Neoliberalism, deliberation and dissent:

Critical reflections on the 'community activation' turn in Ireland's community development programme

Niamh Gaynor

School of Law and Government
Dublin City University
Glasnevin
Dublin 9
Ireland

T: 00-353-1700-6048
E: niamh.gaynor@dcu.ie

Corresponding author: Dr Niamh Gaynor, School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland.

Acknowledgements: This article draws, in part, from research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: ES/L012898/1) for a project entitled *Collaborative Governance under Austerity: An Eight-case Comparative Study*. The author would like to thank Nessa Ní Chasaide and Morina O'Neill for their research assistance on this part of the project.

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Abstract

In this article I aim to add to the literature on the impact of neoliberalism on community development by focusing on two recent seemingly unrelated developments in Ireland. The first is the reframing of 'community development' as 'community activation' in Ireland's latest community development programme. I suggest that this 'community activation' turn marks a new departure in the social and political embedding of neoliberalism in community development and in Irish society more broadly in that its reframing of both the identity of 'the poor' and of the nature of supports that they require individualises responsibility and action. This, I argue, not only fragments and atomises communities, it also risks foreclosing any substantive discussion and deliberation of structural issues, thereby posing a threat to democracy.

The second development is the concomitant emergence of a new, more critically engaged form of community activism in the form of the so-called 'water movement'. The actions and aspirations of the women we interviewed within this movement highlight their role in revitalising and re-energising communities, animating public debate and redirecting power back into communities. Activation clearly comes in many forms and, under the shadow of neoliberal reforms, results in many different outcomes. How or if the formal community sector chooses to respond to this diversity and what impacts this will have will prove critical to local communities as well as providing important avenues for future research.

Introduction

In 2015, as Ireland formally exited its austerity agreement with the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, the Irish government unveiled its new programme for community development, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). While largely reproducing the central tenets of previous programmes, SICAP included two new important developments. The first was the introduction of a public tendering process for implementation contracts. Aimed at enhancing cost-efficiencies in programme delivery, this opened the market to agencies and companies outside the community development sector and led to widespread condemnation of what was seen as the effective privatisation of community development work[1]. The second development was a shift from 'community development' to 'community activation' in both the title and the content of the programme. While there has been much debate and critique from within Ireland's community development sector in relation to the first development, in this article I focus on the latter which, I argue, marks a new departure in state-sponsored efforts to socially and politically embed neoliberalism within community development.

The impact of neoliberalism on community development in Ireland has not been limited to these new developments however. At about the same time as SICAP's activation turn was being formulated, a separate, more critically engaged form of community activism was emerging spontaneously in villages and communities across the country. Borne of a profound sense of injustice with the perceived inequalities underpinning the state's neoliberal reforms, the so-called 'water movement' of 2014 and beyond[2] heralded a very different form of 'community activation'. As well as directly challenging the atomising intent of the state's neoliberal project, the movement also revitalised and (re)activated communities by stimulating local deliberation and debate, thereby redirecting power back into communities. Its activities highlight the different forms community development can take outside of formal state-sponsored structures.

[1] See, for example, 'Stealthy privatisation of community and public services', *The Village Magazine*, March 4th, 2015; Community Work Ireland (2015).

[2] The 'water movement' was a nationwide community-led movement which began in opposition to a new water tax introduced in 2014 but, as I outline in the penultimate section of this article, went on to develop into a more broad-based movement seeking alternatives to neoliberalism.

My aim in this article is to add to the literature on the impact of neoliberalism on community development (see, for example, Shaw, 2011; Meade et al, 2016; Newman and Clark, 2016; Fursova, 2018) by critically reflecting upon these two contrasting forms of community development which have emerged with and through neoliberal reforms. Combining a critical analysis of SICAP and associated policies with data from interviews conducted between 2015 and 2017[3], I argue that, while on the one hand, the 'community activation' turn which underpins Ireland new community development programme marks a new departure in state-sponsored efforts to socially and politically embed neoliberalism in community development and in Irish society more broadly, on the other, the actions and aspirations of community activists within the so-called 'water movement' pose a direct challenge to this. Resonating with the more radical, politically active roots of Ireland's community development movement (see, for example, Bissett, 2015), the actions, motivations and aspirations of these new activists also pose a challenge to the formal community development sector. Enmeshed as it is in the technocratic exigencies and relational limitations of SICAP, can it or should it engage? Its actions in this regard will prove critical to local communities as well as providing important avenues for future research.

