

Note of Seminar on the Enabling State

6th October 2014, Clock Tower, Department of Education, Dublin, Ireland



Speakers and organisers of the event: L-R: Rory O'Donnell, Marian Quinn, Bairbre NicAongusa, James Doorley, Orleigh Quinn, Marie Carroll, Sir John Elvidge, Helen Johnston, Alan O'Neill, Anne-Marie McGauran, Jenny Brotchie.

Introduction

The National Economic and Social Council (NES) and Carnegie UK Trust jointly hosted a seminar to discuss the 'Enabling State' concept, in Dublin on 6th October 2014. The purpose of the discussion was to explore how to move towards new ways of delivering public services, with greater inputs from communities. A range of government and civil society people attended, providing views from both perspectives on the route to an enabling state.



The concept of the enabling state has emerged from the work of the Carnegie UK Trust, where they have observed that traditional models of public service delivery are unable to solve today’s complex social problems. In this context they are engendering support for an enabling state, which is a more responsive and engaged type of state, giving citizens and communities more control.

Rory O’Donnell, Director of NESc, opened the seminar. He reminded the 45 delegates in attendance of NESc’s work in this field: on social partnership; on the developmental welfare state; on standards in human services; and most recently on public participation in wind energy initiatives. A common theme in this work was the role of a vibrant community and voluntary sector, but now it was timely to look at the role of the State, the ‘centre’, and how it could be more supportive.

Dr O’Donnell suggested that now was a good time to have this debate in the aftermath of the economic crash. The crash had led to a period of retrenchment, resulting in greater centralisation and control by the state. There had been reform in the area of service provision, but also reform of the policy process, with a greater emphasis on governance, monitoring and reporting processes, and on ‘open government’. At local level there was an ongoing reform of local government, including the establishment of Policy Participation Networks (PPN).

He concluded by noting that the degree of analysis on the role of the state was limited in Ireland.

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An Overview of an Enabling State

Sir John Elvidge, former Permanent Secretary to the Scottish Government, provided an overview of an enabling state, (you can access the Carnegie UK Trust Enabling State research including the final report ‘[A Route Map to an Enabling State](#)’ written by Sir John Elvidge [here](#) . He argued that over the last 60 years the state had been engaging in the lives of citizens in a ‘top down’ way, where the power and authority was held by the state. The evidence suggested, however, that this model has not worked particularly well in improving the lives of citizens, especially those who are most disadvantaged. An alternative model would be one where the state would ‘ask permission’ to enter the lives of citizens and support them; in other words the power and authority would lie with citizens. He suggested that in an enabling state we would see more of this alternative model.

From the perspective of government he proposed that government should subordinate itself more, be less controlling and more enabling. In the words of Bob Dylan ‘please get out of the road, if you can’t lend a hand’, in other words, find non-controlling ways of lending a hand.

Sir John referred to examples of where local communities were taking control of their own lives, but the difficulty was in making this ‘scaleable’, i.e. how to move from spontaneous events to make these initiatives more sustainable.

The third sector plays a significant role in the emerging enabling state paradigm but to what extent are our charities able to grasp this opportunity? A narrow focus on volunteering fails to pick up on the large amount of informal activity that supports individuals, families and communities. In contrast, at the other end of the scale, many large charities have become delivery arms for public services, potentially reducing their ability to innovate and act independently of the state.

Sir John saw three challenges: first, where the voluntary and community sector positions itself as an alternative service provider it can be seen as an agent of the state and thus lose some of its trust with disadvantaged communities; second, there is no fundamental change in the model of public service delivery when the voluntary sector simply takes on the state’s role; and thirdly, in advocacy organisations there is the danger that the voice becomes the voice of the organisation itself rather than the voices of the individuals, families and communities they represent.

The challenge for both the voluntary and community sector, and the state, is to respect the diversity of community voices.

