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Inclusion and/or Equality

– Anastasia Crickley

Introduction

This short piece, as the title suggests, is concerned to explore the links between inclusion and equality in analysis and action, particularly community development action, to address poverty and exclusion. It is presented acknowledging the extremely difficult times being faced by the country as a whole, and also the way in which these difficulties are being unequally visited on groups already experiencing poverty and inequality. It is also presented at a time when, in spite of major national difficulties, the placing of inclusion and equality, rights, recognition and redistribution matters under the remit of the same Government department, can provide for the first time one overall structural framework for policy-making and practice.

This second edition of the Journal sets out, in the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, to examine the role of community development in addressing poverty. Community work has a key role to

play in supporting communities to actively examine, and try to address, the key causes of their exclusion instead of passively receiving the services set up to alleviate its worst symptoms. The ways in which this work can be done and analysed have been well written about, including through other contributions to this journal. Developing new and innovative responses to poverty and social exclusion – including through EU Poverty programmes and national initiatives - has in turn helped shape modern Irish community work, giving it a clearer sharper focus on working with marginalised groups rather than with the comfortable mainstream.

Communities, however, do not experience poverty and social exclusion in isolation from other forms of oppression. In a more diverse Ireland there is no doubt that the case made over the years by women and by Travellers and their organisations is accurate: poverty and social exclusion in peoples everyday lives are often linked with, and experienced at the same time, as a variety of other inequalities and discriminations. Pervasive inequality and exclusion are frequently integrated in the lived experiences of, for example, women and members of minority ethnic groups but not always integrated in actions to address them.

Using the examples of women and minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, I will now briefly explore some of these issues and the complexities associated with them, examining both single focus work and the need to go beyond it and community programmes, policies and institutions. I will conclude with some pointers for further consideration.

Women

Thanks to the women's movement of the last century and to the ongoing efforts of local and national networks some progress has been made towards integrating women's issues and exposing the gender dimension of poverty. Some progress has also been made towards developing policy responses and other initiatives which link women's poverty with women's inequality. Much of the best work has been informed by the community work approach in local women's groups, national organisations and through targeted initiatives, e.g. with Traveller women. In spite of the progress made, addressing women's poverty can still easily become separated from gender oppression as if the lessons of strife from the women's movement have been forgotten. Then we were reminded that women's liberation could not be achieved without dismantling an oppressive class system which had (and continues to have) the poorest women at the bottom. We were even more starkly reminded that the concerns and rights fought for by white, western, settled, middle class women, while valid and maybe even universal, were and are not the only oppressions, or indeed perhaps the priority concerns of women globally, or of women from minority ethnic groups.

Yet today, for example, the essential and developing focus on participation by women in decision-making and in public life fails mostly to ask fundamental questions regarding participation of which women, for which women and in the interests of which women? More participation by women in decision-making and in public life is important and it can, over time, help create a somewhat more equal climate for all women. I support fully our rights as fifty per cent of the population to occupy proportionally positions of power, while I profoundly disagree with the ways some powerful women have chosen to use them, e.g. Margaret Thatcher.

Prospective women decision-makers, targeted as women for these positions of (some) power in politics and public places, need to be asked to let us know in advance how they will set out to progress women's issues. Otherwise it is both unfair and impossible to blame them for not focusing on and progressing the collective interests of marginalised women later.

At local level also it is women's groups, or groups composed mostly of women, which participate most actively in community projects (although useful emphasis is now being placed on securing the greater involvement of marginalised men). There is little evidence, however, either in national guidelines or local plans of the gender analysis and target-setting required to deal with the persistent deep-seated inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination experienced by women, especially the most marginalised. Annual reports and publications list women's activities and involvements but continue to deal with symptoms rather than causes.

A notable exception in this regard is much of the work with women experiencing violence, which has struggled to uncover causes rooted in power abuse. This work also demonstrates the diversity which exists even when focusing on a single issue. Women from different minority groups may require different supports in dealing with their different experiences of violence, e.g. the spouse of the migrant dependent on her partner's status to stay here.

Single focus

Whether for women or minority or majority ethnic groups, I believe a single focus was, is and will remain essential. Racism has to be named and understood to be addressed; and the invisibility of (some) women's oppression has

helped to perpetuate male domination for millennia. Poverty, social exclusion and class oppression also have to be named and understood to be addressed. The abysmal progress one decade later towards the UN Millennium Development Goals, especially with regard to women, indicates the essential need for continued action on poverty at home and internationally. Transformational progress requires integrated analysis and action in an increasingly global and integrated world. Without this it is likely that progress made in relation to the Millennium Development Goal that refers to mothers mortality rate will remain the one that least (almost no) progress has been made.

Nationally, the work of the Traveller organisations and migrants' rights groups, which focus primarily on Traveller and migrant issues but engage and take action with others to secure a better future for all, including Travellers and migrants, could make some progress.

In a more diverse Ireland, parallel questions to these regarding which women get involved and in whose interests are also relevant in the struggle to secure direct participation in decision-making by old and new minorities. As we know from experience elsewhere, not to mention centuries of the experience of Irish emigrants, merely repeating the class power structures and/or gender perspectives of countries of origin in representational positions here is a recipe for maintaining them and goes very little way towards addressing the discrimination and poverty of marginalised migrants.

