

Submission To The Taskforce on Active Citizenship
By
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1. For you, what does it mean to be an ‘active citizen’?

The concept of ‘active’ citizenship is a product of our recent economic success. In past times citizenship implied activism. Being a citizen implied some onus on a person to contribute something. It implies obligations as well as rights

The success of our economy is an aggregate of the success of many hard-working individuals. With this good work done, and now relatively financially comfortable, it is time to reassess citizenship.

Citizenship must in Ireland today empower people to think beyond their immediate concerns and seek out where they can contribute to a greater good. A lot of Irish people have a large amount of ‘altruistic potential’ that evaporates for want of a channel or focus.

We all contribute to society through our jobs. To go beyond this passive contribution, making a voluntary contribution to society, enriches our society in innumerable ways. It helps balance a society as it changes the motivational factors, and thus adds to the wealth measures when quality of life and happiness are included. Therefore active citizenship for me encompasses all positive contributions to society.

Active citizenship requires active government. Active citizens require guidance from government on where their efforts should be directed. Government should facilitate this altruistic tendency, empowering people to make a contribution where it will have the most impact.

Active participation is a partnership. It is a deal with many stakeholders in society. As a result it requires a volunteer infrastructure that will take decades to build. But as generations pass it will become embedded in our society, so our children and grandchildren are brought up to be citizens and activism will become implied in citizenship again.

Due to our republican history I think those values outlined in the First Dail declaration should imbue our concept of citizenship. Active citizenship will not be expressed at a national level, as Irish people we have no problem proudly proclaiming our citizenship. Active citizenship must be expressed at a community level.

2. Do some people feel excluded from active citizenship and why?

Some people may feel excluded. Many may be excluded from voluntary contributions due to work commitments. This I believe is a definitional exclusion as they are still contributing to society, adding to the wealth of the nation, working over time in many vital sectors and occupations. These people are vital to society and must be included in the definition of active citizenship.

Others who may feel excluded from citizenship include the young, the currently disadvantaged (why should they not be empowered to be citizens), immigrants or non-nationals and commuters.

3. Do you feel strongly part of a community – location, parish, sports association, language/cultural group, trade union or corporate interest etc?

Yes I feel strongly part of my community though organisations such as the GAA, the town chamber of commerce and other voluntary bodies such as the Tidy Towns movement.

4. Do you believe that with other people in the area where you live you can make a difference to the quality of life of people around you?

I believe I can make a difference as I have seen other people contribute to my locality and make such a difference. In my time involved with the GAA club in Kenmare we completed a sports centre that included a sports hall, a gym and a synthetic football pitch. This facility will contribute both to the leisure facilities available to the local community and to the local economy by attracting outside clubs to come and stay in Kenmare so as to use the facilities.

I have also witnessed the development of the town of Kenmare through the Chamber of Commerce and the Tidy Towns committee. Aesthetically the town has been improved immensely and this again has added to the local quality of life along with the local economy.

5. How can active citizenship help to include newcomers in a changing Ireland?

This is a vital area to address in Irish society. With people of so many different nationalities moving to work in Ireland we are faced with a more cosmopolitan society.

To avoid the riots such as those in Bradford or in the Banlieues of Paris we need to be proactive. This challenge needs to be met with a number of policies. The first is for us to try and understand the cultures and traditions of the people entering into Ireland.

We then need to teach these people about our traditions and cultures and integrate them into our society, and make them feel welcome and wanted. Ghettoisation of particular communities will lead to feelings of resentment from both the native population and immigrants. This we cannot afford to allow happen. Should our economy take a downturn and unemployment increase, ignorance toward either group will lead to friction.

Active citizenship will build a social infrastructure for people to integrate and mix. Through sporting and cultural organisations we can help avoid such an outcome. Organisations such as Rehab care will always be interested in benefiting from volunteers' efforts. They have a ready made structure that citizens can plug into.

