

**Presentation by Mary Cullen,
Chairperson Southside Partnership at SPAN Conference,
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**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION IN
THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL SECTOR.**

Good afternoon! This is not going to be a power point presentation rather a somewhat personal view of local development in the non-governmental sector addressing some of the challenges and opportunities confronting us in this new Ireland of today in an era of globalisation and the challenges it poses us.

I was elected to the Board of Southside Partnership as a Community Director in 1999 through the Community Platform, which was and is now a locally based vibrant organisation with an anti-poverty and social inclusion focus and I have been in the role of Vice-Chair and now currently the Chair since that year. My day job is as the Manager of a project based in a school setting which has its origins in the local Community Development Project. We work in a therapeutic way with 50 young people who are considered to be in need of additional support and my background is in social work and psychoanalysis. I am seconded from the HSE where I worked (in the former Health Board) for 23 years so I have experience of both the statutory and voluntary sectors and have experienced at first hand the excellent work carried out in both settings.

The school and Community Development Project is based in an acknowledged area of disadvantage which on an index of deprivation developed by Trutz Haas, a respected social policy analyst, has recently (Nurture Consultancy March 2007) come out at the highest level of indicators in a District Electoral Division (DED) of the County of Dunlaoghaire/Rathdown, a hidden pocket of disadvantage in an area of great affluence. I think that this is one of the biggest challenges for us working in this County in the political, voluntary and statutory sector as the perception of the County as being very wealthy masks the depths of the poverty in some areas and has led to under resourcing over many years.

The school in which I am based has great difficulty maintaining the physical buildings and yard as it cannot and does not levy the parents of the young people in the school for the extra monies that most primary schools now rely on to maintain their infrastructure and enhance the quality of the physical environment they wish to have for their pupils. There is no need to tell the esteemed planners and participants here today that a physical environment sets a particular tone and atmosphere and sends a strong message to the people who use it. This has a particular application in the case of young people who experience the world in such a powerfully sensory way and in the project where I work we have tried very hard to maintain a pleasant environment which gives the young people a sense of their worth. We try to have it painted and maintained on a yearly basis if our funding can stretch that far.

Because the school does not have the requisite funding the physical environment does not receive the constant replenishing it requires. Despite highly committed and excellent staff, special staff resourcing and our own project based in the grounds of the school the daily task of supporting the multiplicity of needs of the

young people can be overwhelming. These needs may be linked to a large extent to the impact of multi-generational poverty on the young people and their families. We don't see the same kind of hunger we saw in the past but we do see a hunger for nurturance and care and many of our parents are facing in an *acute* way the challenges being also faced elsewhere in the Ireland of today but without having the kind of income and supports necessary to sustain them through this period of change. This is a time where society no longer has the same kind of trust in authority as we had in the past, where we have moved from talking about government to governance, where many have lost interest in voting and where all the indicators point instead to our need for participation at a greater level in local structures and a say in the running of our local communities. The lessening of respect for authority and authority structures as we have known them and the consequent impact on families where parents are struggling to find their own authority without the scaffolding of traditional authority structures has greatly challenged traditional parenting methods.

The additional 'clustering or neighbourhood effects of disadvantage' which have been delineated by Trutz Haas impact upon the young people and make their lives more difficult. The inherent stress of poverty experienced by some of our families in the past and in the now, is manifested in the attempts to self-regulate the tensions it brings, through the use of alcohol, violence and drugs. Some of our children are growing up in families with parents dealing with these issues of self-regulation along with physical and mental illness, poorly developed parenting skills, literacy and numeracy difficulties and bitterness at the structural inequalities inherent in a society which tells them that they are second class citizens and rejected or in common parlance 'losers' as a result. **There is less space for a social bond in a culture where these problems exist.**

These conflicts may spill over and be played out in and between families and between different community groups and organisations working in the area and indeed beyond the area. We bring our past to our present! Despite this kind of adversity people in the community and community organisations are working in a creative ways to establish the kind of community infrastructure which will meet their local need, which they can participate in the creation of and which can support the development of the young people in the area and enhance their sense of belonging to their families and community. Indeed the organisation in which I work is an example of the outcome of the aforementioned work. The local community through the Community Development Project lobbied for its existence because at local level the need was obvious. The sustainability of a relevant local community infrastructure is the key element in the creation of vibrant communities

As you can see the achievement of this type of outcome is not short-term, quick-fix work but requires a long term commitment leading to sustainable outcomes for future generations. The evidence required as to the outcome of the work is not always available immediately. Indeed we can see at first hand the evidence of the lack of support structures to previous generations of families now manifesting in the use of heroin and other drugs in many of the disadvantaged communities where we work. The impact is always felt by the next generation and indeed we all know how hard it is to change things in our own families so I am not talking about an 'us and them' situation, indeed we are all in this together. The provision of appropriate and long awaited housing in the area in which I work will not bring its impact to fruition until

the next generation. Building a sense of community means building on what is in place already, growing and nurturing something slowly and carefully. Displacing what is in existence leads to a sense of futility and a re-enforcement of the message that we don't count.

