

Consultation, Poverty & Policy

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Report on the proceedings of two seminars organised by
The Combat Poverty Agency with The National Anti-Poverty
Strategy Unit of the Department of Social, Community and
Family Affairs and The Irish National Anti-Poverty Networks



The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

Combat Poverty Agency
working for the prevention
and elimination of poverty



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July 2000

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Introduction

In 1999, the Combat Poverty Agency (Ireland), in partnership with the National Anti-Poverty Unit in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (Ireland), the National Anti-Poverty Networks (Ireland), the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), STAKES (Finland), I.O. Integrar (Portugal) and Odyssee M.O. (The Netherlands), responded to a Commission call for proposals for preparatory actions to combat social exclusion. A grant (representing approximately 60% of the project cost) was awarded for a project on the involvement of excluded people and their organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies.

The overall aim of the project is to develop a set of guidelines on involving people in anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies, drawing on learning across the partner countries. The project sought to include those with an interest in consultation or involvement in the policy making-process, including those affected by poverty and social exclusion, those who represent their interests, as well as those responsible for drawing up policy. The project, therefore, provides for exchange of experience and information, mutual learning, and the development of an approach that will contribute to improving the design of policies and measures to combat exclusion at all levels.

As part of the project, seminars have been held in each of the partner countries, involving the statutory and community and voluntary sectors and people who experience poverty and social exclusion. Learning from all of the seminars across the partner countries will be shared at a transnational seminar in Dublin in September 2000, from which guidelines for involvement will be developed.

The Project in Ireland

In Ireland, the project took consultation in the government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) as its focus. This is an integrated strategy, that is, it addresses several areas of policy that effect the lives of people who experience poverty and social exclusion. It is

the first integrated strategy of its kind in Ireland. Consultation on the development of the NAPS was extensive, involving people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their representative groups. There has been no such broad consultation on the NAPS since its launch in 1997. There is ongoing consultation between the NAPS Unit, the Combat Poverty Agency and Ireland's seven National Anti-Poverty Networks. There is also a commitment to involve the social partners in the revision of the existing NAPS targets and the setting of new ones.

The issue of consultation is not new in Ireland. Indeed, one of the issues raised by participants at the seminars was the ever-increasing expectation that policy measures, at local and national level, will be developed in consultation with relevant groups. A number of consultations have taken place on national policy in recent years that have provided substantial learning in relation to consultation. These include the National Forum for Early Education, the Commission on People with Disabilities and, most recently, the White Paper on the Relationship between the State and the Voluntary Sector. In addition, there are a number of well-established mechanisms for consultation on national policy, such as the National Economic and Social Forum and the National Economic and Social Council. At local level, new consultation mechanisms are emerging as part of the local government reform process.

The project was informed by this experience of previous consultation exercises. It also sought to draw on less well known and local level experiences of consultation. Two seminars were organised by the Combat Poverty Agency in consultation with its Irish partners. In addition, a Working Group was established to oversee and advise on the Irish component of this project, consisting of representatives of the statutory and NGO sector, affiliates of the National Anti-Poverty Networks, as well as a researcher with expertise in the field. This group assisted in planning the seminars and a number of members provided inputs. Similar seminars have also been held in all of the participating member states.

The Participants

The seminars were aimed at three main groups: (i) representatives of the statutory sector at national and local level, as well as state agencies; (ii) representatives of national and local community and voluntary organisations; and, (iii) people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. It was intended that the same participants would attend both seminars so that the experiences and learning shared at the first would inform the second. It was also hoped that these three groups would be fairly evenly represented at the seminars.

