

Project Up2Youth; Youth, Actor of Social Change

**Youth Participation in the
Republic of Ireland**

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Introduction

This report is a literary analysis of young people's participation in civil society in contemporary Ireland. Following a brief review of the concept of social capital in an Irish context the report is structured into four main sections; Individualization, Learning, Policy and Culture. An additional (minor) section briefly looks at emerging issues. This report forms part of the Irish contribution to project 'Up 2 Youth; Youth, Actor of Social Change', a pan-European research project funded by the European Commission.

Social Capital in Ireland

The usual construction of social capital in Ireland is taken as membership of voluntary or community organizations, interpersonal trust, trust in various societal institutions (such as the media, church and state organs) and engagement in the political life of the nation through voting, membership of a political party or particular interest group (such as farmers association or trade union).

Ireland has adopted a form of corporatist decision-making since the mid nineteen eighties under the auspices of 'social partnership', a mechanism that purports to enhance democracy and enhance the level of social capital available. The system is not without its' critics; primarily the unequal distribution of power within the current arrangement (Powell and Geoghegan, 2005).

In comparison to other European nations Ireland is above average in the amount of social capital available (NESF, 2003, p.61). There is little ground for complacency however as the World Values Survey show Ireland to be average or below in a ranking of OECD countries (2005, p.84-85).

Social capital in Ireland appears to be distributed unevenly according to variables such as age, marital status and education (NESF, 2003, p.49-66). Healy (2005) found these and other factors (watching TV being negative and length of residence in an area being positive) correlated statistically with volunteering and community engagement.

From society's perspective young people's social capital is more or less taken as the passive engagement of the younger citizen in activities deemed appropriate by power holders. Recent developments such as the proposed introduction of Anti-Social Behavioural Orders illustrate that conformity rather than consultation, let alone active

involvement, is the expected youth response to public policy matters that directly affect young people (Leahy, 2005).

Individualization

The impact of individualization on young people's participation in Irish society is difficult to quantify. Whereas the issue of participation has attracted state and academic interest individualization as a factor in participation seems to be a somewhat neglected area of social research.

This may be partly explained by the high level of compliance to societal norms evident amongst Irish youth. Leahy (2006, A) argues that although transitional structures are fragmented amongst marginalized groups the vast majority (80%) of Irish young people exit education at the prescribed level and at the prescribed time. Despite various media and politically generated panics related to drug use, anti-social behaviour, promiscuity and violence the reality is that young people tend to opt into societal systems and conform. This is not to say that these young people are unquestioning and passive; on the contrary research indicates a sophisticated and informed youth population who view the current status quo as deeply flawed and grossly unjust; yet they tend to be cynical and skeptical in their political outlook;

“We're born, put into school to get an education, to go to college, to get a job, to make money, have children and bring them up the same way as we've been brought up” (Cork Skater, in Leahy, 2006, B)

Contemporary youth opts in because it sees no alternative, but it should be borne in mind that contemporary youth in Ireland is an 'MTV' generation, comfortable and confident with information technology and deeply suspicious of adults.

Irish society has changed dramatically over the last twenty years . Peillon (2002) points out that;

“it would be difficult to find an example of such deep, intense and rapid transformation as has occurred in Ireland” (p.1).

Moving from a more or less pre-industrial to a knowledge based economy in under 50 years has dramatically altered Irish society and the shape of participation in this society.

Hegarty (2006) has noted that alongside the economic transformation

“the social fabric of our society has been altered, we increasingly ask questions about identity”.

Identity has become synonymous with occupation and consumption; Ireland has enthusiastically adopted a free-market liberal model of economic development heavily rooted in the capitalist ideology of Thatcher and Reagan (Allen, 2000, O’Toole, 2003). The underlying assumption flowing from this ideology is that participation in society is primarily an economic activity and that;

“the role of the ordinary citizen is to be a member of a paid labour force and a consumer, in order to keep the economy going”

(Ryan in Coulter and Coleman, 2003, p.155).

The rise of individualization in Ireland can be linked with the penetration of New Right values (epitomized by the junior party in the current coalition government, The Progressive Democrats) into society; thus matters such as healthcare and pension provisions are increasingly viewed as the responsibility of the individual and not the state.

Despite these changes it does seem that in the main Ireland has retained a strong voluntary sector that serves to anchor civil society (NESF, 2003); the strength of this sector does not however entail a strong degree of citizen participation in decision making. Honohan for example (2005, p180) observing that;

“We should be wary of exhortations to be more active or civic spirited, or to join voluntary associations in order to strengthen social capital, unless ordinary citizens are given a larger voice in decision making”.

Honohan is alluding here to both the traditional secretive natureⁱ and centralist policies of successive Irish governments that have eroded municipal autonomy and to the concentration of decision making power in Irish society.ⁱⁱ Ruddock (5/11/06) has

critiqued An Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern's apparent concerns for the decline in civil society as a disingenuous stratagem that simultaneously berates the population for not displaying commutarian values whilst leading a government that is;

“Refusing to give us the power to make our communities better”.

Ireland has developed a particular form of corporatism (partnership) that in theory operates alongside the party-political system in allowing active citizen participation in decision making; critics venture that the net effect of this arrangement;

“Is that a small group of peak organizations have come to exert particular influence”
(Tovey and Share, 2003, p88).