One of the biggest messages to the Task Force on Active Citizenship just being launched at this very moment as I speak is that people are fed up with being consulted for the sake of consultation but without any perceived impact on what they were consulted about in the first place. The 'how' of collaboration and dialogue needs to be supported and our capacity to participate and influence outcomes needs nurturing and sometimes professional expertise. Indeed we have learnt a great deal from the recent SPAN case studies including the point at which communities need to be mobilised to have an impact on future decision-making. How can an atmosphere of trust be established and relationships built up in a meaningful way? As we have seen from our Northern Irish colleagues over the past days and years this collaborative process requires a vision of what can be achieved, strong leadership, attention to detail, training, facilitation, personal development, skill and expertise. Yet all of that may be present but without a sense of trust and personal relationship added to the mix nothing will happen. The skills can be taught but this takes time and throughout the process we need to add a sense of hope and fun. The process in itself is important because it is what leads to the aforementioned relationships developing. Need I say that this applies to all sectors and not just to the non-governmental one. The skills are required by all parties to do the deal.

Militating against the type of process described above is the governance structures which have been imposed on us in a strict regulatory environment. It's as if we are a business corporation. The one size fits *all* 'hat' in terms of the regulatory requirements stifles innovation and personal initiative. If we are all the same then the very purpose for which we are there in the first place is defeated. The business model does not fit the kind of work we are attempting to do and this is not an argument against planning and evaluating but rather a plea to tailor the required accountability in such a way that it can be supported to be met without diverting all the project's energies and resources from their core task in so doing.

Different systems of accountability to the multi funding agencies we are dependent upon means establishing complex systems to respond to each agency's distinctive regulatory requirements and is an onerous task recently commented upon by the Partnership's auditors as being more complex than that of some of the multi-national organisations on their books! It is also difficult to work within a yearly budget with no carry over, which does not take into account the ordinary life events that can take away from the carrying out of the envisaged plan. I am referring here to staff moving on, illnesses, difficulties in recruitment, maternity leave etc. In smaller organisations all of the above has a greater impact on the work and cannot be carried in the same way that bigger organisations can. We do not get the additional funding to cater for such eventualities so that the work plan cannot always reach its achievement.

. We are asked to provide representation on the multiple structures we are required to attend without the additional resourcing of staff to continue the work at the community level. These structures could provide the place for the conversations we need to have but instead the business of the day takes precedent and the conversation needing to be had does not take place. These multiplicity of tasks take us away from

the heart of the work and I sometimes wonder how the work gets done at all .The work on the ground has to be a priority and the issues I mentioned earlier underline the need for skilled interventions and supports in disadvantaged communities.

Some more challenges --- It is getting harder and harder to be a volunteer and the systems required to vet people are not in place. The responsibilities of employers in this litigious environment are very demanding and are difficult for small projects to comply with without adequate resourcing .This type of development work requires sustainable projects where staff skills are built up and used for the good of the community. The task of building meaningful trusting relationships between people in the community, their organisations and the other organisations requires nurturing and keeping staff whose work is valued, where a career path is in place and where they are encouraged to stay in the work they are passionate about. This means that the work has also to be respected in the wider context. The greater the inequalities the greater the possibility of what Iseult Honahan of U.C.D. has called ‘separate parallel societies indifferent to, suspicious of or hostile to each other’ developing. Sadly, with the young people I work with I see and hear evidence of this on a daily basis. Introducing ourselves to wider groupings and getting to know one another is extremely important.

I will end on some of the opportunities. I have been very pleased to have been involved with the Southside Partnership Company. It has brought me many of the supports I have mentioned which are needed at the level of the community to continue with our work on the project. Our work needs this involvement in the bigger picture or we can feel very isolated and over-whelmed. Involvement in this wider arena means a greater possibility of informing and contributing to policy at local level and I have represented the Partnership Company on the County Development Board and the County Child Care Committee. Involvement in the Partnership does something similar for many other people and local networks. It is a partnership of different voices, a partnership with a small p and not THE PARTNERSHIP COMPANY. In contributing to it we give up a little piece of our own local loyalties to something with a bigger voice but that does not mean that our voice is occluded. There is a diversity to these voices and they are not always saying the same thing

As a Partnership Board representative of all the various sectors and as a Company we have tried hard to use a particular model of collaboration which allows for the difficult conversations to be had respecting the fact that our job is to bring the voices of a particular constituency to the table. Sometimes in order to give true representation to those voices we have to say hard things. It takes time to build consensus. The creativity and innovation that can be mobilised in structures somewhat on the edge have helped to shape our society today and can be used as a laboratory to test out new thinking and ideas .If we don’t support them in the way they need to be supported, we risk losing something very precious. That something is what the Taoiseach has wanted to protect and which he wished to start a national conversation about, the outcome of which is being published today. Here at the SPAN conversations and events we have gone quite a long way towards a model of what can be achieved through purposeful and meaningful dialogue which is supported and encouraged. Thank you for your time.