

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY WORKERS



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Section 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis, and the challenges it has posed, has been unprecedented. It has exposed and exacerbated the deep inequalities that persist in society. Communities already marginalised by poverty, inequality and social exclusion have experienced a disproportionate impact of disease, of difficulties attendant on the response, including restrictions, and of the social and economic fall out of the responses undertaken.

The crisis and its impacts have posed challenges for community work. Since the onset of the pandemic community workers have been responding to the needs of the communities in which they work. In many instances, the work focused on responding to the demand for basic services in communities struggling to cope with the effects of the crisis. Community workers have been to the forefront of dealing with complex needs within the most marginalised communities. While this work was urgent and vital, concerns have been expressed by community workers at the relegation of community work to service delivery only within this response and the dangers of this continuing. A return to community development strategies, methods, and processes for social change is now vital to ensure that the issues and interests of the most marginalised communities are central to policy and plans for recovery and resilience at this time of potential change.

It was in this context that Community Work Ireland, with funding from Rethink Ireland's Innovate Together Fund, commissioned Values Lab to work on an initiative, *Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing*. The project sought to:

- scope and identify the restrictions, challenges, and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 context
- provide opportunities for community workers to reflect on these issues and identify new ways of practicing community work that maintain the standards, including the values, of community work in seeking to engage, support, and mobilise marginalised communities in a changed context, and
- create a resource for ongoing use by community workers based on the learning from this work.

The project included a peer-led reflection among community workers, a learning and sharing process with community workers that focused on the task and process of community work in this changed context, and the production of this resource to support community work practice.

This resource is rooted in the core values that underpin community work as set out in the *All Ireland Standards for Community Work*¹ (the Standards) and is based on the definition of community work as:

*A developmental activity comprised of both a task and a process. The task is social change to achieve equality, social justice and human rights, and the process is the application of principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision making in a structured and co-ordinated way.*²

The purpose of this resource is to support ongoing reflection on community work values, and their engagement in the practice of community work, both process and task, in a context of significant change and pressure, challenge and opportunity.

Section 2 of this resource sets out some of the challenges and opportunities presented by this context of crisis that were identified by community workers. Section 3 of this resource looks at the importance of reflection in community work. Section 4 suggests a model for reflection at the individual, team and organisational level. Section 5 explores suggests a reflection on organisational values and Section 6 explores reflection as a community work sector.

This resource is based on the community work values set out in [The All Ireland Standards for Community Work](#).

¹ [All Ireland Standards for Community Work](#), All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training, Community Work Ireland, 2016.

² Ibid. Page 5.

Community Work Values

Process

The following values are primarily concerned with the processes of community work



Collectivity

Collectivity, includes collective analysis, collective action and collective outcomes in pursuit of a just and equal society. It involves working in collective ways and establishing groups, networks and organisations that enable communities to come together to identify common goals and to work together to achieve them. A collective approach requires practitioners to focus on the potential benefits for communities rather than focusing only on benefits to individuals.



Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is about working with communities to increase their knowledge, skills, consciousness and confidence to become critical, creative and active participants. It aims to address inequalities of power and provide genuine participation and involvement. Community empowerment involves an approach which leads people and communities to be resilient, organised, included and influential.



Participation

Participation is rooted in the self-identification of needs and interests, the formulation of responses by the community or group concerned and is central to their ability to continue to influence outcomes. Community development recognises that policies and programmes targeted at communities and groups experiencing poverty, inequality, discrimination and social exclusion will not and cannot be effective without the meaningful participation of those communities and groups in their design, implementation and monitoring.

Task

The following values are primarily concerned with the tasks which community work seeks to advance



Social Justice and Sustainable Development

Promoting a just society involves promoting policies and practices that challenge injustice, poverty, inequality, discrimination and social exclusion, and valuing diversity of identities and approaches. Promoting a sustainable society involves promoting environmentally, economically and socially sustainable policies and practices. All Ireland Community Work Standards (2016)³



Human Rights, Equality and Anti-discrimination

In seeking a society where human rights and equality are realised and discriminations is addressed...community work is concerned with the promotion of human rights and equality in society and with addressing the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by many groups.

³ [All Ireland Standards for Community Work](#), All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training, Community Work Ireland, 2016. Page 15.

The Impact of COVID 19 on Community Work

Participants in the *Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing* initiative identified how the COVID 19 pandemic had shone a light on the strengths and weaknesses of current practice in relation to both the process and task of community work.