Nevertheless the Partnership Process is credited with being instrumental in opening avenues of participation for the ordinary citizen in Irish society. This does not however disguise a historical reluctance towards a fuller participatory democracy evident within Irish society. Powell (2003, p.82) argues convincingly that in Ireland;

“Social citizenship rights have remained incomplete and chances for participation have continued, to the present day, to be more unequally distributed than the full status of citizenship in a modern democracy would permit”.

Ireland therefore has the paradoxical scenario of flourishing voluntary sector participation juxtaposed with a dearth of active participation in decision making opportunities for those who volunteer their time and service and an underlying democratic deficit at national, regional and municipal levels.

Within contemporary Ireland there is now concern that the relative strength of the voluntary sector is exposed to grave risks posed by changes in society. An Taoiseach launched a ‘Task Force on Active Citizenship’ in April 2006 with specific terms of reference aimed at encouraging and facilitating active participation in society (Dept of An Taoiseach, 19/5/06).

This task force, chaired by Ms. Mary Davisⁱⁱⁱ, reports that “*no firm evidence has emerged, so far, to support claims that social capital or volunteering has been declining*” (Task Force on Active Citizenship, 2006) although anecdotal evidence of such a decline abounds.

The research of Burgess and Leahy (2003) has showed that although a high degree of trajectory standardization still exists in Irish youth transitions for the majority of the population major disruption and fragmentation now exists for young people from the marginalized sections of society. The increasing individualization of Irish society which Tovey and Share refer to as an “*obligation (on people) to construct their own do-it-yourself biography*” (2003) has impacted upon the nature and depth of young people’s participation in Irish society over the last fifteen years or so. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of shifting patterns of engagement lies in the political field.

The State, NGOs and the main political parties have all expressed unease at the decreasing levels of participation at the polls and at the growing apathy displayed by young people towards politics in general (O’Leary, 2001). Political parties are also experiencing difficulty in recruiting young members. Research conducted amongst 18 to 25 year olds by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) in relation to the local and European elections of June 1999 makes disquieting reading;

“Slightly more than one-third (35%) of the sample group said that they had voted” (NYCI, 1999).

This compares with a figure of 50.2% of the overall electorate, itself a turnout low enough to be a source of worry. What becomes even more alarming from the NYCI research however is the reasons why young people did not vote; nearly half (49%) of them were unable to vote due to work, exams and college or some other absence or because they were not registered (ibid). Indeed fully 20% of the non-voting sample were not registered to vote^{iv}. The government of the day resisted calls from student groups and the opposition to conduct the poll on an alternative date that would not clash with college exams.

This situation indicates that despite the political rhetoric urging citizens, and especially young citizens, to participate, structural factors inhibit or indeed prevent particular groups of young people (and ironically the middle class college student is especially vulnerable in this instance) from exercising the franchise.

Avenues for youth participation at local level also appear limited. Recent research from Trinity College Dublin strongly indicates dissatisfaction amongst young people in regard to having their opinions taken into account;

“Young people felt ignored and excluded by politicians, resident associations and community development committees and that the regeneration of their areas resulted in instances of them being barred from using privately owned commercial leisure complexes”
(Children’s Research Centre, 2006).

This corresponds with Burgess and Leahy’s findings from Project Yoyo, Long’s research amongst urban young people (2001) and with Burke’s (2006) study of young people’s participation in the setting up a youth café. In all cases the young people expressed a sense of alienation from their own communities regardless of class background. Power and decision making in Ireland is controlled by older age groups. Conversely, it is the younger groups who are most at ease with a post modern society.

The youth work sector in Ireland has been at the forefront in attempting to overcome such alienation and to offer young people meaningful participation opportunities. Two overlapping and complementary strategies are employed by the sector;

1. Advocacy. The sector has consistently lobbied for increased opportunities for meaningful participation and for resources to implement relevant programmes (NYCI, 2005).
2. Practice. Youth work organizations are searching for and implementing good practices in active participation. An example of this comes from the Gurrabraher Youth Project in Cork City where young people sit on interview panels for staff recruitment as equal partners with management.

Additionally, within the practice of youth work it is evident that principals of social justice and communitarianism are actively pursued in combating individualization and consumerism. Although a disparate group^v representing a broad swathe of ideologies, Irish youth organizations share a commonality in attempting to foster these values in young people. The sector readily acknowledges that much remains to be done in order to achieve worthwhile participation (National Youth Federation, 2003) yet it is according this issue due importance. It remains to be seen if these organizations can alleviate the effects of individualization as the ideology of consumerism and self-reliance gains further ground.

Learning

Irish young people ‘learn’ how to participate as an age-related integration of personal agency with social structure.

Within the formal education system attempts are being made to start-up student councils. The 1998 Education Act provides for such forums yet;

“In practice only a small number of schools have democratic and effective student councils” (National Children’s Office, 2003).

The formal education sector in Ireland is characterized by a high level of authoritarianism and hierarchical structures; this mitigates against the development of participatory mechanisms within schools. One particular school programme, Civics, Social and Political Education (CSEP) has the goal of developing young peoples (aged 12-16) awareness in these areas. The willingness of individual schools to foster a sense of democratic decision making sympathetic to this programme’s ethos is heavily dependant upon the school management and principal. In this regard O’Sullivan’s (2003) investigation on parental involvement revealed a tokenistic façade with no real decision making power residing with parents.

