



CAN Comment

ISSUE 5

RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY!

On June 24th 2003, a Democracy Commission was established to address the problem of increasingly low turn outs in Irish elections. Also in 2003, large numbers of residents turned out to vote in elections to local community bodies in Dolphin House and Fatima Mansions, two areas associated with voter apathy. These successes were largely as a result of solid community development work in these areas which has gradually strengthened residents' participation.

In this CAN Comment, we argue that wider Irish society can rediscover democracy through learning from the experiences of some of its most marginalised neighbourhoods. At a time when participative processes are being castigated as cumbersome and wasteful of scarce resources, those who practice community development should re-appreciate the value of their work, not just for the marginalised, but for the country as a whole.

In recent years we in CAN have heard community development workers speak with increasing pessimism about their experience. There are more organisations, more programmes, more workers, more training courses, more documents, and more pieces of research. But is Ireland any more a place of equals? There is a sense of stuckness and disillusionment in the community development world. What are we for? Are our best years behind us? Have we lost our edge? Are we settling for a comfortable but meaningless existence? There is a sense that after all the work nothing is substantially changing. Worse, there is a fear that we are actually being subsumed into the establishment and becoming administrators of an oppressive system.

Here is an image. We are clearing a track through a field of briars. We begin enthusiastically, but it is much more difficult than we'd thought. Our tools are poor and blunt, and the undergrowth tough and defiant. Hooks of thorns bury themselves



in our arms, nettles burn our skin and insects rise from the ground and assault our faces. After a time, we pause to look back at our work, only to discover that the briars and brambles have quickly re-colonised the path again. At first glance it looks as if we had never started. We despair. We lose heart and any enthusiasm for further work. Only if we stand back, and look closely, can we discern the track we have cut. Briars, brambles and nettles have all flopped across it, but underneath, at ground level, a very real pathway has been created.

CAN suggests that community development has cut a significant track through some very heavy briars and nettles in recent years. It may have been covered over in all sorts of ways, but it is still there, and can be uncovered. Rediscovering the track we've already cut sets our direction for the future.

What is the track that we have cut? Quite simply, we believe that those involved in community development have begun to create a pathway to meaningful participative democracy in Ireland.

In June of this year, a Democracy Commission was established to investigate the decline in the practice of voting by the Irish electorate. The Democracy Commission is the joint initiative of two think tanks, TASC: think tank for action on social change and Belfast-based Democratic Dialogue. Director of TASC, Paula Clancy explains:

“People might well ask – why a Democracy Commission? The answer is that the democracy we have may not be up to the job. The worry is that it has been reduced to relatively sterile institutions and processes. The danger is that our democracy is becoming, and indeed has always been for many excluded groups, more about form than substance – a game played out by elites and unfortunately too often for elites.”

At the launch of the new body, its chairperson David Begg remarked:

“Democracy is about empowerment. It is about people controlling decisions made in their lives and controlling those who make the decisions on their behalf. Democracy is about equality of respect. We have a situation where whole sections of our society consider our current political system irrelevant to their lives – only half of all under 25-year-olds who could vote actually did so in the last general election, while the rates of participation among people living in poorer communities were reckoned to be even lower.”