Process

Challenges and opportunities were identified in relation to the *process* of community work over this period of crisis:

Challenges

- At individual-level, a sense for some of being overwhelmed in attempting to address the nature and scale of the impact of the crisis in their communities.
- Social distancing requirements presenting significant barriers to community conscientisation, empowerment, connectivity, and mobilisation.
- A shift to a reactive mode in practice with a further emphasis on service provision and filling gaps left by shortfalls in public service provision.
- Digital inequalities, where the use of technology excluded particularly marginalised communities.
- Threats to community work values and living out these values, from external sources and from a context of anxiety and pressure to work in particular ways.
- Fragmentation instead of connectedness between different civil society sectors, competition instead of collaboration within the community sector, and weaknesses in the links between national level and local level organisation.

Opportunities

- Increased use of technology, and the importance and possibilities of the creative use of technology. This has helped to build solidarity, increase reach, and remove barriers to inclusion, in particular for people who are rurally isolated and for disabled people.
- New relationships and partnerships opened up for community workers and their organisations that served to resource and strengthen practice.

The crisis was identified as presenting a *learning moment* for community workers to reimagine and reshape the process of community work. In this regard, a core opportunity was identified for the community work sector to resist a return to 'business as usual' and to promote the evolution of the sector as an effective and dynamic force for change and hope.

Task

Challenges and opportunities were identified in relation to the *task* of community work over this period of crisis:

Challenges

- Being stuck and getting entrenched in a reactive mode and in meeting basic needs primarily through service provision and at times a charitable approach, at the expense of a wider role in charting the vision for the kind of society the sector would like to see emerge from crisis
- Being confined to an agenda of incremental change, where the focus is on problem solving as opposed to transformative change
- The standing of community work itself, which can be largely invisible to the state, and the exclusion of community work organisations from the processes of developing responses to the crisis. It was noted that the real value of community work has yet to be appreciated and understood.

Opportunities

- The values and practice of community work being adopted by different agencies and sectors in their own responses to the crisis, with these presenting opportunities for change.
- Flexibility on the part of some funders in relation to the deployment of funds for locally identified priorities
- New openings for advocacy on core issues.



Section 2. The Importance of Reflection in Community Work Practice

The All Ireland Community Work Standards emphasise the importance of reflection as a key community work skill and a core element of professional commitment and integrity for the community worker.

Community workers should be self-aware, regularly reflect on practice and approach and think and work strategically. They should contribute to the knowledge base of community development by recording, promoting and sharing the reflections, analysis and lessons from their work and strive to continually improve their practice through Continuous Professional Development.

Community workers acknowledged that such reflection can be made difficult by:

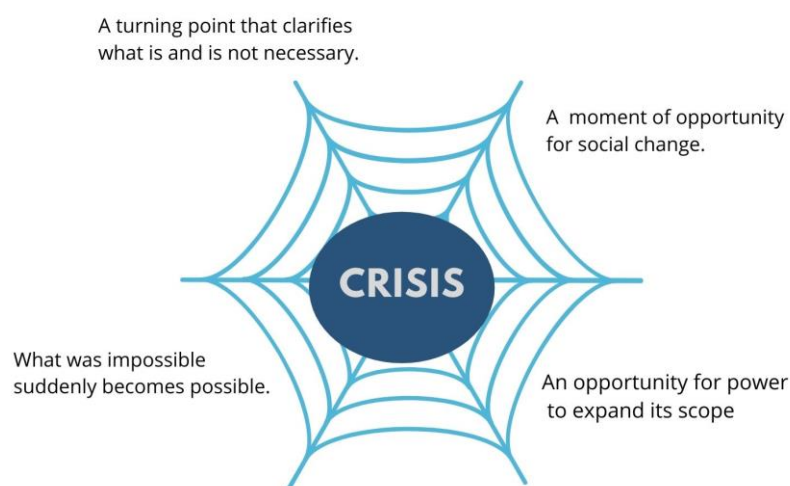
- Lack of time when the pace of work can be frenetic, making it difficult to carve out the spaces and time for reflection.
- Organisational systems for ongoing reflection can be lacking, under-developed or under-utilised.
- Reflection tends to take place in the form of project evaluations, which are often externally driven, rather than devised for internal contemplation and learning.

Crisis as a Driver for Reflection

Moments of crisis, provide an opportunity and a requirement to pause and reflect. The need was identified by community workers for a collective reflection space both within their workplace, to enable a focus on their individual practice and the alignment of their organisation with community work values, as well as at a wider networked level, to enable sharing of ideas and analysis, and peer supported learning to advance the community sector as a whole.

