

# **In Other Words**

Policy Maker's Perceptions  
of Social Justice Advocacy

**Research carried out by Kathy Walsh  
(with Sue Conlan, Rory Hearne, Catherine  
Joyce, Catherine Lynch, Cliona McCormack,  
Rachel Mullen & Diarmaid O’Sullivan)**

The findings expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of The Advocacy Initiative.

**The Advocacy Initiative**

Carmichael House,  
North Brunswick St, Dublin 7, Ireland  
tel: 01-685 3291  
email: [connect@advocacyinitiative.ie](mailto:connect@advocacyinitiative.ie)  
website: [www.advocacyinitiative.ie](http://www.advocacyinitiative.ie)

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# Foreword

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Have you ever sat at a table, in a meeting with policy makers and wondered: *'What is it like to be on their side of the table?'* Then this report is for you. If you are an advocate working in the Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector and are curious to know the views on social justice advocacy of those involved in making and implementing government policy, or if you are a policy maker and are curious about the views of your colleagues on their experience of working with C&V sector social justice advocates, then you too will find this report interesting.

It offers a wide variety of insights into the views and experience of policy makers, including the role and purpose of the C&V sector; the value and effectiveness of social justice advocacy, and what policy makers like and expect from social justice advocates. What makes this report particularly interesting is the extensive use of quotes from the

interviewees so that we get to hear their views in their own words.

There is nothing worse than reading through a report and noting to yourself: 'yes, I knew that', 'heard that before', 'agree with that', as though the report was simply restating the obvious. A report should always have an edge to it, be challenging and stir the reader even to the level of feeling uncomfortable. This report is just that.

Comments by the interviewees about the lack of innovation from the sector *'a repetition of old ideas in response to new problems'*, the lack of legitimacy of some organisations because they are not sufficiently connected to the people who experience poverty and inequality first hand, the lack of self-reflection within the sector which inhibits it from naming some of the inherent tensions and conflicts that arise in being a

service provider and a social justice advocate. But don't be mistaken. This report is not a 'rant' by policy makers - far from it. Their views are thoughtful, insightful, considered, and generally appreciative of the role and contribution of the sector's social justice advocacy.

President Michael D Higgins, in a recent speech on the impact of austerity, posed the question: *'What has gone wrong with so many smart people? Or maybe it is simply that there is something wrong with the tools they have used in order to understand their world?'* This question could be levelled at social justice advocates. There is immense energy, commitment and intelligence within the sector - lots of 'smart people' - so how come we have not been more successful in bringing about the changes to justice, equality and rights we are pursuing? One of the objectives of The Advocacy Initiative is to explore some of the deeper assumptions



which underpin our advocacy work. In essence the way advocates look at the world.

One of the unique features of this report is that it records the reflections of the interviewees who themselves are social justice advocates. The things that surprised and challenged them are pointers to the assumptions that we share as advocates. The interviewees were expecting reluctance from the interviewees to take part in interviews and anticipated them being guarded and reticent in their views. They found the exact opposite. They were open, engaged, had in depth views and were very frank.

Another assumption seemed to be that C&V sector social justice advocates claim 'exclusivity' for the role of social justice advocacy. We imply that we are the social justice advocates and the others in the policy process, the politicians

and the civil servants, are not 'social justice advocates'. This report suggests that it is more complex than this. A community and voluntary sector social justice advocate can be at a meeting in a government department with a senior official who has responsibility for a particular policy area and they too see themselves as a social justice advocate.

What comes across in the report is that policy makers are committed, energetic, enthusiastic, reflective, have opinions and are open towards the sector. I don't agree with everything that is said within the report. But that is not the point. The challenge is not for me to note what I agree or disagree with, but to consider how I respect their perspectives and to engage with their views so as to achieve better social justice outcomes.

I'd like to thank the interviewees for their honesty and for giving so generously of their time; to the interviewees for their commitment and hard work in bringing this research project to a very successful conclusion and to Kathy Walsh for supporting and guiding the interviewees and for the challenging task of drafting a final report.

**Kieran Murphy,  
Chair, The Advocacy Initiative**

# 1. Introduction

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## The Advocacy Initiative background & purpose

The Advocacy Initiative has its origins in discussions at the Centre for Non-Profit Management (TCD) summer school in 2008, which led to the formation of the Steering Group. The Steering Group developed a proposal for collaborative action to examine the status of advocacy work carried out by the Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector in Ireland, and in August 2010 published a report that drew on discussions and analysis by and with a broad range of stakeholders. That report identified a need for deeper engagement to promote understanding, awareness and effectiveness of social justice advocacy in Ireland.

The Advocacy Initiative emerged at a time when the deep economic and social crisis in Ireland was being revealed, and reflects an urgent need to strengthen the influence of social justice advocates. The Initiative aims to make a contribution to shaping Ireland's future by finding new ways of working with the public policy process and of engaging with the broader public debate.

With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies the Steering Group defined and articulated a three year programme of work (2011-2014) aimed at promoting the

concept, practice and efficacy of social justice advocacy as a central feature of civil society. The Advocacy Initiative is open to any C&V sector actor engaged in and reflecting on social justice advocacy and welcomes the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders while seeking to create space for cross-sectorial analysis and reflection.

The ultimate objective of The Advocacy Initiative is to reframe the relationship between the social justice advocacy sector and state actors. This reframing requires both sides to think differently. It is envisaged that this new relationship will be grounded in social solidarity; enhance the prospects for influencing law and policy in positive directions; and enable more effective advocacy strategies.

The Initiative intends to create the conditions for this new relationship by fostering:

- An engaged group of relevant policy makers and influencers, broadly defined, with sufficient knowledge, understanding and motivation to support the legitimacy and potential benefit of social justice advocacy.

- Reframed expectations regarding their mutual relationship on the part of both the social justice advocacy sector and state actors.

- More effective and constructive advocacy strategies on the part of social justice advocates.

The Advocacy Initiative's working statement defines social justice advocacy as: 'planned, organised and sustained action/s undertaken by C&V sector organisations, the purpose of which is to influence public policy outcomes, with and/or on behalf of the communities they work with'.

*The overall objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of policy makers of social justice advocacy in order to support the objective of reframing the relationship between the social justice advocacy sector and state actors. It builds on the learning arising from the 2010 project report, and other research activities, including the report on the link between public funding and advocacy.*

# 1.2

## Study background & purpose

In 2012 The Advocacy Initiative's study mapping non-profit engagement in social justice advocacy found that 39% of the organisations who participated were engaged in social justice advocacy. A further 12% identified themselves as doing other forms of public policy advocacy (51% of non-profit organisations were found to be engaged in some kind of advocacy). The majority carrying out social justice advocacy classified themselves as in the 'social services' (25%), community development and housing (22%) or education and research (13%) sectors. The majority carrying out social justice advocacy were service provider organisations. The main policy areas social justice advocacy focused on were children and families (10%), poverty and social exclusion (8%), education (8%), employment and training (7%) and local development (6%). The most common types of advocacy carried out were identified as public awareness (11%), networking (9%), participation in local and regional committees (9%), lobbying (8%) and membership of national networks (8%).

This study provided very useful insights into social justice advocacy from the perspective of the C&V sector. To complement this study The Advocacy Initiative decided

to explore policy makers and influencers perceptions of the sectors social justice advocacy work. Keen to build capacity and promote learning within the sector in general and social justice advocates in particular, The Advocacy Initiative decided to move away from the linear mould of conventional research, and apply a participatory approach. The process was designed to facilitate a process of sequential reflection and action, with social justice advocates.

The study which ultimately involved recruiting and training social justice advocates to explore the perceptions of social justice advocacy amongst policy makers and implementers had a number of purposes as follows:

- To gain a better understanding of policy makers/policy implementers perceptions of the social justice advocacy work undertaken by the C&V sector (building on the 2010 project report).
- To equip social justice advocates with the capacity (and where necessary the specific research skills required) to actively engage as participant researchers in the study, so that they can learn and reflect on the perceptions and views of policy

makers/policy implementers at first hand.

- To encourage and support the social justice advocates involved (as participant researchers) and others, to take ownership of and responsibility for progressing the learning arising from the study, thus ensuring the study findings have a future beyond the completion of the study.

The study was important to the Advocacy Initiative for a number of reasons:

- 1) The findings could provide additional useful insights into the views of public makers/policy implementers on social justice advocacy work which in turn would increase The Advocacy Initiative and its members understanding of these views/perceptions.
- 2) The knowledge of the social justice advocates who participated in the study would be broadened and deepened.
- 3) Participation in the study by both policy makers/policy implementers and social justice advocates would facilitate active discussion and learning between these two groups (a key objective was to be a catalyst



for new relationships between the state and the C&V sector).

4) The participatory nature of the study would also facilitate proactive reflection and peer learning between the social advocates directly involved in the study.

5) The social justice advocates involved in the study would directly benefit from enhanced research skills and capacity.

Following a competitive tendering process Dr. Kathy Walsh was appointed to oversee and facilitate the research process and be responsible for the preparation of the final report.

"The Advocacy Initiative emerged at a time when the deep economic and social crisis in Ireland was being revealed, and reflects an urgent need to strengthen the influence of social justice advocates".

# 2. Methodology

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There were four distinct phases in the research study; recruitment of the social justice advocate researchers; development of the research plan and instruments; research training and field work; and analysis of the research findings. See [Table 2.1](#) for an outline of these different elements.

**Table 2.1** Research Activity & Training

Timing	Activity Completed	Output
End of June 2012	Appointment of the overall research facilitator	Overall research facilitator in place
End of August 2012	Recruitment of the social justice advocates	Seven social justice advocate 'researchers' recruited
12th Sept 2012	Research team first meeting	Agree research aim, objectives, phasing, key concepts, definitions & consideration of the research methodologies
20th Sept 2012	Research team second meeting	Identification of key interview questions/ exploration of confidentiality issues and identification of key interview types
1st Nov 2012	Research team third meeting	Finalisation of the interview questions and schedule
30th Nov 2012	Research team fourth meeting	Update on progress and identification of issues emerging
22nd Feb 2013	Research team fifth meeting	Discussion of draft report
25th March 2013	Research team sixth meeting	Finalisation of the report

## 2.2

### Recruitment of the Social Justice Advocate 'Researchers'

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This phase involved the development of an invitation to participate in the study as a social justice advocate researcher and an application form. The invitation to participate as a researcher in the study was circulated to all organisations involved in the Initiative. A total of 19 completed applications were received and assessed using agreed scoring and assessment criteria. The plan originally was to recruitment of five social justice advocates to act as the researchers for the study. The

quality and level of interest in the study saw the recruitment of seven individuals as follows:

- Catherine Joyce, [Barnardos](#)
- Cliona McCormack, [Irish Heart Foundation](#)
- Rory Hearne, [Dolphin House Community Development Association](#)
- Rachel Mullen, [Equality and Rights Alliance](#)
- Sue Conlan, [Irish Refugee Council](#)
- Catherine Lynch, [Equality Consultant](#)
- Diarmaid O'Sullivan, [Older and Bolder](#)



## 2.3

### Development of the Research Plan

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A draft outline research plan based on the research objectives was developed by the researcher facilitator as the basis of the discussions with the participant researchers. This plan was finalised and agreed at the first meeting with the participant researchers in early September 2012. It was agreed at this meeting that each participant researcher would identify and interview 4 to 5 policy makers/ implementers across the range of four policy maker types identified

(see [Section 3.1](#) for details) in their policy area (to include where possible a mixture of men and women interviewees).

#### Development of the research questions

The research facilitator developed the initial draft interview questions and confidentiality agreement for the second meeting. These were reviewed and discussed in some detail and ultimately

finalised and agreed by the researchers at the third research team meeting. Methodologies for self-reflection and learning arising from participation as researchers in the study and engagement with policy makers/implementers were also discussed and agreed at these meetings. The adoption of this self-reflection methodology was useful in that it enabled the researchers to document and reflect on their perceptions and learning as the research process progressed.

