

CAN in this moment in time

This is an edited version of the presentation given by Cecilia Forrestal to the 25th CAN Birthday event at Croke Park Dublin on 25th October 2012

Pauline began this morning by describing Ireland in the late 80's as a time of

"... recession in which inequality deepened in Ireland. Unemployment was 17% nationally, while endemic drug abuse, poverty, housing and health problems, and educational disadvantage were rampant."

We could be forgiven for thinking she was talking about now.

Despite expansion and growth in the economy and indeed in the community sector, the people who live with the interconnected web of inequalities continue to do so. So some things don't change. Something else that has not changed is the fact that CAN remains doggedly true to our belief that this reality is rooted in the denial of rights, in political, cultural and economic structures and not simply in the frailties and inadequacies of individuals. Our core mission of creating the deep systemic change required for a more equal and just society that has the well being of its citizens at its heart remains the same today as it did 25 years ago. Another constant for us is our belief that by building upon and drawing out the inherent leadership qualities of individuals and communities, we begin the process of changing the power relationship between them and the people who make decisions that impact on their lives.

The CAN Model of Working

Our experience over the last 25 years has taught us that there are core processes that can and do deliver change for individuals. In recent times, we have begun to make these core processes more explicit – to separate them out into stages. While there are 7 stages to this model, they don't all happen in a straight line – we do not have a spiral in our logo for nothing and those of you who work with us know, we can be very curly! But by separating them out as we have, we can draw attention to both the **intention** of our interventions as well as **how we do it**.

The foundation of our interventions is based on two principles:



- *Change is not neutral* -Those who lead change initiatives must be deeply connected to the value base of their actions. This connection must go beyond an agreed set of words on paper. It must form the lens through which all our actions are filtered and driven. We need to subject our values to regular scrutiny, reconnecting with and nurturing the sources of value. We must ensure

that what we say is what we do. Understanding that change is not neutral is a key part of leading and driving change. In addition, we need to know the nature of change – how it works in action. We have to draw on many sources of knowledge in order to work at the depth required for real change to happen.



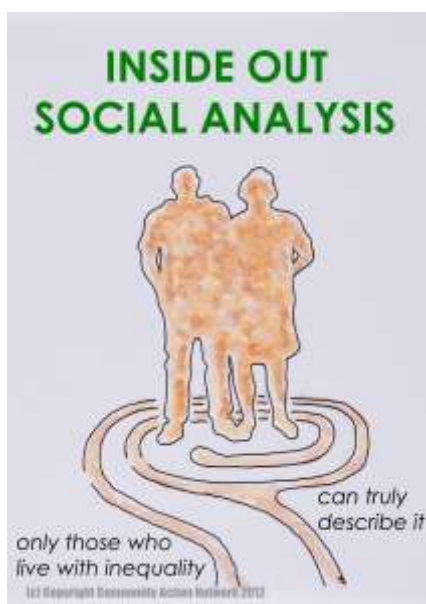
□ *Leadership is key to change* -Leadership is not the preserve of a few gifted individuals. Rather the capacity for leading change is intrinsic in everyone but it often lacks the opportunity to be ignited. This does not mean that all leaders are the same. Each of us has a unique and often different contribution to make and when all contributions are valued, we create equality between us.

These principles are the cornerstones of our model of working. They keep us focused on being change agents. They act as a check list for all our interventions and as a guiding star as we progress with the complexity of the work itself. This understanding allows – in fact, demands-that the ways in which we organize and structure ourselves are in themselves ones of equality. They must reflect the change we wish to see in the world. Without this commitment, we can treat change as something for others to do and are in danger of re-creating the very power dynamic we say we wish to change elsewhere.

With these two principles in place, we put our resources into facilitating four action stages of change:

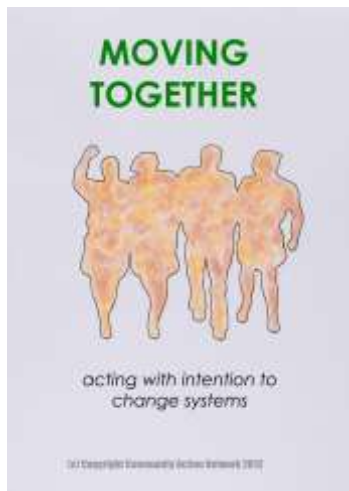
□ *Breaking the silence* – Breaking the silence unlocks the potential of individuals and communities to become powerful actors in their own lives. It is the beginning of empowerment and of grass roots development. We encourage people to tell the story of their lived experience of inequality. When they do so they invariably talk about shame, powerlessness, isolation, failure. When groups of people hear themselves speak out loud about this experience in an atmosphere of respect and trust, they very quickly begin to see the patterns and similarities across the stories and start the move from the individual to the collective. It is a hugely transformative experience as feelings of inadequacy and failure are discarded in favour of anger, frustration and inquiry into the reasons why so many people can have the same experience of inequality. In this way, individuals and communities regain a sense of pride and worth. The