The COVID-19 crisis has compounded the ongoing social and economic challenges faced by marginalised communities and has interlocked with the growing environmental and ecological crisis faced globally, nationally and locally.

The current crisis has caused distress, experienced at the personal, community, and wider societal levels. It has been a source of urgency, mobilising us to respond to the needs and aspirations of people and communities experiencing this distress. Crisis risks instilling a loss of hope and hopelessness in the face of catastrophe. However, it also mobilises our energies to drive change. In this context, it is critical that there are opportunities to reflect on community work values at a workplace and sectoral level.



Collective Reflection

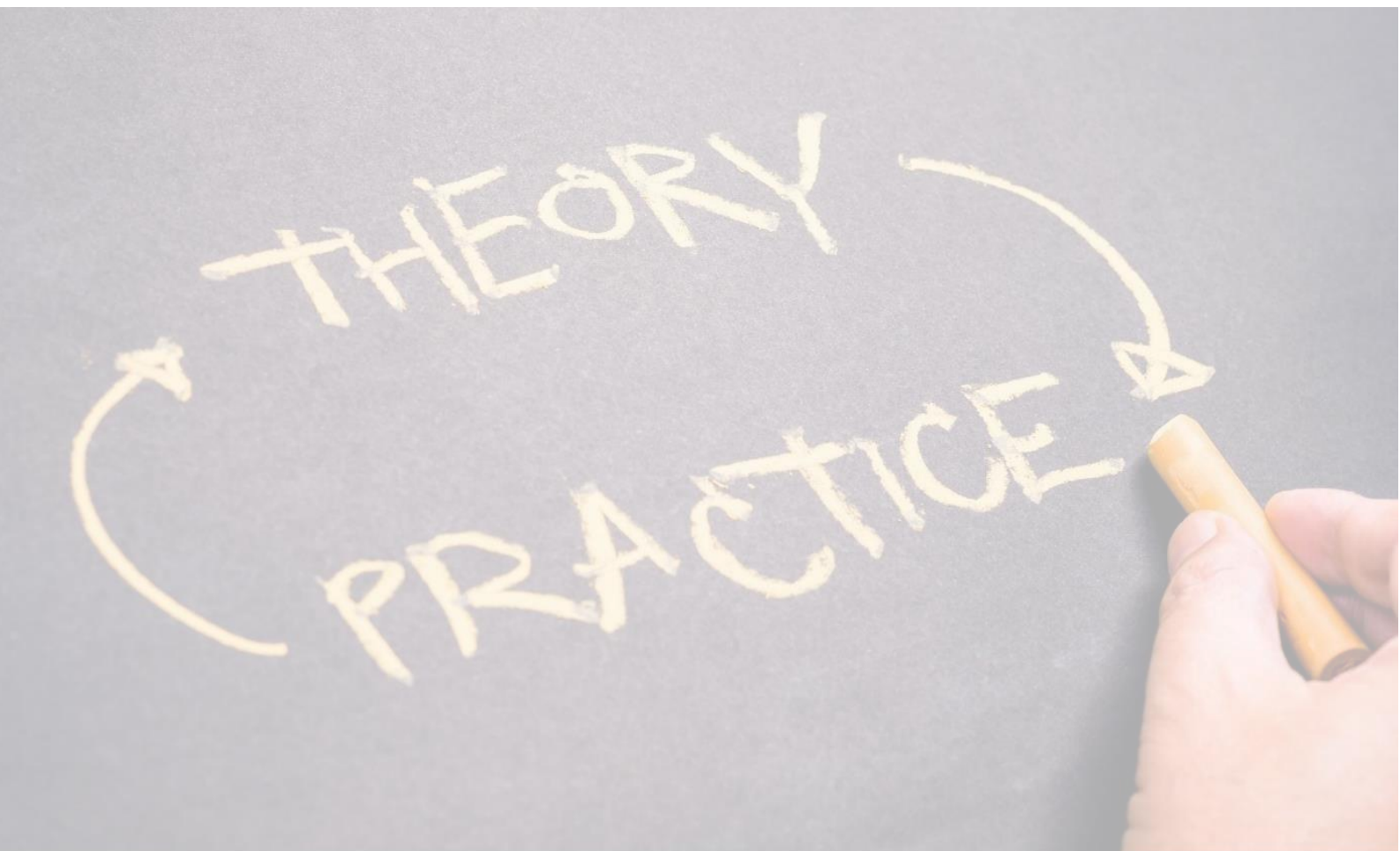
Community workers acknowledge the need to create and participate in spaces that transcend individual organisations and programmes and allow them to collectively work for social change as a sector or as a wider civil society. Collective work of this nature demands collective reflection, particularly in a context of crisis. Collective reflection engages community work as a sector and can engage a wider civil society as a sector concerned for social, economic, political, cultural and environmental change.