6. From your experience, is there less volunteering and civic engagement than in

the past? What do you think are the main reasons for this?

The Celtic tiger economy has led to a large increase in employment, a culture of working harder and longer and a trend to greater mobility and these developments in turn have led to a deterioration of the environment where active citizenship thrives.

As a result it is vital that the forum for active citizenship concentrates its efforts on driving CSR further up the corporate agenda so that companies who benefit from the energy and industriousness of Irish people feel compelled to give something back by allowing their employees to devote some time to valuable causes.

7. How do you think people could be encouraged and supported to be more active citizens?

Firstly an acknowledgement of the change in society is required and also a realisation that we cannot return to the kind of community involvement witnessed in previous generations. Given this we can then try and develop an environment where community involvement can take into account this new disposition. We can also widen the definition of an active citizen, for example to one who donates blood. This is an act of volunteerism and one which takes less time but is no less important to the community.

The key to getting present day citizens who are time poor and in some cases cash rich is to ask for not their time but to ask for their skills.

The matching of skills to volunteer organisations, as carried out by Volunteer Centres Ireland www.volunteer.ie should be properly funded and expanded to all counties and communities through existing local structures such as the citizen advice bureau

8. How could we further develop a sense of active citizenship amongst young people in Ireland?

Through our schools and through the use of national heroes we can demonstrate and educate young people about the benefits of citizen participation. As young people tend to be a lot more idealistic than adults teaching them about such issues as the importance of inclusion in a cosmopolitan society is much easier. They need to be at the forefront of creating a new inclusive society.

9. What role can education play in promoting active citizenship and how?

Education can play a huge role in active citizenship. Here we need a fresh approach on how we teach children about the institutions of State, why it is important to protect them and how they can help society.

We currently send children to learn Irish, English, maths etc. and after 15 years of education we expect them to have some understanding of these subjects. The structure of our education system is to produce workers not citizens. We teach them so that they can contribute to GDP not to society.

Civics (Active Citizenship) in all its forms from voting to volunteerism must be part

of the school curriculum. It must be a living subject as opposed to book/classroom subject. It needs to be a points subject and like English, Irish and maths not an optional subject. What is more important to the future of this country active citizen or students with leaving cert points that have not been taught to contribute to their country, community and neighbours? While added a new subject will place a burden on the existing education system it is vital that Active citizenship be part of the points for the leaving certificate and the points race. By adding it to the points race it will show students that the state values the active citizen.

Education is also vital at adult level, helping immigrants and Irish people alike to understand each other. It is vital that we teach immigrants to speak English so that they can integrate fully and much of this might be possible through voluntary movements.

10. What steps do you think can be taken to promote greater participation in elections and other forms of civic engagement?

The work of the independent electoral commission in Britain and the North is a good example of how the state can promote participation in elections. The commission targets disadvantaged and marginalised groups and engages them in the election process. In the 21st century these groups must be made to feel part of the election process or else we run the risk of creating ghettos of groups who feel out side the system.

Education must play its part – bringing local representative to meet student more regularly so as to debate issues and therefore create a link between people and government policy. Like any subject education in the class room is vital. The existing civics education could be enhanced and further supported. Incorporating field trips or engaging in community organisations such as Tidy Towns would be extremely beneficial.

11. How do you think older people can be encouraged and supported to participate more actively in community and society?

Older people have the biggest contribution to make voluntary organisations, due to the time they have at their disposal and the experience they have. It is an under used resource at present. Engaging the retired population will not only serve the community but will also serve in keeping the retired active and give them a feeling of worth. Organisations need training in how to actively encourage and seek out retirees into helping with voluntary organisations. Not only should organisations be asking this group to volunteer but the seniors in our society should be encouraged to volunteer.