The organisers faced two main challenges in achieving this balance. The first was the identification and encouragement of a number of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to attend the seminars. The Combat Poverty Agency invited a number of individuals through its contacts with local groups and organisations. The National Anti-Poverty Networks targeted a number of their affiliates, invited them to the seminars and encouraged them to attend. Travelling expenses and a bursary towards participation costs were provided. Despite this, few people experiencing poverty attended the seminars. Some of the possible reasons for this low level of participation were identified by participants at the seminars and by the National Anti-Poverty Networks. These included that people could not commit to attending for two days, that seminars are not an appropriate way of engaging with people, that people are tired of talking about ways of talking and that the subject of the seminars was not practical or tangible enough. This learning in itself is valuable in terms of how to contact people and appropriate methods for involving people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in consultations.

The second challenge facing the organisers was encouraging senior representatives of government departments to attend the seminars. Unfortunately, participation by such representatives at the first seminar was low. Following further efforts on the part of the NAPS Unit, senior participation at this level increased somewhat at the second seminar, although state participation fell overall.

Who Attended the Seminars?

	11 th April	4 th May
Statutory Sector	23	19
Community and Voluntary Sector	28	14
Individuals	9	7
Other	2	4
Total	62	43

In total, almost 80 participants attended the seminars. However, quite a small number, only 25, attended both days. The biggest fall off in participants was from among the community and voluntary organisations. Possible reasons identified for this included that many such groups, and particularly those operating ... the local level, do not have the staff resources to allow them to commit two days to such an event or that groups may not have felt that the topic was relevant to their daily work.

The Format and Content of the Seminars

In organising the seminars, the partners tried to take account of a number of important factors. These were the need for content that would provide enough information on the project and the NAPS to allow everyone to participate, as well as a format that was weighted in favour of participant input. To this end, each of the seminars comprised a number of short inputs followed by facilitated workshops.

The First Seminar

Experience of Consultation

The first seminar began with an overview of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy provided by the Combat Poverty Agency. This was followed by a series of workshops in which participants were asked to firstly brainstorm and then to discuss the positive and negative aspects of consultation based on their own experience. Positive expressions used in brainstorming on consultation included *empowerment, action, access, participation, sharing, voices and inclusion*. However, the words and phrases *once-off, power, tokenism, time consuming, and no clear purpose* also

appeared quite frequently. Further discussion of people's experiences generated very clear ideas in relation to what a positive consultation exercise might look like. These are incorporated with learning from the second seminar below.

Benefits, Barriers and Supports

In separate workshops, participants considered the advantages of consultation *with and for* (i) the statutory sector, (ii) national anti-poverty organisations and (iii) local anti-poverty organisations. They also considered the barriers facing these different sectors and organisations and those who want to consult with them and the supports needed. Each workshop had a short presentation from people working at the relevant levels and comprised participants from the state and community and voluntary sectors, as well as individuals experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Some of the comments made by participants are highlighted below.

Workshop 1: The Statutory Sector

Benefits of Consultation with and for the State

*A broader sense of ownership of policy.
Improved state sector understanding of issues on the ground.
Highlights the interdependency of sectors.
Pre-empts problem.
Involves a range of thinking.
Builds new perspectives for all those involved.
Helps build alliances.
Involves different levels of experience and layers of opportunities.*

Barriers to Consultation with and faced by the State Sector

*Raises expectations that are not met.
Culture of state sector does not always make consultation easy.
Needs to be linked more to the political system.
Fear of negative impact on funding.
Time consuming.
Very high expectations of the state sector.*

Supports Needed

*Longer notification of consultation exercises, seminars etc.
State sector meeting people on the ground and local networking as part of their work.
Providing direct contacts in departments.
Clear and shared understandings of concepts and objectives.
Greater integration of the service delivery and policy areas of the state sector.
Training for the state sector to help break down defences and encourage creativity and imaginative thinking.
Cross-sector secondments and training.*

Mary Bulter, Department of the Taoiseach

Providing a view from the state sector, Mary highlighted the importance of good relationships between the sectors in building the trust needed for effective consultation. She also emphasised the importance of recognising the difference between consultation and decision-making and the need for the state sector to fulfil its statutory requirements. The need for resources to organisations working on the ground was recognised and is being addressed in the context of the forthcoming White Paper on the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector, the new national agreement and local government reform. Finally, the potential of information technology to contribute to consultation was raised.