Collective reflection across the community development sector enables reflection on:

- community work practice and its alignment with community work values in a context of political and funder pressures and urgent unmet needs
- the importance of collaboration, at and between national and local levels, to establish and realise the potential of the sector
- community work profile and priorities as a discipline and its positioning within the wider movement for social change.

Collective reflection across a wider civil society enables reflection on:

- developing positioning and agendas to shape and respond to what may emerge from the current crisis;
- building a shared vision for change, encompassing interlinked issues, to be worked for: and
- the nature and content of shared or interlocking campaigns for social change.



Crisis as an Alert

In general terms, a crisis represents a turning point, a moment that points up what is necessary and what is not. A crisis can be viewed as ***an alert or a warning***, a time to stand back and reflect. It focuses attention on the positives and negatives in the social, economic, political, and cultural context and the values which underpin that context, just as it focuses attention on the strengths and weaknesses of endeavours to change this context, including the efforts of community workers.

“The virus is teaching us something, enabling us to recognise our flaws, and the poverty of our endeavours. In this way it is an alert...The virus is an invitation for us to rethink things, to recognise, to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to want to discuss with others.” Saskia Sassen (2020)⁴

When we explore crisis as an alert, we focus on the wider context within which community work seeks to pursue social change and, as a sector or more widely, we reflect on:

- What significant shifts are evident at this moment in the social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental contexts in which community work is undertaken?
- What significant shifts are evident in the institutional context within which community work is undertaken?
- What threats lie in these shifts, what potential do they hold for the future, and what are the implications for community work task and process?

In addition, we, as a sector, reflect on community work itself and how it is positioned to effectively pursue social change

- Has the role of the community worker changed? If so, what are the threats, challenges, and future potential in this change?
- Has the purpose and practice of community work changed? If so, what are the threats, challenges, and future potential in this change?
- Has the nature and culture of community work changed? If so, what are the threats, challenges, and future potential in this change?
- What are the implications and challenges for community work task and process in all of the above?

Crisis as a Portal

A crisis is a moment of opportunity, what was deemed impossible before can suddenly become possible and real. A crisis is ***a portal***, through which we transition from our world prior to crisis into what is a changed world. It is a moment of opportunity for social change and for those, including community workers, who would progress such change.

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no 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 (2020)⁵

When we explore crisis as a portal, we can reflect on imagining a new world and the task of community work in shaping the kind of society we are seeking to emerge. In doing so we reflect as a sector or more widely, on:

- What elements of a new world have emerged, so far, in this crisis that we would bring through this portal and that we would leave behind?
- What social change agenda is required at this point: social, economic, political, environmental and cultural?
- How do we build, develop and secure agreement on this agenda?
- What are the implications and challenges for community work in articulating and pursuing this re-imagined world?

⁴ Saskia Sassen is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Quote from interview with Srečko Horvat in ‘Everything Must Change! The World After Covid-19’, eds. Avila R. & Horvat S., O/R Books, 2020.

⁵ Arundhati Roy (2020). *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction.* Penguin Press, 2020.

Reflection also allows us to imagine new ways of seeking change and the process of community work as it seeks to achieve this new world. In doing so, we, as a sector reflect on:

- What elements of current community work practice would we bring through this portal and what elements would we leave behind?
- How do we build support for and achieve progress on our social change agenda?
- How do we secure progress on and implementation of our social change agenda?
- What are the implications and challenges for community work in seeking change for this re-imagined world?

