



# Involving Communities in Local Government

a guide to participation

Sarah Craig

**Combat Poverty Agency**  
*working for the prevention  
and elimination of poverty*



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# Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency has a statutory duty to support and encourage anti-poverty work and to promote greater understanding of the nature, causes and extent of poverty and the measures necessary to overcome such poverty. As part of this work, the Agency provides resource materials to assist organisations to develop and undertake good practice in anti-poverty work.

In its Strategic Plan: 1999-2001, the Agency committed itself to undertaking work that will assist in strengthening the capacity of local government to tackle poverty as part of the wider process of local government reform. As part of this work, the Agency commissioned Sarah Craig from the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) to produce a guide which would provide practical assistance in promoting community participation and involvement in reformed structures of local government.

The Agency would like to acknowledge the valuable comments and advice received from a range of individuals who took time to read drafts of the guide.

**Combat Poverty Agency March 2000**

# About this Booklet

The aim of this booklet is to highlight areas in which community participation can be enhanced in the setting up and implementation of reformed structures of Local Government, and in the context of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and Local Agenda 21.

The booklet is divided into the following sections:

- Key definitions and glossary of terms for community participation.
- Context for involving communities in local government.
- What is the community/voluntary sector?
- Why consult with the community/voluntary sector?
- Ways of involving the community/voluntary sector.

The booklet also contains some useful contact points and references for those who would like to learn more about the issue of community participation.

# Glossary of Terms

**Social exclusion** Structures and processes which exclude people who experience poverty and marginalisation, because they are different, from full participation in the mainstream of society eg. (Travellers, other ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, gays/lesbians etc.).

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**Participatory/participative democracy** Active citizenship, where the individual has a direct input into the political/decision-making processes and where those with direct experience of services or new social needs are given a voice in determining policy and practice.

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**National Anti-Poverty Strategy NAPS** A major government initiative to tackle poverty and social exclusion in Ireland by targeting areas for co-ordinated action by all government departments and state agencies at national, regional and local level.

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**Poverty** People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living, which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society, generally.\*

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**Representative democracy** Local citizens elect members to local authorities to represent the interests relevant to their area. In Ireland, this happens through a system of proportional representation.

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**Community development** It is a process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self-confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to influence change and exert control over the social, political and economic issues that affect their lives.

\* The National Anti-Poverty Strategy: Sharing in Progress 1997

# Context

## Local Government Reform

In 1996, the government published 'Better Local Government: A Programme for Change', which sets out a framework and strategy for significant reforms within local government. The ultimate objective of the reforms is to develop more effective involvement of local councillors and other interests in the development of local government and local development policy, and to co-ordinate local development initiatives. The reform process aims to establish new forms of local governance and participative decision making processes. It embraces the concept of social partnership, which has increasingly played a key role in informing policy development and the delivery of services. This entails the establishment of local multi-agency institutions which provide a local policy framework based on local consensus.

### Local Governance implies:

- A new proactive relationship with the community at large
- Collaborative consensus, planning and implementation
- The involvement of people below "multi-agency" level
- Acknowledging the community as a source of learning
- Fostering local debate
- An innovative approach to service delivery
- Drawing people into a political process which enhances participatory and representative democracy.

## County/City Development Boards (CDBs)

County/City Development Boards are being established in each of the 29 councils and the five borough corporations. Their main aim is to establish a strategy for social, cultural and economic development within the county/city and to oversee its implementation.

The membership of each CDB will be in the region of 26 representatives drawn from four sectors. These are:

- Local Government
- Local Development
- State Agencies
- Social Partners.

Guidelines for the setting up of the CDBs specify that each County/City Development Board will have six representatives from the local development sector. There will also be two/three representatives drawn from the local community/voluntary/disadvantaged sector. The process of selecting these representatives will be the responsibility of these sectors.

## Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs)

In addition to the County/City Development Boards, Strategic Policy Committees are being established in each local authority to develop policy in key local government functional areas, in particular:

- Planning/Environment
- Housing
- Roads
- Community and Enterprise Development.

A minimum of one third of the members of each SPC are to be sectoral representatives and it is a matter for the council to decide which sectors should be represented on which SPCs. The community/voluntary/disadvantaged sector is one of the six sectors from which representation will be drawn. Representatives will be nominated by the sector itself, 'with facilitation by the local authority'. To ensure the

participation and involvement of those most disadvantaged, this facilitation should include adequate resourcing in terms of travel, childcare, social care and technical support.