The article is structured as follows. Following this brief introduction, I set out the theoretical framework which underpins my ensuing analysis. Focussing in particular on the relationship between neoliberal strategies of state reconstruction and retrenchment associated with the downsizing of the welfare state in tandem with new forms and modes of governing which emphasise individual responsibility and action, I explore the institutional and discursive strategies used in promoting these new forms of governing. These include the social inclusion agenda as promoted, in particular, through the European Union (EU). Section Three then focuses on the activation turn in Ireland's SICAP programme. Exploring this development within the context of broader developments in social protection policy in Ireland, I suggest that both the reframing of the identity of the 'the poor' and of the nature of supports they require individualises responsibility and action. This, I argue, not only

[3] This article draws, in part, from fieldwork conducted as part of an international project exploring the impact of austerity on governance across eight locations. Fieldwork in Ireland comprised, in total, 45 interviews, two focus groups and one observation conducted by either the author or one of her Research Assistants. This paper draws, in particular, from interviews with 6 SICAP implementers, 4 local authority officials and 19 community activists. All data were coded and analysed through NVivo by the author.

fragments and atomises communities, it also risks foreclosing any substantive discussion and deliberation on structural political economic issues, thereby posing a threat to democracy. In Section Four, I turn to a contrasting form of community activation in the form of the so-called 'water movement'. Drawing on interviews with 19 members of this movement, I outline how these activists have countered the neoliberal individualisation agenda by bringing atomised communities together, animating public debate and deliberation, and reigniting and reinvigorating local democracy. I conclude with some questions on what this means for the formal community development sector as well as for future research.

Neoliberalism, social inclusion and community development

While neoliberalism itself is a slippery, contested and indeed, highly contestable concept, manifesting in various ways and through different policies and strategies in different places, its underlying market-based logic and privileging of capital as the means through which prosperity and advancement is attained represents a common ideology. As Harvey (2005: 3) notes, '…neoliberalism values market exchange as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action'. In recent decades, much work has been done in uncovering the different strategies, policies and practices of such 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2005) in different contexts. Here I want to focus in particular on the relationship between neoliberal strategies of state reconstruction and retrenchment on the one hand, and new forms and modes of governing on the other.

A growing body of work is concerned with the emergence of new forms of governing or governmentalities emphasising individual responsibility and coproduction in the context of the downsizing and erosion of the welfare state (Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 1999; Jessop, 2002; Dean, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2007). This work provides important insights which help illuminate how attempts to downsize welfare states are accompanied by institutional and discursive strategies that seek to shift responsibility for employment and welfare provision onto individuals and communities. One of the principal vectors by which this is achieved is through civil society organisations. Fursova (2014: 121) for example, argues that the '…neoliberalization of non-profits morphs the sector into a neoliberal para-state apparatus that is more concerned with re/producing specific neoliberal subjects rather than facilitating

the development of vibrant and participatory civil society'. And, as I discuss below, one of the principal strategies through which this is achieved is that of social inclusion.

An important caveat to note before moving on to this however is that, as commentators such as Newman (2014: 134) point out, there is often an over-reading of the effects of such strategies in terms of their success and ability in constituting new forms of governable subjects. As Rose (1999) points out, citizens possess the agency and freedom to be willing or unwilling allies in this 'conduct of conducts' and in the control and management of their subjectivities and behaviours (see also Dean, 2007: 82). Thus, the active inclusion of individuals and communities is not necessarily a *fait accompli*. Moreover, although many commentators worry about the paralysing effects of such neoliberalisation of community development[4], the variegated and diverse history of community development in Ireland should not be forgotten. Meade (2012), Harvey (2015) and Kelleher and O'Neill (2018) for example, document the sector's strong links to broader social movements from the 1960s forward to its incorporation into the state's corporatist Social Partnership in the mid-1990s followed by its significant state-sponsored downsizing from 2002 forward. Bissett's vivid portrayal of one Dublin community's attempt to defy these cuts and resist austerity through its community arts 'Spectacle of Defiance and Hope' demonstrates the ongoing radical agency of some working class communities despite the odds (Bissett, 2015). Yet, this is against a backdrop of neoliberal retrenchment, rationalisation and incorporation operationalised, in part, through strategies of activation and social inclusion. It is to these we now turn.