Outside the formal sector the voluntary youth work arena does provide subjectively meaningful opportunities for learning in the area of participation. Foroige (a national youth organization) for instance operates a comprehensive ‘Youth Citizenship’ programme targeted at local level. The programme aims to encourage civic responsibility

and to facilitate youth involvement in improving local amenities (Feroige, 2005). Scouting Ireland places a similar emphasis on civic responsibility and environmental issues (in this regard it should be acknowledged that scouting has traditionally been at the forefront in the environmental area). These examples are fairly standard and indeed the main emphasis given over to participation in Irish youth work tends to be non-confrontational and centred on devolving 'low order' decision making to young people.

Within this 'low order' framework however there can be a surprising large scope for learning. The organizational structure used in scouting is based upon small groups (patrols) led by older members. These patrols feature a number of specific jobs with specific responsibilities (such as scribe, treasurer, quartermaster and cook). These patrols operate with a large degree of autonomy and facilitate concrete learning opportunities; for example, if we do not waterproof our tent prior to camping we will be wet, cold and miserable. Decision making is a group activity wherein the older members may exercise more power but crucially all members possess some degree of power and are expected to contribute. The adult leaders retain ultimate authority and also ensure that individuals are accorded respect. The organization has, over the last 20 years or so, worked hard at eliminating undesirable behaviours such as bullying (Bree et al, 1979, White and Bindloss, 1950, Scouting.ie).

The uniformed youth organizations are (usually) perceived as being conservative in outlook and indeed there is little evidence to suggest that Irish scouting deviates from his perception. What is remarkable however is that the (admittedly paramilitary) organizational structures utilized are adept at facilitating participatory democracy within a hierarchy and at the potential for skills development. This contrasts with the more predominant club model employed by other organizations which tends to have a structure of leaders and members. Participation in this model can be as bland as a 'take it or leave it' recreational focus. Gillespie, Lovett and Garner (1992) have characterized club based youth work as being games orientated; in 2006 O'Donovan has argued that the youth service needs to move beyond this outdated model and embrace more challenging, relevant and participatory methods of practice.

Youth work organizations have recognized this situation and are making attempts to improve matters; improvements are hampered however by the dearth of funding available to these organizations to upskill and train voluntary youth workers.

State-sponsored measures aimed at young people (particularly disadvantaged young people) offer another set of learning and participation opportunities. Interventions such as Youthreach (targeted at early school leavers) offer young people vocational training within a training center setting. Burgess and Leahy's research shows that although participation is deemed desirable by the young people it effectively consists again of decision making on low-level issues such as menu choices. A worrying finding from Burke's research (op cit.) is the discomfort felt by the young people in adult orientated discussion forums. The overt formality and intricacies of such forums were viewed as alien sites by the respondents in her study. This raises two questions;

1. were the young people adequately prepared for engagement with other community members and,
2. was the format adopted for meetings cogniscent of the needs of young people who were engaging in this space for the first time?

More radical opportunities for participation also exist. Our preliminary investigations reveal two projects in particular that feature deeper levels of participation for young people in the Cork area.

- 'Unite', the Cork Gay Project's youth club, and
- 'Cork Urban Skate Project' (CUSP), a group supported (not operated) by the Gurrabraher Youth Project's drugs worker,

Unite is a group for gay young people (15-24 yr olds) that meets weekly and offers its members both a social space in which one's sexual orientation is taken as gay and a youth service with specific emphasis on gay issues. The existence of the group is in itself a political act insofar as that Irish society has only recently acknowledged differences in sexual orientation.

The group's mechanisms are heavily rooted in democratic principals and tend to coalesce into a radical humanistic model of youth work practice (see Hurley and Treacy, 1993). The group operates as a community of interest and although primarily concerned with matters such as health and welfare it actively encourages participation in political life. Two of the group members (aged 20 and 2) accompanied the centre's worker to Dublin recently to discuss policy issues with the Department of Health. The group has also visited schools to meet parents groups and outline to these parents the challenges and difficulties faced by young gays and lesbians in school, especially if they are not 'out'. It is not uncommon in this scenario to have two or three 15 year olds discussing these matters and issues with groups of up to 30 parents (interview, D. Roache, Nov. 06).

The emergence of a group such as 'Unite' can be perceived as a sign of a growing maturity in Ireland and yet also paradoxically of the reactionary social environment that minority groups may exist in. Research conducted by Dublin City University shows that 50% of gay second level school-goers have been bullied and that homophobic attitudes are common in schools (Norman, Galvin and McNamara, 2006). Groups such as 'Unite' represent a real avenue of opportunity to counter both bullying behaviour and these attitudes.

The CUSP group represent Cork Skateboarders (see also below under culture) and has met with local authority politicians and officials in relation to the provision of skateboard and BMX biking facilities in the City. This group has proved itself adept at representing its member's interests and (due to the failure of negotiations around facilities) intends to put forward a candidate for election to the municipal council at the next election. A degree of political sophistication is evident with this; they believe that they will not get a candidate elected but they also believe that by running a candidate they will garner votes from the established political parties. Their strategy is therefore to raise awareness (amongst young voters) and to represent a threat to local power holders. The potential diversion of votes may indeed present CUSP with a negotiable asset in dealing with local politicians.

These spaces represent some of the learning opportunities for Irish young people to engage with participation. As was outlined earlier the very notion of devolved decision making is a relatively foreign concept in an Irish context. Momentum does appear to be building in different arenas; Iredale (in Kiely et al, 1999), whilst outlining the state's democratic deficit does note that;

“As Ireland enters the Twenty-first century, informed citizen consultation and participation will be a defining element, with new approaches required to deal effectively with local, national and international issues. Regardless of whichever option to improve public involvement is chosen, the general public must have enough information to enable them to participate effectively”.