Beyond single focus

A single focus, however, cannot fully capture the integrated lived experience already referred to. Nationally, in this Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, a truly

integrated analysis of poverty, exclusion and inequality continues to elude us, rather than an analysis of poverty which includes examples about women or an analysis of racism which deals with poverty as a consequence of racism. Even the brave new initiatives, networks and think-tanks which are making commendable efforts to provide alternative analysis and frameworks for involvement and action struggle to reflect adequately the integrated diversity of both the issues and the transformational actions and organisations required.

Their struggle is no surprise. These, as Fraser and Honneth (2003) point out, are 'two categories which are co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice'. She remind us that 'if recognition's salience is now indisputable, its relation to redistribution remains under theorised'. Her call for a framework integrating what she refers to as 'the two analytically distinct perspectives essential to grasp the imbrication [her word - I understand it to mean "beyond integration"] of class inequality and status hierarchy in contemporary society remains easier said than done'. Recent conferences and public statements and events of the European Year reflect this problem. Moreover, the struggle to reflect the equality dimension adequately in work on poverty was until recently reinforced by the fact that responsibility at Governmental level lay with completely different departments and agencies.

Community responses

Community projects, on the other hand, have had to deal with the reality that no Irish geographical community is either homogeneous or mono-cultural anymore, if they ever were. Encouraging accounts are emerging of community initiatives which include annual events to celebrate the multi-cultural reality of local areas, but which also go well

beyond them to campaigns in support of asylum seekers facing deportation, in solidarity with migrant worker issues, and in solidarity with migrants and minorities including Travellers, on language, health, education, integration and economic issues.

Those involved in the work know only too well that oppression does not automatically make people love other oppressed groups, and they deal daily with the challenges of building solidarity across divides not helped by media accounts of 'spongers' and 'outsiders' taking from 'us'. At national and local levels the idea of the deserving oppressed, which never really went away, again plays a very ugly role. In this regard Travellers and Roma, long since groups against whom individuals and institutions felt they could legitimately discriminate, are particularly vulnerable. This has been very evident in France but continues to be an under-reported reality in Ireland as is borne out in the recent Our Geels, The All-Ireland Traveller Health Status Study. In effect, racism continues to be a major barrier which needs to be consistently named and addressed in community work initiatives, whether members of minority ethnic groups are involved or not.

In a more diverse Ireland, it is essential that integrating initiatives and the empowering processes they represent are nurtured and built on, so that community development does not fall into the same trap it has landed in elsewhere. In this scenario, community work becomes a process with associated projects for white, settled, poor citizens of blanket gender background, while equality and human rights work separately to address the concerns of minorities and migrants, often using the same methods. The two seldom meet and the outcome is increased alienation and lack of contact, solidarity or cohesion between minority and majority.

In addition, the opportunity to build a real civil society movement, focusing not only on citizens but on all who are part of Ireland and are contributing to its future is wasted.

The structure to house an integrated community development response already exists in the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, which has responsibility for rights recognition and redistribution, for poverty, exclusion and inequality issues. On the face of it, the new 'integrated' Local and Community Development Programme could be useful in this regard. This is entirely dependent, however, on the extent to which it actually embraces community development as a means of addressing poverty and inequality, with and for groups experiencing exclusion and discrimination. Community work principles and practices also involve participation, empowerment and autonomous decision-making by groups experiencing the issues, all of which are being progressively distanced from the new programme. Programme structure and restricted budget allocations across the Programme's four goals may well deny the Programme its real capacity, at this very difficult time, to empower communities and groups to be subjects rather than objects in addressing the exclusion and inequality they experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that community development has a key role to play in addressing complex and multiple oppressions of poverty, exclusion and inequality. Local groups and communities, as well as some national initiatives, have already demonstrated that autonomous and empowering processes are effective ways of doing this. It is up to the Minister and Department with responsibility to ensure that such processes, even in these difficult times,

are possible in the future, both as a moral principle and as an economic strategy in support of cohesion. A focus on cohesion, not as currently articulated in the UK to paper over the cracks of community alienation, but as the basis for a sustainable future, could provide us with a key for linking work against exclusion and inequality with rights, including the human rights of women

Single-focus work is essential, and in itself has many dimensions – all women, migrants and Travellers are not the same, and need different responses. Analytical frameworks and critical thinking need to reflect the integrated experience of multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination.

The twin-track approach, which remains evident in spite of efforts to dislodge it, in both analysis and action is a recipe for alienation rather than progress. The traditions, theories, practices and actions which guide both tracks are very hard to bring together, but form an essential element in changing the reality rather than the image and creating conditions for transformation to an economic and socially just future.

Such transformation won't only come about by a fusion of policy and practise on addressing poverty and eliminating discrimination. It also requires a further infusion of rights, firmly moving beyond ideas about what people deserve and what the powerful consider 'fair' to principles of solidarity and participation, focused on entitlements as human beings.

My initial question, therefore, is itself somewhat incomplete. Eliminating poverty and discrimination are inextricably linked not only to each other but also to the policy and practice of rights. Some local projects are already doing this in the north and the south, including those projects that

since 1985 have been working with communities of interest including women and minorities

I commend their approach to doing theory and practice against the dominant flow and look forward to greater understanding and support for their struggles.