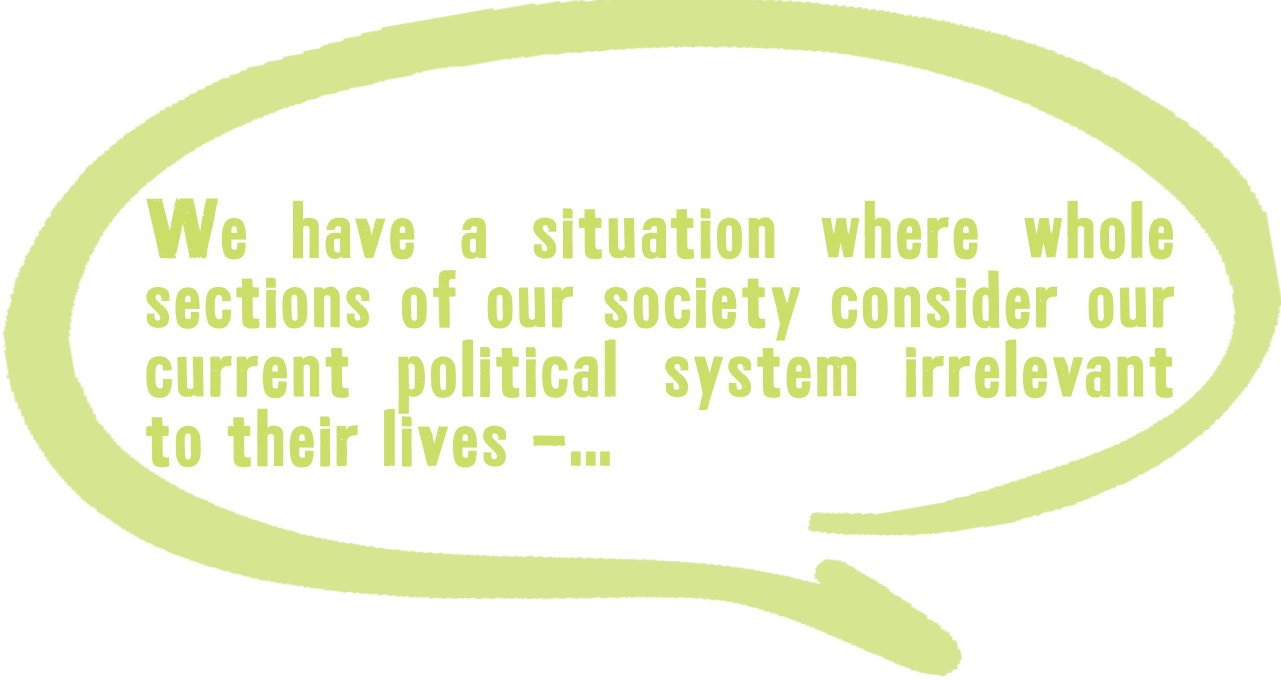
Our traditional democratic model could be described as a “minimum participation democracy”. To function, it needs only the participation of a large minority of its citizens in elections and the reluctance of a majority to take to the streets on a regular basis to protest at how they are governed. Once this minimum is in place, everything else is a bonus. This means that elected representatives, once in power, can themselves or through their designated officers take decisions and have them implemented without the participation of anyone else.

It is as if the track which was cut through the briars of colonisation towards an independent democracy by the founding fathers and mothers of our state is narrowing and becoming overgrown.

Meanwhile, in other places in the field, marginal ones as far as the national franchise is concerned, places like Dublin's Fatima Mansions, St. Michael's Estate or Dolphin House, a new track is being cut.

In the light of the need to increase the density of housing in Dublin and the persistent social problems associated with housing complexes

Democracy is about empowerment.



We have a situation where whole sections of our society consider our current political system irrelevant to their lives –...

in Dublin 8 (articulated over many years by local residents), Dublin City Council embarked on major regeneration projects for Fatima Mansions, St. Michael's Estate and Dolphin House. The regeneration plan for St. Michael's and Fatima, for example, involves the total demolition of the complexes and the building of completely new socially mixed estates to house existing residents and others. The question arises, how would residents participate in the process of regeneration which would so affect their lives? How would they be party to decisions?

Whatever level of participation has been achieved, it is undeniable that the pre-existence of a community development infrastructure in such places was a key factor. Community based organisations were already in place to influence the development of proposals, interpret the Council's plans as best they could, listen to residents' concerns and argue their case. These structures, small, low budget operations such as Fatima Groups United, St. Michael's Family Resource Centre or Dolphin House Community Development Association had grown up in the communities they served and now found themselves facing an immense challenge.

They were being asked to study and understand every detail of complex designs and technical plans. They were being asked to ensure every resident could understand them. They had to fully and accurately articulate the range of responses by residents to the City Council and/or ensure residents could articulate them themselves. They had to create workable mechanisms for negotiating acceptable terms between residents and the Council, and ensure residents' voices could be heard at every step. They had to make themselves ready and able to sustain complete commitment to a long and difficult process. All this in the context of

resources being capped or cut, and pressure to get the project completed while allocated funding remained in place.

In the intense heat of this cauldron a mould for creating a maximum participation democracy is being cast.

