



Working collectively to support and promote community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and advancing human rights

# Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing

## Listening Circle Discussions 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021 Report

### **Crisis**

Crisis presents challenge and opportunity. The current crisis comes on top of continuing social and economic crises, and it compounds these. Many community workers work in communities that are regularly described as being 'in crisis': the current crisis just presents another layer. Crisis is interlinked with other crises such as climate change.

In a crisis, public discourse shifts with a focus on solidarity, advocacy breakthroughs can be achieved, and new work processes emerge that have new potential.

There are personal, organisational, and community/societal elements to crisis.

- At a personal level, there is fatigue, isolation, disconnection, anxiety and a sense of being overwhelmed.
- At an organisational level, roles are shifting, new relationships are built, and crisis shines a light on organisational strengths and weaknesses.
- At a community/societal level, crisis can exacerbate divisions with blaming, it can shine a light on issues of inequality, deepen inequalities and poverty, and damage the resilience and structures to mitigate crisis already built up in communities.

While there is an energy mobilised in crisis, there is equally a danger in loss of hope during a crisis. There is a challenge to hold on to opportunities created by and gains achieved during crisis. A future perspective is needed during crisis to establish what needs to come out of it, and what emerges must be better.

Crisis is a cumulation of things coming together, making us question what we have, where we are, how we got here, how we operate, what we want to keep and what we need to let go of.

### **Context**

There are shifts evident in the political, economic and cultural contexts. There can be positives and negatives in these shifts. These shifts are not static, having changed with each wave of the pandemic. There is a challenge to harness the positive in these shifts and to prevent any rowing back in relation to these positives.

- Political shifts:
  - Government has been forced to listen to community. There has been greater access possible to power holders. Attention is given to long standing problems and some reforms have been achieved.

- The lack of gender balance and diversity in politics is exposed.
- A broader perspective is taken in terms of viewing Ireland north and south, and viewing Ireland within the EU.
- New sources of authority have emerged, in particular public health officials.
- There is new recognition of the need for strong and effective public services.
- Economic shifts:
  - Official perspectives on public debt and increased public expenditure have shifted with less focus on austerity and cutbacks than in previous times.
  - The market is seen to fail and the neoliberal project is under the spotlight.
  - Ideas of basic income and living wage emerge with more viability on foot of the pandemic payments.
  - Workers' rights and conditions come under the spotlight, in particular in relation to workers deemed essential who are subject to harsh working conditions that have not improved.
- Cultural shifts:
  - An emphasis on solidarity, wellbeing, and work life balance is evident in discourse and public concerns.
  - There is space to name feelings and experiences of vulnerability.
  - There is new interest in community.
  - Positive action measures have been implemented without the predicted dire consequences of such an approach.
  - There is a consciousness of the importance of interdependence and a shift in understanding of interdependent power.

There is a change of consciousness with people seeing a bigger picture, people engaging in activism online, and people building community that has a global dimension. The crisis has shown that things can change. It has demonstrated how things that were deemed impossible have suddenly become possible. This is politicising people, who now look on politics and economics in a different way.

Crisis has highlighted and amplified educational disadvantage. It has exposed the digital divide.

### **Community Work**

There are two sides to the experience and situation of the community worker and the purpose and practice of community organisations.

- On the downside:
  - Community workers and community organisations are caught up in emergency work rather than their intended roles. Skills in crisis management come to the fore.
  - Community work is tied into a reactive or firefighter mode, without the space to be reflective and to think through situations. New expectations of community organisations to play such roles could become entrenched.
  - The role to deliver a care package has been acknowledged, but this is far from the role community workers and community organisations have identified for themselves. The real value of community organisations has yet to be realised and understood.
- On the upside:
  - Community work has been able to be more creative in finding new ways to operate and pursue its goals. Blended work with an online element has enabled greater reach for community workers and has allowed for more democratic processes. Community workers have gained new skills in adapting to the crisis.

- New relationships have been experienced with some funders, with community organisations being listened to and being given more autonomy over funds.
- Advocacy opportunities have opened up and have been seized.

There are different perspectives on the visibility of community work in the media and to the public and the state. In response to this crisis the values and practice of community work are seen as being adopted by different agencies and sectors, yet community work can be largely invisible to the state and community organisations have not been included in developing responses to the crisis.

Community organisations are expected to operate on a shoestring. There is a need to invest in this infrastructure with further crises expected.

There is a need for more lateral work by the community sector, coming together as a sector. This would allow for shared reflection and create space to advance as a whole sector. Peer-led reflection should enable community work to reposition and re-present itself. There is a need to spread this conversation.

Community Work Ireland is grateful to Niall Crowley and Rachel Mullen of ValuesLab for their work on the project