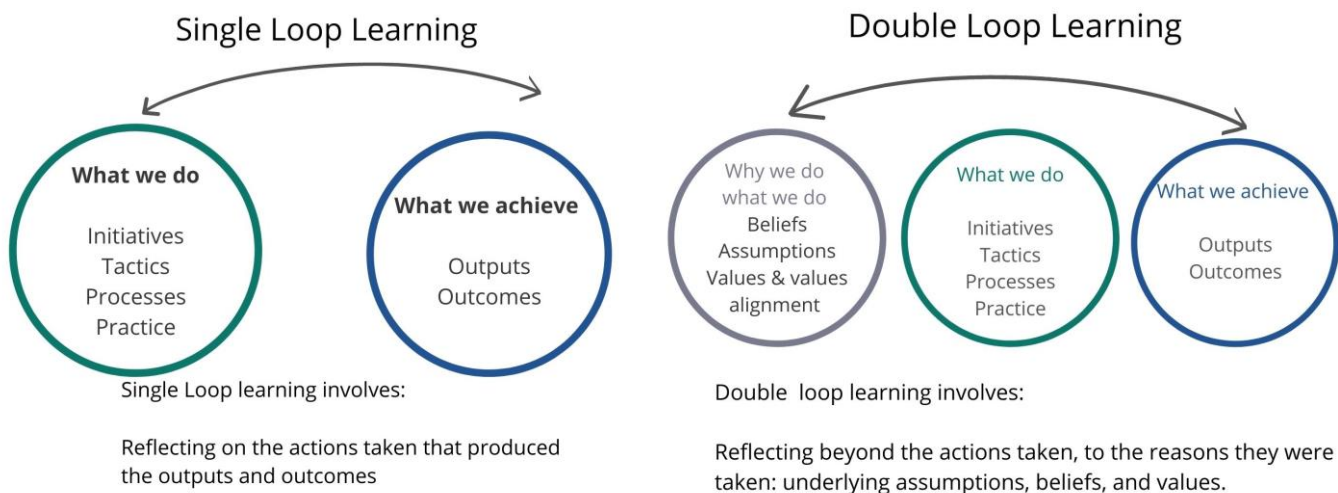


PAUSE
& REFLECT

Section 3. A Model for Reflection

Reflection is “a complex, active and purposeful mental process of becoming aware of old meanings, exploring alternative interpretations, engaging in dialogue and shifting modes of thinking, feeling and acting. It is triggered by meaningful experience and leads often to unexpected outcomes.”⁶

Reflection within an organisation has been usefully identified as serving as a “bridge between experience and learning”.⁷ As a means of enhancing reflective learning, a process of ‘double-loop’ rather than ‘single loop’ learning is suggested as an effective approach.⁸



Reflection that focuses on *What We Do* and *What We Achieve*, Single Loop Learning, can be limited in that it does not go beyond a focus on what we are doing and whether we are doing it well.

The reflective focus of ‘Double Loop Learning’ reminds us to look beyond this to the reasons why actions were taken, and to consider the analysis, assumptions, and values espoused by individual workers and the overall organisation that are shaping organisational priorities and processes. This type of deeper reflection can ensure alignment between the values underpinning community work and those underpinning organisational priorities, processes, and practice.

⁶ [Reflective Practice as a Fuel for Organizational Learning](#), S. Hilden, and K. Tikkamäki, Administrative Sciences, Vol. 3, Issue 3, Switzerland, 2013. Page 82.

⁷ Ibid. Page 80.

⁸ The double-loop learning concept was developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. We have expanded on the model with a focus on reflection on values and values alignment.

Reflective practice needs to occur at a number of levels within the organisation:

- individual reflection
- group/team reflection
- and organisation-wide reflection

It is noted that wider sectoral level reflection is needed, and this is dealt with in section 3 above, of this resource.

Reflection framework



At the individual level, it is important for community workers to have **reflective capability**.⁹ This involves:

- An ability and willingness to examine, question, challenge and if necessary, change one's own presumptions and practice, in particular where they have become routine; and
- Ability and courage to ask relevant and critical questions, remaining open to being surprised.

At the group/team level, it is important to have **reflective dialogue**.¹⁰ This involves:

- A process of collective examination and review to chart new ways forward, based on a shared understanding of why we do what we do (values and analysis) as well on the outcomes sought
- Capacities to speak out, disclose, test, and probe
- An examination of core organisational values, and their alignment of these with outcomes and outputs, processes and practices.

At the organisation level, it is important to have **reflective organisational systems**.¹¹ This involves:

- Values, structures, processes, and procedures to enable and ensure a systematic approach to reflection
- Openness to change and to new approaches and testing out new approaches
- Flexibility to allow action on the basis of learning from reflection

Organisation-level reflection is key and requires feedback systems to the group/team level and the individual level to ensure effective organisational learning.

⁹ [Reflective Practice as a Fuel for Organizational Learning](#), S. Hilden, and K. Tikkamäki, Administrative Sciences, Vol. 3, Issue 3, Switzerland, 2013. Page 83.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Idem.

Reflection Exercise

1. Identify a piece of work (initiative/strategy/process) undertaken by your organisation that you want to reflect on.
2. Invite other colleagues involved in or familiar with the piece of work to reflect with you.