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Respondents

Orlaigh Quinn, Programme Director of the Reform and Delivery Office at the Department of Public Sector and Reform, highlighted the number of funded groups in Ireland, stating that there were 12,000 groups funded by the state by 600 different government departments and agencies. She felt that while this was a positive contribution there was not always transparency, accountability or good governance. With this number of groups she also felt that it was difficult for government officials to deal with their demands.

Orlaigh's key point was that we should work together better, collectively. An aspect of this was the need to share the learning from various projects and there was now a network established to try to do this. She argued that there has been no shortage of willingness or finances but a shortage of collaborative programmes. This was a pre-requisite for sustainable models. She also commented on the importance of considering suitable exit strategies.

Marian Quinn, CEO of West Tallaght Child Development Initiative, stressed the importance of building an evidence base, along with identification of need and a focus on outcomes. She felt that many government departments and agencies did not understand this approach and were still asking for information on inputs and outputs, rather than what is being changed. She also thought that NGOs were required to provide excessive amounts of monitoring information. While there were poor governance structures in a small number of NGOs this was the exception rather than the rule.



Marian's key point was that we know what works from the evidence we have amassed in Ireland, but we are reluctant to accept this evidence and look instead to examples and experts from overseas. Marian also emphasised the need to work collaboratively, across government departments at policy level, as well as at community level.

Bairbre NicAongusa, Assistant Secretary at the Department of Environment (and formerly in the Department of Health), spoke of her experience in the Office of the Minister for Children, which spanned more than one government department, with the objective of getting departments to work together on children's issues. During her time in the Department of Health she supported the service user movement which promoted self advocacy. It was about giving service users choice and control, in other words, the state was 'getting out of the way'. This was not easy as traditionally both the state and the voluntary sector have been marked by a 'benign paternalism', resulting in many people being institutionalised.

One of Bairbre's key points related to the work of the Genio organisation which facilitates community and voluntary organisations to try new approaches in moving people out of institutions into the community. This work is grounded in values which allow people with disabilities to have a level of choice about how they live their lives.

Bairbre also talked about the importance of dialogue – between the voluntary /community sector and the state, as well as dialogue with elected representatives. People are often resistant to change – they are vested in keeping services the way they are or in keeping their organisation going. To bring about the required changes there is a need for dialogue and to put values, rather than roles, centre stage. Bairbre noted that more money is often seen as the key to change but pointed out that even in times when more money was available for public services things did not change radically.

James Doorley, the Assistant Director at the National Youth Council of Ireland, spoke of the strengths of the volunteering and active citizenship in Ireland, where Ireland scores highly in the European league tables. He asked how we can build on these strengths and how we can create the structures and culture to become a 'learning state'?

James referred to the 'enabling state' step of 'getting out of the way' and suggested that this should take a 'cook book' approach rather than a neoliberal free market approach. In other words, the state could provide the recipes but let people /communities decide what to cook. He gave 'The Gathering' as an example of how this approach had been successful.

James also highlighted that there were few examples of community ownership in Ireland at present despite our history of co-operatives, citing the credit union movement as one example. The demise of community ownership has resulted in a lack of public space which



is important for social interaction and well-being, giving the example of the closure of local post offices in rural areas.

James concluded by reference to the Scottish National Performance Framework and the need for ‘joined up’ government. He felt that ‘joined up’ government did not work in Ireland because organisations have to be accountable to their own organisation’s CEO or Minister, which runs counter to collaboration. He suggested that in Ireland we need a national outcomes approach shaped by well-being and where resources would be shared in pursuit of this common goal.

Alan O’Neill, CEO of the Men’s Development Network, outlined the development of the Men’s Development Network (MDN). Alan spoke of engaging with men and the process of developing the first National Men’s Health Policy in the world and of its action plan which allows for implementation at all levels, including the community level.

Alan spoke about the combination of factors which lead to this development - identifying an innovator in the state’s health system, engagement by the innovator with the MDN as a key NGO, and support from an academic to assist in the development of the policy and the action plan.