Theoretically, the concept of social inclusion, and its antonym, social exclusion, emerged in France in the 1970s in response to concern over the growing inequalities associated with the capitalist, neoliberal model. As Daly and Silver (2008: 546) note, 'Most studies of social exclusion emphasise its origins and dynamics in capitalist development. As the market expands, economic and political restructuring produce new forms of inequality and injustice'. Aimed at understanding and addressing this multi-dimensional condition of cumulative

[4] For example, commentators such as Shaw (2011), Meade (2012), Rosol (2012), Newman and Clark (2016) and Kelleher and O'Neill (2018) worry about the implications of the imposition of new managerialist agendas and practices on community development practice, while the attendant diminished capacity for community development practitioners to organise against injustice remains a key concern for others (Mayo, 2011; Crowley, 2013; Newman and Clark, 2016; Fursova, 2018).

disadvantage, scholars sought to move beyond a narrow focus on income and poverty towards a consideration of associated and interrelated social and political factors. Measurements of social exclusion thus included a wide range of indicators. In the United Kingdom (UK) for example, Burchardt et al (2002) used four sets of indicators which cut across economic, political and social fields – namely production; consumption; political engagement; and social interaction. Barnes' (2005) study of social exclusion in the UK included seven dimensions - financial situation; ownership of durable goods; quality of housing; neighbourhood perception; personal and social relationships (operationalised as social support); physical health; and psychological wellbeing. In theory and research therefore, social inclusion has economic, social and political dimensions and is rooted in structural inequalities within the polarising capitalist economic order.

Social inclusion policy however, spearheaded within the European Union (EU) through the Lisbon process which was initiated in 2000, has followed a more selective, narrow route. The European Council's decision, in 2000, that the EU adopt a strategic goal for the next decade of becoming '…the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy… with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (Atkinson et al. 2002: 5) resulted in a change in policy direction which focused exclusively on promoting employment within the labour market. Success was now measured in narrow terms of economic growth and job targets (Atkinson et al. 2002; Levitas, 2005). In its 'Recommendation on the Active Inclusion of People excluded from the Labour Market', for example, the European Commission notes that '…an integrated active inclusion strategy… contributes to the Lisbon strategy by facilitating the activation and the mobility of the workforce' (EC, 2008: 1). The EU's Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion defines active inclusion as '…enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job'[5]. As we will see below, the Irish state's definition mirrors this.

In a more global vein, writing about the situation of more marginalised countries in the global South, Porter and Craig (2004: 392-393) have similarly argued that the social inclusion agenda, as promoted by the international aid industry and incorporated into national

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1059&langId=en.

development policies, is a neoliberal project aimed at actively incorporating 'the poor'[6] into the global economy. As in the UK and Ireland, this is achieved through their active inclusion in labour markets. Thus, rather than being excluded and left behind, through a wide array of projects aimed at boosting livelihoods, 'the poor' are offered every opportunity to actively participate in the global economy. Once inserted within it, they have every stake in ensuring its continuity and survival (Porter and Craig, 2004: 393). This narrow and selective neoliberal interpretation of the original concept of social inclusion negates its social and political dimensions. In its new incarnation, it supports and consolidates the very system responsible for 'the poor's' economic marginalisation. As we will now see, the 'community activation' turn in Ireland's latest community development programme has consolidated this process in Ireland.

From social to economic inclusion: SICAP and the 'community activation' turn in Ireland's community development

Ireland's long and politically controversial history of community development has been comprehensively documented elsewhere (O'Byrne, 2012; Harvey, 2015; Kelleher and O'Neill, 2018). As in other places and contexts, its aims and aspirations have been, and continue to be highly contested. A tenacious adherence to a 'community development approach' however, among both practitioners and within state policy, has ensured, in rhetoric at least, an inclusion of social, political and economic dimensions within community development policy and practice[7].

In practice however, as elsewhere, neoliberalism has brought significant challenges to this work. First, a series of EU and state supported local development programmes from the early

[6] I acknowledge that this labelling of those marginalised by and within the dominant economic system as 'the poor' is problematic. As Escobar (1995: 109) in a somewhat analogous context reminds us, '…labels are by no means neutral; they embody concrete relationships of power and influence the categories with which we think and act'. This is the underlying basis for my critique of the 'activation turn'.