Whether or not this effective participation extends to young people in a meaningful manner remains to be seen.

Policy

The Irish State ratified the UN convention on the rights of the Child in 1990, and although little real progress in solidifying such rights was evident in the following decade a number of key initiatives and developments have occurred over the last six years. The Government published the National Children's Strategy^{vi} (NCS) in 2000 and established the NCO (National Children's Office, charged with implementing the strategy) in 2001. The strategy forms the kernel of Irish policy in relation to children and young people and has three primary goals;

- 1. Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*
- 2. Children's lives will be better understood their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and effectiveness of services.*
- 3. Children will receive quality supports and services to promote al aspects of their development*

(National Children's Strategy, strategic goals).

The NCO has responsibility for the first two goals and aspects of the third. The 'Cabinet Committee on Children' (chaired by An Taoiseach) holds responsibility for providing resources coordinating responses to children's needs. It can be seen that the issue of participation (*having a voice*) is prominent in the strategy; in order to achieve its goal a

number of initiatives have been activated. Student councils (mentioned above) will ultimately be coordinated by the NCO and represent the voice of the school going population;

“A student Council is a representative structure for students only, through which they can become involved in the affairs of the school, working in partnership with school management, staff and parents for the benefit of the school, and its students”

(National Children’s Office, 2003).

A further initiative under the goal of the strategy is ‘Dail na nOg’ (Parliament of the Young). Local structures (Comhairle Na nOg) are operated under the aegis of municipal development boards that allow 8-18 year old a forum for discussion. These local groups select representative for an annual Dail (parliament). This group consists of 192 young people (aged 12-18) drawn from various youth organizations and representing every county (through the municipal comhairle) in Ireland. Officials from relevant government bodies and NGO’s also attend (the government is usually represented by a Minister). The National Youth Council of Ireland is currently responsible for the operation of his forum. The 2003 Dail expressed dissatisfaction at the failure of the government to act on any of it’s recommendation from 2002; this suggests that an element of tokenism may be present. Murphy (2005) believes that improvements are required in at least three areas if Dail na nOg is to truly represent young people at national level;

1. The selection of young representatives at local level needs attention in order to develop relationships between the representative and the represented.
2. Dail na nOg requires statutory footing to underpin its’ role and enhance its’ position.
3. The one day format should be abandoned in favour of (at least) a two day event so as to allow time for proper debate and discussion. (Murphy, 2005).

Parkes has contented that;

“Dail na nOg fails to educate the young delegates about democracy or how the parliamentary process operates”

(Parkes, 2002, in Murphy 2005).

Michael McLoughlin, Youth Work Ireland’s director of central service, has argued that although Dail na nOg is a step forward and is therefore worthy of support the real aim of

organizations purporting to represent youth interests should be the lowering of the voting age to 16 (Youth Work Ireland, 2006).

Dail na nOg's 2006 conference highlighted issues such as "*affordable and safe facilities*" (such as youth cafes) for young people and the integration of young migrant workers and asylum seekers into Irish society. The development of an electronic national youth information and exchange network (possibly reflecting the popularity of sites such as 'bebo' and 'youtube') emerged as the primary issue from this Dail (www.dailnaaog.ie/2006/site/home.php).

A further key element of the children's strategy is the creation of an ombudsman for children. A notable feature of the selection of the first ombudsman was the involvement of young people in the interview process; Emily Logan was duly appointed to the post in December 2003. Alongside the National Children's Strategy various government policies (such as the Task Force on Active Citizenship, see above) are attempting to promote and facilitate participation.

Within the realm of youth work the publication of the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003) placed active participation at the core of good practice. The first goal under this plan is;

"To facilitate young people and adults to participate more fully in, and to gain optimum benefit from, youth work programmes and services" (p.18).

This particular plan has not yet been fully implemented, and it is a matter of some concern to the various youth work organizations that the government appears to be implementing the plan at a slow pace (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2006). The Youth Council itself has the strategic aim of developing participation amongst young people and of advocating for the 'youth agenda' at the highest level (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2004).

Notwithstanding the commitments of both state and voluntary sector to increasing the level of meaningful active participation the salient fact remains that although policy appears to have swung heavily towards a deeper and more meaningful level of participation the situation in practice may not be as strong. The experiences of the young people researched in some of the case studies mentioned in this report (see above) suggest that although a start has been made, much remains undone in translating well intentioned policy into practice. Gunning (2006), in a study on youth participation commissioned by Youth Work Ireland (formerly the National Youth Federation), found a number of challenges inherent in raising participation. These challenges ranged from the avoidance of tokenism to the provision of age appropriate opportunities, and from the need to ‘upskill’ the young people to the need for adults to relinquish power. A key area identified was the issue of training;

“Youth workers and leaders need training in this area as to the transfer of participation practices from the organization to the adults on the ground”
(p.25).

The unspoken challenge may well be the realignment of everyday activity into a more participatory format. Mullender and Ward (1991) have pointed out that the actualization of decision-making in societies hitherto unaccustomed to such practices can lead to puzzlement and confusion simply because people do not know how to be in control.

