



**ENABLING INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES:
ACHIEVEMENTS,
CHALLENGES AND
FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

A Report on the Pobal Regional Seminars 2017/2018

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Introduction

This document provides an overview of the key themes and messages that emerged from a series of Pobal organised seminars with community stakeholders in regional settings that took place between November 2017 and April 2018. The 5 seminars, attended by 377 individuals from 247 organisations, provided an opportunity for Pobal to engage directly with community stakeholders across a range of programmes and provided a reflective space to identify what is working well and not so well in the context of creating inclusive communities, while allowing for the identification of key priorities that would assist in local and regional efforts to achieve same. A number of areas of achievement and challenge were identified at the seminars, along with some key messages from participants that are captured below.

Background Context

In 2016, Pobal hosted a major conference at Dublin City University on the theme of '*Creating an Inclusive Labour Market*'. The event brought together stakeholders from the statutory, community and private sectors, as well as politicians and academics, to discuss the challenges and barriers that exist in the context of creating a more inclusive labour market for disadvantaged groups. The conference highlighted the contribution of the community and voluntary sector in creating an inclusive labour market, while also identifying opportunities for greater collaboration between stakeholders to further this objective.

Building on the success of the 2016 conference, and in light of Pobal's 25th anniversary in 2017, it was decided to host a series of regional seminars on the theme of '*enabling inclusive communities: achievements, challenges, future directions*' in late 2017 and early 2018 to further explore the current context and experience of the community and voluntary sector and other stakeholders in promoting social inclusion and equality.

In organising the seminars, Pobal sought to engage directly with stakeholders in community venues around the country to reflect on the current environment for community and local development work. In recent years Pobal has mostly engaged

with community, voluntary and not-for-profit organisations in the context of a number of particular funding programmes. These seminars provided an opportunity to step outside the specific programme context and look at the bigger picture as it relates to social inclusion and equality work. The seminars acknowledged achievements and positive developments, and enabled constructive analysis to identify what changes would assist in ensuring the needs of disadvantaged groups and communities are effectively addressed in the future.

Format and Agenda of Seminars

Five seminars took place in various community settings as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Pobal Regional Seminars Dates, Venues and Attendance

Date	Venue	Total Attendees	Total Orgs Represented
6 th Dec 2017	Croom Civic Centre, Croom, Co. Limerick	86	53
7 th Feb 2018	Kilmovee Community Centre, Co. Mayo	82	53
9 th March 2018	F2 Centre, Rialto, Dublin	83	56
15 th March 2018	Iontas Centre Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan	64	41
20 th April 2018	Visual Centre, Carlow Town.	62	44
Total		377	247

All seminars followed a similar format, with three speakers followed by a questions and answers session, round table and panel discussions.

Each seminar opened with a contribution from a member of the Pobal senior management team about Pobal's evolving role over the past 25 years, highlighting the changing social, economic and public administration context during this time.

The second input varied between seminars and included presentations from PAUL Partnership, Roscommon Leader Partnership Company, Kilkenny County Council, Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed and the National Economic and Social Council, all of whom offered a perspective from their vantage point on the theme of the seminar with a firm focus on the current context in 2018.

The third speaker, Dr. Chris McInerney of the Department of Public Administration and Politics in the University of Limerick, reflected on the conference theme from a wider national perspective, with a focus on developing a deeper understanding of the narratives that shape our understanding of disadvantage and social exclusion, and how public policy needs to respond to current challenges and opportunities that exist in that environment.

The roundtable discussions that followed a questions and answers session, provided an opportunity for participants to discuss three key questions:

- What is working well in the context of addressing social exclusion?
- What is not working well in the context of addressing social exclusion?
- What needs to be improved/ developed?

Key Themes and Messages from the Seminars

A wide range of points, were discussed during the roundtable discussions and in the subsequent engagement between participants and the panel of speakers. From an analysis of the points raised at the seminars, it is possible to identify three key themes, and related messages from seminars attendees.

Theme # 1: Valuing and supporting the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector

A recurring theme throughout all seminars was the importance of the State valuing and supporting the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector.

This is reflected in the following key messages:

- **Community development has to be acknowledged and valued**

The period since 2008 has been particularly challenging from a community development perspective due a difficult funding environment that impacted negatively on community development structures and supports. The new SICAP framework is a step in the right direction and reflects a more explicit acknowledgement of the value of community work in addressing social exclusion and inequality. However, seminar participants felt that further investment in community development is required.