Workshop 2: National Anti-Poverty Organisations

Benefits of Consultation with and for National Anti-Poverty Organisations

*Increased credibility due to access to consultation processes.
Responding to / representing people's needs.
Increased capacity to develop local and national responses.
Better understanding of issues across organisations.
Gives a voice to those who don't usually have one.*

Barriers to Consultation with and for National Anti-Poverty Organisations

*Lack of confidence, resources and information.
Only a few groups consulted with.
Lack of structures for consultation.
Not enough co-ordination.
Lack of follow-up.
Power imbalance both in state and community and voluntary sectors.
Services delivery based on the needs of government departments not clients.
Token consultations.
Lack of reciprocal relationship between groups and departments.
Little attention to small groups.
Umbrella organisations can't represent everyone.*

Supports Needed

*Status as an equal partner.
Funds to develop local organisations for involvement in consultation.
Greater time to commit to consultation.
Training to ensure representatives can speak for the widest group of people.
'Background' supports, e.g. childcare and family friendly policies.
Financial support to allow individuals and groups that have no funding to participate.*

Camille Loftus, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed

In putting forward the perspective of a national organisation, Camille stressed that consultation had helped in putting the issues of the unemployed on the political agenda. The INOU rely less on set 'consultative events' and work more 'on the ground', for example through local development work and service delivery. In this way they are consulting with people on real issues of importance to them every day. The drawbacks highlighted included that consultation is time consuming. Lack of integration among departments can make this worse as it can mean having to repeat work. In addition, consultation tends to be full of 'jargon' rather than plain language, and can be intimidating. It can also be one sided, with the community and voluntary sector putting their positions on the table, with little return from the state sector. Finally, consultation can be used as a means of delaying decisions and can reduce organisation's ability to oppose state policy as they are seen to support decisions they do not necessarily agree with. In overcoming some of these problems,

Camille stressed the need for additional staff resources for community and voluntary groups to work with their membership on an ongoing basis, as well as greater clarity on the purpose of the consultation exercise.

Workshop 3: Consultation at the Local Level

Benefits of Consultation with and for Local Organisations

*Only way things can really work.
Policies are more relevant.
Promotes trust and responsibility.
Permission to take part or not.
Relevance of an issue can be identified.
Contribute to/draw on best practice models.
Can change people's lives.
Learning for all and changing perceptions.
Can move things on.
Opportunities to come together.*

Barriers at the Local Level

*Lack of acceptance of local groups and individuals, especially in the early stages.
Fragmentation of views within and between groups in the community.
Competition for scarce resources.
Lack of resources such as money, public transport, child care and time.
Lack of resources to increase capacity.
Statutory sector unwilling to consult.
Fear of speaking out.
Not knowing how to target people.
Sometimes there is no end goal.
Lack of information and experience.
Lack of guidelines on the boundaries of the consultation process.
Young people not helped to participate.
Expectations not met.*

Supports Needed at the Local Level

*Shadowing and mentoring.
Good feedback.
Time for discussion of issues.
Training and resources for local people to do outreach work.
Cost of Disability Allowance and funding for personal assistants.
Specific supports for rural involvement.
Involvement of local and intermediate bodies.
Clear and accessible information.
Development of local consultation structures.
Recognition of different levels in the consultation process and the need for linkages.
Recognise that "umbrella" organisations are not always representative.*

Catherine McGlinchey, Helen Kavanagh and Emily Smartt, Clondalkin Women's Network

In presenting the view of a local organisation, the women from Clondalkin Women's Network stressed that consultation provides an opportunity for people to develop personally. It can give them new skills and increase their confidence. It also helps develop awareness of how groups and agencies work and how decisions and policies are made. Through sharing views and experiences, consultation provides an opportunity to contribute information that can influence these decisions and policies.