The issues that will be addressed by the CDBs and the SPCs have a direct bearing on local communities. People living in an area can contribute a wealth of information and ideas about what needs to happen in relation to these issues. In addition, interest groups such as Travellers and lone parents have particular needs in relation to these issues. It is, therefore, vital that consultation with, and participation of, those experiencing marginalisation and poverty, takes place to ensure that social exclusion is addressed.

In the last number of years, considerable new developments have taken place in the local context, e.g. Local Development Partnerships, Community Development Projects, URBAN Initiatives etc. National, regional and local structures have increased the opportunities for meaningful participation and consultation with the local community. There is a growing recognition of the need for greater involvement of people in decision-making about their local areas. Local government provides a very good starting point for the development of participative democracy. However, the key challenge for local authorities will be to ensure that those groups in society that are most excluded and that have least opportunity to have a say, are represented on the CDB and SPC structures.

## National Anti-Poverty Strategy\*

Part of the work of the County/City Development Boards will be to ensure that the objectives of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) are reflected in the development of County/City strategies. One of the key areas which has an impact on poor people and where the local authorities have an important role is in the provision of housing. Housing provision by local authorities often focuses solely on the bricks and mortar aspect whilst

other aspects such as estate management, environmental improvement and community development are neglected or underdeveloped. These are all valuable ways in which local government can play a role in enhancing participation.

The County Development Boards and the Strategic Policy Committees will have an important role in ensuring that the principles underpinning the NAPS inform the processes by which policy and strategy are developed within local authorities.

### The NAPS principles are:

- Ensuring equal access and encouraging participation for all.
- Guaranteeing the rights of minorities especially through anti-discrimination measures.
- The reduction of inequalities and, in particular, addressing the gender dimensions of poverty.
- The development of the partnership approach, building on local and national partnership processes.
- Actively involving the community and voluntary sector.
- Encouraging self reliance through respecting individual dignity and promoting empowerment.
- Engaging in appropriate consultative processes, especially with users of services.

## Local Agenda 21

The Department of the Environment and Local Government has requested all local authorities to prepare a Local Agenda 21 Process. Agenda 21 is the United Nations agenda for sustainable development in the 21st century and was signed by the Irish Government at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It aims to achieve balance between economic, social and environmental development objectives. It is called Local Agenda 21 because most of the issues require

\* The National Anti-Poverty Strategy states that social inclusiveness and equality of opportunity will be fostered through a renewed system of local government (National Anti-Poverty Strategy: Sharing in Progress, 1997)

action by local authorities, in partnership with the community. In essence, it is about local partnerships carrying out local improvements.

The need for greater participation of the local community in the preparation of a Local Agenda 21 process cannot be emphasised enough. This can best be done by organising the community so that collective opinion can be attained. The key advantages of consultation in this context have been described as follows:

- It generates a collective focus rather than individual responses to problems and issues.
- It encourages and enables local groups and organisations to begin to take some sense of ownership of their area.
- It recognises the existence of marginalised groups who are unable to access existing support structures and empowers these groups by enabling them develop skills, knowledge, confidence and influence.
- It enables the providers of services to target resources better and promotes a more equitable use of resources.

from decision-making to date and are marginalised, as a result. These groups include Travellers, lone parents, people with disabilities, refugees and asylum seekers, and women living in disadvantaged areas.

In the context of local governance and representation of the community sector on CDBs and SPCs a number of key criteria should be considered. These are:

- Emphasis should be placed on community organisations with a commitment to and a track record in anti-poverty and social exclusion work
- Community representation should have a collective focus
- Communities of interest such as Travellers, people with people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, etc should be included
- A gender balance should be achieved.

## What is the Community and Voluntary Sector?

The community and voluntary sector is diverse and well developed. This sector is wide ranging in its remit and covers groups involved in service delivery, co-ordination (which often includes a representative role), policy formation and activities which promote advocacy, empowerment and self-help. The sector is non-profit making and is independent of the state and private sector.

In the new structures of local government, key interests within the community sector must be reflected. These interests include those groups that have been excluded

# Why consult with the Community and Voluntary Sector?

**Better Local Government: A Programme for Change** sets out the core principles underlying the reform of the local government system. The principles are based on:

- The development of democracy at the lowest level.
- Better relations with 'customers' of the services provided.
- The provision of adequate funding for these services and making the services more efficient.
- Improving the quality and relevance of service delivery and, hence, the quality of life of the community through open examination of existing methods and effectiveness.

The establishment of CDBs and the SPCs and the changes that are taking place in local government provide a unique opportunity to enhance the democratic process, by integrating and strengthening representative and participative democracy.

