



CESCA Equality Day 2020

On Monday December 7th the Cork Equal and Sustainable Communities Alliance (CESCA) held their annual equality day with the theme of ***Equality in a time of Covid.*** This annual event is one of CESCA's contributions to the [Cork City Local Economic and Community Plan](#) (LECP) and takes place in the same week as World Human Rights Day, which took place this year on Thursday December 10th. Unlike other years we could not come together in person to share our thoughts and agree on actions to address the equality issues of most concern in our times. However, this year's online event presented even greater opportunities to expand our conversations on equality. This event reached beyond Cork City and had a bigger line up of expert speakers than ever before.

The event was officially launched by Lord Mayor of Cork City Cllr Joe Kavanagh. On the morning we heard from CESCA members Fiona Finn CEO of NASC, The Refugee and Migrant Rights Centre, Breda O Donoghue Director of Advocacy at the Cork Traveller Visibility Group and Mary Crilly CEO of the Cork Sexual Violence Centre on the impact that Covid 19 has had on marginalised communities in Cork City and beyond.

Next, we heard from Independent Senator Lynn Ruane and Dr Sean Healy, CEO of Social Justice Ireland on the ties between participatory democracy and equality.

And finally we heard from a panel of speakers: Professor Kathleen Lynch, Professor of Equality Studies at University College Dublin, Paul Ginnell, Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, Doireann Ansbro, Senior Research and Policy Officer at the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and Ivan Cooper, Director of Public Policy at The Wheel.

A full recording of the event and the discussions we had can be found on our [Facebook page](#). The purpose of this write up is to pull out some of the key themes that emerged from the day rather than cover all of the topics covered on the day.

Key themes:

1) Covid 19 has not been the great leveller.

Throughout the morning we heard from speakers about, how despite aspirations to the contrary, Covid 19 has not been the great leveller we had expected it to be and has in

many instances exacerbated the inequalities many communities face. It has also raised concerns about the disproportionate effect lockdown restrictions have had on some of the most marginalised communities in Ireland.

For example, we heard from Fiona Finn (NASC) on the experiences of those living in direct provision centres in this country. Fiona highlighted that particularly during the early stages of the pandemic social distancing facilities were inadequate, people from many different households were required to share a room and other facilities and overall people seeking asylum were treated differently to the rest of the population.

Breda O Donoghue (TVG) highlighted significant concerns also for members of the Traveller community, particularly for people living on halting sites. Many are still living in overcrowded situations where some official sites do not have running water and proper sanitation. Asking people to stay apart in these kinds of circumstances is incredibly difficult.

We also heard from Mary Crilly (Sexual Violence Centre) about how the pandemic highlighted the lack of understanding that still pervades issues pertaining to sexual violence. While domestic violence was rightly raised as an issue during lockdown, assumptions were made that victims of sexual violence would not encounter the same issues with the closing of social opportunities. However, this proved not to be the case.

Paul Ginnell (EAPN Ireland) drew our attention to the fact that even prior to Covid 19 material deprivation had increased in 2019, many were failing to make ends meet. The Covid 19 pandemic has increased these issues and exacerbated a reliance on food banks for example.

Professor Kathleen Lynch (UCD) added to these concerns by highlighting the disproportionate impact that the Covid 19 restrictions had on carers, care workers and those living in institutions such as nursing homes, where people are often in such facilities against their will, are not permitted access to their family and do not have platform to mobilise politically to highlight their human rights issues. Professor Lynch drew the link between this model of institutional care and capitalism, noting that capitalism is dictating our morality.

Doireann Ansbro (ICCL) also highlighted that the emergency legislation enacted to manage the public health concerns of the pandemic was running the risk of suspending other core human rights. This was particularly true in the context of at-risk communities, where it was felt that there was not a full consideration of the different impact that lockdown restrictions would have on different communities. Doireann highlighted the need for a more nuanced approach and not one that solely accommodated a singular view of the make-up of Irish society.