Youth Culture

Contemporary youth culture in Ireland borrows heavily from both American (United States) and British fashions and fads; despite this an underlying ‘Irishness’ is also evident in the cultural spaces that young people create for themselves^{vii}.

Summer schools in Irish language and cultural regions (Gaetacht) remain a popular activity for many young people despite the onset of 21st century globalized leisure pursuits.

Young people in Ireland are enthusiastic users of technology; mobile phone ownership is virtually universal amongst young people and information technology (particularly email) has been internalized in a remarkably short space of time. Young people have thereby

created separate ‘virtual’ sites within which a distinctive youth culture exists and indeed flourishes.

The current generation is somewhat unique in Ireland insofar as that they are ‘Tiger Cubs’; the offspring of the much vaunted ‘Celtic Tiger Economy’ that has transformed the Irish socio-economic landscape. Unlike previous generations they have grown up in a relatively affluent society and have a high disposable income relative to these previous generations. Issues such as mass unemployment and emigration which bedeviled policy makers for decades have receded and are perceived as ancient history by most teenagers. This affluence has fed into the overall rise in consumerism and has also raised concerns about the growth in substance use amongst young people. These concerns appear to be well founded; research published in the Journal of American College Health showed that amongst college students Irish young people came in as the highest drinkers with 57% of female and 49% of male being classified as heavy binge drinkers (Examiner, 24/10/06). Heavy drinking remains a feature of Irish cultural life with the pub occupying a central social space. Consumption patterns are changing yet according to National Geographic (November 2006) Ireland is second only to the Czech Republic in beer consumption, with an average of 127.4 litres per person being quaffed by the population.

Youth Work Ireland has criticized Government policy in relation to young people and alcohol, claiming that;

“It is probably the worst policy in the world” (McLoughlin, in the Examiner, 30/11/06).

The situation regarding illicit recreational drug use has come to be viewed as perhaps the single gravest youth issue requiring attention today. Responses targeted primarily at working and welfare dependant class areas are coordinated by ‘Local Drugs Task Forces’ and typically seek to engage ‘at risk’ young people^{viii} in youth service measures. Participation in socially acceptable activities is viewed as a key aspect in countering participation in activities perceived as deviant by society (National Drugs Strategy Team, 1999).

Youth participation in various counter-cultures is a feature of Irish society; some of these cultures are viewed in a mildly disapproving manner (such as skateboarding) whilst others are deemed (potentially) more threatening. Car modifiers are coming under increasing scrutiny in this regard and the construction of these young people as ‘boy racers’ illustrates the manipulation of language to connect these young people (usually male) with the high road traffic accident rate in Ireland. Christy O’ Neill, a youth worker with the Cashel and Emily Diocesan Youth Service, operates a project with car-modifiers and refutes this suggestion by arguing that given time, money and energy these young people devote to their vehicles it would make no sense whatsoever for them to risk their cars in high speed antics (O’Neill, 2006).

Youth participation in mainstream artistic endeavors (such as cinema, dance, music, drama and painting) has been stimulated over the last decade by the adaptation of a number of National Arts Plans and the creation of a National Youth Arts Programme. Although art plays a significant role in most youth organizations everyday activities the area remains somewhat peripheral in terms of structures and mechanisms;

“There is still no infrastructure at national, regional or local level to support sustainable growth in the youth arts sector despite ongoing expansion at grassroots level” (Coughlan, 2004, p.7).

Grassroots expansion has occurred and not necessarily with the assistance of youth services or other agencies. A group of Cork skateboarders have produced a short film entitled ‘Anti-Typical’. In this film the young people are shown skating at various locations around Cork City (including the courthouse; this is in itself interesting, the young people revealed that this location was safe due to the police presence). The experience and activities of these young people is revealing as it represents an interface between cultural activities within the city. The approbation of youth culture by societal institutions is also evident in this regard. The University’s prospectus for 2006 featured a picture of a skater ‘tricking’ on the campus. The ironic reality behind this photograph is that skaters are constantly being chased off the campus as the activity is not permitted yet

the institution has no qualms about using the image of skaters to attract potential students. (University College Cork, 2006).

Although Ireland is credited with being an artistic society in a cultural sense sport usually triumphs the arts in any competition for resources. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) for example is an amateur organization that has clubs in virtually every parish in the country. Sport represents perhaps the single greatest cultural site in Ireland and it is not uncommon to hear politicians preach the virtues of various sporting codes as an excellent means of socializing the young, combating exclusion and promoting civic integration as exemplified by the Lord Mayor of Cork;

“Sport provides a major tool in tackling social exclusion, in that the greater social participation can positively contribute to alleviating the core social exclusion problems” (Martin^{ix}, in Cork City Council, 2005)

The mechanics of how sport will achieve this noble goal are left unsaid in this instance. This obsession with youth participation in sport might well be explained by the element of adult control within sports organizations. Unlike most youth organizations which at least aspire to a level of equity between adults and young people sports organizations are intrinsically hierarchal with little or no power devolving to the young people. Issues such as team selection, tactics and extra-circular activities are decided by adults. Activities such as BMX biking and skating are beyond adult control and therefore represent a threatening aspect of youth culture.

The allocation of municipal resources in this regard is also noteworthy. Young people in Cork City have been seeking a skate park for over five years. A facility was opened recently but it is not utilized by the skaters as they believe it is unsafe (Examiner, 24/10/06). Yet the municipal authority provides 54 sports fields^x and numerous other resources to sporting organizations (Cork City Council, 2005).