## Field Work Research Training



The initial plan was for interviews to take place over the period of September to November 2012. The reality was that the social justice advocates and their potential interviewees had very limited availability over this period as preparations for Budget 2013 took precedence. Requests for interviews as part of the study were issued by the individual researchers in late October and early November with all interviews completed by the end of December 2012. A small number of potential interviewees refused the request to be interviewed, citing the pressure of work as the reason. Getting members of the civil service in particular sectors to agree/to identify a suitable date for the interview was an issue for some interviewers. These delays were attributed to understaffing and proximity to Budget 2013.

The issue of confidentiality was identified as key to the engagement of senior policy makers and implementers. In order to facilitate their participation in the study it was agreed that their identity would only be known to the individual who interviewed them. The interviewer was responsible for transcribing these notes (ensuring their original notes and recordings of the interviews would be destroyed by an agreed date) and providing only the de-identified data to the research facilitator. Other topics covered at the research team meetings included training and guidance on recording the data in a way that is capable of being aggregated (through the use and completion of agreed field work templates).

"The issue of confidentiality was identified as key to the engagement of senior policy makers and implementers".

# 2.5

## Analysis and Identification of Learning

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The researchers submitted summaries of their interview notes (including detailed direct quotes) and an overview of the issues arising to the research facilitator whose task it was to prepare the first draft of the report. This draft was circulated to all the researchers in advance of the fifth meeting of the research team.

"Once everyone involved in the study was clear and confident about the study purpose and concepts, the group worked together to identify and agree the research questions. Time was also spent agreeing how the researchers would capture and present their individual research findings in such a way that they could be easily aggregated and analysed collectively".



## The Participatory Nature of the Process

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Some participant researchers had significant research experience. Others had less. Regardless of the level of experience of each researcher, time was required to ensure that all seven researchers involved in the study had a shared understanding of: **a)** the purpose of the study and **b)** the concepts to be explored as part of the study (Research team first meeting).

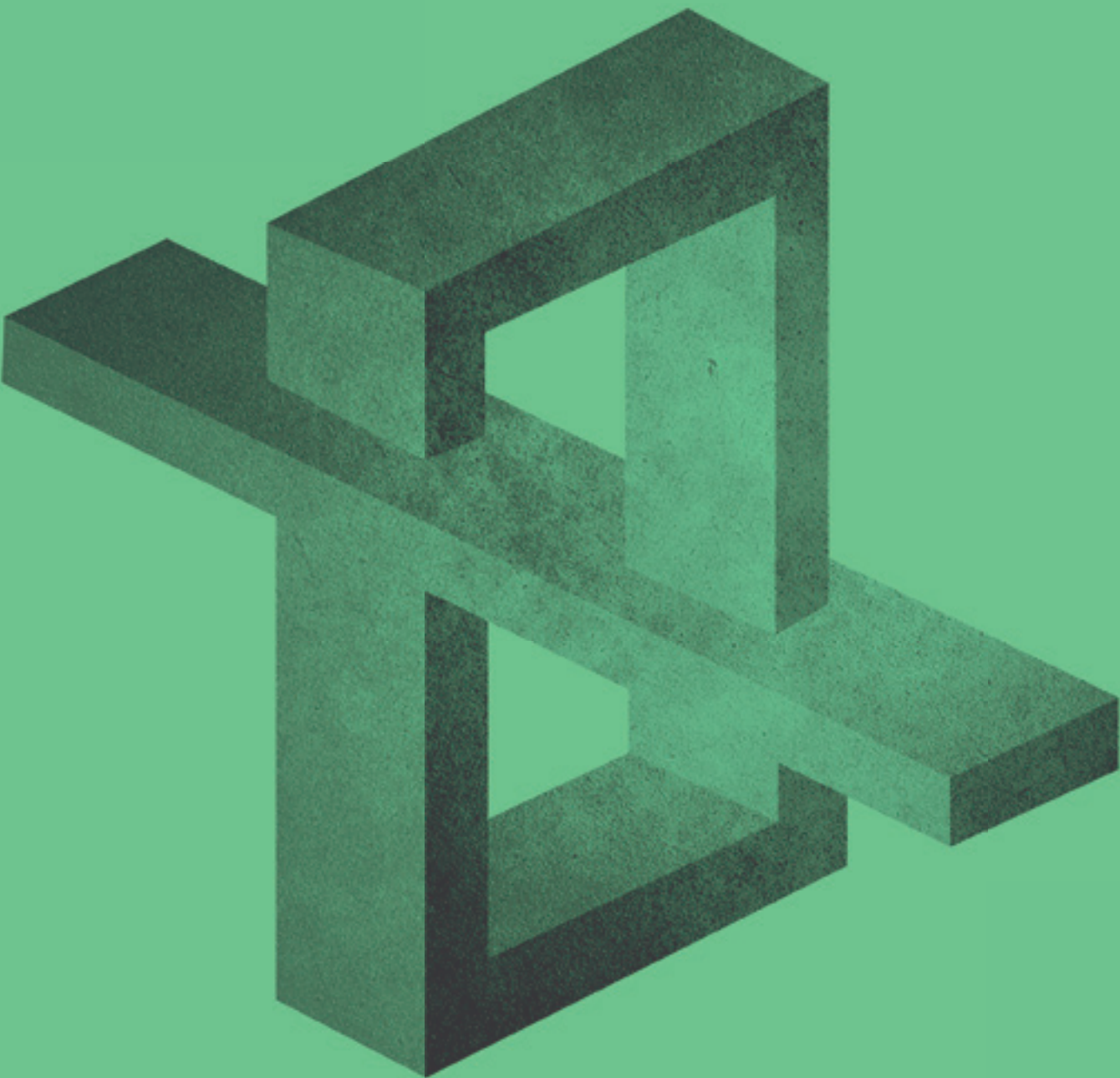
Once everyone involved in the study was clear and confident about the study purpose and concepts, the group worked together to identify and agree the research questions. Time was also spent agreeing how the researchers would capture and present their individual research findings in such a way that they could be easily aggregated and analysed collectively.

It was agreed that the researchers would meet at least once as the research progressed to explore issues that might be emerging from the research process and to identify any gaps or indeed changes that might be needed in relation to the interview questions. For a variety of reasons (the lack of availability of interviewees, the researchers other commitments etc.) not all of the researchers had undertaken an interview at the time of the fourth meeting. Notwithstanding this was a very useful meeting in terms of identifying some of the emerging issues and in terms of identifying some shared strategies to enable the researchers encourage their interviewees to focus on the interview questions (as it became apparent that the interviewees often became diverted on other issues of interest).

The last two meetings of the research group focused on shaping the final report. They specifically focused on ensuring that the views and findings of all seven researchers were reflected in the report. This was a particular challenge given the diverse and contradictory nature of the 33 interviewees across the various policy fields. These meetings were supplemented by conversations and communications with the various researchers. The learning generated from this type of participatory process was iterative, it evolved as the research progressed and has been channelled into the shared analysis contained within this report.

# 3. Findings

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## The Interviewees

A total of 33 policy makers/implementers were interviewed across a number of policy areas including children and young people, equality, age, racism, health, asylum, human rights, social inclusion, immigration, housing and community development. The policy makers/implementers were broken down into four different types: elected representatives, experts/advisors/academics/researchers for political parties, key public/civil servants and representatives from state or semi-state organisations. The majority of policy makers interviewed were operating at a national level; four were operating at a more local level. See [Table 3.1](#) for a breakdown of the interviewees by type and by gender.

**Table 3.1** An analysis of the interviewees

Interviewee type	Total	Number of women	Number of men	Number of researchers who undertook interviews with this stakeholder type
Elected representatives	8	2	6	5
Experts/advisors/academics/researchers for political parties	5	2	3	4
Key public/civil servants	11 (including three at local level)	2	6	5
State/semi-state agencies, organisations	9	3	6	5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>23</b>	-

The majority of interviewees had considerable experience of working in policy development and implementation. See [Table 3.2](#) for details.

**Table 3.2** An analysis of the interviewees

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**Elected representatives**

*The majority of elected representatives had been involved in politics and local community activism for considerable lengths of time. Most had been involved in local politics before becoming involved in the Oireachtas. More than half of these interviewees had held political office at national level for approximately ten years. A smaller number had been more recently elected. They all indicated that they had been involved in policy development directly and through the work of Oireachtas Committees. They were all familiar with the C&V sector and some had been directly involved in the sector before holding public office (interviews were conducted across the political spectrum and including representatives from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Sinn Féin and the Green Party).*

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**Experts/advisors/academics/  
researchers for political parties**

*These individuals had all been involved in influencing policy for at least 5 years and some for considerably longer (20+ years for one individual). These individual's routes into the role of expert/advisor varied considerably some had been involved in party politics others had been involved in the state and/or NGO sector.*

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**Key public/civil servants**

*None of the civil/public servants consulted had less than 16 years policy development and implementation experience and some had considerably more. Many had experience in more than one policy field. Most were involved at a very high level in their current policy area working in many cases at both national and EU levels. All of these individuals had engaged at some level with the C&V sector in their policy development/implementation role.*

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**State/semi-state agencies,  
organisations**

*These interviewees all had a minimum of 10 years' experience of policy development and implementation within state or semi state agencies/organisations (some had considerably more with 3 interviewees having more than 20 years' experience). Some had been involved in a number of social policy areas, while others had focused on a single area. Many had experience of dealing with the C&V sector.*

## Role/Purpose of the Community & Voluntary Sector

### Role of the C&V sector

One of the first observations made by many interviewees was the disparate and diverse nature (the terms 'broad', 'big', 'vast' and 'diverse' were frequently used in this context) of the sector with a huge variety of different groups having different roles and purposes, ranging from GAA clubs right across to large scale NGO's involved in providing services.

This was acknowledged as posing challenges in terms of identifying a clear single role, purpose or approach for the sector.

'I think it is apples and oranges and pears and pineapples. They [C&V sector organisations] are very different groups and frankly there are some people in that sector who would still strike me as old-fashioned charities'.

*(Expert/advisor/academic)*

Among the most common roles identified by interviewees for the C&V sector were a) service provision and b) advocacy (for rights and for service provision) often with overlap between the two functions.

'The C&V section is at the coalface of an awful lot ...and have exposure to circumstances that a lot of time maybe the state agencies may not have exposure to, that's a big role'.

*(Public/civil servant)*

### Service provision role

Many interviewees considered 'flexible on the ground' local service provision to be the most important purpose of the C&V sector, although most recognised that not all organisations provide services. Some interviewees believed that service provision is often 'the bedrock of community organisations'.

*(Elected representative)*

'A small community organisation is probably better placed to provide a service in that locality rather than the state... responsive community groups can adapt to meet the needs of people as those needs evolve'.

*(Public/civil servant)*

'Community groups have access to a community at a level that very often the public sector (health boards, agencies, state agencies) don't. In relation to the issues of drugs, drugs abuse, drug treatment, you are far better being a resident of a local area arguing for and providing services than an outside public bodies seeking to get involved...'

*(Elected representative)*

'To fill a gap between the public and private sector by providing services and from that position to advocate in order to show government and civil servants what is not working and why'.

*(State/semi-state agency/organisation)*



Some interviewees indeed argued that the C&V sector is a part of public service provision at local level and as such indivisible from the overall architecture of public service in Ireland. Others were of the view that 'the state should be providing services since the C&V sector is not resourced sufficiently to provide services in anything except in a piecemeal fashion'.  
*(Public/civil servant)*

Indeed there was a clear view among the majority of interviewees that being a service provider can ensure a C&V sector organisations advocacy work is both grounded and informed.

'The C&V sector is a major service provider it also has an advocacy/ lobbying role'.  
*(Policy advisor)*

'There are relatively few examples of organisations in our area that just do advocacy and aren't service providers'.  
*(Public/civil servant)*

'Often the large C&V service providers are the most effective advocates'.  
*(Elected representative)*

### Advocacy role

Many interviewees (perhaps influenced in some part by the nature of the study) were of the view that advocacy is core to what the C&V sector does and that the sector is an important part of democracy, in terms of 'representing and giving voice' *(Expert/advisor/academic)*, 'advocating on behalf of' *(Public/civil servant)*, 'articulating the voices of marginalised communities and individuals in order to ensure their needs and rights are included and addressed in policy formation and political debate' *(Public/civil servant)*, 'ultimately effecting change regarding the structures and institutions of the State' *(State/semi-state agency/organisation)*.

