

Taskforce on Active Citizenship

# *The Concept of Active Citizenship*



Taskforce on  
**active**  
citizenship

TASCFHÓRSA UM SHAORÁNACHT GHNÍOMHACH

# **Background Working Paper published by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship**

**March 2007**

Requests for copies of this document and other Taskforce reports can be directed to:

Secretariat of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship

2-4 Merrion Row

Dublin 2

Tel: (01) 619 4332

Email: [info@activecitizen.ie](mailto:info@activecitizen.ie)

Website: [www.activecitizen.ie](http://www.activecitizen.ie)



## ***Contents***

Preface:.....	2
1. Introduction .....	2
2. Philosophical roots of Active Citizenship in civic republicanism .....	3
3. Different dimensions of Active Citizenship .....	5
4. The rise of 'social capital' .....	7
5. Disentangling Active Citizenship, social capital and community development.....	9
6. Where does Active Citizenship sit in debates about public policy in Ireland and Europe today?.....	11
7. Unresolved questions and further research .....	14
References .....	16



## ***Preface:***

The Taskforce on Active Citizenship was appointed by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D. in April 2006 to, amongst other things, 'review the evidence regarding trends in citizen participation across the main areas of civic, community, cultural, occupational and recreational life in Ireland' and to 'examine those trends in the context of international experience and analysis.'

This report discusses the origins of the concept of Active Citizenship and reviews the relationship between Active Citizenship, community development and social capital. It also considers the relevance of Active Citizenship to debates about public policy in Ireland and Europe today.

This report is one of a range of background papers produced by the Taskforce, which include papers on 'Statistical Evidence of Active Citizenship in Ireland' and 'Active Citizenship in faith-based communities'.

These reports, as well as the Taskforce's Report to Government (March 2007) and other relevant information are available on the Taskforce website [www.activecitizen.ie](http://www.activecitizen.ie).

March 2007

## ***1. Introduction***

This paper considers the notion of Active Citizenship and traces some of its origins across different fields from political science to philosophy and sociology. 'Active Citizenship', can sit within many different normative frameworks and does not necessitate a legalistic view of 'citizenship'. Active Citizenship is probably best understood from its rich connotations in political philosophy especially that of 'civic republicanism' which is a close ally to the idea of 'social capital'.

The paper is structured as follows:

1. Philosophical roots of Active Citizenship in civic republicanism
2. Different dimensions of Active Citizenship
3. The rise of 'social capital'
4. Disentangling Active Citizenship, social capital and community development
5. Where does Active Citizenship sit in debates about public policy in Ireland and Europe today?
6. Unresolved questions and further research

There are a number of different approaches to defining **Active Citizenship**. Rather than defining it as mainly to do with volunteering or informal social engagement and thereby separate from political and civic engagement, it is suggested that Active Citizenship is an all-encompassing concept embracing formal and non-formal, political, cultural, inter-personal and caring activities.

## ***2. Philosophical roots of Active Citizenship in civic republicanism***

A number of broad theoretical approaches have informed political thinking in relation to citizenship. For a more detailed review of the theoretical foundations of civic republicanism the reader is referred to extensive literature including the following: Dagger (1997), Honohan (2002), O’Ferrall (2000), Pettit (1999) and Sandel (1996). Some liberal approaches emphasise citizenship as a status entitling each individual to the same formal rights that are enshrined in law. The main function of the political realm, according to these approaches, is to protect and maximise individual interests. More recent communitarian approaches emphasise that citizenship is socially-embedded: an individual’s identity is influenced through their relations with others.

So called ‘liberal’ and ‘communitarian’ approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A sense of balanced rights and responsibilities to the wider community can also be found in earlier political philosophies. A ‘civic republican’ perspective on citizenship arises from the capacity for collective self-government and the individual’s sense of social concern as a member of a polity. These acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of citizenship as a philosophy and practice that values the mutually compatible goals of liberty, equality and fraternity (or community).