Suggested Reflective Questions

- What was done and what was achieved (outcomes)?
- What assumptions motivated this piece of work?
- What values motivated this piece of work?
- Do these values include any alignment with those of community work? Why? Why Not?
- Something that surprised me was....
- Something I observed about my own practice was....
- A key learning about my practice, that of the group/team or that of the organisation is....
- What are the implications of this learning?

Reflection on process

Community work values provide a valuable frame for reflection on community work process. The core values in this regard are: collectivity; empowerment; and participation. They are joined as a thread by the theme of power and its imperative in achieving change, by community workers.

Collectivity

Collectivity includes collective analysis, collective action and collective outcomes in the practice of community workers and organisations taking a community development approach. It involves working in collective ways and establishing groups, networks and organisations that enable communities to come together to identify common goals and to work together to achieve them. A collective approach requires practitioners to focus on the potential benefits for communities rather than focusing only on benefits to individuals.

Collectivity, with its concern for organising, can be viewed in terms of the community worker building power behind the pursuit of social change

Collectivity can be reflected in action by community workers in:

- Coordination and collaboration within the community work sector:
 - Create spaces for cooperation, based on the connectedness of and solidarity between organisations within the sector, and
 - Develop shared campaigns across the sector through these spaces
- Coordination and collaboration between the community work sector and other civil society organisations and sectors:
 - Strengthen relationships and create structures across civil society that reflect the interlinked nature of issues such as social and economic justice, climate disruption, workers' rights, and global justice
 - Develop systems to enable interlocking campaigns to be pursued and to deepen mutual solidarity and support between sectors.
- Linkages between national and local organisations.

Challenges to collectivity:

Working collectively in the current context poses challenges:

- Organisations are under pressure from the demands of their service provision role, the frenetic pace of the work, and bureaucratic demands from funders and legislation governing the sector;
- Organisations within the community sector are often in competition for resources, media space, and political attention.
- The siloed and fragmented nature of the wider civil society is a barrier to collective approaches.

Reflection on the Value of Collectivity Post-Crisis

- At local level, what steps could we take to build power to advance the change we seek?
- What opportunities are present to enable further progress to build such power?

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is about working with communities to increase their knowledge, skills, consciousness and confidence to become critical, creative and active participants. It aims to address inequalities of power and provide genuine participation and involvement. Community empowerment involves an approach which leads people and communities to be resilient, organised, included and influential.

Community empowerment, with its concern for conscientisation, could be viewed in terms of the community worker mobilising power for the pursuit of social change. Mobilising power is interlinked with the work of building power to ensure influence and impact on the issues being addressed.

Community empowerment can be reflected in how community workers:

- Respond to the changes wrought by the crisis by:
 - Using technology creatively to build reach and relationships
 - Harnessing the frustration while also instilling hope.
- Take advantage of the context of crisis to:
 - Build on shifts in consciousness, driven by a crisis that has rendered possible things that were previously deemed impossible
 - Engage the shared values that enabled communities to manage crisis, identify shared concerns, and drive collective action.

Challenges to community empowerment:

- Loss of face-to-face contact which has limited processes of conscientisation
- The demands of funders, which can drive a focus on individual need rather than community concerns.

Reflection on the Value of Community Empowerment Post Crisis

- What steps are we currently taking to mobilise power to advance social change?
- What opportunities are present that enable further steps to be taken to mobilise this power?

Participation

Participation is rooted in the self-identification of needs and interests, the formulation of responses by the community or group concerned and is central to their ability to continue to influence outcomes. Community development recognises that policies and programmes targeted at communities and groups experiencing poverty, inequality, discrimination and social exclusion will not and cannot be effective without the meaningful participation of those communities and groups in their design, implementation and monitoring.

Participation, with its concern for participative democracy, could be viewed in terms of the community worker deploying power in the pursuit of social change. Deploying power is interlinked with the work of building power and of mobilising power so that the negotiation for change involved in participative democracy is rendered effective.

Participation can be reflected in how community workers:

- Interrogate and seek change in the structures and processes for engaging with the state
- Seek processes of participative democracy that are meaningful in involving real negotiation for social change and are empowered to progress any outcomes from this negotiation.

Challenges to participation

There are challenges in advancing and enhancing community participation in decision making that community workers have identified as:

- The structures and processes that were put in place to enable participative democracy are found to confine the agendas and undermine the demands of community workers for social change
- Engagement with the state in these structures and processes has confined the community sector to a focus on problem-solving over social change, and a process of persuasion rather than negotiation.

Reflection on the Value of Participation Post Crisis

- How are we currently using and mobilising power to advance the change we seek?
- What opportunities are present to enable further steps to be taken to more effectively use and mobilise power?

