CLDV sector that will prevent the realisation of these values and principles and, as a consequence, the fulfilment of the government’s vision to “create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members,”⁵ if they remain unaddressed. In our experience, this is most evident in the competitive tendering process for local organisations and the job security and pay disparity experienced by CLDV staff.

COMPETITIVE TENDERING

The competitive tendering process for programmes such as the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

(SICAP)—the primary community development programme in Ireland—is irreconcilable with the ethos of respect, partnership, trust, and collaboration. It embeds an inequity and a power imbalance in every aspect of the relationship between the Contracting Authority (the State)⁶ and the Framework Member such as local development companies (LDCs),⁷ with the former delineating the terms of the latter’s work and holding the power to decide their fate. The primary outcome of competitive tendering is the destabilisation of the very ecosystem designed and endorsed by the State to tackle poverty.

While there was consultation with LDCs around the design of SICAP since the completion of its first iteration in 2017, the development of the programme is still indisputably top-down, with the State deciding on the target groups, objectives, local priority

4 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership Working with the Community and Voluntary Sector’ (Dublin: Government of Ireland, June 2022).

5 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities’, 10.

6 A Contracting Authority is a public body that is awarding a contract for goods, services or works. This may include individual Government Departments or Offices; local or regional authority; any public body, commercial and non-commercial State bodies, and private entities which are subsidised 50% or more by a public body, when awarding contracts for goods, services or works.

7 Local Development Companies are multi-sectoral partnerships that deliver community and rural development, labour market activation, social inclusion, climate action and social enterprise services.

In supporting disadvantaged individuals and communities, LDCs are not-for-profit, volunteer-led organisations who provide a national service through locally-based services. Their ethos is bottom-up, taking a holistic view of the individual and the community.



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groups and reporting requirements. It is not a process whereby the State and the LDCs collaboratively work towards an agreed programme of work based on their shared but diverging knowledge and understanding of communities. Destabilising competitive tendering processes are imposed on LDCs without meaningful input, despite their years of experiences and often decades of working on the frontline with and alongside affected communities.

Competitive tendering creates an environment wrought with instability and insecurity as staff at LDCs are forced into a position whereby they must not only reapply for their jobs, but compete for them. Organisations are forced to justify their existence at the end of each arbitrarily imposed funding cycle. While SICAP's funding is currently a five-year cycle, with the possibility of a one-year extension, most grant funding cycles are only 12 months in duration which is very disruptive and destabilising. It is worth noting that, under SICAP, all implementers have received additional funding called SICAP New Arrivals, specifically to address the refugee (both Ukrainian and International Protection) crisis. Despite falling under SICAP, this funding is only approved on a 12-month basis with funding allocations only being confirmed at year's end. This indicates an obliviousness to the delicate hybrid ecosystem and the impact such policies have on its stability and effectiveness. Furthermore, it disregards the tireless work of LDC staff in providing for the evolving needs of people and grappling with community cohesion in the context of the poly-crises faced. The lingering effects of the pandemic; endemic poverty; the cost-of-living crisis; the housing crisis; the climate crisis; international commitments to refugees; and the rise of the Far Right to name a few.



Credit: Alexander Grey at Unsplash

A key question remains as to why the hybrid relationship of State and anti-poverty bodies can not be permanent. With a market-based model to provide social goods, and a neoliberal State which will always create marginalised groups or exclusion zones, poverty will always be with us. The Government does not fund other key providers of social services such as schools and hospitals on an annual grant basis or even multi annual basis with the threat that funding could be pulled at any time. Why not have LDCs as permanent partners of the State (which we are anyway) and then monitor and inspect our work using relegatory mechanisms similar to school and hospitals?

LDC staff are at the forefront of the many crises within our society, and while the State declares its ostensible appreciation, the competitive tendering process betrays any gratitude. While we do not doubt the dedication of our colleagues in Government departments, statutory agencies, and local authorities in the fight against poverty, they



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are part of a process which destabilises this goal through the clearly inequitable treatment of their “partners” in this mission. The inequality sown into the relationship as a consequence of competitive tendering severs trust between the State and the CLDV sector. This is clearly not conducive to collaboration, nor to partnership. A destabilised ecosystem risks becoming a failed ecosystem.