Emerging Issues

The participation or non-participation of young people from minority groups in Irish civil society will most likely become a focal point for youth organizations over the next decade or so. The issue of Traveller^{xi} participation in society remains a vexed question in Irish society. Pavee Point, a Travellers advocacy group, believe that relationships between settled majority and travellers have deteriorated as Irish society has become more prosperous (Pavee Point, 2006). Cronin's (2004) investigation into Traveller participation in healthcare initiatives led her to question if Traveller interest's would be better served by alternative tactics such as negotiation or direct action; "*beyond empty ritual*" (Cronin, 2004, p.54).

The participation of migrant young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds will undoubtedly pose a challenge to both the state and NGO's in the near future given recent immigration trends. Dorrity's (2006) studies indicate obstacles to participation for this group.

A further area of debate is manifested in the emergence of new technologies and their impact on young people's participation. Put simply; does increased access to internet, mobile phone and virtual reality technology increase a young person's access, communication and participation in civil society? Or can these technologies similarly be cited as leading to insularity, isolation, disengagement from civil society and the construction of an 'anti-community'; that which resides within the individual alone, separate and apart from civil society? An anti-community with no obligations to society? Alongside ethnic minorities and gay young people the participation of other minority groups seems likely to feature heavily in policy and practice discourses in the coming years.

In a recent report the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) revealed that only five out of 14 institutes of Technology (third-level vocational training colleges) are fully accessible to disabled students. This state of affairs illustrates the stark reality that despite various initiatives and policy decisions significant barriers remain to

be dismantled before the opportunity for full active participation becomes a reality rather than a utopian aspiration. As the 'Hearing Young Voices' report puts states;

“It remains the case both in and beyond Ireland that most organisations representing the rights and interests of children/young people do not consult with them during the preparation of submissions on public policy proposals affecting children/young people. If a child-centred approach is to be taken to progressing consultation with children/young people, then the matter of direct and indirect consultation will need to be addressed”
(McAuley and Brattman, 2002, p.29).

Structure of Youth Policy at National and Local Level

Rather than coming under the aegis of any single government body, responsibility for youth policy in Ireland tends to be divided across a number of Government departments such as Education, Health, Labour and Justice. These various departments are charged with implementing policy in their respective areas, sometimes with particular emphasis on particular sub-sections of the population. Youth work is seen primarily as a recreational and leisure orientated activity within the broader social education area and falls under the Youth Affairs section of the Department of Education. This particular perspective of youth work is changing as policy makers have come to view the sector as offering valid services in working with disadvantaged and marginalized young people. The Department of Justice, for example, has become a significant funder of youth work services through their 'Garda Youth Diversion Projects', projects usually operated by voluntary youth organizations in collaboration with local police. These projects are located in areas of social disadvantage and aim to 'divert' local young people away from crime.

Policy Framework

The Republic of Ireland has signed (30/9/90) and ratified without reservation (21/9/92) the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child and is therefore committed to upholding and advancing these rights in domestic legislation and social policy.

The National Children's Strategy (2000), the Children Act (2001), Child Protection Policies (Children First, 1999), the Childcare Act (1991), the Youth Work Act (2001) and

the National Youth Work Development Plan (2003) represent the principle legal and policy instruments that *directly* address the formation of social policy in the area of youth.

Youth Work Act, 2001,

The Youth Work Act (2001) defines youth work as;

“A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is-

- (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and*
 - (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organizations”*
- (Youth Work Act, 2001, sec. 3).

Furthermore, the Act places youth work on a statutory footing and lays down parameters for youth work in Ireland. Under the Act’s provisions the Minister for Education carries certain responsibilities in relation to the provision of services for young people and for the development and coordination of youth work in Ireland.

The main responsibilities are;

- *“To provide annual funding for youth work programmes and services,*
- *To carry out research or to commission research in respect of youth work,*
- *To monitor once a year the youth work programmes and services of at least one organization in receipt of funding,*
- *To provide for the assessment once every three years of state funded youth work programmes and services funded by the Vocational Education Committees,*
- *To appoint the National Youth Work Advisory Committee,*
- *To give due regard to the treatment of male and females between the ages of 10-21 years and to those who are socially or economically disadvantaged,*
- *To give direction to Vocational Education Committees or youth work organizations if this is required”.*

(www.education.ie/home).

The National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC) commenced work in April 2002 and meets monthly. This group is charged with advising the Minister and with overseeing the implementation of the Youth Work Development Plan. NYWAC is

comprised of representatives from the state and the voluntary youth sector. At regional level the Act regulates the operations of the VEC's¹ in the provision of services.

The National Youth Work Development Plan

The national plan stems directly from the Youth Work Act 2001 as the strategy adopted to implement the Youth Work Act 2001. This document represents a comprehensive attempt to upgrade, coordinate, develop and monitor a nationwide youth service. The plan represents the culmination of over twenty years of reports, strategies and policy frameworks for youth work in Ireland and sets out a series of 46 actions related to four primary goals that will ultimately deliver a quality service to the youth of Ireland. These primary goals are;

1. *To facilitate young people and adults to participate more fully in, and gain optimum benefit from, youth work programmes and services.*
2. *To enhance the contribution of youth work to social inclusion and citizenship in a rapidly changing national and global context.*
3. *To put in place an expanded and enhanced infrastructure for development, support and coordination at national and local level.*
4. *To put in place mechanisms for enhancing professionalism and ensuring quality standards in youth work.*

(National Youth Work Development Plan, 2003).