However, a number of barriers exist to participating in consultation. One that is not frequently explicitly referred to is poverty itself. Childcare, including after school care, and other costs of consultation should be paid up front as people often do not have the means to wait for these payments. This is a particular problem for women. A further constraint arises if childcare expenses are only reimbursed if people use registered childminders. People also need to feel that they are dressed appropriately and not knowing what to wear can be an issue. Poverty affects skills and confidence and this can be a very real problem when asked to speak up and form opinions quickly. People experiencing poverty are often disillusioned and disappointed with state bodies and need to be assured that getting involved will make a difference. Volunteers may feel less valued than those in paid work. In addressing these barriers, outreach work is critical and this requires personal contact with people and resources. Training to help develop skills and confidence, accessible background information and assistance for groups to develop a mandate beforehand are all essential. Finally, literacy problems can be a problem and should be addressed through the use of creative methods.

The Second Seminar

Practical Consultation Exercises

The second seminar began with presentations by the South Dublin Community Platform, a

member of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs on models of consultation used by them. Following this, participants broke into working groups to address the task set for the day. This was to design a consultation process or exercise for a given imaginary situation. The questions that informed this exercise were drawn from six main issues that arose in the first seminar. These were: who are the key stakeholders, what is the purpose or objective of the consultation, what principles should underlie the process, the methods to be used, the supports required and how feedback would be provided to those involved. In addition to doing this, participants were asked to take on roles other than the one they usually fulfil. For example, representatives of community groups were asked to address the problem as a representative of the statutory sector and vice versa. These roles were negotiated between the facilitators and participants.

The scenarios were substantially different in both the issues they addressed and the levels at which consultation was sought. The feedback from the working groups reflected this most clearly in the stakeholders represented. However, a high degree of similarity was also reported across these working groups. This was particularly true with regard to the underlying principles, the methods to be used, the supports required and the ways in which feedback should be provided. Two examples of the feedback from these workshops illustrate these differences and similarities.

The Men's Working Group

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy revised its targets on long-term unemployment in 1999. Located in a disadvantaged urban area, the Men's Working Group provides support and advice to long-term unemployed men. The group is interested in local strategies that will help reach the new NAPS targets locally and nationally. The group wants to produce a policy document for circulation to the training and employment authority, the Department of Work, the local authority and others based on the needs of their client group. The group wants to hold a consultation exercise that will inform this document.

Stakeholders Represented

- Unemployed men and those affected by unemployment, e.g., spouses / partners
- The Men's Working Group
- Relevant Community and Voluntary organisations including the INOU
- Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
- Service Providers, including FÁS
- Local Area Partnerships and Community Development Projects

Purpose / Objectives

- To establish the needs of unemployed men locally and those affected by unemployment
- To establish the needs of employers
- To gain an understanding of the impact of unemployment
- To promote involvement, empowerment and participation
- To keep people involved in all stages of the strategy and encourage accountability and feedback
- To gather information
- To improve quality of life

Underlying Principles

- Inclusion: this requires resources and the inclusion of family units as well as individuals
- Partnership among the stakeholders, while each retains their independence
- Participation of the target group on an ongoing basis
- Clear definition of the areas (geographical)
- Non-judgemental and non-prescriptive approach
- Accountability, flexibility and sensitivity on all sides
- Clarity on the context and realistic expectations
- Encourage ownership of the process by the target group

Methods to be Used

- Need to think the process through and put steps in appropriate order
- House-to-house visits
- Visits to organisations
- Focus groups
- Public Forum

- Use of open questions and a flexible agenda that allows people to talk
- Limited use of questionnaires
- Review of experiences of other areas

Supports Required

- Childcare and transport
- Food and drink at meeting
- User friendly times and venues
- Administrative support
- Facilitators to build the capacity of people to participate and to facilitate meetings etc.
- Assistance in developing the consultation process, questionnaires etc.
- Support networks

Providing Feedback

- Feedback has to be seen as essential
- Newsletters delivered door to door
- Local radio / papers
- Go back to visit those who participated and those who didn't
- Circulate plans and details of actions through local people and networks

A New Education Strategy for Disadvantaged Youth

A new unit on education has been opened in the Department of Saints and Scholars. This unit is drawing up a new strategy to prevent early school leaving among disadvantaged students. Their focus will be on increasing the numbers achieving a Junior Certificate in order to meet the target set down in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Department wants to conduct a consultation exercise that will involve as many people with an interest in this area as possible.