Competitive tendering is widely used as a process by which the Government determines to which company/organisation it awards contracts for the provision of services and delivery of projects. On the surface it may appear to be a prudent way of ensuring value for money and accountability, crucial for the expenditure of taxpayer money. However, we must apply a critical lens and interrogate the efficacy of such processes across contracts as heterogeneous as SICAP and those awarded for the delivery of construction projects such as the new Children’s Hospital. As outlined above, the CLDV sector has a long and unique history of working alongside the State in a hybrid system, one largely designed and determined by the State. Does this entwined history of mutual dependence and the social value of their goals not call for a different form of funding arrangement than a critical infrastructure project undertaken by an international company? Prior to the introduction of this public procurement process, funding was provided via grants. Were there issues with this system that preceded the introduction of the tendering process in 2015? Relatedly, has there been any investigation into whether public procurement has given rise to greater efficiency, accountability and, more importantly, better services and outcomes in terms of stated aims?

The SICAP tendering process is an arduous undertaking for the 48 LDCs around the country, demanding hundreds of hours of work to be dedicated to its completion per LDC. Moreover, we must also consider the hours spent by the lead Government department, local authority officials, Pobal,⁸ external evaluators and private consultants as part of the public procurement process. All these hours add

up to an enormous cost to the taxpayer. Yet, has there been a cost benefit analysis conducted to justify this method? It is important to note that LDCs are not given additional resources during the tendering period, therefore their usual front-facing work must be side-lined, inevitably to the detriment of the individuals, households and communities supported by the LDC. It is important to ask the question, is the imposition of public procurement processes, in the context of social inclusion and poverty eradication, evidence based? Or is it the result of blind and unquestioning allegiance to neoliberal economic ideology?⁹

As recipients of taxpayer money, we must be held accountable for the work we do. However, we would argue that the competitive tendering process is a wholly inappropriate way of ascertaining the social value generated by LDCs. The tender is comparable to a written exam, with marks allocated to each section (of which there were seven in the most recent SICAP tender, each with several subsections) and minimum scores required in each to ‘pass.’ No part of the public procurement process involves an in-person review of the work carried out by LDCs. No recipients of our services are consulted to evaluate the effectiveness of the work carried out. The nature of community development work is such that many of its impacts do not fit easily in a spreadsheet, as we are dealing with human beings.

A written document cannot capture the confidence that completing a local community education course in Arts, Drama or Stained Glass Making can ignite in a person, nor the connection that a weekly coffee morning can foster, nor the true meaning that such things can have on the quality of someone’s life and the ripple effects within the wider community. It fails to portray the reality of the work in all its successes and failures. Competitive tendering forces LDCs into a position whereby they must convince faceless evaluators hired by the State of their worthiness as opposed to opening a dialogue around what is working, what is not and

8 Pobal works on behalf of Government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development.

9 Ireland fully embraced neoliberalism by the late 1980s, as a means of structuring its economy, government and society, and the Irish political elites have been unwavering in their adherence to neoliberal doctrine since then. For a fuller account of neoliberal governance, ideology and “evidence-based” policymaking, see Keith Adams, ‘In Evidence We Trust’, *Working Notes* 33, no. 85 (2019), <https://www.jcfj.ie/article/in-evidence-we-trust/>.

why. The time spent on tendering could be used to conduct a real examination of our collective work, aimed at ensuring the accountability of the State and LDCs with communities leading the process. Would this not be a more honest and impactful way of gauging value for money and accountability? Humans have a tendency to accept senselessness once systematised. Acceptance of systems, of course, allows society to function smoothly and helps avoid anarchy. But blind adherence to processes that do not serve the intended end must be challenged.

In *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, the Government states that a medium-term objective is to “review the current national practice in relation to the commissioning model and develop a model reflecting a collaborative, partnership and whole-of-government ethos and prioritising societal value and community need.”¹⁰ This objective is crucial and the Government must prioritise it as a matter of urgency. Moreover, in redesigning the model, to do so in true partnership and in the spirit of listening.

JOB INSECURITY AND PAY DISPARITY

Job insecurity and pay disparity are both intimately linked to the existing funding model. When hired in the community development sector, contracts state that one’s position is *subject to funding*. The reality of one’s precarious position becomes increasingly unnerving as the end of the funding cycle approaches with this uncertainty and instability having a hugely demoralising effect on staff and colleagues.