- **Leadership in the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector requires investment**

The expectations from the State of the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector are high, and participants expressed a need for investment in leadership both for voluntary board members and for management. Seminar participants felt that additional investment is required for leadership training programmes that specifically target the sector.

- **Create opportunities to transfer learning from the sector to other sectors**

The community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector is skilled in many areas that would benefit other sectors. Too often there is a focus on capacity building within the community sector, and a lack of focus on how the sector can contribute to capacity building within the State. This can be achieved by sharing learning, strategies and approaches with State and local authority staff around effective engagement with, and support for, disadvantaged groups and communities.

- **Encourage young people to get involved in voluntary activity**

The profile of volunteers appears to be aging, and seminar participants felt there is a need for targeted measures to encourage young people to get involved in voluntary activity. This is a particular challenge in rural areas where the age profile in many communities is older.

- **Support greater diversity in the sector**

Ireland's demographics have changed considerably over the past 25 years, but the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector and those who support the sector, do not reflect that diversity in many instances. It is important that support agencies such as Pobal do more to reflect the diversity of the communities it seeks to support.

- **Recognise the cost of administration of programmes**

Community, voluntary and not-for-profit groups feel that there is a lack of recognition by government of the cost of administering programmes locally, and that insufficient provision is made to cover such costs when funding programmes are being rolled out. Many funding programmes do not make provision in their design to cover administration costs, and seminar participants felt that groups are expected to carry such costs themselves. However, the view was expressed that there is a limit to what can be carried by the sector.

- **Consultation with sector to be real and meaningful in the context of programme design**

The experience of participants with regard to the re-design of the new Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) programme was positive. Seminar participants felt that they were heard during the SICAP consultation process, and that the new programme framework is more reflective of the issues and suggestions raised. This has not always been the case in terms of programme design, and the view was widely expressed that consultation is crucial with community stakeholders in other programmes such as the Community Services Programme (CSP) when programme design is under review.

Voices from the regions.....

“boards are expected to take responsibility for all decisions, but are not listened to when it comes to policy decisions”

“Nobody wants to pay for the cost of administration”

“Don’t try and turn the community sector into the same as the State sector as then their relevance is lost”

“Communities are more diverse, but this is not evident in how the State communicates with the sector”

“Volunteers tend to be older in age, and they are burnt out”

“invest in leadership programmes within the sector”

Theme #2: Creating an enabling environment

While seminar participants acknowledged the support of the State and related agencies in addressing poverty, inequality and social exclusion, it was also felt there are unnecessary blockages that need to be addressed before a truly enabling environment is created. There was a strong consensus from seminar participants that new thinking is required to work towards removing these blockages, involving all stakeholders, thereby creating an enabling environment where the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector can truly reach its potential in addressing poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

This is reflected in the following key messages:

- **Need for proportionate bureaucracy**

At times it appears that the level of detail required to access funding and report on spend can be the same regardless of the amounts of money involved. Seminar participants called on funders to put into practice the principle of 'proportionate bureaucracy' so that requirements are not overly burdensome and are proportionate to the size of the funds being allocated.

- **Developing an enabling model of accountability and compliance to serve a developmental goal**

With an enhanced regulatory and compliance environment in recent years, the requirements of board members and management within the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sectors are immense and can sap the energy of volunteers in the sector. Seminar participants recognise the importance of good governance but there is a need to ensure that requirements placed on the sector in this regard do not come at the expense of good developmental work. Participants felt there is a need for an enabling framework of accountability and compliance to be developed and administered, moving from a 'red tape' to a 'green tape' model of accountability and compliance.

- **Collaboration between support agencies to streamline requirements and duplication**

Key to the achievement of a 'green tape' model of accountability and compliance is better collaboration and agreement between funders of the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector in relation to requirements that are set for the sector. This was seen as having the potential to streamline information requests so that they can be shared across a number of agencies. The idea of a 'charities passport' to demonstrate compliance is one such area for examination that participants felt was a good idea.

- **Extend the Public Sector Duty within the State sector**

Seminar participants felt that the potential of the Public Sector Duty (PSO) has not been realised to date, and support should be provided to relevant bodies to translate the vision of the duty into practice.