CAN has been involved in supporting community organisations and residents in Dublin 8 over many years. Our strategy is to use every opportunity afforded us to enhance the participation of local people in the momentous events occurring in their communities. These opportunities have included:

- * Invitations to conduct consultations with local residents on their views of proposed plans.
- * Invitations to evaluate aspects of the regenerations and how they affect residents.
- * Invitations to facilitate the development of local community structures.
- * Delivery of relevant training to enhance the capacity of local leadership.
- * Working with voluntary and statutory agencies to encourage more participative practices.
- * Our role as Support Agency to local Community Development Support Programmes and Family Resource Centres.

David Wilcox has developed a framework to describe the processes of participation. He calls it "The Levels of Participation". For our purposes here, it is an ideal model to help us understand how the struggle of communities undergoing regeneration in Dublin 8 is cutting a track towards maximum participation democracy. Democracy does not arrive pre-packaged. It evolves through a process of increasing participation of people in the decisions that affect them. Using Wilcox's framework, we will describe the evolution of this process in Dublin 8, as we have witnessed it.

Wilcox introduces his framework as follows. "The key issue is what 'stance' you are taking as someone managing a participation process, or controlling resources." He goes on to suggest five levels – or stances – which offer increasing degrees of ceding control.

1 GIVING INFORMATION

The least you can do is tell people what is planned.

2 CONSULTATION

You offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.

3 DECIDING TOGETHER

You encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best course of action.

4 ACTING TOGETHER

Not only do different interests decide on the best course of action, but they form a partnership to carry it out.

5 SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

You help others do what they want – perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder."

GIVING INFORMATION

In both St. Michael's and Fatima Mansions, the community organisations were presented with a proposal for regeneration. They felt uneasy about the proposals. Fatima Groups United described "a difference in vision" between themselves and the Council. The community organisation's instinct was to slow things down, to reflect, to study and to consult. The Council's instinct was to press on, not to delay and risk the designated funding available during the Celtic Tiger years. In this situation the temptation can be to go for minimal, if any, consultation. Perhaps a meeting with the local residents' association or a questionnaire dropped into every letter-box.

Many arguments can be put to what could be seen as the 'dithering community organisation' at this point. Do they really speak for the community? Wouldn't residents be happier to have brand new homes in six months time rather than go through endless meetings where nobody can agree anything? Why can't you trust the Council? They know what they're doing and they must want to see things improve too. Surely it's much easier to be a landlord when your tenants' interests are satisfied with a decent place to live. If you delay, the funding might not be there in a year's time. How will you explain that to the community?

The community organisations had to work hard to resist this pressure. They sought technical expertise of their own to review the proposals. They organised meetings of residents. They published position documents. Fatima brought out "Eleven Acres, Ten Steps." a brief from the community to the planners, developers and service providers involved with the regeneration. In this document, the chairperson of Fatima Groups United at the time argued:

"The old ways don't work. If Fatima is to be regenerated successfully, it will mean building in a new and innovative structure for meaningful participation for the residents. I know this is the kind of statement that bores decision makers and causes T.V. cameras and radio mikes to be turned off in droves. 'Consultation and participation – well we do that already', most agencies and decision-makers claim. But if there is one major barrier to the regeneration of Fatima, it is the gulf in understanding which exists between the residents on the one hand, and the landlord and service providers on the other. The old ways don't work."

When the first houses were built in St. Michael's and residents saw for themselves the reality of what was being provided, the need for greater community participation in the process became apparent. The units were, in fact, unacceptably small, being below technical specification and they were refusing to move into them.



The old ways don't work

CONSULTATION

It was becoming clear that merely giving the information and ploughing ahead was inadequate. There were calls for the next level in Wilcox's framework – *Consultation*. This was seen as a way of arbitrating between the community organisation's and the Council's perceptions of what residents actually wanted. The fact that the community's wishes were seen by both sides as a key deciding factor was significant. Residents were in effect being given a strong say in what would happen.

CAN was invited to carry out consultations in Fatima and St. Michael's. Under the direction of steering groups comprising of community organisations, residents, the Council and other stakeholders, we were expected to conduct consultations that were independent and comprehensive. But consultations are dangerous things, and can easily be undermined. If participation is the track, then there are many briars and brambles that can quickly overgrow it. Here are a few, in the form of barbed criticisms of consultations, and a summary of our attempts to cut them back.