The typical 3% annual increases in SICAP funding, which are not guaranteed,¹¹ does not typically keep pace with inflation. Inflation was over 8% in 2022.¹² Combined inflation in 2021, 2022, and 2023 was 16.5%.¹³ Funding increases

do not cover rising programme costs and overhead costs, let alone pay increases. A report conducted by TASC and The Wheel confirms this stagnation of wages in the sector, featuring an example of a Section 39¹⁴ worker whose salary increased by only 2% across 14 years during which time inflation increased by 17%.¹⁵ The result is that workers in the CLDV sector are getting poorer year on year.

Both job insecurity and diminishing pay are in stark contrast to the conditions of our counterparts in the anti-poverty ecosystem who are employed in the civil and public sector. In January 2024, the Government agreed to a new collective pay agreement for the public service.¹⁶ The pay agreement provides for increases of 10.25% over a two and a half year period, with those on lowest incomes receiving up to 17.3% over the lifetime of the pay agreement. This is not to chide our civil and public service colleagues. Job security that enables individuals to make life and financial decisions should always be welcomed. Incremental pay increases that acknowledge the value of individuals’ experience and dedication to their work are appropriate. What we are asking, is whether the same is deserved by workers in the CLDV sector? Is it not these workers who comprise half of the hybrid-system designed to fight poverty in this country?

What these disparities between the conditions in the CLDV sector and the public sector indicate is a fundamental inequality in how we value and respect the work. Far from the government’s aim of achieving “a strengthened partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector,”¹⁷ strife is mounting. This is observable in the 2023 vote by Section 39 workers (voluntary, not-for-profit employees in healthcare) to strike indefinitely, contesting the discrepancy in their conditions of employment

10 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities’, 27.

11 Increases in SICAP funding are not stated in the tender at the beginning, with LDCs only being notified of increases for the following year, if any, at the end of the given year when budgetary and programme decisions may have already been made.

12 Irish Local Development Network, ‘Budget 2023: Protecting Communities & Promoting Social Inclusion’ (Limerick: Irish Local Development Network, July 2022).

13 Central Statistics Office, ‘Consumer Price Index December 2023’, January 2024, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexdecember2023/>.

14 Under the provisions of the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive may enter into agreements with and provide funding to voluntary agencies (section 38 and 39 organisations) to deliver services on its behalf.

15 TASC and The Wheel, ‘The Future of Public Service Delivery by the Community & Voluntary Sector’.

16 Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, ‘Minister Donohoe Welcomes Proposals on a New Collective Pay Agreement for the Public Service’, Government of Ireland, 26 January 2024, <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93217-minister-donohoe-welcomes-proposals-on-a-new-collective-pay-agreement-for-the-public-service/>.

17 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities’, 12.

in comparison to Section 38 (HSE) workers.¹⁸ This was the manifestation of frustrations that have been bubbling for years as a result of workers toiling with lip service as their only thanks. Can a meaningful hybrid system predicated on such inequity endure? This leads to the bigger question of whether a network based on inequity can be fairly expected to positively impact societal inequity.

The Government states that “the community and voluntary sector is critical to a healthy, just and prosperous society in Ireland.”¹⁹ In that case, the health of our society is in peril. The CLDV sector is experiencing an acute recruitment and retention crisis fuelled by job insecurity and pay disparity during a time when demand for not-for-profit services is growing and becoming more complex.²⁰ Rather than a harmonious, collaborative and impactful environment underpinned by parity of esteem, the hybrid ecosystem is fractured and damaged.

TOWARDS TRUE COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities offers hope for the future of the CLDV sector, for its relationship to the State and for the attainability of our shared aims. Objective One, to “strengthen and develop participative approaches to the development of public policy and programming underpinned by an autonomous community and voluntary infrastructure,”²¹ has the opportunity to be transformative if we can find meaningful ways of implementing it. “Autonomous” speaks to the independence of the CLDV sector and their distinctive insights into where policies and programmes are failing, where they could be adjusted, better implemented, or transformed to achieve our objectives.

An autonomous CLDV sector has the potential to encourage the flourishing of our civil society,

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contributing to the enhancement of our democracy. For this to be realised, methods of harnessing this potential must be developed and effectuated. An action listed towards the fulfilment of objective one is the establishment of a “Civic Forum for formal dialogue between the sector and local and central government.” If objective one is to be accomplished, we must go further than a Civic Forum.

