



ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Getting to the Roots

This is a short summary of a discussion paper prepared by Gabriel Chanan of the Community Development Foundation for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. It provides a review of key research on the concept of active citizenship and its implications for social policy.

■ Introduction

The contribution of citizens and the role of civil society are increasingly emphasised in the move towards a truly European society. Commission President Romano Prodi stated in April 2000: 'I believe it is time to recognise that "Brussels" is all of us: Europe is not run by European institutions but by national, regional and local authorities too and civil associations such as NGOs.' In announcing plans for Network Europe, a new more democratic form of partnership between civil society and other actors involved in governance, he said, 'Europe must be built *by* the citizens *for* the citizens and civil society must have a key role in the proposed Network Europe.'

The discussion paper summarized here highlights the practical meaning and significance of a topic of hitherto neglected importance in social policy across the European Union – active citizenship. 'Active citizenship', taken broadly, can mean any form of productive contribution to society. What policy makers appear to have in mind is people's capacity to take an active role in public affairs, whether through formal democratic structures, through the press, through public debate, through associations, political parties, trade unions, local clubs and societies or simply through informal networks and mutual aid amongst neighbours, friends and family.

■ Objectives

The paper aims to prime policy makers and practitioners on the question of how to mobilize citizen involvement in achieving the goals of social and economic policy, and to delineate some of the key questions on how this issue should be addressed into the 21st century. The present paper therefore has these aims:

- to discuss, in the light of continuing experience and new findings, the relationship between local citizen action and the functioning of local economy and society;
- to illustrate the continuing significance of the key findings of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Condition's research on citizen action in today's context;
- to suggest ways in which new social and economic policy can absorb and build on this experience, and
- to identify pointers to further development of the issue of active citizenship and local action.



■ Why involve local citizens?

This paper identifies three main sources of policy concern in relation to stimulating greater citizen involvement:

1. A perception that the current economic polarization between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society is dangerous for social cohesion; cohesion depends on the relatively advantaged sections of the population feeling solidarity with the worse-off, and the worse-off feeling that they have social protection.
2. A perceived need for public services and social protection measures to be reshaped to cope with restricted resources and increased demand, and to reduce pressure by mobilizing greater self-help.
3. A perceived need for widespread democratic support for the legitimacy and efficacy of the European role in social policy and legislation.

The Foundation's Citizen Action research, which took place between 1987 and 1992, showed that citizen participation in practice takes place largely through the local community sector – the range of small autonomous groups and networks which can be found to one degree or another in every locality. Their activities are, for many individuals, a necessary stepping stone between the privacy of the household and access to some form of public life.

The research concluded that local community action was of universal importance. But activity is often very patchy. Whether the sector has any coherence, collective public voice and momentum of development depends on its degree of self-consciousness and may be critically affected by whether there are local umbrella groups or projects which purposefully help to develop and co-ordinate the sector. However, it is functioning well below its potential in most localities, because of lack of recognition and support. The significance of these findings is that it became clear that policy makers and project designers need to focus more on certain local realities:

- first, that people are already trying to improve their conditions – indeed, were

they not doing so, the conditions would be even worse;

- secondly, that this process takes place through whatever small, participative vehicles are available to them: access to politicians, influential people, churches, schools, businesses, charities, clubs;
- thirdly, that the effort to improve things brings people together in groups – either existing groups or newly-formed ones, and that many of these groups take on a quasi-permanent and quasi-formal formation, according to local and national traditions, for example parents' associations in Greece, social clubs in Portugal, community projects in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

■ Contribution of local community action

Local community action can make an important economic contribution not only through a certain amount of job creation but also through cost-saving and the direct productivity of mutual aid. Awareness of the importance of this 'local factor' in economic and social policy has been increasing. The involvement and participation of residents and citizens in achieving the objectives of EU programmes and initiatives has become more evident in EU documents from the White Papers on Social Policy and on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, through the Report of the Comité des Sages and the recent Communications on Social Protection and on the Role of Voluntary Organizations and Foundations.

Amongst other roles, the community sector has an important contribution to make in increasing people's employability. This can be summarized as five functions:

1. Overcoming demoralization and low self-esteem by giving people more social contact and reinforcement.
2. Organizing mutual aid and personal support, which helps people to maintain social networks, information and involvement in the world outside the home.
3. Providing practice in taking on responsibilities, carrying out tasks co-operatively and learning new skills needed in the running of community organizations (many of which are similar to those



required in the running of small businesses).

4. Stimulating the creation of community businesses, including job creation through the growth of the community organizations themselves.
5. Fostering mutual aid arrangements to release more time for people to seek and engage in employment, for example mothers of young children or family carers of the elderly.