Reflecting on the key elements of this model he felt it was enabling in that it supported change and had a beneficial impact on men’s relationships, on their families, their communities and on society. Government funding was central to this development and through this support a network of national representatives has now been formed. The work involves men across the social and economic spectrum and they work at local, regional and national levels. The focus overall is very much on men’s well-being.

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Discussion facilitated by Marie Carroll

A number of issues emerged in the discussion facilitated by Marie Carroll, former CEO of Southside Partnership. These are summarised as follows.

The Vision and Values of an Enabling State in Ireland

The underlying values of an enabling state were thought to be important. A key question was ‘what kind of Ireland do we want to live in?’ There was frequent reference to the need for a public vision for Ireland, an over-arching well-being framework which listed desirable national outcomes. Some of the values proposed included a focus on the common good, public participation, solidarity and equal citizenship.

Measurement

A related issue was measurement with a number of people referencing *Scotland Performs*, the Scottish National Performance Framework which takes a well-being approach to promoting social progress. The introduction of this framework and the concurrent abolition of central government departments along with a new more flexible relationship between national and local government – founded on Single Outcome Agreements – has been instrumental in the process of change in the public service in Scotland, resulting in a public service more oriented towards prevention, with ‘joined up’ service delivery and a stronger focus on outcomes. Participants also referred to the use of evidence and a focus on measuring progress towards the desired outcomes. A point was also made that we tend to always ‘evaluate backwards’ and that there is a need to look forward too.

The Autonomy-Accountability Dilemma

A major point in the discussion was *how to achieve higher levels of autonomy at the local level along with good governance and accountability*. There was a range of views on this issue. Some felt that the current governance and bureaucratic requirements at community level were very onerous and constrained innovation and creativity, suggesting instead stronger governance structures at higher levels, freeing up local organisations to focus on ‘activities’ rather than ‘accounting’. It was also suggested that there was a need to design levers that take into account values, purpose and accountability, with a focus on outcomes rather than roles.

The issues of *power and trust* were raised in a number of guises. Many people felt that since the economic crash the power in the system had become more centralised with respect to budgets and staffing, in particular. So much so, that there was now a lack of trust between the state and the community and voluntary sector. It was felt that this view was reinforced by a greater reliance on the private sector to deliver some services, epitomised through a tendering model now being employed to engage service providers.

A related concern was a *tension between service delivery and advocacy*. Many local community and voluntary groups wanted to advocate for change and not all were service deliverers, yet many felt that the state was uncomfortable with advocacy groups. There were also differing opinions on the range and diversity of groups. Some participants were of the view that diversity and fragmentation of groups was healthy as groups emerged relating to issues which affected them. Others felt that there were too many groups and there needed to be greater collaboration to maximise efficiencies, e.g. through shared services and to avoid duplication and overlap. On this theme the point was made that collaboration is not easy and that we cannot presuppose that it will happen – there has to be enablers to support it. An insight was that things can best be achieved when no-one wants to take the credit.

Challenge of Mainstreaming

A number of participants spoke of the challenge of mainstreaming the learning from pilot projects. There were a number of aspects to this, including sharing the learning and how to convince the state to support work which was making a difference. The role of middle management was also identified as being central in transferring new practices. This work required a particular skill set of coaching and mentoring to support front line staff to change practices and may require training for middle management. A related concern to mainstreaming was how to stop supporting projects which were not making a difference or achieving their desired outcomes.



Positive Steps for Change

A number of examples of positive steps for change were suggested, two in particular: the Children's Services Committees and the Local Community Development Committees being established in local authorities.

The Children's Services Committees were set up about seven and a half years ago to enable provision of integrated child and family services. The idea was that they would have shared values and would work towards shared services across a number of service areas. Yet, their operation in practice had not met initial expectations as many of the Committees lacked clarity about their role and their mandate. It was felt by a number of participants that this model had potential but that cross-agency work needs to be supported, for example, through appropriate funding mechanisms, reporting lines and performance assessment systems. A point was made that the learning from these committees would be relevant for the Local Community Development Committees.