Section 4. Reflection On Organisational Values

Given the centrality of values as a framework for community work, a focus on organisational values in underpinning community work priorities, processes, and practice is essential.

In every organisation a dominant set of values shape the organisation's culture, which, in turn, motivate the **priorities** pursued by the organisation, the **approach** to pursuing them, and the **attitude, practice and behaviours** of staff.

Dominant organisational values derive from **personal values** of staff members, **founding values** of the organisation, **espoused values** of leadership in the organisation, and **values that are imposed or adopted** from external stakeholders

There can be significant potential for disconnect between espoused organisational values and actual dominant values, and from time to time, the dominant organisational values may conform or clash with the espoused values of the organisation.

Moments of crisis can explicitly or implicitly, stimulate a reprioritisation of organisational values. This presents a challenge for an organisation to be explicit about its core values, to take steps to defend these values, and to ensure alignment between core values, organisational priorities and processes, and staff attitudes and practice.

Process Values Check

- Does our organisation continue to prioritise community work process values – collectivity, community empowerment and participation?
- Can we identify where these values are evident in our organisational processes?

Organisations that engage in community work need to be values-led in relation to community work values, using a whole organisation approach. To ensure consistency and coherence, a Values Statement can be useful as a foundation stone for organisational culture, to enable an ongoing engagement of these values in the work of the organisation, and to ensure no values gap emerges between espoused values and actual dominant values in the organisation.

A Values Statement

A values statement is a tool to support the organisation to apply core values at key moments: strategic planning; project/service development and delivery; human resource management; and monitoring, review and evaluation.

A values statement identifies and defines the organisation's core values. It concretises each value with:

- > a statement of outcome: the implications of the value for the change that is sought by the organisation;
- > a statement of process: the implications of the value for work systems and processes; and
- > a statement of practice: the implications of the value for staff practice and behaviours.

The Values Statement serves as a benchmark to check and ensure an ongoing alignment of the work of the organisation with its core values.

Using the Values Statement to ensure the organisation remains aligned with identified core values, involves attention to: organisational systems that will engage the values systematically; leadership practice; and capacity-building of staff at all levels to ensure they understand how core values will be embedded in their specific areas of responsibility.

Developed by Values Lab. For more information see: Mullen R., [Values-Led Organisations: Releasing the Potential of Values](#), Values Lab, 2018. www.values-lab.ie

Section 5. Reflection on Task

Community Work Task: Social, Political, and Economic Systems

The social change that community work seeks is transformative, as it is based on the values of social justice & sustainable development, and of human rights, equality, and anti-discrimination. Such transformation requires a new model for the social, economic, and political systems that are capable of advancing such an agenda and that encompass and link the local, national and global.

A new model of development would shape and give definition to the task of community work behind which to build and mobilise power for social change through community work process. This model of development would involve a change agenda that:

- encompasses an integration of social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions
- engages with the different sectors in creating an interlocking agenda across these dimensions and building on work already done across these different sectors
- builds on the context of crisis and the shifts and change in these systems that are involved in managing crisis
- engages local and national action.

A blueprint for this new model of development can build on and take advantage of shifts identified across these different dimensions due to crisis. Such a blueprint serves to imagine the society that would emerge from crisis. Project participants identified a number of key shifts which may offer new opportunities:

- **Social systems:**
 - Greater visibility and concern for key social issues that were amplified and exacerbated by the crisis, including health inequalities, educational disadvantage, housing insecurity, homelessness and inadequate Traveller accommodation, domestic violence, an inadequate and often inappropriate care infrastructure, and digital inequality.
 - Strengthened recognition of the necessity for strong and effective public services, in a context where the lack of investment in and resilience of public services was highlighted, with over-reliance on community organisations to prop up key services and infrastructures.
- **Political systems:**
 - Changing balance in power at different moments in the crisis between business interests and public health interests.
 - Emergent new sources of authority, in particular public health officials
 - Government and decision makers at times being forced to listen to community allowing in some instances, greater access to decision makers.
 - Centralised decision making became further entrenched
 - further exposure of the lack of gender balance and a gender focus in representative politics and decision making more broadly
 - Further exposure of a lack of gender balance and diversity, and the absence of a focus on equality, in representative politics and decision making more broadly.
 - Further exposure of a lack of an environmental lens to shape policy-making.
 - Some participative arenas for engagement with the state secured influence and had an impact on issues related to the crisis.
- **Economic systems:**
 - Primacy of market considerations in policy making was challenged at points.
 - Official perspectives and thinking on debt and debt management that do not involve austerity measures and cutting back on public expenditure gained some traction.
 - Income policies reflecting concepts of basic income and living wage emerged for a period.
 - Workers' rights and conditions came under the spotlight, in particular in relation to workers deemed essential yet who experience some of the worst working conditions in the country.