Stakeholders Represented

- Statutory sector, including government departments, Gardai, VECs etc.
- Non-State sector, including trade unions, partnership organisations, community groups
- Organisations representing the interests of the early school leavers
- Early school leavers, young people at risk of early school leaving and parents.

Purpose / Objectives

- To achieve a better understanding of the problem
- To draw on people's experiences
- To promote a sense of ownership among stakeholders
- To promote well being
- To better direct resources

Underlying Principles

- Strategic planning
- Transparency, accountability and honesty on all sides
- Effective representation
- Trust and respect and co-operation
- Openness to a variety of new ideas
- Clear expectations
- Wide feedback
- Commitment to building capacity to consult
- Ethical
- Agreed objectives and methods
- Equal participation by all parties
- No jargon
- Resource participation where necessary
- No token consultation – must produce a product

Methods to be Used

- Face to face meetings
- Focus groups
- Outreach to target groups and local communities
- Submissions
- Public Forum
- Literature reviews
- Survey of target groups
- Study of best practices
- Working groups, involving grass roots organisations
- Links with local media

Supports Required

- Time for reflection
- Budget to commission work
- Access to information
- Capacity building for all those involved – could include job placement, skills development and training (state sector suggestions)
- Transport and childcare
- Facilitators
- Information on similar exercises

- Advice on making presentations, submissions etc.
- Advertising and promotion of the consultation exercise
- Provide a range of venues to achieve a geographic spread
- Resources

Providing Feedback

- Resources dedicated to providing feedback to all levels
- Newsletters
- Interim position papers
- Easy to read reports and documents
- Media releases
- Conferences
- Small scale briefing sessions with groups
- Public Forum
- Ongoing monitoring of strategies

The two workshops not detailed here considered the issues of homelessness and community development in an isolated rural setting. Details of the feedback from these are available from the Combat Poverty Agency.

Some Issues Arising

Who Should be Involved in Consultation?

At the first seminar the issue of who should be involved in consultation was raised with participants expressing the view that consultation should be as *extensive as possible* and involve as many relevant people as possible. Participants discussed this further at the second seminar in deciding who were the key stakeholders in hypothetical scenarios. Stakeholders were identified as those with an active interest or role in the issue or policy in question. Participants had no difficulty in identifying a broad range of stakeholders but found it more difficult to limit these to key ones in light of limited resources. In this case, the limited resources were the number of stakeholders they could reasonably represent in their workshop given a limited number of participants. This reflects a very real problem in consultation, that is, the scope of any exercise will be determined, in part, by the resources available to it. This is where the

idea of 'key' stakeholders becomes relevant. In each workshop these invariably included representatives of the statutory sector, the community and voluntary sector and the target group(s) for the policy in question. One issue of relevance that emerged here is that while *the right of individuals living in poverty to be consulted with is upheld*, clearly representative organisations have both a mandate, a responsibility and a role in consulting on behalf of their constituent groups. Who it is most appropriate to involve and when will be specific to individual consultation exercises.

Setting Objectives and Identifying Principles

One of the common problems identified by participants from all sectors is the *need for greater clarity* in relation to all aspects of consultation. This need for clarity also arose again when participants came to identify the principles that they felt should underlie any consultation exercise. It could be argued here that this is a question of process rather than of principles. Irrespective of how one classifies this, the need for clarity arose repeatedly in relation to *the objectives or purpose of the consultation, and what the process is seeking to and can achieve*, so that unrealistic expectations are not raised. In addition, state sector representatives in particular stressed the need for participants to be clear about *the limits of consultation and the difference between this and the political decision-making process*. In essence, the position put forward is that while consultation can inform the decision-making process, decisions are ultimately made by the government of the day.