## Core Principles

1. Enhancing local democracy
2. Serving the customer better
3. Developing efficiency
4. Providing proper resources

(Better Local Government: A Programme for Change p. 10)

# Reasons for Community Participation

There are a number of reasons why community participation is a valuable asset in local government:

- It results in more appropriate and relevant services being delivered.
- It is the right of every citizen to be able to participate in decision making about his/her community.
- It ensures that policy makers and service providers are in tune with the needs and issues within communities.
- It ensures that local people are well informed about what is happening.
- It ensures that local development and decisions about development reflect the needs and wishes of the local community.
- It provides a mechanism for resolution of conflict.
- It gives a sense of ownership in policy development and initiatives within an area because people have an opportunity to voice their opinions.
- It develops a culture of participation that can have relevance beyond the local level.
- It allows individuals to have some control over what happens in their community.
- For those groups, in society, that are socially excluded, it provides an opportunity for their voices to be heard and for developing ways of addressing the marginalisation they experience.

# Ways of Involving the Community/ Voluntary Sector

Preparing the Ground: Guidelines for the Progress from Strategy Groups to County/City Development Boards (DoE&LG 1999) suggests that a Community and Voluntary Organisations Forum should be established by each CDB. One of the key challenges in setting up such a structure is ensuring that:

- It builds on existing community infrastructure including existing networks/structures/relationships within the sector.
- Representation is broad and encompassing.
- Marginalised and socially excluded groups are incorporated.

In an area where there has not traditionally been any involvement of local groups, it can be difficult to begin to engage at a local community level. However, there are examples of good practice from previous initiatives that should be drawn upon. For example, the Local Development Partnerships, funded by ADM have been working on the development of a community forum approach in a number of areas.

## What is a Community Forum?

The development of a local community forum offers a means for consultation and communication between local government and the community sector. The objectives of a community forum in a local government context are:

- To provide a two-way exchange of information and ideas between the CDB and the community.
- To act as a sounding board for the local authority at community level.

- To establish a participative structure/s from which representation can be drawn for the range of interests that may seek to be included.

It should be noted that a range of community structures currently exists which have been set up under other local initiatives. It will be important to build on and develop existing structures.

In some areas, however, there is not always a well-developed community infrastructure from which to establish a community forum. In some instances, it may be necessary to begin a process of community development to encourage local people, particularly those that are most disadvantaged, to have a say. This may mean undertaking capacity building measures to encourage empowerment and participation, which will give a voice to those that have not been heard in the past.

Community fora can be set up in the local area to address a particular issue or concern and to bring together the range of groups in an area that have an interest in addressing this issue. Examples of this include fora for womens' groups, fora for childcare, fora for unemployed groups etc.

Alternatively, groups may organise themselves on a geographical basis, addressing issues, for example, in a local authority housing estate or on a town basis. In either case, it is important that the forum established takes account of the needs of the most marginalised.

### Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Community Platform

Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Community Platform was established by community activists in the area with support from Southside Partnership. It has a clear anti-poverty focus and aims to support the development of a strong community sector in the region. The Platform organises elections for community representatives to external bodies and has a key focus on informing and involving its members on issues of local government reform.



## Issue-Based Community Forum Approach

In the Tralee Area Partnership an issues-based forum was established in 1995. Membership of the forum totalled 60 organisations. The forum identified a range of initiatives for inclusion in the Partnership's Local Action Plan, including areas such as education and training, enterprise and community development.

## Community Consultative Panel

Ballymun Regeneration Ltd. has set up a Community Consultative Panel of representatives from residents' associations and interested groups in Ballymun and adjoining areas. Panel meetings give groups a regular opportunity to see how proposed developments in their area fit into the overall regeneration project and to discuss and debate the issues of concern. They can then update the committees, which they represent. The Panel meets every two/three months.

# Other means of Consultation and Participation

In addition to the establishment of a community forum, there are other ways in which local authorities can engage with the local communities they serve. However, it must be noted that these approaches need to build on the community infrastructure of the area.

### 1. Change of practice/Delegation of power

The culture that previously surrounded the relationship between local councillors, local authorities and members of the community was one where power to decide on the local area rested firmly within the local authority. There is now an opportunity for shared power and for greater levels of consultation with the community.

However, the change in culture starts within the local council. Meetings that were, heretofore, closed to community members should be opened up. Representation of groups affected by a particular issue should be included in meetings/dialogue where the issue is being discussed and information produced by and for the local authority should be openly accessible. This transparency can greatly enhance the trust of community groups in their local bodies.