■ A strategy for local participation

The paper shows the relationship between active citizenship in a general sense and community involvement in official initiatives such as regeneration programmes. It is shown that all branches of social policy have something to gain from becoming more aware of, and supportive towards, local community organizations. These are endemic everywhere but often at a low level of development owing to long neglect in policy and a general lack of public awareness of their collective significance.

At the same time, official initiatives such as local development programmes seek to enlist the participation of representatives of the local community in plans for improvement and yet are often unclear as to how to achieve this objective. Whilst only a small number of local residents can become directly involved in such initiatives, the key to success is to take a strategic view of the sector of local community groups and voluntary organizations. By building up their capacity both individually and through networks, these organizations can provide opportunities for participation at many different levels. On the basis of a stronger sector, community representation on public programmes can be linked to increased activity on many different issues amongst the local population as a whole.

The paper concludes that the fostering of the local community sector should become a standard component in socio-economic policy, and provides pointers to emerging questions about how this could be implemented and the ways in which it would complement other current changes in social policy. In particular it highlights propositions that could be

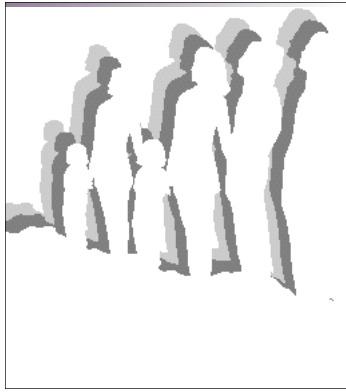
considered by all those concerned with maximizing local community involvement and active citizenship in Europe:

- social policy could be more explicit in recognizing the locality as the primary setting for implementation;
- there could be specific policies for developing the local community sector;
- approaches to active citizenship should begin with a clear concept of the objective nature of the local community sector; baselines should be set in terms of present levels of participation, and targets in terms of improved levels;
- projects which aim to maximize citizen participation should adopt a firmer framework for planning and evaluation: participation should be defined firstly as inhabitants' participation in the local community sector, i.e. their own associations, and secondly as representation in official decision-making;
- measures to increase job creation could be supplemented by measures to facilitate transitions from voluntary activity to paid work and combinations of paid and unpaid work;
- the concept of training should be widened to include job-readiness and improved employability through building confidence and skills through participation in local community activity.

■ Where next?

Making community sector development a social policy goal reveals a need and an opportunity to look at social policy in a new light. Therefore this paper ends not with a full stop but with the opening out of new horizons and the realization of what more we need to know, namely:

- how far local community involvement is now part of regeneration policy in the various EU and Member State programmes;
- what basis exists for recognition of the local community sector in the different Member States;
- what models of the local economy could be established to take account of both paid and unpaid work and the relationship between them.



PUBLICATIONS

5
4
SX-11-97-487-EN-C

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Foundation Publications are on sale from the official sales agents of the EU or the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, L-2985, Luxembourg. Where prices are not quoted, the document is free of charge and is available on request from the Foundation.

Free publications can also be downloaded from the Foundation's website at www.eurofound.ie.

Local Community Involvement: A Handbook for Good Practice

Cat No. SX-21-99-270-*-C
Available in EN and FR

Active Citizenship and Community Involvement: Getting to the Roots

Cat No. SX-09-97-301-EN-C
Available in EN

Partnerships, Participation, Investment, Innovation: Meeting the Challenge of Distressed Urban Areas

Conference Report. Dublin, June 1998
EF/99/06
Available in EN/FR

Local Partnership: A Successful Strategy for Social Cohesion?

Cat No. SX-12-98-845-*-C
ISBN 92-828-3050-0
Available in DE, FR, EN
EUR 40
Summary Report also available in ES,
DA, DE, EN, FR, IT, NL, PT, FI, SV
Cat No. SX-12-98-788-EN-C

Local Community Action and Social Policy

Cat No. SY-78-93-201-*-C
Available in ES, DA, DE, EL, EN,
FR, IT, NL, PT

Out of the Shadows: Local Community Action and the European Community

Cat No SY-74-92-443-*-C
ISBN 92-826-4146-5
Available in ES, DE, EN, FR
EUR 15

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on this project, please contact:
Teresa Renehan
**European Foundation for the
Improvement of Living and
Working Conditions,**
Wyattville Road,
Loughlinstown,
Co. Dublin, Ireland.
Tel: ++ 353 1 204 3100
Fax: ++ 353 1 282 6456
E-mail :
teresa.renehan@eurofound.ie

Copyright: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Reproduction is authorised, except for commercial purposes, provided the source is acknowledged and a copy is sent to the Foundation.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions,

Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Tel: ++ 353 1 2043100

Fax: ++ 353 1 2826456/2824209;

E-mail : postmaster@eurofound.ie

EF/97/57/EN



OFFICE FOR OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS
OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