2) A 'new normal' is needed

There was a clear consensus from attendees and speakers that there is no desire to return to 'normal' after we emerge from this pandemic but instead, we want a new normal. One that properly addresses the inequalities in our society highlighted by the pandemic.

This new normal would focus on equality, social justice and all communities having a say in decisions that affect their day to day lives.

All speakers agreed that now is the time to reflect on the type of society we want to live in and to consider what needs to be done to achieve it. There was a strong sense that we as community organisations need to be much more critical and collective in our approach if we are to achieve the change we want to see for Irish society and if we are to hear from communities who are not currently part of decision making processes.

Professor Kathleen Lynch especially spoke to the need to be much more upfront, critical and demand that civil society is adequately funded. This would involve challenging the concept of capitalism and privatisation and finding a means of properly hearing from carers and those who are institutionalised as they have no opportunity for public dialogue as it stands.

Paul Ginnell spoke of the need to move away from a society that leaves people behind and focuses on the economy first, where we fund capitalism and not focus on social justice or equality. This new normal needs to involve a proper balance between our social, economic and environmental responsibilities with a progressive and integrated approach to taxation. A new normal would mean adequate incomes for everyone. This is currently not the case as we have one of the highest levels of low paid work in the OECD. This was highlighted by the fact that income tax did not reduce significantly during 2020 as most people who lost their jobs as a result of Covid 19 were low paid.

Dr Sean Healy (Social Justice Ireland) elaborated on this further by highlighting that Covid 19 has shown us that we need to think more deeply about the type of society we want to build. From Social Justice Ireland's point of view this means a new social contract and a new social dialogue focused on 5 key outcomes happening simultaneously and in solidarity:

- 1) A need to build a thriving economy
- 2) Build decent services and infrastructure
- 3) Just Taxation
- 4) Good governance
- 5) Sustainability

This approach would require a greater focus on holding the government to account on its commitments in the new programme for government on a social dialogue with all communities.

Ivan Cooper (The Wheel) spoke of the need for the new normal to incorporate more sustainable models of funding for the community and voluntary sector. There are real concerns that we may see a return to more fiscally conservative approaches to funding the sector going forward, despite the initial support that has been offered at this time. A new normal would mean that the potential of the sector would be harnessed and match the right that people should have to consistent, equitable and sustainable community supports available in their area. This would however need a shift away from the command and control model of funding the community sector.

Senator Lynn Ruane also shared concerns that a focus on good governance of the community and voluntary sector had removed the human element from human services and that this was impeding work at a local level. She spoke to a need to ensure we do not put a blanket imposition on what reporting and good governance looks like in the sector as this runs the risk of alienating people.

3) A way forward - Interagency working, participatory democracy and a sustainable community and voluntary sector.

Despite the many concerns shared on the day it was also clear that there is much that can be done to challenge the inequalities in our societies and to ensure that there is not a slide away from the collaborative working we saw during the initial stages of the pandemic. Ensuring all people have a say in the decisions about their lives and are enabled to participate in society is a key element of the change needed going forward. But more needs to be done to challenge the narratives around what we mean when we speak of equality for all.

It was clear that there is already much in place both in terms of structures and policy commitments to enable these changes to happen, but more needs to be done to work collectively to realise this change and to hold Government and others to account on the commitments made.

- 1) Participatory democracy** and a new social dialogue was a key focus of the conversation on the day and an areas that requires much more exploration, particularly in terms of what this would look like for marginalised communities and seldom heard from groups in our society .

Public Participation Networks (PPN's) were mentioned as one key way of achieving a better social dialogue on a local level. They worked effectively to bring all parties together during the initial stages of the pandemic to ensure local communities were supported with a real understanding of the local need. This sets a good precedent and there is an opportunity to build on this work to establish local dialogues between the PPN's, HSE and the local authority as a forum to discuss and address the challenges that many communities face and will face going forward. Dr Sean Healy highlighted that in so doing it was important not to let best be the enemy of the good and that a perfect social dialogue won't be created in the next few years, but a good start can be made.