### 2. Advisory Committees

Advisory committees can be established by local government in an area around a particular issue. Advisory committees, and working groups/task forces may be set up to respond to particular local issues or concerns. Particular issues where this may be of relevance include housing, traffic management, parks and other facilities as well as the treatment of specific groups in the local area. In Tallaght/Clondalkin URBAN Initiative, for example, neighbourhood planning groups have been established in a number of local authority estates. To encourage participation, tenant participation workers have been appointed and a community planner works with the local tenant groups.

### 3. Collecting information on how to make decisions

Research into the local area involving local people can help identify specific needs of the area. A considerable amount of base-line and local research has already been carried out by Local Development Partnerships, County Enterprise Boards, LEADER Companies, Community Development Projects and other bodies. However, some action research could be undertaken through the County/City Development Boards by local people for local people to ensure that there is detailed information on which to base future decisions that may be taken.

### 4. Resources for community participation

Meaningful participation often begins with a consultative process. This involves local government structures being required to invest resources into the consultation process to ensure

that the groundwork can take place easily. This may range from providing or paying for venues for meetings, using specialist facilitators to work with the community sector (for example, people who have experience of working with ethnic minorities) paying travel and social-care expenses, to funding community research work and investment in community initiatives. An audit of resources needed for community participation should be undertaken at an early stage. In developing consultative processes, local authorities should draw from the skills and expertise which exist within their areas.

## 5. Support and training Issues

The establishment of County/City Development Boards and Strategic Policy Committees will create a new culture within the local government context. It will require the working together of local politicians and other interests on issues which have direct relevance to those interests. It is likely that this will pose challenges, given that this approach has not operated before now. It is, therefore, proposed that CDBs and SPCs include developing an understanding of consultation and participation of marginalised groups, when considering the support and training needs of their members.

## Checklist

Checklist for developing a model of community participation in local government structures:

- ✓ Encourage public participation through shared decision making.
- ✓ Educate local community and local government members to enable participation, drawing on local expertise and skills.
- ✓ Seek out and encourage broad involvement.
- ✓ Create the right setting for participation (e.g. meetings accessible to all, giving people an opportunity to speak etc.).
- ✓ Set up systems to encourage participation e.g. community fora.
- ✓ Provide adequate funding to enable participation including payment for venues for meetings, use of outside facilitators, education and training for participation, technical assistance with community base-line research etc.
- ✓ Develop pro-active information and communication systems.
- ✓ Ensure that information produced is clear, transparent and user-friendly. This includes all reports of meetings, briefings etc.

# Useful Reading

- Insights Series.

**Area Development Management Ltd.**

- Community Profiling: Auditing Social Needs, 1994.

**Buckingham Open University Press**

- Studying Your Local Area(1999);

Planning for Change: A Handbook on Strategic Planning for Local Development Partnerships (1995);

Community Participation: A Handbook for Individuals and Groups in Local Development Partnerships (1995);

Making Partnerships Work: A Handbook on Involvement in Local Development Partnerships (1995)

**Combat Poverty Agency**

- Strategies to Encourage Participation, Strategy Guide 1. 1997. Local Development for the Future, 1998 (Refer to Chapter on Local Partnerships, Sustainable Development and Agenda 21 by S. O'Neill.

**Community Workers' Co-op**

- Webb, R. and Associates, Public Policy on Children's Play in Ireland: An Examination of Central and Local Government Policies on Children's Play in Public Areas.

**CSER/Children's Research Centre, TCD, 1999.**

- Preparing the Ground;

SPC Guidelines;

Guidelines for Preparation of County/City Strategies for Economic, Social and Cultural Development;

Better Local Government: A Programme for Change (1996)