[7] This 'community development approach' is defined within the current *Framework for Local and Community Development* as involving '…individual and collective empowerment, enabling and supporting members of a community (of place, identity or interest) to work collectively, to improve the quality of their lives, their community and their society. This approach is often but not exclusively based on an understanding that those affected by poverty and / or disadvantage are often excluded from society due to discrimination, prejudice, lack of resources, skills, confidence and/or education.' (Government of Ireland, 2015: 7-8).

1990s forward, while ostensibly recognising the social and political dimensions to community development work have, in practice, privileged an employment focused social inclusion approach[8]. Second, the state's so-called 'cohesion and alignment' strategy, rolled out under the LCDP programme from 2010-2015, has significantly reduced the number of local delivery structures and placed these under the aegis of local government authorities. As a number of our interviewees noted, suffering expenditure cuts and capacity constraints themselves, local authorities are ill equipped and untrained to carry out community development work, thus replicating the classic neoliberal local reform paradox of increased responsibility with reduced resources (Peck, 2012). And third and related, under the auspices of austerity, state supports to more marginalised communities and their groups have been cut at a rate which is significantly disproportionate to cuts meted out overall[9].

These developments notwithstanding, my argument here is that the quality and ambitions of community development work have been dealt an even more significant blow since 2015 with the advent of SICAP and its associated 'community activation' turn. Specifically, I argue that this this 'activation turn' marks a new departure in the social and political embedding of neoliberalism in community development and that this is marked by two significant shifts in both the policy direction and framing which underpin SICAP. These are discussed below.

Reframing and redirecting supports: From social protection to labour activation

The first shift is in the area of social support. While the rather vague and amorphous aims of both SICAP I (2015-2017) and II (2018-2020) make reference to both the social and economic dimensions of social inclusion, the social dimension is conspicuous in its absence within the key background documents and government speeches on the programme. Indeed, the *Updated National Plan for Social Inclusion* is clear that poverty is to be solved through employment. 'The links between work and poverty are well-established; employment is critical as a route out of poverty' (Department of Social Protection, 2016: 5). It goes on to

[8] These include the Area-Based Response to Long-term Unemployment (ABR) 1991-1993; the programme of Integrated Development in Disadvantaged Areas (PIDDA) 1995-1999; the Local Development and Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) 2000-2006; the Local and Community Development Programme (LCDP) 2010-2015; and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2015 – present.

[9] Harvey (2015) has documented expenditure cuts to local community development groups from 2008 to 2014 of between 35 and 45 per cent in the context of an overall public expenditure cut of 7.1 per cent.

explicitly spell out a change in public policy from a focus on social protection to labour activation. 'In recent years, the policy of transforming the social protection system into one which focuses on maximising employability by providing training, development and employment services side by side with income support has been further expanded' (Department of Social Protection, 2016: 5).

The context for this change is provided in the background documentation to the second SICAP programme. In the context of the programme's co-funding by the EU, the EU's priority as being the 'activation of the unemployed' is highlighted. In this framing, social inclusion explicitly becomes narrowed to labour market inclusion. As the background document points out...

> *The ESF* [European Social Fund] *Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020 is co-financing SICAP in the years 2018-2020. PEIL's priority areas for investment revolve around the activation of the unemployed, social and labour market inclusion, education and youth employment.*
>
> Pobal (2017: 9 – emphasis added)

The definition of active inclusion in the more recent (2018) consultation process for the new *Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2018-2021* mirrors that of the EU, where it is defined as 'enabling each person, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society including having a job.' (Department of Social Protection, 2018: 3 – emphasis added). The priority and focus of the new Plan are clear. More structurally attuned measures aimed at social protection are out of favour and individualised approaches to 'active inclusion' and 'labour activation' now take their place. As Murphy (2016: 432) has argued, this is 'low-road activation' which eschews the more social democratic values of 'high-road' versions, and plumps instead for '…neo-liberal managerial stock management and conservative behavioural controls'. It is not a significant leap from here to understanding what is meant by the 'community activation' concept underpinning SICAP.