It was strongly felt that bringing communities themselves into the discussions about the society we want to have was vital. Senator Lynn Ruane's work in collaboration with Trinity College Dublin's Dr. Robert Grant establishing Philosophy in the Community is an example of how this can be done. This is a programme based in Rialto which introduces local residents and youth workers to philosophy and encourages them to explore the broader philosophical contexts in which they live and work. It encourages communities to come together on issues of importance, to have dialogue, think well and make good and positive decisions rather than being polarised.

Paul Ginnell also highlighted the opportunity in the Programme for Government with the inclusion of a commitment to pilot an autonomous community development model which is an important element of enabling communities to fully participate in society and decision-making processes.

However, in order for all communities to be involved in participatory democracy as outlined Professor Kathleen Lynch sounded a warning that we need to find ways of enabling carers, those living in institutions and seldom heard from groups to be

fully involved in the process. This may involve paying for childcare or caring responsibilities and finding other avenues to support people's genuine involvement.

- 2) A sustainable community and voluntary sector.** Concerns were raised throughout the morning about the funding models of the sector and its sustainability at this time. It was strongly felt by speakers that more needs to be done to understand the impact that the pandemic has had on the sector and what it will mean for the future. And a much more integrated approach to public service provision is needed with the voluntary sector considered a vital element of this. However there remains an increasing tightening of the contractual obligations being placed on the sector. This is something that needs revising with a more responsive and cohesive voluntary sector that should be responding to local need rather than being determined by central resources.

There were some positives emerging as highlighted by Ivan Cooper such as the Health Dialogue Forum chaired by Peter Cassels. The aim of the Forum is to build a stronger working relationship between the State and the voluntary health and social care sector for the benefit of communities. This has helped to lead the way in a shift away from funding agreements to discussions about what we need to do for communities. The National Economic and Social Council are also currently doing a report looking at how a more collaborative approach between the statutory and voluntary sector can be fostered. And much work has already been done, such as the Day Report in 2018 *Report of the Independent Review Group established to examine the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded health and personal social services* which outlines a number of issues that need to be addressed to place the voluntary sector on a sustainable footing. Overall it was felt that the sector needed to be much more vocal and strategic, working together collectively to challenges decisions that would impact on the sustainability of the community and voluntary sector and working for recognition of their key role in public service provision.

- 3) Interagency working.** Underpinning these themes is the importance of interagency working, both within the community and voluntary sector but also across statutory sectors. Alliances such as CESCO were considered a good example of ways in which collective expertise could be pooled and a larger platform could be built to highlight the concerns for our communities and the sector we work in.

Furthermore, the interagency working between the voluntary sector and with the HSE and local authorities, particularly in Cork, is an example of what can be achieved when the groundwork is already in place and the will and opportunity is there. Particular mention was made on the day to work of the HSE Social Inclusion Services and Cork/Kerry Community Healthcare for their work and support of communities and the voluntary sector throughout the pandemic and the difference it made to the experiences of many marginalised communities. It was felt important to maintain and build even further on these ways of working to ensure greater progress on issues of inequality as highlighted throughout the morning.

What next for CESCA?

Following our Equality Day, we plan on building on the conversations we had on the morning, particularly around ways of supporting our communities to have a voice and be involved in decision making processes either through models of participatory democracy or through community development.

We also are keen to consider our role in raising awareness of the sustainability of the community and voluntary sector and of progressing social dialogue even further in Cork City.

We are also aware that there was also a focus on the day from speakers and in the questions from attendees on the vital link of housing and health to the inequalities people are facing. We will explore ways of working collaboratively on these issues that are a common concern for so many of the people we support.

We hope to update you on the progress we have made at our next Equality Day in December 2021 when hopefully we will once again have the opportunity to come together in person on the equality and social justice issues of importance in 2021.

CESCA is made up of:

