

**Community Work in Ireland Today**  
**IASW Workshop**  
**24<sup>th</sup> April 2010**

**What is Community Work?**

“Promoting positive change in society in favour of those who benefit least from national and global, social and economic developments... (it) seeks to challenge the causes of poverty and disadvantage and to offer new opportunities for those lacking choice, power and resources”

(CDP-Dept Community, Rural and Gaeltacht)

“The long term process whereby people who are marginalised or living in poverty work together to identify their needs, create change, exert more influence in the decisions which affect their lives and work to improve the quality of their lives, the communities in which they live, and the societies of which they are a part”

(Combat Poverty Agency)

“..a developmental activity composed of both a task and a process. The task is the achievement of social change linked to equality and social justice, and the process is the application of the principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision making in a structured and coordinated way”

(Pobal)

**Is it Social Work?**

Community work has long been viewed as an approach to Social Work from as early as the late nineteenth century in the UK. In the late 1960s and during the 1970s Community Work was a popular way of working and in the UK government launched a Community Development Project as an attempt to combat poverty and deprivation through holistic and preventative work. In Ireland Community Work posts were in place across the country as part of Community Care teams.

Community Work has not been confined to Social Work and many Community Workers in Ireland are currently working in Community Work posts- mix of paid and voluntary work with a range of training backgrounds.

## Values

### *Traditional Values*

Individualisation  
Purposeful expression of feelings  
Confidentiality  
Client Self Determination  
Non Judgementalism  
Acceptance

Biestek 1961

### *New/ Radical Values*

Consumerism  
Empowerment  
Participation  
Partnership  
User involvement

Allen 1988, Adams 1990, Marsh and Fisher 1992

### *Values of Community Work*

Collective Action  
Empowerment  
Social Justice  
Equality and Anti-Discrimination  
Participation  
Integrity  
Competence

‘Towards Standards for Community Work’ (2009)

### **The Value of Collective Action**

*Collective action* is based on working with and supporting *groups* of people. It enables them to develop knowledge, skills and confidence so that they can develop an analysis, identify priority needs and issues and address these through collective action. (Towards Standards for Community Work (2009: 22)

This value is central to Community Work where there is the opportunity to work with groups and an emphasis on the benefits of working at this collective level.

The emphasis particularly in Social Work Casework in general is to work with individuals or families as separate entities, for the most part, to their wider communities. Social Workers face large caseloads, complex cases, high levels of paperwork and pressure to produce outcomes and close cases. However Social Workers are aware of the wider societal and community issues and needs impacting on their work continue to recognise the power and importance of group work and community supports and where possible seek to make change at a broader level.

## **The Role of the Community Worker on a Children and Families Team**

In Dublin South West there is a Community Work Team comprised of 2 Community Workers and a Community Work Team Leader. All are Social Work trained. Other Social Work Departments in Dublin have smaller teams, single handed Community Work posts or have no Community Work post as part of their Children and Families Social Work Dept.

### **Community Work Role**

To promote an understanding of the HSE in the local area and encourage dialogue and co-operation between the local community and the HSE

To Liaise with local community and voluntary groups on relevant matters and ensure a flow of information between them and the HSE.

In co-operation with local residents and community organisations, identify issues of concern to the community

In co-operation with local residents and community organisations facilitate/ support the development of strategies, which target people experiencing poverty and social exclusion

To support community groups/ projects to develop funding proposals

To participate in local networks of community, voluntary and statutory organisations and promote strategies which address the general health and wellbeing of local residents

To work with other agencies so as to ensure an integrated and co-ordinated approach to local development

Represent the HSE on appropriate committees/ forums  
Provide monthly reports to TL

Carry out duties as assigned from time to time by the TL

Emphasis on the PROCESS and the TASK. The end *product* is important but the *process* of increasing people's confidence, knowledge, skills or attitudes is equally if not more important.

Challenge in today's climate is how to measure the success achieved through the *process* when the emphasis is on achieving outcomes that are measurable.

CW strives however to measure success and clear annual work plans (team and individual) with aims and indicators of success are useful.

## **Challenges**

- Trust building with Community projects and people due to the agency you are employed by/ perceptions and past experiences with this agency.
- Seen as representing the HSE and therefore having power or influence
- Seen as having resources- i.e. financial
- Community Work not being understood or valued by a department/ agency

### General Challenges:

- Reduced funding for the Community sector
- Closure of CDPs and other projects
- Slow process of Community Work
- Frustration of seeing need and not having remit to meet the need or mechanism to work within

### **Benefits:**

- Addressing the bigger picture! Cuts down on frustrations
- Putting practice experience into action
- Driving change, inputting into policy, getting active
- Grass roots approach- understanding needs of the community, meeting the community where they are at.
- Empowering local people to improve their own communities