In that context many interviewees commented on how important it was to ensure C&V sector groups undertaking advocacy work were as one interviewee described as 'genuinely representative' *(Elected representative)* of those they claim to represent.

'I've been on panels after the Budget for instance and the person who would really be expressing the view of the effect on the poor would be the [C&V sector organisation]

representative. The voice of the poor has been expressed more by the C&V sector, than by the political sector quite often, particularly over the Tiger years'.  
*(Expert/advisor/academic)*

Interviewees also commented on the useful role of the C&V sector as a source of information and as a provider of research, data and evidence to support policy directions. The C&V sector organisations that could produce this type of informed analysis were praised and generally well regarded, while questions were also raised in relation to why more groups don't engage in research and policy development. Some interviewees described how they had developed relationships with a small number of trusted individuals within the sector and used them as a source of information on how changes were/ might impact on certain vulnerable groups (e.g. budget) were.

It was also noted the C&V sector is involved in advocacy to secure the necessary resources to sustain itself.

'A lot of the advocacy work done by non-profit organisations in this field is simply for the good of the organisation rather than for social justice objectives necessarily. They





are looking for more funding for the organisation itself. A lot of the role of the voluntary and community sector in terms of its formal role in policy nationally for instance via social partnership has actually been about growing the sector and expanding the number of jobs etc. rather than actually meeting the interests of clients – so I don't think that counts as social justice advocacy'.

*(Elected representative)*

Some challenges that emerged from the interviews included the emphasis placed on both the importance of having a strong independent C&V sector advocacy, especially in the current economic climate, and the recognition that often the most effective advocates are those who provide services on a professional basis.

'I think it is terribly important that there are checks and balances in society.....it is also important to have people in the C&V sector who are not beholden to power and who are able to challenge power'.

*(Expert/advisor/academic)*

### **Combining service provision and advocacy**

These can clearly be seen to pose challenges as those who provide services on a professional basis are 'inside the system and therefore dependent on often diminishing levels state funding' and as a consequence may be wary of engaging in advocacy work. The other challenge that was identified was how a large service provider can act as an independent voice for its clients given that the way it delivers its services could potentially be contributing the issues its clients are seeking to deal with.

### **What is meant by services?**

Among the services the C&V sectors were identified (by the interviewees) as providing included:

- social case services and support
- care/care work with people who are vulnerable
- education
- information, advise and support on a wide range of topics
- social housing
- homeless services
- legal advice and assistance
- childcare
- tenant sustainment services
- local development services
- testing and piloting different models of service
- activities for children and young people and families and training and capacity building supports for local communities for help them advocate for their rights.

# 3.3

## The Role of Advocacy in Irish Society

Advocacy was seen as important in Irish society. The role was broadly understood by the interviewees as 'influencing policy/decisions' and/or 'contributing to the development of policy'. More specifically it was seen to be about:

'Arguing for a position and producing the evidence to support this view'.

(Elected representative)

'Another form of small political activity'.

(Public/civil servant)

'Putting issues on the radar of politicians'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

'Identifying gaps; showing what isn't working'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'Explaining a need/s and what needs to be done to address the need/s'.

(Public/civil servant)

'Raising awareness, make representations and engaging the media'.

(Elected representative)

'Providing another view to the political system, a view connected to the experiences on the ground'.

(Public/civil servant)

'...persuasion and bringing the issues to the table and making sure they are heard and understood'.

(Public/civil servant)

'...offering insight, including into the consequences of policies'.

(Public/civil servant)

'Getting a certain issue/s prioritised by key policy/decision makers'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

A number of interviewees associated advocacy with 'voice'; and giving voice to issues and service users, arguing that advocacy needs to be supported because policy makers can 'become completely excluded from reality sometimes' (Expert/advisor/academic). There was also a concern that 'advocacy done by powerful groups for powerful groups can be a dangerous type of advocacy especially where those groups already have a lot of power'. (State/semi-state agency, organisation).

Interestingly as part of this discussion many interviewees and particularly the elected representatives and civil servants highlighted the role Oireachtas members and locally elected representatives play in advocacy, many indeed saw themselves as elected representatives as the true advocates. Other policy maker types saw themselves as moving between the positions of 'lobbied' and 'advocate' on a regular basis, depending on the forum and the context.

'It is hard to separate them from me. I sit on the [policy developing] group so am I making the policy, or am I influencing the policy? I think I am doing both. When we developed the [recent] policy you bring a huge amount to shape that. You are advocating against yourself'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

Many elected representatives interviewees in particular saw their role as 'the true representation of the majority public view' believing that as elected representatives they were 'the purest representatives of society's wishes because they had to balance all views and arrive at compromise', in contrast to the

C&V sector who as one interviewee described it 'had the luxury of being able to pursue a single/limited range of issues'.

Philosophically it appeared as if the elected representatives were willing to have the C&V sector engage in advocacy if they had something useful to contribute, which was different to the other interviewees who generally believed that the C&V sector (because of their particular knowledge) had 'a right' (embedded through social partnership) to be engaged in the process.

Many of these interviewees and indeed others linked advocacy with the C&V sector (but it is not clear whether this was as a result of the research or whether the sector were genuinely regarded as a primary source of advocacy work). Advocacy work was also recognised by some interviewees as having a role for C&V sector organisations in ensuring their visibility of the sector and particular organisations. Advocacy activities identified included holding meetings, rallies, galvanising support for change, writing and circulating documents as well as working with who you know within the political system.



# 3.4

## Social Justice Advocacy

### What is social justice advocacy?

The difference between advocacy and social justice advocacy was not always clear in the opinions and views of the interviewees. Nor according to the interviewees was it clear within the advocacy operations of the C&V sector.

'Just because you're an advocate, doesn't mean you're a social justice advocate... If you put a group of people in a room they'll all have a different view of social justice – some will say we 'should charge people who can afford to pay for it' and I'd be saying 'yes, but not at the point of access'. And they'd say 'but what's the difference in social justice terms?' and I would see a difference and they mightn't. We don't debate policy enough in this country'.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

Where the interviewees were familiar (about a quarter indicated that they were not very familiar with the term) with the concept of social justice advocacy it was generally seen to be 'related to influencing policy/ decisions' (Public/civil servant) and/ or 'contributing to the development of policy' (Expert/advisor/academic) on behalf of the more marginalised or excluded, involving issues of 'justice, equality and rights' (State/ semi-state agency/organisation).

'Social justice advocacy is about mobilising the power of people who are excluded....for justice, for equality, for participation'.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

'It is about speaking up for people who probably otherwise wouldn't have a voice'.  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'Social justice advocacy is about empowering the disadvantaged to become their own advocates. This is the only way to achieve real transformative change for marginalised groups'.  
(Public/civil servant)

'Social justice advocacy is about bringing about a fairer and more equal society'.  
(Public/civil servant)

'It is all about acting as the conscience of society'.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

'It is about equalising opportunities and/or minimising disadvantage'.  
(Public/civil servant)

'Social justice advocacy is about channelling real experiences and campaigning for the realisation of rights'.  
(Elected representative)

" Just because you're an advocate, doesn't mean you're a social justice advocate... If you put a group of people in a room they'll all have a different view of social justice".

'It is about lobbying for a more equitable distribution of public spending and public services and ultimately of life chances between different income groups and between different social groups in terms of men and women and people with disabilities and people without'.

(Public/civil servant)

My view of social justice is that there are certain fundamental things in a society that should be given as a right according to need, education is one, health is another. And we should pay for it according to our ability to pay, through the tax system, through the social insurance system. In the course of our life we may be net beneficiaries or net contributors. But that is having a social safety net, social solidarity and intergenerational solidarity. I think it is still very much an upward battle to get people to accept that as an approach'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

The terms 'fairness', 'equity', 'speaking up for people who can't', 'representing the least advantaged in society' 'rights', 'empowerment' and 'social change' were indeed frequently mentioned in the context of this discussion. A number of interviewees also connected social justice with religion and faith. A small number of interviewees identified two different levels of social justice advocacy as follows:

- Individual advocacy: focuses on working with/on behalf of individuals to support/assist them access/navigate the systems and services they require.
- Policy advocacy: focuses on getting changes in policy and improved services for particular groups.

The issue and use of social justice advocacy work as a means by which C&V sector organisations ensure visibility and secure their funding was also raised and several interviewees were very critical of this.



## **The difference/s between advocacy and social justice advocacy?**

Initially not all of the interviewees made a distinction between advocacy and social justice advocacy. However many went on to acknowledge that advocacy can be conducted by interests groups (like the trade unions, the Irish Farmers Association and business groups) ‘protecting their interests’ and contrasted this with social justice advocacy which they believed to be about ‘protecting basic rights’. Some interviewees gave examples in order to distinguish between advocacy and social justice advocacy. One cited the example of a hospital closure; distinguishing between advocacy undertaken by the workers protesting because of loss of jobs and the social justice advocacy undertaken by patients, their families, the wider community and patient support groups concerned about the implication of the closure for wider local health needs.

Other differences identified between advocacy in general and social justice advocacy related to the issues that were being lobbied on. There was a sense that social justice advocacy is rights based

about equality, empowerment and progressive social change, making it different to advocacy more generally which does not necessarily require social change.

A small number of interviewees also made a distinction between the ways in which social justice advocacy was undertaken compared with advocacy more generally. There was a view that social justice advocacy involved a participative process that engaged with the groups affected ensuring it was grounded in the real ‘on the ground’ issues. Interviewees also commented on the fact that social justice advocacy had become professionalised over the last number of years raising what must be seen as a critical question in terms of how effective social justice advocates were at giving voice to the disaffected.

## **The current relevance of social justice?**

All interviewees believed that the concept of social justice was relevant (some indeed believe it to be ‘highly’ relevant) to our current economic situation in particular. Among the reasons given for its relevance included

‘The public have come to realise that, although the fruits of the boom weren’t distributed evenly across the economy, most people’s situation improved relative to what it was. But now there is a bust the inequity of the situation has become much more clear to the public and we see that the costs of the bust are being met by ordinary people who didn’t gain most of the benefits of the boom and also because we are having to make very, very severe cutbacks in public expenditure and increases in taxes. It’s particularly important, therefore, that there is advocacy for fairness and equity in the distribution of that burden – so I think in some ways it’s much more relevant’.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

‘The economic situation/ recession creates a greater emphasis on better, more effective use of resources’.

(Elected representative)

‘In the economic crisis you have to be much more out there. In a crisis, the stress and tensions on policy makers are tremendous... Any policy implications taking place must have regard to all the implications including financial’.

(Public/civil servant)



"There was a view that social justice advocacy involved a participative process that engaged with the groups affected ensuring it was grounded in the real 'on the ground' issues."

'If it wasn't relevant... it wouldn't exist so it has to be relevant. It's the citizen, it's Joe Public out there that feels this is necessary. We have to be able to think of those who haven't got a voice – whether it's those who are living today or tomorrow. We have to look at the collective and what benefits society as a whole as distinct from just vocal groups. The main thing that is important is that the citizen thinks that advocacy outside of official channels is a legitimate and necessary way to go about things. Joe Duffy wouldn't be on the air – which is another form of advocacy – if the citizen thought there were ways in which to air their grievances in a proper way'.

(Public/civil servant)

'With the dominance of economics, there is a risk social justice is liable to be left off the agenda'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

A small number of interviewees were less positive about the execution of social justice arguing that it conjured up 'demands that can't be met' and 'self-interest'. One interviewee argued that while social justice 'had the appearance of being more altruistic the reality was that it had the capacity to enable self-interests to proliferate'. (State/semi-state agency/organisation)

Barriers identified in relation to the achievement of social justice include the application of a charity model rather than a rights based approach.

'That mentality [based on the Poor Law mentality] is a major barrier to achieving social justice in Ireland. We have not accepted arguments for universalism. This means that we feel the 'deserving poor' should receive services. This then allows the system to decide capriciously who is deserving and keep changing that. This creates a whole apparatus

of means testing and poverty traps. It is a very fundamental philosophical stance. It is also quite paternalistic because someone else determines if you are deserving'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

A couple of interviewees also questioned whether social justice advocacy was too broad a term that could mean different things to different people, depending on their world view. A small number of interviewees also specifically suggested that the work done and promoted by the C&V sector could be more effective and certainly more transparent if it were to explicitly name its ideologies, acknowledging that its views and opinions are ultimately driven from a leftist point of view.

# 3.5

## Role of the C&V Sector in Social Justice Advocacy

There was a broad consensus among the interviewees that the C&V sector had a role to play in 'influencing', 'in giving people a voice and championing their cause' 'identifying gaps', 'defending the weak and making the case for those who would otherwise be voiceless in society', 'bringing expertise around social justice issues that impact on the people they represent' to policy making processes in order to support 'progressive social change'.

'Yes, they [C&V organisations] have influence. Sometimes they think they have greater influence than they have. The fact that they are there and taking a certain position allows them to be invited in to strategy and policy development. So, yes they have a role to play and they have a perspective to bring because sometimes you need to balance things against another view. If Government decides to do anything there will always be someone who says we shouldn't

and someone who says we should. And if you don't have the balance between those who think we should and those who think we shouldn't you won't maybe be aware of all the issues, or you may miss some of the issues. So, they definitely have a role to play.'

(Public/civil servant)

This influence is useful because the C&V sector organisations were often close to the ground and trusted by the groups marginalised from decision making. This role was seen as important in terms of achieving progressive social change, over a sustained period. There was recognition by many interviewees that this could not happen overnight.

'I think it [the C&V sector] is crucial... It has to reflect another opinion. The political system is the political system and it has the various vested interests it has to deal with. It has to look at the whole and concentrate on the whole all the time. But then

from time to time, and maybe all of the time, various events occur that require another response or another input into government. That's where the C&V and civil society comes into play. They can probably recognise with greater clarity, with greater depth that there are issues of importance.'

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'C&V advocates can bring a real world experience to the table and they can bring the voice of people who are actually experiencing the issue at hand. It is very difficult for a Minister/adviser to argue with someone who is sitting there describing what actually happened to them (as opposed to someone talking about issues in a more abstract manner) no one is going to say well that's not true'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

"This role was seen as important in terms of achieving progressive social change, over a sustained period."

'I use those organisations to try and pursue policy.'

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'I think it (the policy making system) could massively benefit more from the (C&V) sector. In my experience in the civil service, policy is made on the basis of forming impressions rather than any objective informed evidence or consultation'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

For one interviewee the social justice advocacy role of the C&V sector was as a consequence of a failure/perception of failure of the state to meet the needs of its citizens.

'The state is failing when the citizen has to move off to a third party to receive what they should be receiving and for somebody to listen to them. Our business [as public servants] is to serve the people and to serve the people through elected representatives. So if it comes to a stage where a citizen in order to receive their rights or to be treated well by the state has to move into a different dimension that's a problem with either a) perception or b) fact as to how we go about our business.

That's where my big issue is. Why does the state need an intermediary to discuss things with or to work with their citizens? I don't see why that should be so and I don't see why that should have been allowed to happen. I think that is a failing if that's the case and we should be moving to redress that failing'.

(Public/civil servant)

The relative importance of the role of the C&V sector in social justice advocacy varied significantly between interviewees. For some interviewees it was very important and for others significantly less so.

The C&V sector 'has a fairly influential role... they are advocates for social change or interventions. They are very important in society – these are a voice of civil society –they are key players in our democracy... The fact that they have been founded to campaign indicates that there is a missing link between the service that is provided by the state and those for which they are campaigning – so if its victims of household domestic abuse, if its families of drug addicted kids, if it's a group campaigning on behalf of the impoverished –they are campaigning to the state to extract from the state what they themselves

believe should be the basic entitlements of a citizen'.

(Elected representative)

'They are ambassadors/advocates on behalf of civil society who are striving to achieve entitlements from the state'.

(Elected representative)

'The C&V sector can stop governments and the public sector and civil servants in particular doing stupid things which they are probably unaware of and that is a role which shouldn't be sneezed at'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'They are essentially a conduit by which the feelings or the requirements or wishes of certain segments of society are transmitted, formulated, composed back in – whether that is to do with people who feel their rights one way or the other – in relation to housing, welfare, education, health haven't been fully recognised and they feel powerless to change that through normal channels and have used the benefit of third parties who can articulate their requirements'.

(Public/civil servant)

"There was also a view that the sector can bring leverage as well as specific and focused single issue expertise to policy making processes and that this can be useful."

A number of interviewees specifically referenced the importance of the C&V sector as a provider of 'sound evidence' (including 'facts' and 'case studies') of the impact/potential impact of a policy thus enabling and facilitating enhanced levels of debate on policy issues.

'It is about persuading, backing up arguments and delivering. The C&V sector plays both a necessary role creating tension and useful role in identifying issues and concerns'.  
(Elected representative)

There was also a view that the sector can bring leverage as well as specific and focused single issue expertise to policy making processes and that this can be useful.

'Some of them [policymakers] love it [C&V sector advocacy] and some

of them hate it. Some of them want you to be there... The clever civil servant will know how to use the C&V sector to move things on when they have opposition from within... And I think you'll find that across the board in all the sectors – if there is a block within a Department .....The C&V & NGO sector can unlock that for you.'

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

Others emphasised the importance of the C&V sector taking a sophisticated approach to negotiations and in that context the importance of alliances of making the case for particular policy directions/changes.

Critiques of the role and importance of the sector and its work in this area provided by interviewees included:

'Some of them are truthful and some of them are not truthful.

They are defensive, advocating civil democracy, but on an extremely limited basis so as to maintain levels of spending on the sector and ultimately to benefit their organisations'.  
(Elected representative)

'There is very little critical scrutiny of the way the sector is run by those running the sector, there is huge sense of entitlement to public funding, and a huge unwillingness to be subject to any regulation'.  
(Public/civil servant)

'Some groups are very simplistic and self-interested'.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)





## Changing Role

For many interviewees the C&V sector's social justice advocacy role used to be all about 'voluntary people trying to better their area/group and putting pressure on decision makers to deliver better services and to provide them with what they needed' (Public/civil servant). This was seen by many to have changed because of the introduction of pay and resources to support this type of work. Interviewees working at national level generally regarded this process of resourcing and 'professionalisation' as positive. Others (particularly those working at a more local level) regarded this as a retrograde step for a variety of reasons as follows:

'It's an unfortunate consequence of government policy that ... it has tended to stream funding through the C&V sector and, therefore dismantled real community volunteering'. (Elected representative)

There was clear consensus that the C&V sector role had been diminished because of a loss of a significant level of credibility, influence and power over the last number of years. There was also

consensus that the role of the C&V sector as social justice advocates had been adversely effected.

'The C&V sector had a lot more power in the 1980's and 1990's linked to being needed to make the social partnership process credible'. (Expert/academic/advisor and a Public/civil servant)

'The focus is so much on the economy and jobs that social justice issues can be de-prioritised. The challenge and role (for the C&V sector) is to be heard in this environment'. (Public/civil servant)

Most interviewees believed that many C&V organisations were engaged in social justice advocacy work. It was noted however that the almost exclusive focus of policy-making structures on the economic argument for every decision is a challenge for the sector. A small number of interviewees believed that because the sector has lost its currency with the state since the demise of social partnership, policy makers had become 'closed off to hearing the demands of the sector' (Elected representative).

'The (C&V) sector has no power anymore, it is seen by some elements of government as a vested interest'. (Expert/advisor/academic)

Several interviewees were of the opinion that the current economic crises had changed the C&V sector for the better in terms of making the sector more outcomes focused and more focused on prioritising efficiencies and solutions rather than asking that money be thrown at problems. Interviewees suggested that in the current context the C&V sector needed to engage more with the economic arguments regarding their issues.

'The sector's advocacy work has not adapted to the current context, and it is placing its energy in the most unresponsive areas (decision-making structures) and is too rigid in how it advocates'. (Expert/advisor/academic)

'It is not enough to make demands without sound economic rationale for those alternative choices'. (Public/civil servant and an elected representative)



It was suggested in this context that the C&V social justice advocacy work may need to adopt a different approach, appealing more to the public, so that the issue is seen as relevant to politicians.

‘There is a need for the sector to shift focus and work at engaging public support for the values and actions of social justice’.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

An (elected representative) interviewee also spoke about how there was a role for the C&V sector to work with those in opposition (with limited resources) to prepare and shape opposition policies in a way that is not possible when a party is in power.

‘When a political party is in power, policy is decided by the Ministers, their advisors and civil servants (not the party) when in opposition the political party plays a pivotal role in shaping policy. C&V groups should be aware of this when seeking to influence policy’.  
(Elected representative)

‘It is vital that the C&V sector plays a large role in shaping policy as they are tapping into the experiences and needs of those who are affected. However I don’t think the political

system is open to that sort of engagement.’  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

A small group of interviewees identified a need for more engagement of the C&V sector in street/action politics and increased dissent.

‘I think Ireland needs to learn more about street politics to be quite frank. I don’t think we should be congratulating ourselves on our passivity... If we have very difficult decisions to take in society we need to be debating them ferociously at the moment. I also think it is the time for some grand coalitions to open up that discussion about where we are going as a society in this very difficult time with the troika in the country’.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

‘The C&V sector needs to engage in more street demonstrations and actions to make their case and be heard’.  
(Elected representative)

While others indicated that this type of street action (described by some interviewees as radical) was not useful and generally more likely to have the effect of inhibiting debate rather than facilitating it.

A particular issue that came up in the context of the role of C&V sector social justice advocacy at local level was the future of this work in the context of the proposed alignment and on-going local government reform. The proposed reform/alignment process will give local authorities enhanced responsibilities for funding and determining the work programmes of a range of C&V type groups at local level. A number of public servant interviewees did not see this as an issue preferring instead to view the local authority as the principal ‘advocate’ (given that they are not central government), questioning the need for ‘third party advocacy’ as there already exists mechanisms for the citizen to express their concerns such as through their elected representatives, Ombudsman, Equality Commission etc. It remains as yet unclear whether and to what extent local authorities will support, facilitate and engage with C&V sector social justice advocacy work.

Where the interviewees identified the need for change in the way the sector worked the overall changes focused on **a)** addressing the economic issues, **b)** getting more focused and **c)** being more creative.

## Effective Social Justice Advocacy

What constituted effectiveness in relation to social justice advocacy varied from interviewee to interviewee. Some interviewees highlighted the issue of how effectiveness is/could be defined as an issue within their interview.

### Being representative

Some interviewees linked questions of effectiveness to 'being genuinely representative', 'being relevant to public opinion/debate', 'generating a clear ask (i.e. 'what do you want, why do you want it)', 'being organised, well informed and creating compelling and informed arguments (underpinned by solid evidence) making it easy on decisions makers'.

'It is about being an honest conduit for issues on the ground'  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

The issue of legitimacy in terms of where a particular group gets its mandate from and who it

represents was also raised as a key issue in relation to effectiveness. The majority view was that to be effective, groups needed to have a clear direct mandate from the individuals/groups they purport to represent.

### Being both representative and professional

For some interviewees effectiveness was about being able to combine being representative and professional in terms of having clear strategies for engagement with policy makers and clear actions to support this engagement.

'I was impressed by a local group... They went out of their way to show me the work they were doing. They... wanted to show me their work and the reality of life for the group they were working with. That concentrated my mind in regard to the change required and the need to provide certainty for that community'.

(Elected representative)

'They [particular named C&V organisation] are effective because they actually merge the speaking up for these particular groups with further action in terms of providing services... they are in the business of advocacy but are also in the business of service provision... they are also very professional in their operation and work well with state agencies'.

(Public/civil servant)

'The more professional groups... are very effective in the key area of influencing legislation as the legislative proposals as proposed by these organisations are very important in dealing with the key issues and they can and do influence policy'.

(Elected representative)

Some interviewees also continued to make the link between service provision and advocacy suggesting that C&V's advocacy role was more effective when their work/experiences of service provision was fed directly into their advocacy function making them more aware





of 'tight budgets and thus more realistic about what is possible'.

(Public/civil servant).

'Groups engaged in service provision, are more able to see that there had to be incremental changes, that not everything is going to be achieved in one go.'

(Public/civil servant)

The ability of a group to generate/use/ provide evidence and information was highlighted by a significant majority of interviewees as a significant contributor to effectiveness.

'They are effective because they produce good quality analysis and other materials'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

### **Building relationships/ understanding the system**

Some interviewees linked effectiveness to 'the development of relationships', 'understanding the system and the challenges facing

policy makers who are trying to find compromises to move the system forward', 'getting the timing right' and 'making the relevant targeted material/evidence/information accessible to policy makers (i.e. short and straight to the point)'.

'As a policymaker you are tangled up in a process that is never black and white. From the C&V sector's view it is black and white because 'we want x and y and we can't see why we can't have it and here are the reasons why we should'. I think there is a greyness in the civil service and government that has to be worked around... You have to work in that greyness. You could have something totally black on one side and white on the other and you're in the middle trying to find the balance. You agree with one side but you are trying to find a way to navigate through something. You'll come out at the end and have a compromise, because that is what we do in the civil service; we find a compromise to keep things moving. And nobody will be happy and if nobody's happy

it can be seen as success because you steered the course, you got somewhere that you weren't a year earlier but it just moves in the right direction, it just takes time'.

(Public/civil servant)

Understanding the position of policy makers and being readily available for consultation and briefings for political parties were all considered effective ways of working. The regular production of clear messages and policy positions and research as well as representation by articulate spokespeople in the media were also commented on favourably by all interviewees types.

'They are effective because they really understand the work'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'They are effective because they have been able to engage with us to generate a political response'.

(Elected representative)

Some interviewees also linked effectiveness to cultivating and having ‘a leg in both camps’ working within and outside the system at the same time. In that way the sector can influence the system without being ‘captured’ by it. The recognition by the C&V sector of incremental gains and not ‘lambasting the State’ for not giving them everything they wanted were also seen as important particularly by civil and public servants. Being ‘politically savvy’, well networked, and developing positive working relationships with key civil servants and politicians were also seen as effective.

### Being solution focused

Presenting solutions (that take cognisance of the current economic crisis) rather than just repeating demands and providing follow up on issues were also seen as key ways of being effective. Interviewees ultimately indicated that it was all about the outcomes achieved on behalf of the marginalised. It was noted that it can often be very difficult for the C&V sector and for organisations within the sector to assess this because it is not possible to isolate their influence from that of activities undertaken by others both inside and outside the system.

### Being sufficiently responsive/innovative

Some interviewees (particularly the elected representatives) linked effectiveness to being able to respond quickly, with relevant data, and a considered position to emerging issues. Others linked effectiveness to the ability of a group to do different and interesting actions that engage a wide range of groups.

### Working collectively

Being part of a larger, broader (involving other sectors not just the C&V sector) group, coalition, alliance or network was also seen as effective particularly from the perspective of the policy maker in terms of them knowing who to turn to in a sector for a representative response.

‘They are effective, bringing together organisations across different sectors and building a force for change’.

(Public/civil servant)

### Ineffective Social Justice Advocacy

Ineffective social justice advocacy was associated with a variety of factors, in many cases the direct opposite of the factors associated with effectiveness.

### Outrage – with no solutions (often linked to a lack of realism)

Among the most frequently cited example of ineffective social justice advocacy was outrage without either evidence to back up the outrage or suggestions/solutions to improve the situation. There was a view that to be effective C&V groups need to be more realistic about what it is possible to achieve at a time of recession.

‘They aim for the stars in terms of what is financially feasible and so are always going to be disappointed and are always going to disappoint the groups they represent and that is not a great way of working for anyone’.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

‘They [the C&V sector] are ineffective when they are unable to decide what is most important at any given point of time and what can be left to be argued for on another day’.

(Public/civil servant)

There was also a view that some advocacy work was too superficial to be effective.

‘This type of work is not always very grounded in proper analysis,... with people speaking for children without talking to children about what they want, just because they are C&V sector workers and youth workers they feel they own that sector and they are only ones that should be speaking for them’.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

### A general absence of energy

Other factors related to ineffectiveness identified by interviewees included a general absence of energy among some groups around the work:

‘Groups and or individuals can be around a bit too long...and people stop listening after a number of years...-it’s important for groups to change people around and for groups to find ways to re-invigorate themselves’.

(Public/civil servant)

### Negative attitudes and approaches

Negative ‘them and us’ attitudes and ‘demands driven’ approaches

(complaining and asking for concessions without giving back) were also cited as another source of ineffectiveness. There was indeed a strong view among the interviewees that some groups are always ‘hitting Government over the head’ and while it was recognised that this criticism may of course sometimes be warranted, it cannot be continually warranted.

Some individuals also highlighted the existence of at the least an unwillingness and at worst an antagonistic approach to policy makers, among some individuals involved in C&V organisations.

‘They (the C&V group) were not willing to listen, even when what I was trying to do was assist them...’  
(Public/civil servant)

‘There would be some – mainly smaller organisations – that in the past I would have felt were a bit unreasonable. Their cause was good and noble, but the way they were going about their business wasn’t very professional. And that can be a problem. If a manager who feels he is competent and trained and is dealing with a small organisation that doesn’t seem to know what they are doing and is actually fighting with people in other groups,

then managers won’t want to get involved at all. They’ll almost have an adversarial approach to it. Now, I won’t say that is very common. It was probably more common in the past.’

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

‘Ultra-leftist advocates damage the cause because their relationship with the political forces from whom they are seeking support are very often alienated (they are so aggressive and so self-righteous) that would never be the policy of a sophisticated/professional advocate or advocacy group, they would generally try and work with you’.

(Elected representative)

### Being sufficiently responsive/innovative

There was a view that some C&V groups had become ineffective because they had become stuck in their ways of working and had forgotten that they how to be innovative and how to follow up. Examples cited by a variety of interviewees included the ‘lazy use of cut and paste online mass emails/petitions’ (Elected representative).



'I might get 120 emails a day and if you open an email and see it is a generic email that has gone to every TD then it just goes to the bottom of the pile... lobbying needs to be tailored to who you are trying to influence'.

(Elected representative)

'They sent us in a set of leaflets... they are good leaflets but there was no follow up... no request for a meeting etc. a leaflet is a means to an end not an end in itself. Do I have to go out of my way to follow up with them?'

(Expert/advisor/academic)

'Some groups just will not move on, when it is clear that a particular approach/model is not working/had failed/lost credibility'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

This absence of innovation was linked by some interviewees with the presence of a limited skills base among some C&V sector organisations.

### The absence of a clear mandate

For some interviewees ineffectiveness was linked to both a lack of connection with popular opinion and the inability of a

particular group/s to 'mobilise their membership/supporters', to 'speak and to take action' (State/semi-state agency/organisation). This is particularly an issue where a policy maker wants to hear the voice on the ground.

'The things that have impacted me the most are when real people sit in front of you and touch you. It's fine and dandy for professionals (and I appreciate that there have to be professionals involved in advocacy and sometimes I am one of them) to give you high level pitches, policy papers and presentations. But to have someone in front of you who is actually, or has, lived through the thing you are trying to advocate for is far more powerful and actually far more effective'.

(Elected representative)

'When I'm looking for the voice I'm looking for the clear, frontline voice that doesn't belong to an organisation. And I find it is tainted sometimes, by the time it gets embroiled in an organisation and it has almost taken on the ethos of that organisation'.

(Public/civil servant)

The absence of a clear mandate was also identified as a challenge for C&V organisations in terms of

a) ensuring they do not misrepresent the situation on the ground in order to suit the particular position of their organisation and b) (where C&V groups do both advocacy and service provision) ensuring that the interest/tension that can exist between being a service provider (and recipient of state grants) and a social justice advocate does not cause unnecessary modifications in behaviour/positions in order to sustain funding support.

### Building relationships/ understanding the system

Ineffectiveness was also frequently linked to a lack of understanding of how the systems work and an absence of awareness and experiences among some C&V groups of the time required to implement change (i.e. calling for further development/s and changes while implementation of the first phase is yet to be completed). This in turn was linked to the absence of consistent message/s and a lack of focus/targeting on both the specific issue/s and the key individuals involved).

### Competition between groups

Competition between groups, duplication of efforts, fragmentation



and overlapping activities with too many groups trying to do the same thing, and/or an absence of collaboration with likeminded groups and/or a multitude of uncoordinated voices 'that can very easily be dismissed as noise' (Public/civil servant) were also all identified as examples of both ineffective social justice advocacy and a waste of resources.

'The issue of competition makes community organisations ineffective as everybody has their own clients they are using to get funding and they don't want to share them so we used the phrase of the 'poverazi' industry - cynical maybe but truthful too because what are they going to do if they sort out the problems? I remember asking a particular project what they would do when they had sorted out the problem they had been set up to address. And they had absolutely no notion - the C&V industry exists by having people dependent on them'. (Public/civil servant)

Interviewees recognised that that learning to work together was a challenge that required strong leadership skills to steer the process.

'It requires leadership, strong leadership. And for some

organisations that can be a bit of a challenge because sometimes you have to make compromises with other organisations. You have to come to agreements and you might think they are being unreasonable but you've got to work with them. So for the leader of an organisation which sees itself getting involved in advocacy, you've got to have those skills of advocacy which aren't just about following you. That can be a bit of a challenge for C&V sector and non-governmental organisation CEOs as sometimes they might have to let go of some of their own authority'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

### An absence of self-reflection

The absence of self-reflection and an honest critique of the C&V sector internally is for some policy makers a significant gap in terms of the sectors' effectiveness.

'There is a huge amount of critique of public services not that public services shouldn't be critiqued, but there is very little critique, looking in at their (C&V sector) services'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

There was a view among some interviewees that the sector and

groups needed to accept and acknowledge their 'insider' status, where they get funding from the state for the operation of an organisation.

'They (the C&V sector) see themselves as independent. They say they are not part of the system but that is not the case... Many of them are invested, they earn a salary more often than not funded by the state.'

(Elected representative)

The (C&V) sector needs to recognise that it lacks the skills and experience of the trade unions when it comes to negotiations'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

There was a view among some interviewees that the C&V sector needs to recognise that the interests/needs of the marginalised/disadvantaged communities aren't necessarily the same as the interests of the people who provide them with services. There was also a view that were the sector to explicitly name its ideologies, acknowledging that its views and opinions come from a leftist point of view, it would be more transparent and ultimately effective.

# 3.6

## How can the policy making process get more benefit from C&V sector social justice advocacy work?

The suggestions interviewees made in relation to what a) the C&V sector could do and b) what policy makers could do to derive more benefit from the social justice advocacy work of the sector are explored within this section. Interestingly in this context a small number of interviewees indicated that the sector needed to be cautious about getting 'too enmeshed in the policy-making process' (State/semi-state agency/organisation), the danger being in relation 'to losing independence through being too involved' (Expert/advisor/academic).

### What does the C&V sector need to do?

A lot of what interviewees identified that the sector needed to do more effectively is relevant and was restated in the context of this question. These suggestions include:

- Reducing duplication by working together and build alliances and networks (eliminating crowded spaces and mixed messages)
- Engaging in focused research to provide credible and accurate evidence for evidence based advocacy.

'The advocacy work done by some in the sector is too simplistic. A much more sophisticated discussion is required with the community (group) before engaging in advocacy on their behalf... Now is a time when sector should be developing innovative ideas about reform.... with the state more open than ever to such ideas'.  
(Public/civil servant)

'The viewpoints put forward by the C&V sector at NESC for example are the same old reheated ideas they had from the boom—a really simplistic analysis of what should be done... based on a series of unquestioned simplistic assumptions, this has to change.'  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

- Employing sufficiently qualified individuals that have the skill set necessary to 'support and engage in long term planning in terms of what policy should look like into the future'.  
(Elected representative)

- Being more cognisant of the political context in which they are operating and fit in with the narrative ('do better follow-up to better understand how the policy-making process and structures

work', 'engage better with politicians and policy makers').

'Treat politicians and civil servants as professional equals'.  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

'While you may have no moral ambiguity about what you want... you need to recognise that there are other factors that influence government and civil servants ... including restrictions associated with limited resources, legislation and political decisions.... policy makers have to balance different perspectives.'  
(Public/civil servant)

- Prioritise issues (this was seen as particularly important during a time of recession) and focus on a few clear issues:

'They [the C&V sector] have to move beyond just complaining about cutbacks and start looking at how can we actually provide these services better, because okay the cuts and tax increases need to be distributed equitably, but we need to recognise that the level of spending we had during the Celtic Tiger can't be maintained, and the payback from a lot of it... wasn't great'.  
(Expert/advisor/academic)

- Work both inside and outside of the system.

‘Need to have greater public visibility, to be of interest to politicians in a crowded space’.  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation).

- Make visible the issues and the people most affected as advocates with personal experiences of the issues.

‘It’s a pity that social justice advocacy in Ireland tends to be by middle class people for poor people, with as a result a lot of the real social justice issues being lost. People do have the capacity but they are not facilitated to be involved and they also feel intimidated by the language of the middle class social advocates advocating on their behalf’.  
(Public/civil servant)

- Be more realistic and non-partisan, have a broader view of community, be solution focused. Provide practical thought-out solutions, understand the system better, work by listening and persuading, creating clear rationales for the change needed. Recognise that communication, relationships (particularly with civil servants) and credibility are key.

‘There is a huge demand on the political establishment to deliver in a very unusual political climate – which is the lack of sovereignty and the Troika being here – it’s important to assist them in whatever way they can be assisted’.  
(Elected representative)

‘Present materials in a clear and concise way that is easy for policy makers to digest and absorb (recognising the ‘heavy load of material that crosses policy maker’s desks every day’).  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

‘Recognise they [people in the statutory sector] are nervous about it [working with C&V sector] they are worried they will be doing something wrong/or they might get in difficulty because they are seen to be criticising the services. They may not feel they can go as far in as position is articulated by the NGOs. Sometimes then they might actually feel that the NGOs are being/will be unreasonable’.  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

‘I find it enormously frustrating that in the context of a country that is totally broke, the voluntary sector hasn’t come up with any solutions

and large sections of the sector just seem to see social justice advocacy as just advocating for more money for their organisations –rather than trying to think creatively about how we can come up with new solutions’.  
(Elected representative)

‘The C&V sector organisations are more useful when they come with an understanding of both sides and with solutions/proposals/ideas’.  
(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

Other suggestions made by interviewees included the need for the C&V sector to widen the focus of their social justice advocacy actions from influencing policy creation and review to policy implementation (a key national gap), with the recognition that policy makers should not be expected to consult with every group about every decision. There was also a view that the sector generally needed to take itself more seriously and engage in more critical thinking about what is social justice and whose interests are they trying to promote.

There was a sense from across the interviewees that the social justice advocacy work of the sector had become at the very least jaded

and, at the more extreme end of the spectrum, discredited in the eyes of some policy makers and the policymaking process. The general view was that the sector needed to 'up the ante' and change/vary their routes and approaches in order to highlight and get attention for their issues. According to some interviewees a lot of the reasons the sector are not being listened to is because the same old people have been there for 20 years and have few new ideas.

'There is a real need for new blood and new organisations to get involved in that advocacy at national level for example...'

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

Other suggestions made by a number of interviewees was for C&V organisations to put forward a community candidate for election at local/national level to represent social justice issues and bring community matters forward. Interviewees also suggested that there was a need for new voices within the national advocacy sector thus avoiding a repetition of old ideas in response to new problems (some interviewees indeed appeared to conceive and link their issues with the sector with the issue

of the same people in positions for a long time).

### What do policy makers/ implementers need to do?

The majority of interviewees agreed that policy makers need to continue to recognise the legitimacy of the C&V sector (recognising also the fundamental, structural issues regarding resourcing which constrain the sector).

'It is hard for advocacy organisations and for the C&V sector because if you are seen to be compromising, or agreeing to less than you were looking for, it might be seen as a weakness or something. It is a very dangerous line to walk'.

(Public/civil servant)

The majority saw the role for the sector as reflecting another/other view/s into the political system. This role was characterised differently by different interviewees – in some cases it was seen to relate to challenging current orthodoxies, in other contexts it was seen to be related to providing a different view to that expressed by other particular interest groups. There was also a broad consensus that policy makers need to recognise the role and the benefit of involving, listening to and

engaging the sector in the policy making process.

'New spaces need to be created to enable us as officials and the C&V sector to engage in policy making processes in a post partnership era'.

(Public/civil servant)

'To work with the statutory sector where we have a common position on something and most of time should be possible. The difficulty may be that voluntary sector might feel that people [in the statutory sector] can only go so far in taking a position on this, and that may not be enough... but there should be lots of areas where we could work together'.

(State/semi-state agency/organisation)

There was a broad consensus among the interviewees that 'it would be good for officials in particular to engage more proactively with the sector' with many noting that 'the resources to enable this are more constrained now'. There was also a view that civil and public servants are often very constrained in what they can do and that this is something that needs to be reviewed in order to facilitate more open debate.

"It was noted by many interviewees that policy makers need to be careful about who they listen to and who they fund and support."

'They (civil/public servants) are very constrained. They have a constitutional role and they have to be aware of it. Maybe they are too constrained. Maybe there should be a different approach. Maybe that is one of the difficulties in terms of an open policy debate'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

Many of the policy makers consulted indicated that they were keen to build relationships and enhance levels of dialogue with C&V organisations, recognising and accepting many of the constraints on the sector (need to be seen to take a strong position, to be seen as leaders on an issue etc). One of the barriers to working together was identified as the existence of a lack of trust between policy makers and social justice advocates.

'Policy makers need to get out of their offices, talk to people and be less defensive... good civil servants do that and are clear and upfront

about the constraints they are working under, not promising the undeliverable'.

(Elected representative)

There was also a minority view that policy makers may in some instances feel threatened by the expertise of the sector and where this is the case that policy makers needs to overcome their concerns and tap into and respect this type of specialist knowledge to enhance the process of policy making and implementation.

'I don't think they [policy makers] are always [open to knowledge from the CV sector]. I think they are kind of threatened by people who have an expertise outside because they don't genuinely have an expertise inside and that is not good... This is a crazy failure not to tap into the resources of the country when they are needed'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

'I think there is a real problem with the Irish civil service of not respecting specialised knowledge. We have inherited from the British this thing of 'the generalist'. You are no sooner are on top of an area and then you're moved. And if I've heard it once I've heard it a hundred times, 'I'm new to this area'. 'I'm new to this area' is used as an excuse for not knowing it. That is not good enough at all. There is no respect for corporate memory. No need to build up expertise and to bring in experts'.

(Expert/advisor/academic)

It was noted by many interviewees that policy makers need to be careful about who they listen to and who they fund and support and for what purposes.

'In the past there was a tendency to listen to the person/organisation who shouted the loudest often with disastrous consequences. There is a need for greater analysis of the issues, with more time to be

taken to identify the organisation/ individual best qualified to deal with the issue/s. Policy makers also need to ensure the C&V organisations they work have good governance principles firmly embedded at their core'. (Expert/advisor/academic)

Finding ways to engage in a 'longer term plan for recovery moving away from thinking in five year election cycles' was identified as a key challenge that policy makers and the policy making process need to address. Interviewees also identified the need for more focus on policy implementation (to include realistic timeframes and a transparent process of monitoring to improve transparency around implementation). A number of interviewees also identified a need for the policy making system to be open to doing things differently and be more innovative in its approach when appropriate. According to one interviewee now is a time for 'grand coalitions, primarily to develop compromise solutions'. (Expert/ advisor/academic)

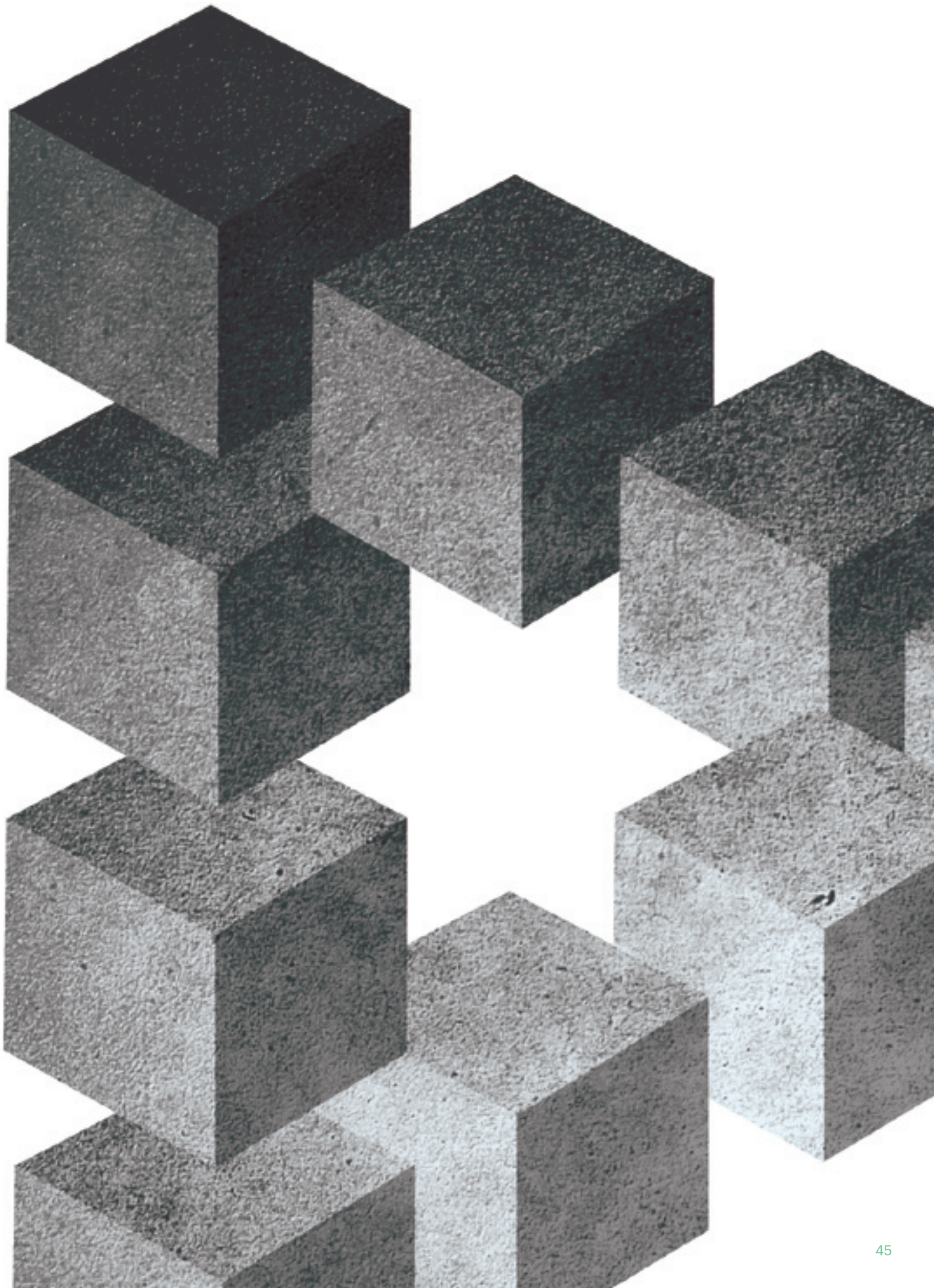
Interviewees generally recognised the financial vulnerability of the C&V sector. Some indeed linked this to the modus operandi of the sector which left organisations

anxious to sustain their profile and as a consequence acting essentially independently from one another. The suggestion was made by a small number of interviewees that there would be merit in policy makers finding a way to provide security of funding for social justice advocacy work by the sector.

'I see the need to reinvigorate and to streamline the funding streams through some sort of more cohesive social inclusion government department - it should engage in a partnership and board like structure with the civil society advocates'. (Elected representative)

One civil servant interviewee also suggested that government departments need to engage in more critical analysis of their aims, objectives and activities. The view was qualified by a recognition that government and government departments by their nature are conservative and as a consequence are always going to be behind public opinion and that that is not a bad thing considering given they are legislating for people's behaviour.