“Consultation only delays things. People want things to change now, and your consultation process will only put that back. You're putting the whole project at risk because funding available now will not always be available.”

Community organisations are often presented with this argument when they ask for a consultation process. They can sometimes take it to heart, wondering if their insistence on consultation will mean their community will lose out. But it surely makes sense to invest in proper planning and consultation before ploughing millions of euro into something which people will not accept, or which simply repeats the mistakes of the past. Consultations, if managed well, do not actually take very long. In St. Michael's and Fatima it took CAN a matter of a few months. In fact delays are more often caused by the authority's attempts to rush through their plans, only to be forced to start again when they find they will not work.

“You only talk to a certain group of people. You never spoke to me, or my group.”

The only way around this is to speak to a large sample of those whose views are sought, and to give everyone the opportunity if they so wish. We actually spoke to 70% of key holders and to every community and statutory organisation that would talk to us. The list of organisations was drawn up by a monitoring group in each consultation made up of residents, the main on-site community organisation, the Council and other stakeholders. These monitoring groups guided the process, ensuring all angles were covered. Everyone in the community was informed through the on-site community

organisations that the consultation was underway and how they could participate in it. This is hard, slow work, and it takes determination to see it through. But if consultation is to be meaningful, nothing less will do.

“You were biased when you carried out this consultation. You looked for a certain response and you got it.”

This charge can totally undermine a consultation. We followed a simple two part process. We presented the proposal for regeneration which the Council was making and we simply recorded people's comments on it. The presentation of the proposal was meticulously planned and agreed with the monitoring group as was the schedule of questions used to elicit the response.

“When you get a bunch of people together and ask them what they think, they'll complain. People will always be negative.”

It can be true that people who do not often have the experience of being listened to can take the opportunity to vent their frustrations. There needs to be some allowance made for this, but it is unfair to make such a sweeping judgement about people. Most people are fair and reasonable, and their views deserve to be respected. We spoke to a lot of people, most of them in the privacy of their own homes where people are free to speak their mind. Public meetings, especially among residents were held often and in different locations, so they tended to have small numbers where everyone could speak.

“People are responding out of ignorance. They'll say things without appreciating the full facts and that'll go unchallenged.”

We developed a simple but comprehensive presentation using models and posters to present the plans. Council officers were on hand to explain details if needed. But yes, people will sometimes express concerns that may appear groundless or make criticisms that appear unfair. But this response is information too. It is important to know about people's gaps in understanding.

“Consultations are a waste of time. you ask people what they think, and then you do what you like.”

Ouch! That one really cut. Are we colluding in a window-dressing exercise that is going to make no difference to the final outcome? Those undertaking a consultation have a responsibility to ensure, in so far as they can, that this will not be the case. They must have an eye to how the consultation phase of participation will lead to the next phase, deciding together.

DECIDING TOGETHER

During the consultations the question arose, “What happens if there are serious differences emerging between the residents and the Council over this plan? How will they be negotiated?” Nobody suggested it was alright for the Council to merely take on board the consultation and decide on what it thought was best. Everyone realised that more hacking was required. We had to extend the track deeper into the field. The “new and innovative structure for meaningful participation for the residents”, identified as a need in *Eleven Acres-Ten Steps*, was asking to be born.

So we find ourselves confronted with the challenge of *Deciding Together*, Wilcox's next level in his framework for participation. In both communities, an attempt was made to create a mechanism for getting stakeholders (local residents, neighbouring residents, the Council, other statutory agencies and community groups) together in the right proportions, under independent chairs, to hammer out a deal.

Marie Fitzduff has written a useful workbook on conflict in which she identifies different types of power. In the *Deciding Together* dynamic, people are bringing their power to the table. They are trying to use the power to which they have most access to best effect. And they are trying to strengthen themselves in relation to the kinds of power they lack. Some of the types of power Fitzduff identifies include:

Representative power, whereby people can influence on the basis of a popular mandate.

Elected local Councillors bring this, and it is helpful to the city Council officials too, who work on behalf of elected representatives. Community organisations which claim to be a voice of the people can also play this card. But both have gaps in their representative power. Local Councillors were not really elected by residents of the flats complexes. Only six individuals from Fatima Mansions actually voted in the previous election. Community organisations' claims to representative power could be challenged too, if the representation was on the basis of who might happen to volunteer to be on the committee at a community meeting held three years previously.