personal experience can now be named and organised around in terms of issues. CAN has developed a range of proven techniques for eliciting the lived experience of those who have been affected by social injustice and inequality.



□ *Inside-out social analysis* -This is a process of questioning systems and structures that underlie inequality. It is called inside out as it starts with the personal and community experience of an issue, moving from that to understanding the interconnected web of cultural, political and economic factors that keep the issue as it is. It is a key enabler of civic engagement, and represents the shift from needs to rights as people begin to understand the power dynamic that governs their lives. CAN has developed tools for questioning the systems, structures and processes that cause and perpetuate inequality from the lived perspective of those affected by it.

□ *Imagining a better future* -This enables communities and individuals to become active participants in the construction of their own future and it gives them the confidence and pride to enlist wider support. Reawakening the belief that change is possible is often challenging to people and communities who have lived with inequality for generations. It is therefore, critically important that those who lead change can themselves hold a powerful vision and help people and communities deal with limiting assumptions about what is possible. CAN has developed strategies for envisioning a better future founded on strong community leadership and capacity building, and focused on creating new structures to reflect change in action.



□ *Moving together* – Moving together and acting with intention to change systems takes many forms of action. This is often a time to introduce new allies. This can be a delicate time as people from different backgrounds and life experiences find ways to create new structures and ways of working together that reflect change in action. Through moving together, they learn the value of linking different communities and building effective partnerships for action across and within issues. CAN has developed strategies for engaging in positive collective action for change and for developing sustainable cross-issue partnerships.

As groups begin to take action, outside forces sometimes seriously resist their challenge. They may

- Withdraw or threaten to withdraw resources and in so doing reduce the capacity of the community to the point it becomes ineffective.
- Co-opt the community group by incorporating the work so deeply into established systems that it is no longer challenging
- Ostracize the group by retrenching so much that any alternative structures or initiatives created become irrelevant to mainstream change

But in our experience, when the groundwork outlined in this model has been given sufficient attention, communities can and do resist the resistance. They do take their power and will not go away. They learn the value of linking in bigger alliances and networks across issues.



The final stage of the CAN Model that I wish to highlight is one that is essential during all stages. It relates to the practice of acting, reflecting and learning. Deep learning keeps us focused, helps us deal with challenges, celebrate achievements, develop new thinking and acting and nourish our spirits.

In our experience, this model of leadership does change lives and build communities. People do assert the right to participate fully as subjects in their own lives, to have their voices heard and their choices respected. They can and do change inequitable, unjust structures, policies, practices and priorities as those of you in the room know only too well.

Applying the CAN Model in this moment in time....

So how should we apply this model into our present time?

We dwell in a time of rapid change, great uncertainty, unpredictability -a time when we have more access to immediate information than ever before and yet live with far greater complexity. The reality of this current context is reflected in the words of Mark Twain

“The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on the subject, and it is probable that if they continue we shall soon know nothing about it at all”

While it is easy to despair about the darkening direction of the world, it is essential that we get in touch with the hope and excitement of change. In the words of Margaret Wheatley

“The old ways are dissolving and the new has not yet shown itself. “

She invites us to fully engage with the complexity of this time and to hold

“The grief of dreams dying with the exhilaration of what now might be

*The impotence and rage of failed ideals
and the power of new aspirations”*

And to be:

“warriors for the human spirit and as such to remain focussed and confident in service to the issues and people we care about, focussed not so much on making a difference as on being a difference”

Like her, we believe that now is a time to welcome questions, uncertainties, paradoxes and dilemmas in a way that frees us up from the tyranny of trying to find the right answers and gives us permission to take what fits and make it our own.

Moving Forward Responding to Requests

So moving forward, aware of the darkness, guided by our model, all the time searching for the “crack that lets the light in”, we will continue to place people who live with inequality at the centre of all our actions when we respond to requests or offer initiatives that we believe will contribute to our change agenda. The requests will be decided upon by you and we hope that our work and yours will continue to be intertwined for many a year to come. Our contributions of community development training, organisation development, variety of participative processes, consultation, strategic planning, team building and all the other work we have always done will continue to be available to you as you need it.