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) has argued that despite the adaptation of this plan the Government has inadequately funded and places little value on youth work; indeed the sector should retain a degree of caution in relation to both the 2001 Act and the National Plan due to the historical tendency of the state to shelve reports and plans regarding youth work (NYCI, 2004, p.4).

Structure of Youth Work in Ireland

Youth work in Ireland is conducted by a diverse and diffuse variety of organizations. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) consists of forty-three full member organizations, four observer members and six members with correspondence status (NYCI, 2004, p.21). These fifty-three organizations can be taken *de facto* as the youth

¹ Vocational Education Committees. These are municipal bodies charged with providing educational services They consist of elected representatives fro the relevant municipality and state officials.

service in Ireland as the NYCI is the overarching umbrella body of youth work in this country.

“Traditionally, youth work in Ireland has been carried out mainly by voluntary youth organizations operating at national and regional level”
(Becky and Newman, 1996, p.41).

In the main organizations are geographically structured along ecclesiastical boundaries; Youth Work Ireland for example is a federation of regional services based upon diocesan divisions. Within these regions one finds parish based youth clubs operated by local volunteers. Projects for at risk young people are usually found in disadvantaged areas and again the norm is for parish based services. The uniformed youth organizations follow a similar organizational pattern. This particular arrangement evidences the strong influence of the clergy's involvement in youth work and indeed in the wider field of social service provision in Ireland. Although its influence is waning the Catholic Church still retains a significant level of power in Irish youth work.

A heavy emphasis on volunteering is evident in the sector and this emphasis reflects both the corporatist inclinations of the state and the sector's own historical development. It is also advanced as an example of civic participation. This situation is very much in keeping with Ireland's embrace of a 'partnership' approach to economic and social issues. Powell and Geohegan (2004) contend that generically;

“The concept of partnership today envisages an integrationist model of development based upon cooperation between government, market and civil society” (p.38).

Recent years have seen as reduction in the numbers of volunteers and an increasing professionalization of the field. Generally, local parish based services are provided in the form of youth clubs affiliated to a voluntary organization. They are operated and managed by volunteers who are supported by the affiliating organization's professional staff. Interventions for marginalized young people are operated by professionally qualified personnel; in the past these may have been teachers or social workers; the norm

today is for persons who are qualified youth workers. In both instances a community youth work model is employed, either a geographical community or a community of interest. Theoretically, youth work in Ireland tends to be conservative in nature although radical forms of practice (see Dec. '06 report) are gaining ground.

Although the voluntary youth organizations remain the primary providers of youth work services other actors are also involved. There are three core actors involved in service delivery, firstly the youth organizations themselves, secondly the state through its various departments, and finally local communities. Virtually all interventions are funded by the state regardless of the management structure; therefore a degree of state control usually exists in all youth interventions.

Current Policy Discourses Related to Citizenship and Participation

In recent years the state has set in place mechanisms for increased youth participation and has expressed concern around the area of civic participation in general (see December 2006 report). Despite these developments the rhetoric emanating from government sources in relation to young people has tended to revolve around a perceived increase in anti-social behaviour and deviant activities such as substance mis-use.

The up-coming general election (an election has to be held in 2007) may well account for at least some of this rhetoric as various political parties attempt to woo the electorate with a 'law and order' agenda. Opportunistic electioneering such as this appears to be a factor in the continuing decline of young people in political participation although research from the National Youth Council of Ireland (1999, see also Dec. '06 report) suggests that many inter-linked factors are at work..

Sexual Activity

Due to a controversial High-Court judgment relating to underage sex the age of consent for sexual intercourse in Ireland is currently a matter of polarized debate. At present, the age of consent is 17 apart from married couples. The minimum age for marriage is 16. The absence of input from young people in this debate is especially striking given the

state commitment to involve young people in matters affecting them (McLaughlin, Youth Work Ireland).

A recent research study by second level students in Dublin revealed that young people under 16 face difficulties in accessing contraceptives (Young Social Innovators, 2007). In relation to this research the Minister for Health (Mary Harney) commented that;

“Too often when we make decision in Ireland we don’t listen to the next generation. Policies are stronger when we listen to the voices of young people”

(Examiner, 27/1/07).

Issues pertaining to sexual activity in Ireland are fraught with moral and ethical considerations.

Welfare System

The social welfare system in Ireland can be traced back to various services developed by the British government prior to independence in 1921, chiefly the Poor Law of 1838. Such services included primary education (1831), children’s service (1908), non-contributory pensions (1908) and unemployment and sickness benefits (1911). Following independence a significant degree of British influence remained evident in the nature of state welfare provision (Curry, 1998, p.13). Alongside and in part independent of the state the Catholic Church undertook a significant role in the provision of welfare, and although this role is now receding it is by no means defunct.

The current welfare situation in Ireland is a rather complex system of payments and benefits which have defied attempts at simplification. Education is now universal up to degree level; the healthcare system is a combination of public and private provision. Housing is predominantly a private matter as state funds for the provision of social housing are minimal. Various allowances are also available for people seeking to further their education; access to these allowances is however subject to the meeting of relatively stringent conditions (i.e., to claim a third level allowance a person must be unemployed for at least three years).