- **Need for more community workers engaging on the ground**

Participants considered that greater investment in community work positions across the State is required so that social inclusion and equality is developed from the ground up. Direct engagement with disadvantaged groups and communities is central to promoting social inclusion and equality and more 'on the ground' personnel working to clear developmental goals was viewed by seminar participants as essential.

- **Social inclusion and equality work to be valued within State and local authority sectors**

As local authorities are key stakeholders in promoting inclusive communities, community development, local development, anti-poverty and social inclusion work needs to be seen as vital work by local authority management, and not just 'add-ons' to their planning and environmental remits. Seminar participants felt that structures such as Public Participation Networks (PPNs) need to ensure effective

representation from socially excluded groups and communities if they are to have any chance of effecting change locally.

Voices from the regions....

“The State needs to become an enabler where the trend has been towards greater centralisation”

“too much centralisation in terms of making things more efficient at the expense of engaging communities”

“There is a fear around governance and data protection issues and volunteers need to be supported”

“Governance is killing projects. Funders need to make it easier for small community organisations to be compliant”

“Reduce complexity and increase administration assistance”

Theme #3: Focus on outcomes rather than outputs

Participants at all seminars highlighted the need to have a stronger focus in programme design and delivery on results, outcomes and impacts. It was felt that there is often too much of a focus on programme and projects outputs and targets with insufficient focus on the end result for disadvantaged groups and communities.

This is reflected in the following messages:

- **Invest in results based planning**

There is a need for a shift in mind set amongst all stakeholders (funders, local authorities, community sector) to focus in greater depth on results based planning. Too often the starting point for programmes and projects is on activity and task planning, as opposed to thinking about the end result required, and what strategies and approaches are required to achieve that desired result and impact. Training for all stakeholders in results based planning was recommended. Policy and programme implementation would also benefit greatly from such investment.

- **Flexible programme design**

Participants highlighted the need for less rigid programme frameworks and for greater input at the early stages of programme design. There is a balance to be struck between flexible design and ensuring clarity of purpose, but rigid frameworks lead to increased bureaucratisation of development work. Seminar participants felt that creating opportunities for dialogue on programme design between the State and community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector would benefit all stakeholders.

- **Longer timeframes for delivery**

Seminar participants felt that moving towards longer multi-annual funding arrangements within programmes would provide greater certainty and continuity of effort in achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups and communities. The timeframe for the new SICAP programme was welcomed in this regard.

- **Delivery mechanisms**

It was felt by seminar participants that Ireland is good at devising strategies to address issues, but lack effective delivery mechanisms. Detailed implementation plans that translate strategy into real action and benefits are necessary as part of any new strategies for addressing social exclusion and inequality.

- **Collect data that is relevant to results**

Data collection is a big part of programme implementation in the current operating environment, but concern was expressed by seminar participants about whether data is collected for the sake of it in certain instances, and whether some data is ever used in practice. By implementing a results based planning framework, data relating to the achievement of results should take centre stage and ensure more focused data collection and data use.

- **Social impacts need to be measured**

Investments such as the Community Services Programme (CSP) and other programmes make positive contributions in local communities, but the social impact

is often not captured in any meaningful manner. While quantitative analysis is important, more qualitative studies on the social impact of community programmes would highlight the value for money of such programmes.

Voices from the regions.....

“Training in result based planning needed”

“New SICAP has moved towards inclusion, room for more discussion and negotiation”

“What gets measured gets valued, and the social impact of programmes and projects need to be measures and valued”

Conclusion

Feedback from those who attended the seminars highlighted the value in creating opportunities for engagement and reflection. Participants saw the value in stepping outside the parameters of individual programmes, and having a two-way communication with Pobal on achievements, challenges and opportunities that exist in the wider social inclusion and equality policy and programme environment.

Many messages emerged from the seminars, some specific to Pobal, others that relate to the wider culture and practice of engagement with the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector. Pobal will continue to work with funder departments, and others in the State sector, around creating a more enabling environment that values the community, voluntary and not-for-profit sector.

The seminars have proved to be a valuable exercise for Pobal. They have complemented other initiatives undertaken such as Pobal’s Feedback and Engagement Project. In addition, the seminars raised issues that have fed directly into the new Pobal Strategic Plan 2018-2021. This plan includes many commitments that will act on the messages contained in this report, including a commitment to reduce bureaucratic burdens for community organisations and early years services to allow them to dedicate more of their time to the delivery of core services and supports.