Moral power, where people can influence on the basis of the justice of their cause.

Community residents' groups are strong here. They, more than any others will be affected by regeneration, so surely they should have the biggest say? Also, communities with a long history of neglect deserve something better for their futures. But the Council can also use moral power. There is a housing crisis in the city. The need to build more houses is urgent and look at all the spare land around here!

Legal or contractual power, where people can influence on the basis of a prior agreement.

There is more security for community organisations in tighter procedures for agreeing terms of reference, recording decisions, keeping minutes of meetings and having statutory officials put commitments in writing. They would argue that looser arrangements, and "trust us, it'll be fine" arrangements suit the statutory agencies more because they allow them more 'wiggle room'. The Council can use legal power, for example to insist on higher housing density as the law requires a minimum number of units to an acre.

In a crude sense, Deciding Together is about parties trying to trump each other's power with their own. When a local authority, backed up by a team of architects presents a highly technical plan to residents for their consideration, the community representatives can argue: "Our community is made up of residents who have not had the educational opportunities you have had. We need resources to get our own independent technical advice on these plans." But the council can respond: "That's fine, but at the end of the day the law clearly states that we can't reduce the housing density any more"

This translates as "My moral power beats your technical power." "Yes but my legal power beats your moral power!"

Participation in the Deciding Together stage means having access to the table, directly or indirectly, and a fair chance in the power struggle. To achieve this, residents needed to ensure the following are in place.

- * A workable mechanism for negotiations, where their equality at the table was underwritten by cast iron guarantees.
- * A transparent system of democratic representation for all residents. (Residents elections were held in Fatima this year with 11 candidates from which six were elected by a 46% turn out. This compares to just six individuals voting in the previous by- election.)
- * Capacity to devote large amounts of time and energy to the process over a long period.
- * A residents' participation strategy to allow sustained input and involvement by all residents who wish it, into the process.
- * Access to independent and trustworthy technical support and expertise regarding the subjects under negotiation.

ACTING TOGETHER

As we cut away at our path, we come to the *Acting Together* level in the framework. When at the *Deciding Together* level, parties collaborate to take the decisions, but do not share the responsibility for carrying the decisions through. Usually one party is charged with carrying out the agreement, usually the one with statutory responsibility. However, in the context of regeneration, there were examples of a shared responsibility for implementing agreements. In Fatima, once the process of how to temporarily arrange for residents to be accommodated while their old homes were being demolished (Transition) was decided, everyone involved in making the decision was responsible for making sure it happened as agreed. Residents who sat on the decision-making board went about informing their neighbours about what was happening and supporting them in the moving. It was not left to the Council staff.

Doing this involved risk for these residents. They were implementing a plan alongside Dublin City Council, acting together with them, almost as colleagues. They had to stand over the plan and take responsibility for it. They had to try to make it work, sometimes in face of criticism from their own neighbours.

The level of *Acting Together* that will evolve remains to be seen. But in so far as they have gone, these communities have provided us with the vision of local power structures feeding off participative democracy processes, where stakeholders act together to take real decisions for local areas.

The deeper into the field we go, the thicker and more obstinate the briars!

SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

The next stage in Wilcox's framework, *Supporting Independent Community Initiatives*, where local autonomous structures are established with a strong identity and the authority to oversee the development of the community, seems a long way off. Such structures would be facilitated and resourced by central government, but allowed get on with running their affairs. In September 2003 the Department of the Environment rejected the plan for the regeneration of St. Michael's which had been hammered out by the Task Force over two years. The Task Force is the *Deciding Together* mechanism in St. Michael's. This decision by central government illustrates that we are a long way from the *Supporting Independent Community Initiatives* position. The deeper into the field we go, the thicker and more obstinate the briars!

From our experience of places like the flat complexes in Dublin 8, we can envision some key elements of maximum participation democracy structures.

they would grow organically.

There is always a temptation to impose a blue-printed structure everywhere and all at once. This inevitably leads to frustration and resentment and is perhaps one of the central flaws in initiatives such as RAPID. Why can democratic structures not be facilitated to evolve from where things are? In one place, a Task Force may be the seed, in another, a residents' association. Gradually, evolving structures could be ceded more decision making responsibility, as they show their capacity to exercise it.

they would be representative.

