

## CHAPTER 12

### TOWARDS A PUBLIC SPHERE OF EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

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These chapters have explored recent and historical participative processes from a number of different ideological perspectives and sectoral experiences. A number of conclusions can be identified across the chapters and are discussed here under the broad structure used in the book's framework; partnership, poverty, public policy and public spheres. Three themes, e-participation, power inequalities and protest as participation, surfaced in the various chapters and so are discussed in more detail in this concluding chapter.

Gary Murphy's chapter on partnership reminds us that Ireland did not discover partnership in 1987, rather it had long been open to a corporatist model of key sectors participating in deliberating in economic and social policy. His characterisation of Irish corporatism as 'a dance of strangers' highlights the limitations of Irish corporatism. The partnership approach to public policy which dominated the economy for the last two decades was often portrayed as a problem solving space however it tended to avoid hard choices in favour of easier win-win outcomes and perpetuated an unchallenging group think which proved unsustainable. The real test was not capacity to forge consensus in times of growth but capacity to manage the conflict of crisis and it appears to have at least partially failed this test. The remaining public sector partnership relationship the Croke Park Agreement is due to expire in 2014. It remains to be seen whether partnership has a role in enabling the hard choices that need be made in managing crisis and, as Allen argues, in achieving social justice. Deiric Ó Broin's review of local partnership and participative structures concluded that without the local authority's desire to cede a policy-making role to local citizens and transformative potential of new participative mechanisms on local governance will remain unrealised. All the evidence about the government's agenda for local government reforms points towards a realignment and cohesion of participative structures back into the systems of local government. Without significant local government reform it seems difficult to be optimistic

that local partnership is anything but a legitimation strategy and service delivery vehicle.

Participation cannot be separated from power and the reality that some people have more power to participate than others. The three chapters on poverty offer very different insights into the experience of participation and deliberation from the perspective of the poor. Matthias Borsheid's chapter in examining the processes through which new ideas and ideological theories permeate our thinking, demonstrates that the issue of structural distribution of resources is not a legitimate concern of ABCD. Ginnell's chapter reflects on the EU as a source of thinking and processes. The well-meaning effort of the European Commission to devise a process of stakeholder consultation was underpinned by a principle that the poor should participate in the process of decision making. However, without the states' willingness or interest in making such policy-making processes work, they can be frustrating experiences that fail to harness their transformative potential. Mike Allen's honest reflection on the experiences of the homeless sector and unemployed people can be used to reflect on wider experiences of poor people and their representative organisations participation in policy processes and wider public debate. Clearly there are limits to the self-organisation of groups where the cause of the immediate poverty (unemployment, homelessness, parenting alone) is not the primary identity of the person. As Allen argues the episodic or transitory nature of unemployment and homelessness has several consequences for attempts to build movements built on identity. This raises the question of how or whether the state should support the role of civil society organisations who mediate between the state and marginalised people. What impact will the state withdrawal of resources have on the inclusion of marginalised people in policy processes?

Elite governance of science is another power structure that requires 'democratic flattening'. There is much cross sectoral learning to be gained from a close reading of the two chapters on public policy which bring us into the brave new world of science policy and the sub-fields of nanotechnology and health diagnostics. Both raise the issue of ethical reasons for enabling public participation, if technology is likely to be all-pervasive, then it needs to be the subject of public discussion. In addition participation has a valuable role to play in shifting public values, public education, creative problem solving and generating new

consensus and how society should tackle 'wicked problems'. Further dialogic participation ambitiously anticipates that public engagement might shape discourses and even end products of emerging science. However scientists and policymakers are also motivated to enable public participation to win over public opinion to new technologies and risk scenarios and to mitigate barriers to industrial development and competitiveness. Such dual agendas can make for a sceptical public. For O'Brien the concept of Scientific Citizenship is crucial for enabling both citizen competence in the sciences and active participation in debate. Her focus on the linkages between the public, science and the health diagnostics industry is interesting for the absence of the state as a stakeholder. Murphy's examination of citizens juries as a method of involving the public with nanotechnology is a practical insight into the dogged challenges of involving the public and the time and resources needed. That this pilot tackled issues of marginalisation and challenges of literacy is encouraging. The chapters make clear the link between science and an inclusive society, flattening of power is just as important for participation in the sciences public policy as other areas of policy. State and business resources are required to deepen the relationship between science and society.

All of the chapters have in common a robust belief that the public sphere is important and needs to be meaningfully populated by active citizens. O'Brien for example describes 'dialogue events' that do not seek to influence policy but seek to enable individuals from potentially diverse cultures to come together, articulate positions and views, and interact in a context of genuine equality. Murphy's case study of *Claiming Our Future* and its focus on the core principles of values-led deliberation, cross-sectoral and society-owned spaces is an important insight into how present systems of governance (including political parties) fail to enable mechanisms for legitimate participation. Sheehan's reflections on Occupy's attempt to create a public sphere contrasts with Murphy's. Both chapters reflect that such efforts are not without critique and prove difficult to sustain. Society is demanding not only new forms of governance and public spheres but also a refocus on values and new ideas to create a more sustainable future. There is a lack of dialogue and overlap across the two experiences, an irony given the focus on inter-sectoral alliance building in *Claiming Our Future* and inclusivity in *Occupy*. The two do agree on Drysek's principle (introduced in McInerney's chapter) that civil society requires distance

from and autonomy from the state and the importance of society-led creation of public spheres, the two also illustrate the very real challenges of sustaining state-free public spheres.