For true partnership in the co-creation of programmes and public policy, comprehensive structures and issue-based working groups must be established, with experts from the CLDV sector, the State and community members appointed to them. Status equality and mutual respect must be foundational, requiring a culture which enforces this. Reducing the material inequalities between workers will be necessary to achieve this. Creating an environment where the CLDV sector operates in a perpetual state of uncertainty, instability, and anxiety is contrary to the Government’s *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*. Moreover, weight must be given to recommendations made and where implementation is not possible, reasonable justifications must be given. For democracy to be participative and deliberative, input from civil society must be valued and acted upon assuming actions are practical and logical.

While this paper has focused on the CLDV sector and the State as the key components of the hybrid ecosystem, there is another component which must be given primacy: the communities facing poverty, the “targets” of programmes and policies. No programme or policy is credible, nor are their aims achievable without inclusion of those impacted. Again, the Government recognises this vital component in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, with actions 1.1 and 3.7 providing a roadmap for the inclusion of the community voice in decisions that affect them.

18 Muiris O’Cearbhaill, ‘Health and Community Workers to Strike “indefinitely” from 17 October over Staffing Concerns’, *TheJournal.ie*, 25 September 2023, <https://www.thejournal.ie/workers-volunteer-community-sector-strike-6177851-Sep2023/>.

19 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities’, 8.

20 TASC and The Wheel, ‘The Future of Public Service Delivery by the Community & Voluntary Sector’.

21 Department of Rural and Community Development, ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities’, 24.

Action 1.1

Develop and sustain national, regional and local structures and policies that facilitate and promote meaningful engagement of marginalised communities.

Action 3.7

Provide public information and education programmes to enable people, particularly those from marginalised communities, to engage in national and local democratic processes.

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities

A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024



Figure 1: Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities

The CLDV sector can work with the State and communities to build the programmes and processes referred to in action 3.7, tailoring them so that they are relevant to local contexts and could potentially play a part in their delivery. For this to provide a basis for engagement in national and local democratic processes, the fulfilment of action 1.1 must be occur simultaneously so that individuals and communities have avenues through which their concerns can be addressed, and their ideas fostered and initiated. Without the simultaneous development of these structures, there will be a greater loss of faith in democracy, and we risk further disenfranchising marginalised communities and providing an opening for Far Right actors.²²

CONCLUSION

Albert Einstein is famously attributed with describing insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” He may have had a different issue in mind but this quote is an apt representation of the current state of affairs in the fight against poverty. Last year, poverty increased at a time when the Irish State has more available spending than ever before.²³ This fact requires all actors that are involved in the fight against poverty to take a moment to reflect. We cannot continue to operate as we currently have and reasonably expect to overcome the challenges that persist.

22 Sofia Clifford Riordan and Noel Wardick, ‘Reading the City Centre Riots: Thoughts, Feelings and Reactions of the Dublin Community Co-Op’, *Working Notes* 38, no. 95 (2024): 5–14.

23 Central Statistics Office, ‘Poverty Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022’ (CSO, 22 February 2023), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/poverty/>.

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Unity is increasingly vital as this fractured system will not hold up to future pressures alongside the present destabilisation.

Looking to the future, the poly-crises we face will be compounded and exacerbated by the climate crisis and the far-reaching disorder it will cause. Our systems, characterised by instability as elucidated above, are not equipped to deal with these realities. Creating greater equality between the State and the CLDV sector is by no means a panacea. However, it will help quell the division and create the environment in which cooperation and collaboration can prosper. Upon mending this relationship and deciding to nurture rather than destabilise the hybrid system, we can begin to build more participative and deliberative forms of fighting poverty. In partnership, we can draw on our collective experience and knowledge to formulate solutions to the issues we currently face and those unknown that lie ahead.

Unity is increasingly vital as this fractured system will not hold up to future pressures alongside the present destabilisation. A stable community, local development and community sector with secure, long-term funding and staff with job security and equitable pay progression would be a clear sign from future Governments that the eradication of poverty is a priority. To not do so, would sentence many to lives of poverty in one of Europe’s wealthiest countries.