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are being set up by the local authorities to provide services at local community level. These committees are drawing up six year economic and community plans, with a remit to co-ordinate local and community development activity. The Committee itself contains elected representatives, statutory representatives, private sector members and community and voluntary sector representatives. The community and voluntary representatives are being selected through Public Participation Networks comprising representatives from environmental, social inclusion and community 'colleges'. While, historically, it was suggested that local authorities did not fully recognise the role of the community and voluntary sector this new structure has the potential to embed their participation. It was proposed that a shared funding mechanism or small grants programme could enable local community development



in local authorities. An example was provided where Kerry County Council is using a proportion of the Property Tax collected to establish a community fund.

Other Issues

A number of other issues were raised, which are briefly noted here.

The role of elected representatives was discussed. It was argued that they could be a central part of an enabling state model but that a critical feature was the need to take decisions which were informed by the available evidence.

Understanding of community was raised and it was contended that communities exist at a whole range of levels and that this should not be a constraining factor. This diversity was seen as a strength in seeking a range of creative and innovative solutions to problems.

The importance of public spaces was reiterated. Public buildings and spaces were important as both meeting places for community activities and for local social interaction.

Communication was seen as important in engaging with local communities. Multi-channels of communication were required to engage with a range of audiences and the role of social media in linking with young people was noted.

A concluding point was made that more value can be obtained from *seeking to understand policy failure* than just documenting policy delivery.

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Closing remarks

In closing remarks **Rory O'Donnell**, Director of NESC, emphasised the importance of the discussion and having the space to debate the issues in an informed way. He highlighted a number of themes which kept recurring - transparency, accountability and governance – in both the state and the community and voluntary sector. He noted the ongoing tension about what constituted 'evidence', from randomised controlled trials to the voice of the citizen. Dr O'Donnell concluded by putting forward the proposition that diversity is a strength and the need to reduce the number of groups is not necessarily a desirable objective. Instead, an enabling state should be seeking to collaborate with these groups as co-producers, and what was important was the nature of that relationship.

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List of Participants

Maura Adshead	University of Limerick
Inez Bailey	NALA
John Breen	Kerry County Council
Jenny Brotchie	Carnegie UK Trust
Lillian Buchanan	Disability Federation
Niall Byrne	HIQA
Marie Carroll	Facilitator
Theresa Carter	LEAF
Brian Carty	Irish Local Development Network
Brian Cawley	IPA
Ivan Cooper	The Wheel
Malachy Corcoran	Department of Health
Mary Cregg	Department of Education and Skills
Kevin Daly	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
Eileen Davey	Department of Environment, Community and Local Government
James Doorley	National Youth Council of Ireland
Eileen Fitzgerald	Citizens Information Board
John Elvidge	Former Permanent Secretary to the Scottish Government
Michael Ewing	Irish Environmental Network
Susan Fleming	Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources
Michael Goodwin	Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources
Sean Healy	Social Justice Ireland
Aoife Kelly	NCCA
Paul Kelly	Department of Social Protection, Social Inclusion Division
Liz Kerrins	Society of St Vincent de Paul
Joe Larragy	Maynooth University
Dermot Leavy	Westmeath Community Development & County Childcare Committee
Joan Martin	Louth County Council
Sean McLaughlin	Department of Environment
Seamus Mulconry	Philanthropy Ireland
Bairbre Nic Aongusa	Department of Environment, Community and Local Government
Diarmaid Ó Corrbuí	Carmichael Centre
Brid O'Brien	INOUE
Caitriona O'Brien	Department of Education and Skills
Fergus O'Ferrell	The Peoples Conversation Towards a New Vision of Citizenship
Gavan O'Leary	Department of Education and Skills
Alan O'Neill	The Men's Development Network
Marian Quinn	West Tallaght Child Development Initiative



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council



Orlaigh Quinn	Department Public Expenditure and Reform
Cormac Shaw	Southside Partnership
Dalton Tattan	Department of Education and Skills
Mervyn Taylor	SAGE
Barry Vaughan	Department of the Taoiseach
Marian Vickers	Northside Partnership