### *Inequality*

McInerney's opening chapter stressed the importance of power differentials and in particular how participation offers potential to restrict and counter balance the power of business, finance and markets. Gary Murphy's noted the degree to which partnership enabled only limited participation and even then participation was in a context of power hierarchies. Padraig Murphy outlined the need to maximise democratic potential by broadening inclusivity to include diverse publics, including the marginalised voices in society. O'Brien observed the MASIS report's (2011) reflection that participation in public science initiatives in the past decade was concentrated in well-educated, urban, younger sectors of the population.

The three chapters focusing on participation of the poor, homeless and poor communities examined not only the real obstacles to participation but also the limitations to what can be achieved by more micro processes of participation in the absence of broader strategies to tackle and redistribute structural inequalities. None of the chapters in the book offered any gender analysis, nor was there any exploration of the experience of participation by other groups experiencing structural disadvantage and discrimination (including migrants or Travellers, people with disabilities, and the LGBT community). Much of the most severe obstacles to participation are experienced where there is intersectionality of inequality. Sheehan's honest and often poignant reflection gives insight into generational tensions between old and young activist participants.

Taking gender inequality as an example, there is a broader gendered pattern of participation inequality (Murphy 2012). This is not just limiting for women. Patterns of gender inequality in political and public spheres limit our collective capacity and gender equality in public and private decision making is an essential part of a sustainable future. There is a growing awareness about the degree to which gender inequality in governance was a strong contributory factor in causing the initial global and economic crisis. Research confirms women's presence in policy processes alters the process of decision making. While not necessarily less risk adverse, women are more active and

independent as board members and directors. This has immediate and strategic application to overall risk management processes, women tend towards more use of committees, weigh long-term priorities and pay more attention to audit and risk oversight and control. TASC concluded that severe gender imbalance and lack of social diversity in participation in corporate governance tends towards 'groupthink' and to decision making that prioritises consensus while ignoring alternative evidence. While women participate more in local community infrastructure they tend not to translate into more formal participative structures like Strategic Policy Committees, this limits participative processes with state/society interfaces. There are significant gender imbalances amongst those representing the interests of businesses and workers in partnership and more informal lobbying processes, this means women's vulnerability in economic downturn is unlikely to receive sufficient focus. The 35% funding cut to the National Women's Council of Ireland in 2012 can only intensify this problem, other national and local women groups are also fire-fight funding cutbacks and coping with pressures on services.

### *E-participation*

Several chapters in this volume noted the use of new technology in enabling participation and observed that the participative web provides both a unique set of opportunities and constraints for deliberation. O'Brien describes the creative methods of the BDI education team sought to adapt and replace the original text-rich format with multimedia elements appropriate for adults with low reading and writing competence and non-native English speakers. *Claiming Our Future* for example made extensive use of the free deliberative software polling, e petitions and web based policy forms as key methods of enabling participation. That Sheehan's article first appeared on blogs is indicative of the power of such new forums and their use in the *Occupy* movement, she however discounts the idea of Facebook or Twitter revolutions arguing the impetus really comes from real social conditions and relations, while technologies greatly enhance the capacity to connect and to build social movements. The internet is said to have transformed three factors fundamental for policy-making: knowledge, connections and individuals embedded in networks (Liston *et al.* 2012). Online forums provide a unique opportunity for integrating citizen deliberation to the policy process on an on-going

basis. Examples of online deliberation are emerging and include participatory budgeting, city planning, deliberative opinion polls, online political discussion networks and online town hall meetings. Yet to date public authorities have, for the most part, used the internet for service delivery and information provision and dissemination. To this extent we have had more e-government than e-democracy. Komito's review of e-governance, new technologies, local government and civic participation shows a clear evidence of interest in policy participation but inadequate structures to facilitate participation (2012: 197). In common with the OECD 2003 review he finds little mainstreaming and 'little evidence of new technologies that encourage significant numbers of citizens to participate in policy formation'. Komito offers, as an example, *Mobhaile*, a pilot project established in 2004 to progress e-government and e-participation functions. While this had technological potential its capacity was reliant on the local authority's desire to cede a policy making role to local citizens and Komito found no evidence they wanted to do this electronically or otherwise. Consistent with many contributors to this volume (Ó Broin, Borsheid and Ginnell) he concludes that without desire the transformative potential of new technologies on governance will remain unrealised.