A number of schemes operate in relation to income maintenance; Children's Allowance is universal whereas others such as the One-Parent Family payment and Old-Age Pensions are particular to individual circumstances. Payments are made under two categories, social insurance or social assistance. Tax on income is paid immediately on first employment; however the right to claim social insurance based income is predicated on having achieved a certain quantity of contributions that in reality would be extremely difficult for a young worker. Qualifying conditions for assistance based payment (unemployment assistance or dole) are means tested and age related; a young person who has paid tax in their employment may therefore find themselves with little or no income if they become unemployed. The current (2007) rate of payment is 185 euro per week.

Additionally, there is one particular scheme, the 'Supplementary Welfare Allowance' that is administered locally at the discretion of state officials (Community Welfare Officers). This scheme allows for payments to be made to welfare dependant persons in extraordinary circumstances (such as homelessness) and for the payment of a 'rent allowance' (again subject to stringent conditions) to people living in private rented accommodation.

The National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) 2005 report places 20% of the Irish working age (15-64) population at risk of living in poverty (Changing Ireland, Winter 2006, p.16). The Central Statistics Office (C.S.O.) reports that in 2005 10.1% of the population were living in consistent poverty (C.S.O., 2006, p.7) with an at risk of poverty rate of 19.7 (ibid.).

Education and Training

To leave school in Ireland a person must be at least 16 or have completed three years of secondary education. Alongside the traditional formal education system there also exists an informal training system that caters for the training needs of young people who have left school without completing the Leaving certificate examination. 80% of young people on average now complete the Leaving Certificate each year (Gorby, McCoy and Watson, 2005) and this examination is an integral part of the selection procedure for third level. The central intervention in the informal training system is 'Youthreach', a vocational training system that operates centres across the country, although not all young people

who wish to attend may reside within easy reach of a center. Two additional interventions run alongside Youthreach; Traveller training centres for members of the Traveller community and Community Training Workshops. Responsibility for the provision of these services lies with the local V.E.C. Youthreach is a national programme that seeks to equip those who leave school without qualification with a set of basic skills that will allow these young people to either participate in the labour economy or re-enter formal educational and training initiatives. There are currently 173 centres in Ireland with 7034 places for young people (Youthreach.ie).

Schemes such as the 'Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes' (VPT) and 'National Qualification Awards Certificate' (NCVA) have developed with the core purpose of preparation for work (Dept of Education and Science, 1997, p.11). These schemes are operated in schools or in centres such as Youthreach.

FAS (Foras Aiseanna Saothair, the Training and Employment Authority) operates a wide range of training courses that include apprenticeships, skills training and community employment schemes (www.fas.ie/home).

In the main, a person's level of education strongly predicts their future opportunities in the labour market with the more highly qualified enjoying more secure and rewarding positions than their less qualified fellows. A mere 1.5% of those with a degree level education are categorized as being in consistent poverty (Central Statistics Office, 2006, p16).

Labour Market and Socio-economic Situation

Ireland has seen an unprecedented enlargement of its workforce over the last fifteen years. The numbers in employment grew from 1.2 million in 1993 to 1.8 million in 2003 (The Economist, 16/10/04). Correspondingly, unemployment has fell from, a high point of around 17% in 1987 to approximately 4.6% in 2005 (Central statistics Office, 2006). Eurostat gives a figure of 4.3% in 2005 (Mlady, 2006, p.6) for total unemployment in Ireland. The figure for youth (15-24 year olds) unemployment is double at 8.6%. This

contrasts with an E. U. figure of 18.7% youth unemployment across the Union (Eurostat, 2006).

Regarding youth employment, the primary legislation in this area is the ‘Protection of Young Persons (Employment) Act, 1996’. Under this legislation employers cannot offer a full time position to anyone under 16 years of age. 14/15 year olds may be employed during holiday times on ‘light’ work. Various schedules are set out to ensure breaks and days off and limit night work. Employers must verify the young persons age and receive parental permission in writing if the person is under 16.

Whereas the national minimum wage in Ireland is 8.30 Euro per hour workers under 18 are legally to only 70% (€5.81) of this rate.

Endnotes

ⁱ The current Government severely curtailed access to data previously available under the Freedom of information Act. They have also imposed a fee on requests for data thereby placing further barriers on such data.

ⁱⁱ See Dooney and O’Toole (1998) for a detailed analysis of Irish governance.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ms. Davis was Director of Special Olympics Ireland.

^{iv} The NYCI report recommended that people’s names be added to the electoral register automatically upon obtaining the franchise.

^v The National Youth Council of Ireland is comprised of 43 different youth organizations, ranging from uniformed movements such as scouting to the youth wings of both conservative and radical political parties.

^{vi} In Ireland a person is legally a child until the age of 18.

^{vii} The phenomenal support for British football teams is one manifestation of this influence. The ‘underlying Irishness’ can be seen in the level of interest in Glasgow Celtic. Ostensibly a Scottish club, this team enjoys tremendous support due to its perceived Irish bias.

^{viii} The term ‘at risk’ has come to be viewed with suspicion amongst some practitioners and academics. See Leahy, (2006) and Beasant (Youth and Policy, The Journal of Critical Analysis, No.83, (2004), Leicester, National Youth Agency).

^{ix} Sean Martin, Lord Mayor of Cork City, Fianna Fail politician.

^x These fields are owned and operated by the council. In addition parish based sports clubs will usually own their own playing pitches and halls.

^{xi} The Traveller community are an indigenous migrant ethnic group in Irish society,

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