Reframing identities: From poor to unemployed

The second shift, which appears a little later in policy discourse although, intuitively, precedes the move from social protection to labour activation discussed above, involves a reframing of the identity of 'the poor' – from poor to unemployed, and from political and social agents to economic subjects. This is achieved through new statistical representations which construct new identities and subjectivities. A key step in the process appears in the consultation background document for the new *Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2018-2021* where it is proposed that poverty reduction targets be dropped altogether. The rationale provided for this is the failure to date in meeting these. As the consultation document sets out (Department of Social Protection, 2018: 7)…

> The overall aim of the [national poverty reduction] target is to reduce consistent poverty to 4% by 2016 and to 2% or less by 2020, from a baseline rate of 6.3% in 2010… The most recent Social Inclusion Monitor (using data from the 2015 Survey of Income & Living Conditions) reports that consistent poverty was essentially unchanged at 8.7% in 2015… leaving a gap of over 4 percentage points to meet the 2016 interim target of 4%. Reducing the rate now by over 7.5% to reach the 2020 target of 2% may be seen as being very ambitious and unlikely to be achieved….

It then goes on to pose the question (2018: 8) 'Do you think that we should continue to measure progress against targets that are ambitious and challenging but which may also be seen as unrealistic and/or unachievable?'

The implication is clear. It has proven impossible to meet poverty reduction targets and it will not be possible to do so in the future. The solution is not to question why. It is to drop these targets and focus, instead, on job uptake targets. This seemingly bizarre proposal (situated, as it is, in the centre of a social inclusion consultation document) of course makes sense when understood in the context of the consolidation of the neoliberal agenda within and throughout social policy. Preoccupied with measurement and identity construction, it reframes the identity of the poor. They are no longer poor (we don't know as we will no longer have poverty targets[10] to measure against), they are now unemployed. They are no longer social and political agents, but economic ones. And the policy aim is now clear and unambiguous – employment, not poverty reduction.

[10] The limitations of consistent poverty as an overly reductive measurement of poverty should be acknowledged. However, as noted above, this limitation is not the rationale behind the government's proposal to abandon it.

This new identity is reinforced and consolidated through a new statistical monitoring mechanism introduced with SICAP, the Integrated Reporting and Information System (IRIS). IRIS gathers a detailed level of information about individuals registered under SICAP, including their age, gender, education and economic status, together with details of supports received. This represents a far more detailed level of monitoring and surveillance than that carried out heretofore. Our interviews with SICAP implementers reveal it to be extremely problematic in two respects. First, it is very time-consuming leaving little time for any 'real community work'. And second, and more egregiously, it is extremely invasive and demeaning to its newly 'activated' subjects. A third important point is that its selective, statistical collation disaggregates community members and represents them as linked (or not) to the global market in ways which negate the broader structural barriers this same market poses. Statistics are never neutral. As Escobar, writing in the analogous context of the international aid industry notes, 'Statistics tell stories. They are techno-representations endowed with complex political and cultural histories… [they] reflect the crafting of subjectivities, the shaping of culture, and the construction of social power' (1995: 213). The neoliberal 'activated' subject is thus constructed through this selective information gathering, as are their relations within and to the broader neoliberal system.

From its labour market focus to its reconstruction of citizens and communities as economic subjects – 'activated' within the labour market, my argument here is that SICAP represents a consolidation and expansion of neoliberalism across community and social life. This is seen in both the problematic and disempowering reframing of community development as community activation, and in the economic colonisation of its broader tenets of social inclusion.

The limits and dangers of the inclusion / activation turn

But what is so wrong with community activation and social inclusion? Surely measures aimed at including people in opportunities offered by the global market would seem preferable to excluding them and forgetting about them altogether? Is it not better to have a job on minimum wage than none at all? Is it not better to have access to services, however

restricted, than none at all? Perhaps. But three important features of the inclusion / activation model need to be considered. First, the inclusion / activation agenda is not fundamentally redistributive in any substantive sense. The 'poor's' 'inclusion' is a limited one and their 'activation' only goes so far. It poses no challenge to the underlying distribution of local or global assets and wealth. Its impacts are purely palliative. Second and related, the inclusion / activation discourse forecloses substantive public deliberation on structural political economic issues. As others have noted, the current neoliberal consensus is in fact an economic consensus based around the interests and exigencies of global capital (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2012). The inclusion / activation agenda, as part of this, is in fact a political agenda, aimed at the disciplined inclusion of the poor / marginalised into this. Shifting responsibility for a whole range of economic, social and political problems onto local actors, it leaves marginalised communities and individuals with little option but to participate, and closes off political and structural deliberation and critique. And third, the inclusion / activation agenda, in its practical and discursive construction of 'active communities', individualises responsibility and action. In building a deliberate, statistically-constructed resource differential between 'activated', included communities (the employed) and their peripheral, 'inactive', residual neighbours (the 'lazy' unemployed), it pathologises frustration, resentment and dissent. This, in turn, risks driving deep social divisions and intolerance.