12. What role can the media, including the internet and other new technologies, play in promoting active citizenship?

The internet can play a central role in the active citizen sector. By creating a national website for voluntary organisations (along the lines of the Volunteer Centres Ireland) interested citizens can seek out the voluntary organisations in their locality. Included on this website would be the point of contact for the organisation - along with a

mission statement. People moving to a new area can then easily find out how to join such organisations. With this they can begin to contribute quicker to their new community and also help their own experience of settling into a new area.

Like any sector looking for members the active citizen movement needs to be marketed through the media. By developing the cult of the volunteer, using national heroes or high profile people, the media can promote membership. A simple acknowledgement through the daily newspapers of volunteer of the Day/Week/Month/Year with the bio pick of the volunteer in question would be one way of keep the volunteer in the public eye.

Like any organisation looking for recruits or 'employees' the state needs to fund a professional recruitment campaign. This campaign need to be sustained and omni present. It would also harness the good will of the media and media organisations to create the cult of the volunteer.

13. What role can the corporate sector (including public sector organisations) play in promoting active citizenship? How can this be encouraged and supported?

As many corporations do at present companies should be encouraged to adopt specific charities. Staff would be encouraged to contribute both time and money since it is conducted within company working hours or at least as part of the social scene in the company. Also support for staff volunteering through paid or unpaid leave beyond the statutory leave allowance. For example in the UK some companies offer employees up to 15 hours paid volunteering leave per year.

In addition many corporations are making Corporate Social Responsibility the top of their corporate agenda. Harnessing this corporate concern and matching up groups of 'active citizens' can lay the foundations of a new society.

An example of a linking community organisation with business would be Community Timebank, Glounthaune Village, Co Cork, using this as a blue print for linking the private sector in Ireland with the 'third' sector, the volunteer sector.

14. What types of support do communities require to increase levels of participation and involvement?

See 16

15. How can communities be encouraged to identify the unique strengths and skills of their own members and to draw upon them for their own benefits?

As per 16 below through training and through the central database communities can identify not only willing volunteers but also identify the particular skill set these volunteers can bring to an organisation.

16. How can Government – including Local Government – work more effectively with communities to help them organise effectively?

As Irish society has progressively become a more skilled economy people demand higher levels of service and professionalism, be it in private, public or voluntary sector. This is relevant whether the person is on the supply or demand side of a relationship. In the voluntary sector if people are to give of their valuable time/ skills then they demand the organisation that they are part of be a professionally run organisation. They will not give of their time/skills to organisations that are inefficient or poorly run, their time is too valuable for such an effort. To foster an environment where this time conscious and perhaps less patient person can contribute - the Government, be it national or local, needs to provide support services and training to voluntary organisations on how to properly run such bodies. This training would include people management as much as the other traditional functions of organisations like event and financial management.

Such training will enable organisations to make optimal use of the time that professionals can offer. It will enable them to maximise the use of the individual talents and would also help to include those people who tend to move between communities by making participation easier and less of a long term commitment.

17. What are the main challenges in establishing and running a community or voluntary organisation in Ireland today?

Getting people involved. Financial resources are obviously important but less so in an affluent community. It is the ability to get people involved to help in the particular area, along with tapping financial resources, that is the main challenge.

18. Does your organisation, or do organisations in your sector, find it harder to recruit and keep volunteers than in the past? If so, why and how can this trend be reversed?

Yes – see answer 16 above. Through the development of a better trained voluntary sector and with the acceptance that commitment to organisations will be less long term in the future the decline in volunteering can be reversed. The move to ‘commitment when able’ should encourage more people to get involved. These people may be inhibited now due to the belief that to reduce or sever their commitment to an organisation in the medium term, for whatever personal reasons, may cause resentment within the organisation or that the loss of continuity from such short term commitment would damage the organisation. A well trained core of staff should be able to people manage so as to take advantage of the short term contributions of such people.

19. How can the State support and encourage community and voluntary organisations?

As per 12 and 16 above the State has a major role in facilitating the volunteer sector. Through provision of support services, training and marketing - in cooperation with the various organisations - the State can greatly aid the active citizen to get involved.