# 4. Analysis & Learning

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This section provides an overview of some of the key issues, learning and reflections arising from the interviews with the policy makers and influencers. This overview is relevant to members of the C&V sector and indeed social justice advocates who want to learn more about the views

of policy makers/shapers. It is also relevant to policy makers who are interested in the views of their colleagues and peers. [Section 4.7](#) is the research teams attempt to distil the essence of the key learning arising from the study for the C&V sector and policy makers alike.

"This overview is relevant to members of the C&V sector and indeed social justice advocates who want to learn more about the views of policy makers/shapers. It is also relevant to policy makers who are interested in the views of their colleagues and peers."



# 4.2

## Role and Purpose of the C&V Sector

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Among the most positive findings from this study was the finding that all the policy makers interviewed believed that the sector had a role to play in 2013, (with a lot of debate around the nature and diversity of the sector). The two roles identified most frequently for the sector were advocacy and service provision.

Almost two thirds of the interviewees identified advocacy as a key role of the sector (perhaps influenced in part by the advocacy focus of the study), while just over on third identified a service provision role. Three interviewees identified service provision as 'the' role of the sector. For them flexible, local service provision was the bedrock of community organisations, for others service provision was a function the state should be providing.

Particular reference was also made to the role of the sector as a source of information (seen by some as an element of advocacy, seen by others as a discrete function), research, data and evidence to support policy directions. Key advocacy activities included:

- Meetings
- Writing and circulating documents

- Activities to galvanise support for change within and outside political system
- Activities to galvanise support for change within the media.

Other roles and purposes identified for the sector included: fundraising, popularising particular issues among politicians, wider society and the media (again seen by some as a part of advocacy and by others as a distinct function), empowering and developing the capacity of individuals and groups from the ground up so they can do their own advocacy, representation of the views and experiences of marginalised groups, holding decision makers to account, community development, serving the needs of the community, encouraging and increasing community participation in decision making process as well as identifying and working towards solutions after analysing problems. A number of interviewees also identified a role of the C&V sector as advocating for the resources to sustain itself.

## Role of the C&V sector in social justice advocacy work

Advocacy was generally understood by interviewees as the process of influencing policy/decisions, and was recognised as an important function, undertaken by not just the C&V sector but by many other organisations and sectors, including commercial businesses/sectors, as well as elected representative and civil and public servants. Social justice advocacy was less well understood and it was hard to get some interviewees to focus on the topic preferring as they did to focus on advocacy.

Interestingly the majority of policy makers believed that the sector had a potentially significant role to play in social justice advocacy because they are close to the ground and trusted by the groups marginalised from decision making. There was also a contradictory view that the C&V sector (and by association its social justice advocacy role) had as a result in part of the demise of social partnership and an increased economic focus lost credibility, influence and power, while the current focus of policy-making structures on the economic argument for every decision is a challenge for the sector.

The importance of the sector as a source of evidence and expertise

in particular areas was particularly highlighted by those supportive of the advocacy role of the sector.

There was a concern however that some of the analysis currently being provided by the sector was over simplistic and that the professionalisation (while useful in terms of the evidence the sector was now able to provide) had led to a reduction in level of volunteering and the number of volunteer social justice advocates, which was a particular concern at a local level.

Where the policy makers consulted made a distinction between advocacy and social justice advocacy, the majority of these linked social justice advocacy specifically with issues of justice, equality and rights for individuals and for particular groups. A small number of these individuals also went on to describe social justice advocacy as a more participative process that engaged directly with the groups most affected. A number of interviewees also connected the concept with religion and faith.

Where the interviewees linked social justice advocacy with issues of structural inequality, the concept was regarded as very relevant in the current economic situation

with the need for information and evidence to facilitate and support equitable burden sharing and better, more effective use of resources. The most supportive believed that social justice advocacy was useful in bringing local knowledge and expertise into decision making processes. That was not to say that the policy makers found it easy to address the issues raised through social justice advocacy work, many indeed spoke about how difficult it was to meet/balance all the various competing needs they heard. Some policy makers also indicated that they were challenged by the need to ensure the social justice advocacy voices and views they heard were authentic based on the real needs of the groups on the ground.

Others were less positive about the social justice advocacy work of the C&V sector arguing that it conjured up 'demands that can't be met' and 'self-interest'. Social justice advocacy work was also criticised/dismissed by about a fifth of interviewees as a mechanism the sector organisations used to secure their funding; they saw these groups as primarily concerned with 'self-interest'.

# 4.4

## Considerations of Effectiveness

Policy maker's perceptions of effectiveness varied very significantly reflected in many cases by how they interacted with the sector and what it was that the sector provided that was/was not useful to them in their current role. For example those involved in policy formulation in many cases linked effectiveness to the production of focused research that could be fed into forming policy, while those involved in service provision linked effectiveness to the delivery of services. For the policy makers who believed service provision was the core role of the C&V sector (many of whom themselves had responsibility for service provision), effectiveness was seen to relate the efficient and cost effective delivery of targeted services. For others effectiveness was all about being representative (of the real, on the ground issues).

For others effectiveness was about generating a clear ask (based on evidence) and creating an argument/solution (taking cognisance of the current economic crisis) that policy makers could consider. In this context being realistic was seen as a very positive habit for effective social justice advocacy work and there was a clear perception among about a third of the interviewees that C&V sector groups involved in service provision were often more realistic about what

is possible, than groups involved in advocacy alone. Being part of a larger, broader group or alliance or network making a particular case argument was also seen lending weight to arguments and making the task of the policy maker easier in terms of the number of groups they would have to meet to get a view from the ground.

Policy makers were very divided when it came to effectiveness in relation to engagement with the wider public and the media. For some this was a core action and measure of effectiveness of the sector, while others highlighted the use of online mass emails/petitions as particularly ineffective and were strongly critical of them.

Some interviewees defined effectiveness as the ability to combine different often competing functions, e.g. delivery of public services on behalf of the state and also holding the state to account where it is not living up to its commitments. Other core elements of effectiveness identified frequently by policy makers included: the development of relationships (which included being available for consultations) with key policy makers/influencers; having and maintaining a good understanding of policy making processes; getting the timing right and making

the relevant targeted evidence accessible to policy makers at the most appropriate time. Providing follow up and recognising incremental gains issues were also regarded as effective ways of working and of building relationships.

There appeared to be more consensus in terms of what constituted ineffective social justice advocacy among the interviewees. Policy makers appeared particularly to associate ineffectiveness with an absence of realism and energy/appetite to do anything but critique the status quo. Negative 'them and us' attitudes and a generally antagonistic approach were also cited as the reason behind the inability of some organisations to move on from a particular agenda/debate, when it is clear that a particular approach/model is not working/had failed/lost credibility. A general lack of energy/enthusiasm as well as a lack of on-going engagement and/or follow up were also factors linked to ineffectiveness. The inability/unwillingness of some organisations within the sector to listen when being advised by a policy maker trying to assist them was also highlighted by a number of interviewees as an example of ineffectiveness.



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There was a clear divergence of views in relation to the impact of the economic crises on the sector and its social justice advocacy work. Some interviewees believed it had had a positive impact in terms of making some within the C&V sector more outcome and solution focused. Others were of the opinion that the sector had not sufficiently taken the crises into account and had as a result become very unrealistic in relation to what was possible.

For some the economic crisis requires the sector to adopt an entirely different approach to its social justice advocacy work, for others it needs to apply a variety of different approaches to their work. Among the most frequently cited approaches were: needing to appeal more to the public (in order to make issue relevant elected representatives); being more creative; working more with the political opposition; as well as a much stronger focus on economic issues.

One or two interviewees suggested that what the sector needed to do was more street/action politics, while others indicated that this type of action is more likely to stymie progress and debate, than facilitate it.

The majority of interviewees were of the view that there are opportunities for energetic and positive C&V sector organisations who adopt innovative and focused work to raise awareness of particular issues.

The uncertain future of locally focused C&V led social justice advocacy work was also raised by a number of the local level policy makers, in the context of the on-going local government reform process.

# 4.6

## Critical Observations

### Legitimacy

Legitimacy was generally associated by the majority of stakeholders with the extent and nature of groups mandate/their connection with the 'ground' to the 'real voices'. For about a third of policy makers interviewed it was being a service provider that gave a C&V sector organisation legitimacy in terms of its advocacy work. Another basis of legitimacy was identified as being a provider of grounded research/evidence. A lack/perceived lack of on-going and meaningful connection with the groups/individuals the C&V sector purported to represent was a cause of concern for policy makers, leading them to question the legitimacy of groups falling into this category.

### Perceptions of self-interest and an absence of self-reflection

There was a view among some policy makers that some C&V organisations actions were motivated more by self-interest and an interest in sustaining the organisation/their jobs, rather than the interests of the groups/individuals they set out to represent. Policy makers while often linking this to the professionalisation

of the sector agreed that the professionalisation was useful in terms of being better equipped to provide the necessary evidence needed to argue for change.

The absence of honest critique and self-reflection within the C&V sector and an inability to accept their 'insider' status (where funding is provided by the state for the operation of an organisation) were the cause of much frustration for the policy makers interviewed. Policy makers were of the opinion that the sector would be more effective if it was able to recognise and name the tension that exists between being a service provider and a social justice advocate.

### Diversity of the sector

One of the frequent observations made by almost three quarters of the interviewees related to the diversity and disparate nature of the sector and the challenges that this diversity posed in terms of being definitive about an overall role and purpose for the sector. It was also seen to pose challenges for policy makers in terms of the decisions they made about who they spoke to and engaged with in relation to particular topics. There was a view among policy makers that

they simply do not have the time to undertake exhaustive consultations and therefore needed to be selective about who they engaged with for their purposes.

Policy makers in some cases linked the disparate nature of some groups with a lack of depth, focus and evidence and ultimately solutions as a source of ineffectiveness. They raised the issue of the prevalence of duplication (arguing there were often too many groups trying to do the same thing), and the absence of collaboration between like-minded groups.

### Challenges of being both an insider and an outsider

Policy makers interviewed identified a clear tension for C&V organisations between being part of the system (providing services for the state) and acting as an independent voice critiquing the system. They also identified a tension for C&V advocates between developing relationships with policy makers and publically criticising the policy they are responsible for. There was a view that this second tension was easier to manage, where individuals are professional and where the critique of policy stuck to policy and did not become personalised.

Engagement in the research process had led the research team to identify a number of clear 'Do's' for the C&V sector and for policymakers/influencers.

#### Do's for C&V sector social justice advocates

- Do identify and focus a small number of key priority areas. Clarify the key ask.
- Do ensure you allocate time to building trust and relationships with policy makers and influencers.
- Do engage with the policy making process/policy makers in an energetic and constructive way with follow up as necessary.
- Do adopt more innovative approaches to influencing policy both within and outside the system, keeping a foot in each at all times.
- Do engage in regular and on-going consultations/ conversations to ensure your mandate derives directly from the group/s you represent. Encourage the emergence of new spokespeople to represent the views of your organisation in different fora.
- Do undertake focused research (which gets to the heart of the issues) to provide the evidence necessary to make the case for key policy changes.
- Do where relevant work in collaboration with others to seek positive change within your key policy areas.
- Do empower individuals/client to become actively involved in representing their needs.
- Do regularly engage in a critique of the work of your organisation and or the sector.

#### Do's for Policy Makers and Influencers

- Do find ways to build trust and work with C&V sector representatives.
- Do find ways to tap into the specialised expertise and knowledge of the C&V sector in the policy making and policy implementation process.
- Do consider whether it might be possible to relax the legislation which constrains civil/public servant actions to enable them to engage more in debates.
- Do recognise the financial vulnerability (caused by structural and resourcing issues) of the sector.
- Do create spaces to enable policy makers and the C&V sector to engage in policy making processes in a post-partnership era.
- Do get out of the office and see what and who is working in practice.
- Do be open to doing things differently, adopting more innovative approaches to policy implementation and development.
- Do find ways to enlist the support of the C&V sector in the process of policy implementation as well as policy development.
- Do encourage and support the development of C&V sector coalitions.