The local power structures would include the key stakeholders for that community.

they would feed from maximum participation democracy processes.

A resourced community infrastructure would be working to develop and sustain residents' participation in community life. This would include local elections, but also festivals, community groups, learning programmes, local action groups, sports and leisure groups and all the regular community development work that gives life to democracy. This activity would nourish any power structure from below.

they would have mechanisms to ensure independence and equality of participation.

Independent chairing, legal incorporation, trust development processes, common ownership of projects, property and staff, are all mechanisms to strengthen this as partnership power structure, where community equality is assured.



This is not intended as a blueprint for brave new democratic structures. It is merely indicating what the stories of places like those in Dublin 8 appear to point to. It remains to be seen how effectively power structures and processes to engender community participation will take root in these communities. But it should be remembered that it is not the perfect structure, nor the well planned programme that will deliver maximum participation democracy, but a genuine yearning for it by everyone.

Engendering this yearning requires leadership, a leadership born of a conviction that participation deserves a central place in the life of society. Such a spirit of leadership can be seen in the democracy movement in Burma.

CAN is currently working with the Burmese Democracy Movement in exile. Burma is under military rule. The last time the franchise was exercised was in 1989 when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) gained 82% of the vote. The military, having expected the vote to be splintered along tribal lines, were amazed at this level of support and responded by arresting the NLD leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi and brutally repressing the democracy movement. One million Burmese are now displaced to Thailand, about 100,000 political refugees among them. They continue to organise and work for the day democracy is restored.

CAN were invited to lead some training in leadership skills with grassroots leaders based in Thailand. We had the privilege of working with around 40 leaders from as many as ten ethnic

backgrounds, most of them young people under the age of thirty. Their complete dedication to their cause, and their courage in struggling against enormous odds brought home to us how much we in Ireland take the right to vote for granted.

Despite this fundamental commitment to democracy, our participants had little or no experience of a learning workshop which drew on their own experience as their main source of learning. The idea that the tutors did not have the answers to their problems, but only some skills to facilitate their search for answers, was astounding to them. After initial surprise, and some resistance, our groups began to enter fully into the process, immersing themselves in small group work, team exercises, reflections and planning. Quieter people, younger people and women began to emerge more and more into the full life of the group. These young leaders, dedicating their lives to democratic freedom, were seeing democracy being created, through participation, among them.

But it is also astounding for them to hear that in Ireland, only around 50% of people turned out in our last national vote (Nice Referendum), and that in the last general election less than two thirds of people voted. Democracy we may have, a mechanism for choosing our leaders that they would die for, but a democracy with minimum participation, where many people don't vote.

Interestingly, while the concept of democracy was uppermost in their minds and hearts, the concept of participation at all levels of community and organisation was new to many. One of our

participants, Tin Tin Nyo, commented, "Recently, trainers from CAN came to introduce us to participatory methods of learning. Our Burmese people are used to a top-down teacher-knows-best type of learning. But we all liked the participatory method. People can give their own perspectives and analysis of the situation. In this method, the teacher never says their idea is the best, but facilitates participants to discover their own truth. I would like to see all schools in Burma and the refugee camps develop participatory methodologies. This would build a movement where people could think for themselves and be more confident to participate in the movement."

Participation is the soul of democracy, and it is in the world of community development that the practice of participation is most in evidence. It is slow, painful work, but there are no easy short cuts to a meaningful democracy.

CAN wishes to encourage those engaged in community development to appreciate the significance of this work. This is not just for the communities in which it takes place, but for the country as a whole. We also wish to alert those who are concerned about the decline in the practice of democracy in Ireland to this path-clearing process. This has been happening in areas long associated with alienation from the mainstream. The destination, ultimately, is real, participative democracy.

by peter dorman

Peter is a member of staff at CAN



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CAN

Community Action Network Ltd



CAN is a small not-for-profit organisation working for greater equality and justice in Ireland through community development. Since 1994, CAN has tried to raise debate on issues of current relevance and importance to community groups through a series of occasional papers called CAN Comment.

CAN would like to see further debate on the issues raised in this paper and welcomes your comments and views.