Participants were clear on the need for principles that all parties would accept and work within. In general discussions, the principles were very broad and did not become much more specific when applied to individual consultation exercises. The operationalising of these principles, such as trust, respect partnership etc., needs significantly more attention. In addition, workshops were asked to limit the number of key principles to six. In general, many more than six were identified and in some cases this resulted in the amalgamation of a number of principles into one rather than their prioritisation.

How Should Consultation Take Place?

While in general participants frequently stressed the need for *creative and inclusive methods of consultation*, few of these were evident in the practical exercises. The methods identified were, by and large, the standard ones of public meetings, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and submissions. Some more creative methods were identified, including house meetings and street meetings. Participants stressed the need for *methods that were appropriate to the particular situation and target group*. It remains, however, that much work is needed on methods of consultation that are not only creative, but that also ensure the deepest possible involvement of relevant stakeholders.

Challenges were made in relation to how consultation is carried out and a number of different ways highlighted. For example, the INOU stressed that they saw their ongoing welfare support and advice service as a form of consultation with their constituency. This is an important source of information in formulating policy positions as it reflects the issues that are of immediate importance to people. This could be considered one way in which ongoing consultation is built into the work of many organisations. The Corporate Section of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs provided a useful model of a proactive consultation exercise that, although ongoing, has a limited lifespan for participating individuals. In consulting with clients through User Panels, they are clear that any particular Panel will only meet four times. After that, the participants themselves have said all they want to say and are happy for their involvement to come to an end and new Panels to be formed.

The Need for Supports

All sectors stressed the need for resources and other supports. These resources are very wide ranging and include those for *individual consultation events, such as childcare and transport, as well as finance to pay additional staff, to train local people etc.* More ongoing supports were also identified that would allow for organisational capacity building. Primary among these was the need for *additional human resources to devote to consultation*.

This would allow organisations to devote *more time* to this type of work. The need for such resources has frequently been made by community and voluntary organisations but was also stressed time and again by representatives of the state sector who are also feeling the weight of increasingly frequent consultation exercises. While there is little question that these supports are necessary to varying degrees in different situations, the question of actual costs of a full consultation exercise was not addressed by participants, even though this was one area for consideration in the second seminar.

Providing Feedback

The issue of feedback emerged as one of the key issues in the first seminar. Participants expressed a degree of frustration and a sense of exploitation that those leading consultation processes rarely provide comprehensive or indeed any feedback to those who participated. *Feedback was seen, however, not just as an issue of protocol or courtesy, but also as a key component of consultation as an ongoing process*. Again, a number of practical ways of providing feedback were identified (see examples from the second seminar above).

However, *the issues or areas that feedback should address were unclear*. Should this be in relation to the consultation exercise itself, to the policy or measures arising from the consultation, ongoing changes to these etc.? It was also unclear how long feedback should be provided for. Essentially, this is a question of if and when the ongoing process ends for organisations and participants. In certain situations, such as the example from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs Corporate Section, participants are involved for a defined period of time, while the process is ongoing for the Department. In other instances, organisations have more ongoing contact with the same people, such as members or affiliates through newsletters etc. What is important to recognise is that consultation and feedback should be a part of the design, the implementation and the evaluation of any policy or strategy. How people are consulted, who is consulted and how and when feedback is provided should be considered at each stage of the process.

A Positive Consultation Exercise

Drawing on the learning from the two seminars, some of the characteristics of a positive consultation exercise involving the state sector, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations have become clearer. In addition, some of the practical measures required to meet these are also clear, but only to the extent that they can be framed in general terms. The detail of this is something that requires more in-depth work than can be achieved in two seminars and that will also, to some extent, depend on the specific circumstances. However, the guidelines below should apply to all sectors and all levels of consultation.