That is not to say there is no impact from new technology, Komito (2012) observes that Irish politics has shifted from mediation with individuals in a clientalistic and brokerage culture to mediation with interest groups and that a specific contribution has been the way new technologies have enhanced general and specific access to information. On the other hand the ease to which individuals can use new technologies (to blog, set up Facebook campaigns etc) might lead to a pattern of individual rather than collective action (Kirby and Murphy 2011; Ó Broin and Moore 2011). Assuming that internet-based media may overcome the limitations of traditional media may be over-optimistic. E-Participation is also heavily gendered and there is a significant age and socioeconomic digital divide, new media can mirror and perpetuate existing unequal patterns of participation (Bua 2009).

### ***Protest***

A previous publication in this series *Power Dissent and Politics, Civil Society and the State in Ireland* interrogated the relationship between state and society in Ireland (Ó Broin and Kirby 2009). It concluded there was to some degree an absence of a culture of conflict and

ideological debate in Ireland. Carney and Harris (2012) argue Irish civil society organisations are adjusting to the impact of the economic crisis and the partial collapse of Irish social partnership corporatist structures by adapting lobbying techniques to include street protests, media campaigns, and social media communication strategies. It is still too soon to see what impact the replacement of social partnership by 'social dialogue' will have on the dynamics of participation in decision-making in Ireland. As chapters by Mary P. Murphy and Helena Sheehan show, the lack of trust in the political sphere and political institutions is translating into some (but not significant) demand from citizens in the form of protest and calls for greater participation. It is notable that these take the form of peaceful deliberative processes rather than more dissent oriented street protest. Pádraig Murphy also notes in the area of nanotechnology real tensions and conflict in local public arenas where there are socio-technical disputes. Real fears of (and experience of) corporatist bullying are a significant obstacle to participation.

Lowenstein *et al.* (2007) define protest as a traditional and essential form of participation in policy making in a democracy, protest and dissent about the status quo is a public expression of policy preferences demands and of stating citizens' and migrants' frustrations with state policies. Since the current economic crisis took hold international commentators congratulated Irish society on its mature response to budget cuts and many mainstream commentators perceive a passivity in Irish society response to the crisis. The late Peter Mair (2010: 7) describes a 'passive' and 'demobilised' citizenry. However, since 2008 pensioners, students, workers, parents and disadvantaged communities have mounted various responses to austerity and cutbacks and used demonstrations, petitions, meetings, marches and creative 'spectacles of defiance' to register protest against health and education closures and social welfare cuts. These have been local as well as national. Sheehan records a significant level of protest activity in the Occupy movement and related campaigns. Issues pertaining to local environmental issues have significant capacity to animate local protest. Pádraig Murphy describes the socio-technical nature of science and sub politics which intensifies when fuelled by economic and political disillusionment. The Rossport protest predated the crisis and anti-fracking campaigns have potential to be a major source of tension between state and society.

The most vociferous protest, the household charge campaign, while clearly challenging the state, has to date been a largely peaceful protest. It is not clear whether this pattern of relatively peaceful protest will prevail or whether as unemployment stays stubbornly high (14.9% in July 2012) the nature of state-society relations will shift to a more conflictual pattern of contestation. Allen's chapter, however, gives some insight that high unemployment or social trauma does not necessarily translate into protest. He does however raise the interesting question as to how we understand the function and power of protest and how this relates to the function and power of disruption and argues for a wider yet more strategic concept of what can be done by the poor to disrupt public policy making.

### *Conclusion*

Kirby and Murphy (2009) argue that fundamental transformative change will not come about without participation in open communicative discourse about values. Habermas (2006: 103) speaks of the importance of a political public sphere, significant policy change requires public communication and discourse. This means a pivotal focus on the role of the media. Many are rightly critical of the role of the Irish media in framing politics, policy and power. Participation in public debate and an inclusive mainstream media community is crucial for healthy democracy. The Carnegie Trust (2007) points to issues of ownership of new and old forms of media. Sheehan points to the important lesson from *Occupy*, what she calls the be-your-own-media approach. It is ironic that government's support for the community infrastructure (once highlighted as an example of good practice to other Member States) is now being dismantled with severe consequences for participation. Pdraig Murphy notes the dialogical models of the future require significant commitments from what he describes as already over-stretched community workers.

Stoker (2012) identifies public participation and deliberation as necessary ingredients to deliver a politics that is capable of addressing crisis, managing loss and building coalitions of long-term policy support for more sustainable alternative economic strategies. He notes this needs to involve bypassing electoral constraints by developing a more deliberative dialogue with citizens and a different form of institutionalised power sharing giving a much wider role to interests and local and regional government. There is increasing demand for



creative public space for political and policy debate and there is a particular challenge of including people experiencing poverty in new public spheres. While this space needs to be some distance from and autonomous of the state there is also an obligation on the state and society, in facilitating a functioning and effective democracy, to make sure public spheres are challenging, participative and inclusive of all. However this should not over stress what can be achieved through such participation. As Allen argues, given the difficulty of meaningful mobilisation of people experiencing socio-economic rather than identity-based marginalisation (although these are clearly linked), solidarity is at least as important as inclusive participation. As McInerney argues there is a weak relationship between meaningful public participation and the institutions of representative democracy at both local and national level. We should be mindful that there is a very distinct and growing distance between the aspiration for greater public participation in public policy making and the reality of how policy is actually determined.