Ireland's activation turn, as embodied within the discourse surrounding SICAP, is therefore doing little to improve the conditions of the poor in the long-term. If anything, through its distinctly technocratic, disciplinary intent, it risks diluting and dissipating the political agency of more marginalised individuals and communities, worsening their long-term conditions and prospects. All is not lost however. 'Activated communities' come in many different guises and communities can be 'activated' in many different ways. This is the subject of the following section.

Activated communities bite back: 'Putting the unity back into community'

In 2014, as part of a series of new taxes under Ireland's austerity programme, a new water charge was introduced[11]. Coming on the back of new household waste charges and new property taxes, and in the context of widespread retrenchments in public services and supports, this, for many, was the final straw. Pockets of localised resistance – to bill payment and to the installation of new water meters – grew as communities organised in opposition. Building on these pockets of resistance, a series of large public protest marches[12] led by a number of Trade Union movements were organised from October 2014 forward, and what became known as the 'water movement' was borne[13].

From the outset, four key features of this movement and its adherents were striking. First, this was never just a single-issue movement and it was never just about water. A survey carried out in 2015 of 2,556 people involved revealed that 60 per cent had gotten involved because 'austerity has gone too far' (Hearne, 2015: 9). Second, a wide variety of people became involved, in a wide variety of ways. And, for many, it was the first time they had ever become engaged in community activism. Within the same survey of activists (Hearne, 2015: 17), 54 per cent were what I call 'new activists' – people who had never engaged in community activism before. Third, many of these 'new activists' were women. And fourth, and perhaps most crucially, this was very much an organic movement which arose spontaneously in villages and communities across the country and did not rely on the formal community development sector or on local political or trade union leaders for guidance or leadership. In many ways, this movement is reminiscent of earlier waves of community mobilisation which arose organically in the 1960s and 1970s in response to crises of housing, drugs and urban poverty. Many of these earlier community movements became absorbed into the state sponsored community development sector of the 1980s forward however, effectively neutralising resistance and bringing it under state control (Meade, 2012; Kellegher and O'Neill, 2018).

[11] Up to this point, water provision was financed from general taxation.
[12] According to Hearn (2015: 7), 27 marches occurred across the Dublin area, while 64 others took place nationally.
[13] See Finn, 2015 and (author – citation removed) for more detailed accounts of the background to this movement, together with the state's and mainstream media's efforts to delegitimise and repress it.

In 2017, we met and spoke with 19 of these 'new activists' involved in the recent water movement. Our conversations focused on their motivations for becoming involved in local actions, what form this involvement took, how the experience had impacted upon them, and their aspirations and ambitions for the future. While the majority of our respondents were initially motivated by challenges in their own personal circumstances linked to austerity – job losses and/or emigration within their families; increasing difficulties paying bills on reduced wages; cuts to pensions and other supports – the one common theme cutting through all conversations when talking of impact was the movement's role in bringing diverse groups of people together in common cause and mutual support – in other words, in re-energising and (re)activating communities.

The activities the women we spoke with varied from participating in public protest marches and blockades of meter installations in estates and on roads within their communities, to providing supports of many other different kinds. Some looked after the children of women out 'on the meters' after school or in the evenings so that they could attend meetings or participate directly in other ways. Some distributed information leaflets and spoke at local meetings. Some cooked hot stews and dinners for those blockading meters. Others became involved in local soup kitchens providing hot dinners to the growing numbers of homeless. Others organised fundraising events for the homeless in their areas. Although they found and continue to find their engagement tiring and extremely demanding, all spoke of the importance of solidarity and support, their sense of renewed purpose and power, and the firm friends they had have made through their experiences.