Some Basic Guidelines

- *Clearly establish the purpose, objectives and expected outcomes of the process*. This should initially be done by the lead organisation(s), but where possible with sufficient flexibility to allow participants to comment and advise on these, if appropriate. However, in practical terms it needs to be recognised that while such discussions and negotiations should inform a final decision on these issues, this decision will ultimately have to be taken by either the lead organisation(s) or a particular group of people, such as a working group.
- *Establish clear rules of engagement*. These should outline the practical arrangements and working methods of the consultation process. These should be negotiated and agreed as much as possible with the participants in the process.
- *Ensure that the topic and exercise are relevant to those you involve*. Consultation exercises should address the concerns of the people and organisations you wish to consult with and be relevant to their lives and work. Ways in which this might be achieved are through clearly targeted rather than broad consultations or building consultation into advocacy services.
- *Be an ongoing process that contributes to the decision and policy making process*. The practical definition of 'ongoing', whether this means for the lifetime of a

policy, provision or strategy, or for a limited period in any one form or with any one group of people, should form part of the rules of engagement.

- *Provide sufficient advance resources for groups and individuals to prepare for involvement.* Recognising the time consuming nature of consultation work, key here is sufficient advance notice of all stages of the consultation process. Also necessary is accessible information, as well as resources for capacity building and training.
- *Cover all participation costs including childcare, eldercare and transport.* These should, if possible, be paid in cash and on the day. For local organisations, paying such expenses may not be possible. However, some alternatives have been found to address this issue. These include taking the process to the people in their homes and using community resources and facilities to provide supports.
- *Use appropriate ways of involving people.* In relation to those not usually consulted, and in particular those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, involvement should be mainly face-to-face, use creative approaches where appropriate, build on existing services such as advocacy and advice, allow sufficient time for people to think about what they want to say, and involve regular meetings to let people get to know each other and to build up trust.
- *Be based on the principles of accountability and transparency.* All parties to the consultation must accept these principles.
- *Be free of jargon and use clear language.* The use of jargon and complicated language was clearly considered to be a barrier to consultation. It should be avoided if at all possible.
- *Involve, but not expose, people affected by poverty.* The right of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to respect and privacy should be upheld and appropriate resources and supports should be put in place. However, consultation should always be undertaken on a voluntary basis and be facilitated rather than imposed.
- *Be based on institutional rather than individual commitment.* It is essential that

any consultation process be supported by institutions and not just by individuals if the process is to be ongoing, meaningful and effective. This requires organisations to develop a culture that accepts consultation as part of the way in which it works. Such a change will take time to achieve in some organisations where the concept and practice of consultation is still relatively new.

- *Do not reinvent the wheel, but learn from and build on previous experience and existing models of consultation.* This places the onus on all those involved in consultation to document the models they develop and to make this information available. In addition, where possible evaluations of consultation processes should be undertaken.
- *Where possible be based on small rather than large groups.* For all sectors it was agreed that consultation should be based on small groups where people may be more comfortable expressing their views. This was seen as particularly relevant to involving people who experience poverty and social exclusion to whom large groups may be more intimidating.
- *Provide regular and accurate feedback.* In particular, feedback should be provided on the role consultation played in formulating policy and the reasons for decisions.

Conclusions

What is clear is that people believe that consultation leads to better decisions and policies. However, consultation is not a simple exercise to which a set of rigid rules can be applied. What is, possible, however, is the identification of guidelines within which consultation exercises can be designed to suit specific consultations and to facilitate and support the participation of all relevant groups. Further work in designing these will be done by the transnational partners in this project and at the transnational seminar in Dublin in September 2000. However, any resulting guidelines will only be of use if they are accepted across different sectors and are implemented. This will be the real challenge facing the partners in this project.

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¹ The seven Irish National Anti-Poverty Networks are the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN Ireland), the Forum for People with Disabilities, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INO), Irish Rural Link (IRL), the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), One Parent Exchange Network (OPEN) and the Community Workers Co-operative (CWC).

Consultation, Poverty & Policy



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