The variety and range of requests have always brought us to a place of deep listening to the issues and patterns that exist within the work itself and across communities and this in turn influences what it is we wish to offer out by way of initiatives

Offering Initiatives Our work in **human rights** is a good example of what offering an initiative looks like in practice. In developing a body of work around the right to housing and the right to health, we are embarking on a new way in which to apply our model of working. In so doing we are laying down human rights standards as a measure of enough for everyone. This is not just about tackling an issue but inviting all of us to consider the kind of society we wish to live in.

When we start to frame issues as rights rather than needs, to hold systems to account for the failure to respect, protect and fulfil these rights, we create the environment where rights holders can take power, leadership and participate as equals within local, national and international arenas. The very public nature of this work illustrates how we seek to stand apart and put pressure **upon** systems to change. This is a new area of work for us and one we wish to do a lot more of.

Less public, but equally important is our other example of taking an initiative that seeks to bring about change from **within** systems i.e. our work in **Dialogue**. The word Dialogue comes from Greek and signifies “a flow of meaning”. It is based on a few beliefs:

- I only see the world from my experience and viewpoint. You do the same. Neither of us have the full picture but we often presume we do and spend a lot of our time defending our viewpoint as if it were the only truth.
- We make assumptions all the time based on this viewpoint, seldom check them out to see if they are accurate and yet whether we are aware of it or not, they guide our actions.

This impacts on our capacity to communicate and build effective relationships – which are the cornerstones of all our work. When we try to communicate, especially where there are differences, we often end up passing each other by, and repeating old battles. We wish to connect, to influence, but quite often we get caught in a web where differences are translated into judgments of who is right and who is wrong and where clashes and conflicts absorb all our energy.

Dialogue offers us an opportunity to stop defending and start inquiring with curiosity into our different experiences and perspectives; to structure conversations in such a way that brings out differences. This allows us to create a much bigger pool of meaning and understanding about the situation we find ourselves in.

We have used dialogue within organisations, between service users and service providers and across multiple stakeholders within community settings.

In all cases, we have seen the power of this way of working to

- Build effective working relationships that are based on more honest communication
- To deepen understanding and learning, especially in situations where there are very different perspectives and priorities
- To stimulate creative thinking and actions
- To provide an oasis of calm in dark situations and to allow everyone to just be until such time as they are ready and able to move on.

We believe this work has much to offer to many of the dilemmas facing us at this time, one example of which is to strive to unlock new thinking and actions to tackle community safety. We acknowledge that for some, the idea of working both within and upon systems is strange but we believe that it is not only possible, but necessary.

There is **another new (or is it an old?) initiative** we would like to offer at this time. In CAN's early days, the first training course in **Leadership** we delivered was affectionately known internally as the "initiative" – it was our first offering into a sector that was asking for leadership development and guidance. As we stand in this moment in time, we see the hunger within fellow activists to stop the busyness, to reflect, to re

energise, to re focus, to revisit old skills and practices, be exposed to the, to generate new knowledge with fellow activists and to move forward leading change, with a clearer sense of purpose and intention. This hunger resonates with that of the 80's and we would like to respond to it by drawing on the learning and approach of our own leadership model.

The Leadership Programme we wish to develop now would also target two other groups i.e. young community activists and Elders. We see the spark of leadership within young community activists and would welcome the opportunity to help nourish this into a strong vibrant flame. The very concept of Eldership in itself changes the value that is placed on aging and older people. We are keenly aware of the untapped leadership elders have to offer to our times and have ideas on how that too can be an integral part of an overall package of developing leadership for a changing Ireland.

A Time of Hope

So, at this moment in our history while we have a strong, determined, passionate sense of purpose we find that it is HOPE that keeps us going in these very uncertain times. For us, today is about a 25th celebration and equally about sending out a strong message of hope to all us to keep the belief that we can bring about change and to keep networking the action. Let us end by remembering the words of Emily Dickinson

HOPE

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers That
perches in the soul And sings the tune
without the words And never stops -at all –*

*And sweetest -in the Gale -is heard And
sore must be the storm That could abash
the little Bird That kept so many warm –*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land And
on the strangest Sea Yet -never -in
Extremity, It asked a crumb -of me.*