



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 March 10<sup>th</sup> 2021 Report

### **Pandemic as a Portal**

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudices and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage to imagine another world and ready to fight for it” – [Arundhati Roy](#)<sup>1</sup>

*We would leave the following behind as we go through the portal...*

- Structural inequality, oppression, racism, classism, discrimination, and human rights abuses,
- Educational disadvantage,
- Reliance on technology and the digital divide,
- Structures, programmes and KPIs for resourcing community development work, and
- Lip service paid to change agendas by those in power.

*We would take the following with us through the portal...*

- Universal health system,
- Organisations taking up community work strategies and principles,
- Discourses of interdependence, humanity and vulnerability,
- Capacity to do things differently, resilience, innovation, creativity and flexibility that has characterised community work, and
- Digital links that are empowering and that enable reach,
- Willingness to scrap everything and start over again, and
- Optimism, drive for change, and empathy on a personal level.

### **Looking forward, what is the change we now seek? Should the agenda evolve?**

There is room opening up for new agendas. Things are in flux. The change sought is systemic change, root cause change. Just as we need to be in a position to respond to what comes out of the pandemic, we need to be in a position to shape what comes out of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy is an author, actress and political activist. Quote from: The Pandemic is a Portal, in AZADI Freedom – Fascism - Fiction, Roy A., Penguin, 2020.

A shared vision for change is needed across organisations and across sectors. This would capture and progress intersecting issues. It would include a focus on: climate change and the environment; and economic structures and the capitalist system.

The change agenda needs to include a focus on creating the conditions for the sector to drive change. Community development needs greater recognition, parity of esteem, and power, with respect for the expertise, values, and approaches involved. There is a need to generate respect for community and the capacity of communities to identify their needs and the responses required. There is a need to be part of new political discourses while remaining independent, and to focus on the type of politics that could enable change, both in terms of political parties and political systems.

**Given these ideas for a changed agenda – is there anything new or different in HOW we might pursue that agenda?**

There is a need for change in the way we work. Optimism is important. Time and the investment of time is key. The new tools developed during the pandemic make change in our work more possible for the connections they allow.

There is a need to build:

- Connectedness in the sector based on our shared values and the touchstone provided by the community work standards. We need to express solidarity and show up for each other's struggles,
- Cross sectoral work. We need to create spaces for this work to enable collaboration and cross-fertilisation behind common goals and common frameworks, and
- Movements in place of silos. We need to look at the spectrum of allies and be open to unusual allies.

There is a need to further develop north-south links in Ireland and global links.

There is a challenge to learn and to carve out spaces to enable reflection for learning and to document the learning. Structured time to reflect is important. We need to learn from the past. We need to learn from the present, the shifts we perceive and the good practices we develop. This learning should specifically empower new generations of community workers coming forward.

We need to cause trouble and build power.

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