**Department of the Environment and Local Government**

- Local Community Involvement - A Handbook for Good Practice - Gabriel Chanan

**European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 1999**

- Voluntary Sector Unit, A Guide to Participation

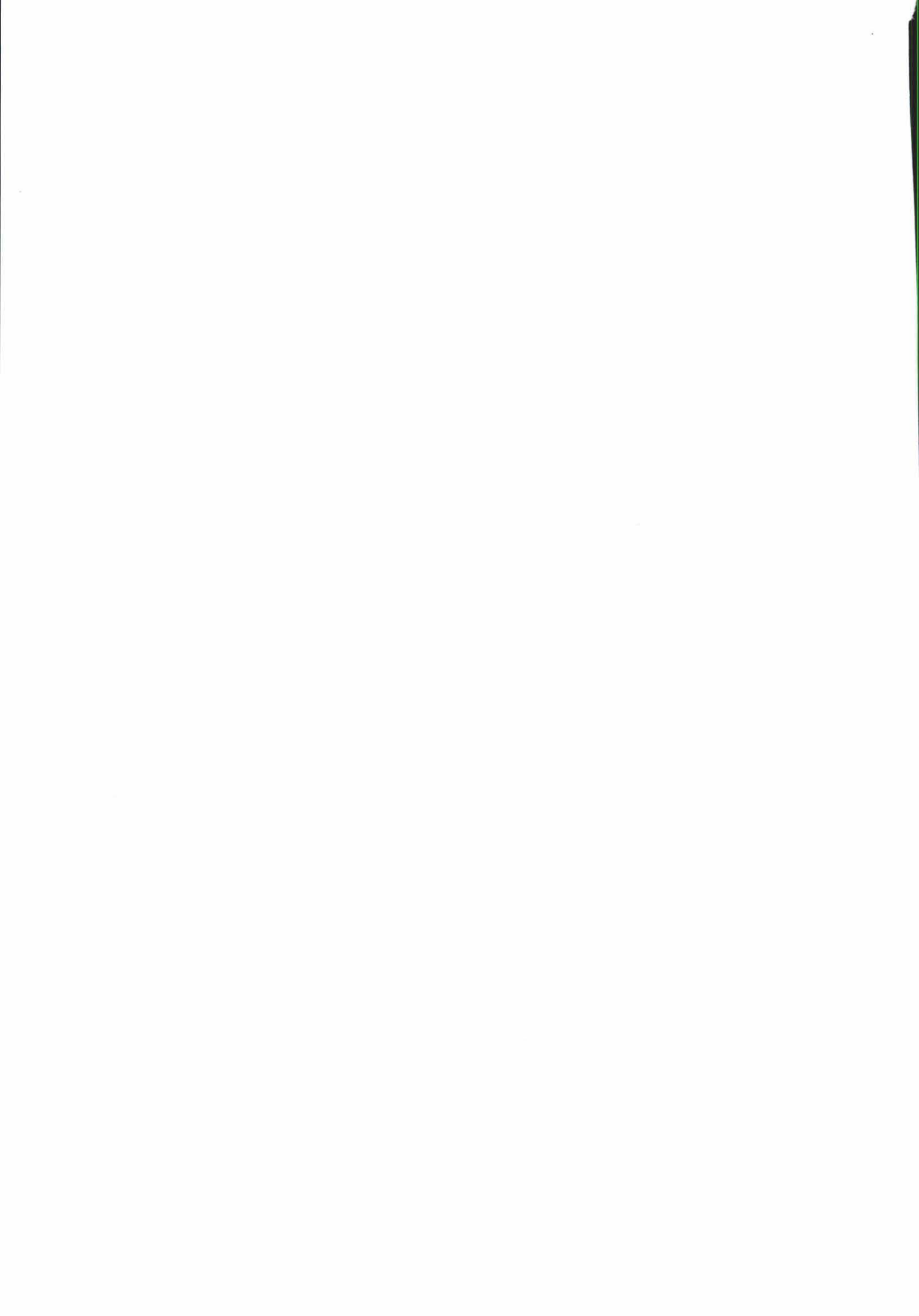
**Leeds Metropolitan University**

- Seminar Papers on Consulting Communities

**Policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University, 1995.**

# Useful Contacts

- Area Development Management Ltd. Holbrook House, Holles St., Dublin 2, Phone 01-6613611
- Ballymun Regeneration Ltd., Ciaran Murray, Stormanstown House, Ballymun Rd., Dublin 11, Phone (01) 8421144
- Combat Poverty Agency, Bridgewater Centre, Conyngham Rd., Islandbridge, Dublin 8, Phone 01-6706746
- Community Workers' Co-op, First Floor, Unit 4, Tuam Road Centre, Galway, Phone 091- 779030
- Cork Community Forum, Comhair Chathair Chorcai, Sunbeam Industrial Park, Millfield, Mallow Rd., Cork, Phone 021-302310
- Department of the Environment and Local Government, Custom House, Dublin 1, Phone 01-6793377
- Directors of Community and Enterprise, [www.cdb.ie](http://www.cdb.ie)
- Drogheda Community Forum, Drogheda Partnership Company, 12A North Quay, Drogheda, Co. Louth, Phone 041-42088
- Institute of Public Administration, 57-61 Landsdowne road, Dublin, 4 Phone 01-6686233
- SRUNA Project, Dublin Regional Authority, 11 Parnell Square, Dublin 1
- South Co. Dublin Community Forum, [westtallaght@eircom.net](mailto:westtallaght@eircom.net)
- Southside Partnership, 45 Upper Georges St., Dun Laoghaire, Phone 01-2301011
- South Dublin URBAN Initiative, Unit 1, The Village Square, Tallaght, Dublin 24, Phone 01-4626240



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