Community workers have a key role to play in the emergence of this change agenda:

- creating and enabling the spaces required to define and shape the vision of change: at community level, within the community sector, and across the diversity of sectors concerned for such change
- prefiguring such change by devising and implementing initiatives with local communities to contribute to the change sought
- advocating and negotiating for such change by, building and mobilising power to advance this reimagined society.

Reflection

- What steps can we take to further develop the blueprint for the society we wish to emerge from the crisis?
- What steps can we take to align the objectives and actions of our organisation to contribute to advancing and realising this blueprint for social change?

Strategic Communication

Societal culture, i.e. the common values prioritised by wider society, was identified as a key but neglected focus for social change in community work. Societal culture merits further attention for its potential to motivate and drive wider systems change.

In the initial period of the COVID-19 crisis, popular and political discourse, driven by public health concerns, persistently emphasised values of solidarity, care, empathy, community, and interdependence. Individual and broader public concerns and consciousness arguably shifted with the consistent underscoring of these values strengthened with the introduction of national policy changes in the context of the crisis, such as social welfare and housing protections.

These policy decisions further demonstrated that the impediments placed on the introduction of progressive policies by successive governments could suddenly disappear when the political will was there. A message that social change is possible was effectively demonstrated and communicated across Irish society.

Community Work Task: Values-led strategic communication

Societal culture is an important element in its own right as part of the social change pursued through community work. However, societal culture merits further attention for its potential to motivate and drive the wider systems change that would be involved in advancing social justice & sustainable development, and human rights, equality & anti-discrimination.

Values-Led Strategic Communication for Social Change

Strategic communication for social change is a multidimensional process involving the purposeful use of communication as a central element in the organisation or campaign network's strategy for social change. The principle aims of strategic communication for social change include:

- *Mobilising: rallying the support base to organise and take action on issues of concern*
- *Engaging: motivating the wider public to understand an issue and building a popular demand for change*
- *Influencing: informing and influencing the agenda of power-holders on the change needed*

When communications for social change are values-led, this increases the potential to powerfully bind people to issues of social and environmental concern and consequently, to mobilise them to take action. Values Lab, 2018¹²

In focusing on change in societal culture, community workers and organisations involved in community development could usefully engage in this strategic communication for social change. This would include:

- taking steps to understand the audience of their communications work, the stories they tell about the social change that is sought, and the values embedded in these narratives
- identifying those values that: motivate a concern for the social change sought; are a priority in their organisation; and have an alignment for the public audience being addressed
- crafting messages and narratives to engage and motivate a public audience around the values of social justice & sustainable development, and human rights, equality & anti-discrimination
- consistently and creatively engaging these values in all internal and external communications
- systematically auditing all strategic communications materials to ensure that these values are being effectively engaged.

Values Check:

- Has our organisation established the values that could motivate a public audience to be concerned for social justice & sustainable development, and human rights, equality & anti-discrimination, and have we developed the messages to carry such values with resonance for this public?
- Do we consistently engage these values in our communications and in a creative manner?

¹² Mullen R. (2018) Communicating Values: Values-Led Strategic Communication for Social Change. Values Lab.

Community Work Task: Creating the Conditions for the Sector

Change in societal culture, change in social, economic, and political systems, and change underpinning environmental sustainability require local input and action as well as national action. Community workers can and do play roles in the emergence of such a change agenda across these dimensions, at local and national level:

- creating and enabling the spaces required for definition of the change sought – including spaces at community level, within the community sector, and across the diversity of sectors concerned for such change;
- prefiguring such change – devising and implementing initiatives within communities that live out elements to the change sought; and
- advocating and negotiating for this change – mobilising, building, and deploying power to advance this reimagined society.

The pursuit of this change agenda by community workers was seen as requiring an additional focus on creating the conditions for the sector to drive the change agenda. This was identified as requiring:

- greater acknowledgement of community and the capacity of communities to identify their collective needs and the responses that might be required to these;
- greater recognition for the role of community development and respect for the expertise, values and approaches involved;
- provision of adequate funding for the sector to make its full contribution to change;
- parity of esteem and influence for the sector, with other sectors, in its engagement with the state; and
- greater accountability of power holders at community level.

The creation of these conditions needs to be a focus within the task pursued by community workers and community development organisations.