These are truly 'activated communities' in that their actions not only resulted in a government U-turn on the new charges in 2016[14], they revitalised and re-energised communities, opened a space for deliberation and debate on the policy choices taken and not taken, and, at a time of profound stress and difficulty, redirected power back into communities. Possibly a more significant outcome of these developments however, and the one most consistently highlighted by our respondents, is the way in which these diverse and variegated acts of collective resistance, solidarity and support contributed to the healing and rebuilding of

[14] By May 2016, according to official figures, less than 50 per cent of Irish citizens had paid their water bills. In July 2016, the government finally capitulated to popular resistance and scrapped the new water charges scheme.

fractured and atomised communities. The waged, non-waged, and inadequately waged all came together to debate and deliberate upon the direction their lives and those of their communities were taking. Individual experiences of stress, frustration and, at times, despair were individualised no more. The dots were joined and people's power and hope grew. The rallying call for the movement speaks for itself – 'putting the unity back into community'. Some excerpts from some our conversations give a flavour of this.

> *At the edges of the estates, people started putting up tents and gazebos. If you had acquired a house on the estate* [if a household had agreed that their meter installation be blocked]*, then those people would allow us into their garden to have set tents up, you know? Such kindness, you know? So people could gather in that space, you know? And people would donate say a Superser* [gas heater] *or a radio. And then, what started to happen was people started to kind of just talk to each other, you know? … People got to know each other, people that would've only seen each other on the street were now actually sharing stories, you know?… And I thought to myself, of all of the memories that I have, and I hope to live to a very old age, that for me was the absolute most amazing thing that I witnessed.*
>
> (Activist 1)

> *I just had, again, that sense of what was happening, that reclaiming of common spaces within the community as our own, where people could come and verbalise and be listened to.*
>
> (Activist 2)

> *That sense of walking down O'Connell Street on the march and knowing that this was your community around you… that you're a part of this national community. And you'd say, "Hello, how are you?" And you would actually engage with people, you made eye contact… it just kind of opened up a new world of relationships of respect, of acknowledgement of others.*
>
> (Activist 3)

At a time of profound fracture and despair, when mainstream public discourse and policy – from government and opposition parties, to media institutions, to SICAP itself – refused to countenance any alternative to the obviously failed and failing inclusion / activation agenda, the actions and ambitions of these local communities shone a light in the dark. Highlighting the political and economic limitations of the state's ambitious social engineering project, and operating outside formal community development structures, they brought atomised

communities together, animated public debate and, (re)activating communities of solidarity and support, reignited and reinvigorated democracy.

Conclusion

The policy and practice of community development has always been contested. The challenges and constraints of neoliberalism render it now even more so. However, it is important to remember the diversity of voices, identities, ambitions and talents that often lie hidden or unrecognised within our communities. As Meade et al (2016: 1) note, 'Against the dominance of managerialism and the fracturing of solidarity between citizens, we highlight the importance of a critical vision of community that supports diversity while promoting dialogue across distance and difference'. This paper gives concrete empirical reality to that vision. Its critical reflection on the two contrasting forms of community development that have emerged through and with neoliberal reforms adds to the wider literature on the impact of neoliberalism on community development.

But what does this all mean for Ireland's formal community development sector, enmeshed as it is in the problematic inclusion / activation relations and technocratic managerial exigencies that are SICAP? Should it continue with business as usual – SICAP implementation in survival mode in the hope that things will improve in the future? Or is it possible to regain a more critical, political edge and assist in the healing and rebuilding of communities? In times of acute economic marginalisation and stress, solidarity and support are crucial. And just as important is the space and the permission to imagine beyond a 'TINA' to a world where communities reclaim their power and voice, and fight back against the marginalising discourses of the economic elite. When asked about their ambitions and plans for the future, the women we spoke with all emphasised the need for more local democratic participation. Not in the form of traditional institutions and practices, but in the form of real, substantive fora which, fostering dialogue, deliberation and understanding, open a space to all to share and laugh and question and learn. The conversations have begun, in tents and gazebos, in kitchens and community centres, on 'meter lines' and protest walks across the country. As the 'water movement' has shown, 'community activation' comes in

many different forms and results in very different outcomes. How the formal community sector chooses to respond to this diversity and what impacts this will have will prove critical to local communities, as well as providing important avenues for further research.

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