# 5. Reflections

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# Reflections by the Researchers

Sue Conlan, Rory Hearne, Catherine Joyce, Catherine Lynch, Cliona McCormack, Rachel Mullen & Diarmaid O'Sullivan

One of the unusual elements of this study was the request that the social justice advocates involved would be supported to reflect not only on the perceptions of policy makers but on their own perceptions, experience and learning generated as a result of being intimately involved in the research process. This section provides a snapshot of our views, perceptions, experiences and learning under the headings of challenges, surprises and assumptions and learning.

## Getting an honest cross-section of policy makers views

A key issue for this study was the question of whether we could/would be able to get a cross section of policy makers to talk to us as part of the research process, and assuming they did agree to participate, to what extent they would be prepared to be open and frank in their views. In both cases we were very pleasantly surprised, the vast majority of policy makers we invited to participate in the research, took us up on the invitation, enabling us get what we consider a good representative cross section of policy makers views. We are also of the opinion that the policy makers we interviewed were very open in terms of sharing their views and

observations (positive and negative) on the C&V sector. Some of it was hard for us to hear, but our job as researchers was to listen and ultimately analyse the learning arising from the process for our work as individual social justice advocates and for the sector more generally.

## Philosophical Challenges

We found across all our interviewees that understandings of advocacy and social justice advocacy in particular differed widely. These differences in turn impacted on the type of analysis the interviewees could provide. Doing these interviews led some of us to question (in a way we had not done before) whether and to what extent the advocacy work (or even some part of the advocacy work) which we do is 'social justice' advocacy. Some of us indeed wondered about how commonly the term 'social justice' is used and fully understood in particular sectors.

'This made me a little uncomfortable with the section of the interviews which related to social justice specifically. I wondered whether the interviewees would see the relevance of social justice to their work and/or the interview. However, in

many cases my concerns were unfounded'.  
(Participant researcher)

Some of us found the lack of understanding of social justice advocacy among our interviewees a challenge, particularly as we were not in a position to challenge or question the views expressed.

'Many of my assumptions such as the vital role of social justice advocacy were challenged the effective and professional delivery of services by the C&V sector. was strongly challenged. There was a real sense that social justice advocates were interfering middle men and really that the good advocates should be working in partnership with the state structures. This challenged me. There was also a real sense that the solutions that are required and changes possible from their points of view should all be undertaken within the current 'cake' size and that any notion of enlarging the cake to provide alternative solutions was not a viable alternative. This makes putting forward innovative solutions that don't involve cutting some areas very difficult and runs counter to the values and priorities of social justice at this time'.  
(Participant researcher)

Participation in the study also raised questions for some of use in relation to the conception of social justice in Irish society and how this is influenced by our history and our social attitudes. This in turn made us question whether and to what extent we in the C&V sector perpetuate a narrow conception of social justice.

### Operational Challenges

For those of us with more limited research experience it was a challenge to keep the conversations flowing naturally while trying to cover the required interview questions. For all of us it was a challenge when our interviewees decided for whatever reason to ‘shut down’ or were not willing to engage in relation to certain questions. There were a number of reasons for this type of shut down including previously negative experiences with similar projects which made some of us nervous. The status of the interviewees, and the time constraints they were under also meant that some become impatient with persistent questions on a theme if they felt they had already answered it. This was particularly the case where the interviews used generic terms and you were trying to get them to be more precise about what they were referring to.

It was also hard where an interviewee (knowing this was an interview about advocacy) moved straight into discussing advocacy by C&V organisations and had to be pulled back a little to discuss the role of the organisations and of advocacy more generally.

‘In one interview the challenge was to bring the interviewee back to cover broader topics (this one went very deep and narrow very quickly). In another it was to move from the interviewees own main interest area – service provision – to get their perspective on the role of advocacy’.

(Participant researcher)

The level of detail shared by the interviewees, and the small policy making community in Ireland, led some of us to have concerns about honouring our commitment to safeguarding the anonymity our interviewees. Those of us who felt like this reviewed the draft reports very carefully to ensure the anonymity promised was delivered.

### Practical Challenges

At a very practical level finding the time and head space necessary to do the interviews was a key challenge for most of

us, (given other work and family commitments). This resulted in some of us not being as prepared going into interviews as we would have liked. But in the end we all made the time and got the interviews done.

‘Trying to be relaxed and present during the interview itself and listen to responses was a challenge. It was a particularly busy period in my work and home-life’.

(Participant researcher)

Getting a gender balance among interviewees was also always going to be a challenge for us all, given that the senior civil service and politics are male dominated.

### Surprises

We were all very pleasantly surprised by how many of the individuals we approached agreed to be interviewed and indeed how open and frank most of them were in the actual interview process. Some had really thought about the sector and engaged in a very deliberate way. They were prepared to be critical of both the sector and how civil service/government departments go about their work. In the C&V sector we can often see our engagement with policymakers as adversarial.



However, our interviewees generally seemed to want to build relationships and dialogue with C&V organisations.

‘I thought the interviewees would be more guarded, less forthcoming than they actually were’.

(Participant researcher)

Many of us were also surprised by a) the range of views about the C&V sector (from a very narrow view that saw it primarily in terms of service provision to others which viewed it much more holistically) and b) how broadly some interviewees perceived advocacy with many of them viewing politicians and/or policy makers as advocates. These perspectives were ones that had not occurred to at least some of us before.

‘I believe that commercial organisations are not ‘advocates’. Some interviewees challenged this view. While they didn’t see them as ‘advocates’ they did see a strong role in representing their commercial interests. This role was seen by some to be as valid as C&V organisations representing citizens’ interests.

(Participant researcher)

Interviewees perceptions of the C&V sector trying ‘own’ the term

community and that their role as policy makers was to balance all views of the whole community before arriving at decisions was we believed an interesting insight for the sector, challenging us to think about our sense of ‘community’ in our approach to solutions to societal issues.

What was also surprising was the extent to some interviewees downplayed their involvement in policymaking.

‘Few of my interviewees seemed to feel they were influential, or wanted to say as much. This was despite the fact that many of the interviewees were senior employees with responsibility for national policy development/ implementation. I was surprised by the fact that all my interviewees appeared to be creeping towards the same conclusion – that there is a systems failure which necessitates a coherent voice to advocate for changes. The majority viewed a coalition to articulate this need as a consensus building exercise. Only one interviewee saw a coalition as a means of challenging current orthodoxies’.

(Participant researcher)

Many of us had assumed that the interviewees would be more

intensely critical of social justice advocacy and the C&V sector and were therefore surprised at many of them applied common themes around the need for long term planning, strategy and an implementation focus to both the sector and the policy making sphere. There was in fact more common ground than many of us anticipated with interviewees generally considered in their views.

‘The other assumption I made ...was that he would perhaps not have a very well developed analysis of what constitutes effective social justice advocacy. This was not the case at all. He was very clear about what constitutes genuinely representative advocacy and the nature of transformative advocacy’.

(Participant researcher)

Some of us were of the opinion that policy makers were generally unaware of the constraints which advocacy organisations experience (needing to maintain profile, be seen to ‘win’ policy debates, rather than compromise and be a strong voice for the people they represent) and were surprised when interviewees (unprompted) referred to and accepted these constraints as valid concerns for the C&V sector.

## Individual Learning

### Reflection

'I am not adequately reflective about the activities of my daily work. I often don't consider the political theories behind the advocacy arguments we make, or my own personal view of my organisation's positions'.

(Participant researcher)

'There is always more and more to learn'.

(Participant researcher)

### Silence/Listening

'I learned to use silence; it wasn't as difficult as I thought to sit back and allow the interviewee to share perspective even if it was one I would not share'.

(Participant researcher)

'As individuals (workers, advocates, researchers, and policy makers) we are professionals who can shift roles depending on what is called for. It was very easy to sit down and discuss these questions openly and without an agenda from either side'.

(Participant researcher)

## Relationships

The research provided us with a unique space to engage with and listen to the views of the policy makers we work with.

'Having space to allow... a key policy maker, to expound for an hour uninterrupted enhanced trust from interviewee towards me. In each case after I turned off the microphone and ended the interview we had a longer and very frank discussion about policy positions related to my area of work. I don't think I would have had those conversations in the way we did were it not for the proceeding interview'.

(Participant researcher)

'I learned that it is important to sit and talk to your adversaries in a non-'project' environment! I learned more about their views and it was informing to me about the state's view of advocacy. I also learned that there is an important value in strong independent critical voices once they are factually based and not to be afraid of being critical. But it also important to provide solutions'.

(Participant researcher)

'In my work I should be continually reaching out to civil/public servants rather than waiting until we have

the 'solution' wrapped up in a perfect package. There is a need to maintain on-going engagement to discuss the problems and develop solutions. Our organisation should shift advocacy activities away from the political sphere and into the civil service'.

(Participant researcher)

## Advocacy and the policy making process

'This process reinforced my view that the policymaking system isn't a system as such, rather an awkward arrangement of fortunate/unfortunate incidents and decisions'.

(Participant researcher)

'I am more comfortable with strategies of dissent and critique than many of the policy maker/ influencers I interviewed. They preferred to discuss consensus and coalition building approaches. I was disappointed that many of the interviewees were seeking a solution which could be summed up as 'more of the same, but a bit better and a bit quieter'.

(Participant researcher)

'A lot of what the interviewees said confirmed what I believed to be the case about what constitutes effective and ineffective advocacy.

It was also useful to hear about the constraints that decision-makers are operating within, as this is something that we can sometimes overlook or ignore as a sector’.

(Participant researcher)

### **Learning for the C&V sector and C&V sector advocacy/social justice advocacy work**

‘Being part of this study made me think about how closed we can be as a sector in relation to the solutions we seek. We narrowly define the community and don’t think about issues from a whole society point of view which I think could be helpful in developing longer term solutions to some of the issues we work on. I also think there is crucial learning in terms of really thinking about how we communicate, how we think about our audiences and how we present arguments to them which I found invaluable’.

(Participant researcher)

‘Overall... I feel a sense of despondency regarding the advocacy role of the sector at this time. There is a strong sense from interviewees that now more than any other time, the C&V sector is failing to make inroads in terms of effecting change. This is (according to interviewees) partly to blame on

the way we are operating as a sector and partly to do with the decision-makers being closed to hearing us as a sector. I come away from this feeling that as a sector we perhaps need to be doing things differently’.

(Participant researcher)

‘Be considerate when agreeing to certain requirements/demands from funders/policy makers. Some of the problems officials had with the sector (professionalization, structures may disconnect projects from the communities), are as a result of some of the things demanded of projects in the 1990s. There is a bit around assuming legitimacy but also expertise. So, there needs to be a more honest, equal relationship between the C&V sector and the state – particularly when it comes to the direction/structure of the sector’.

(Participant researcher)

‘There isn’t a magic formula to influence policy. In many cases no-one can pinpoint why a particular decision was made. Interviewees demonstrated a general level of frustration with the hazy way that the system operates, but no coherent solutions to this were provided. I was dismayed and felt let down by an older generation of career policy makers who could see

from within that the system wasn’t working but didn’t seem to feel the same impetus for change. Nor, did they seem to feel a responsibility, or an ability to reorganise the system’.

(Participant researcher)

‘We need to situate our advocacy efforts in this reality and to engage with the economic issues if we are going to convince decision-makers to make changes’.

(Participant researcher)

# Acknowledgements

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In this context we would also like to thank and acknowledge the support of The Advocacy Initiative and particularly Anna Visser as the Director in this process.

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The research process provided us with a rare chance to step back from our daily campaign and advocacy activities to reflect on the nature and process of social justice advocacy work. As advocates working in different policy areas, it was a unique opportunity, through the research process, to have a collective space to interrogate the process of social justice advocacy: how we as advocates perceive the work and how it is perceived by policy-makers and influencers. We hope the research findings provide similar food for thought for other social justice advocates and policy makers alike.

**Sue Conlan, Rory Hearne, Catherine Joyce, Catherine Lynch, Cliona McCormack, Rachel Mullen & Diarmaid O'Sullivan**









The Advocacy Initiative  
Carmichael House,  
North Brunswick St,  
Dublin 7,  
Ireland  
tel: 01-685 3291  
[www.advocacyinitiative.ie](http://www.advocacyinitiative.ie)