The term ‘republicanism’ may be confusing especially in a historical Irish political context. It is important to emphasise from the outset that civic republicanism represents a strand of political thought and practice that emphasises the civic virtues of participation, democracy, liberty, equality and social solidarity. Civic republicanism is about the exercise of these values in practice and not, primarily, about what the absence or presence of a monarchy or, in the Irish context, affiliation to one cultural or national identity or another. Civic republicanism acknowledges the mutual interdependence of all those who belong to a society or community while recognising the possibility of different identities within or across societies as well as overlapping and multiple identities. Hence, any number of different and possibly overlapping identities such as Irish, British, Celtic, Ulster, European, etc can find expression in political or social institutions based on the principles of democracy and cooperation. A feature of modern-day Europe and, indeed, Ireland, is that the sharp lines of distinction and boundary that once marked off different religions, language groups, ethnic and nationality groups are a lot more fuzzy. At the same time, diversity has increased as people are more mobile; live and work in different places at different points in their lives and connect and meet with others who are less alike through new forms of communication, travel and exchange of ideas.

The historical origins of civic republicanism go back to early civilisations including those of Athens and Rome. The very term ‘republic’ comes to us from the Latin term *res publica* – ‘public thing’ or public concern. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle discussed at length the role of the citizen in activity pursuing the common good of a community. In keeping with the writings of other ‘civic republicans’ such as Cicero, Rousseau, Montesquieu and de Tocqueville, Aristotle emphasised the principles of freedom or voluntarism – authority cannot compel people to be good but it can provide incentives as well as sanctions for bad behaviour.



Taking its cue from the French revolutionary tradition, which also inspired the movement for independence in Ireland at the turn of the 19th century, various political strands from liberalism to socialism to modern nationalism adapted the principles of civic republicanism: socialism emphasised equality, solidarity and interdependence; liberalism emphasised rule of law and freedom from excessive Government; nationalism aimed at national self-determination and freedom from foreign oppression. However, underlying all of these strands was the acceptance that any political arrangement requires active, educated and responsible citizens who behave according to various civic virtues. Without the practice of civic virtue and without active participation by citizens in the life of the community, the institutions of democracy, the market, the State – civil society as a whole – cannot operate in a sustainable way.

The very notion of ‘citizen’ was, and is, a contested area. The emergence of strong and centralised nation states in the 19th century did not necessarily lead to recognition of all persons in a given territory as equal and empowered citizens. Universal suffrage became a right for all adults only by degrees. Initially, property, gender, age and legal citizenship status were criteria for eligibility to vote. Then some of these criteria were relaxed over time<sup>1</sup> and the minimum age reduced<sup>2</sup>. Nation states operated a more or less restrictive policy on who is legally a citizen of its community – with all the rights and responsibilities that that brings. A fundamental confusion can arise around the very notion of citizenship. Some may interpret it in a most literal and legal sense as the conferring of membership of a nation state group – citizenship as nationality. Others may interpret it as an encompassing notion that describes people’s status as active participants in the community and democratic life of a nation state (or states) regardless of their long-term affiliation or ‘legal’ citizenship status.

Added to this confusion, the very notion of an active citizen may be compromised by the opportunities that citizens have to exercise influence and to play an active role in society. This compromising may reflect differences in social, health, disability, age, gender and economic position and status within a society. Depending on who they know, how they are respected and viewed by those in more powerful positions, many citizens – regardless of their legal status – may be outsiders and marginal to the key decisions that impact on their lives. Honohan (2005a) has pointed out that:

*...substantial economic inequalities pose an obstacle to equal citizenship, citizens need to be independent of the overbearing will of others - in the terms of the time, this implied that they should be property owners. While some envisaged measures to limit excessive accumulation of wealth, it was more usual to exclude from citizenship those seen as naturally dependent: property-less wage-earners and women...*

<sup>1</sup> Women in Ireland won the right to vote for the first time in parliamentary elections to Westminster in 1918.  
<sup>2</sup> The minimum age for voting in local, Dáil and other elections was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1973 following a referendum.

### 3. Different dimensions of Active Citizenship

The Government's White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity (2000: 14) has defined Active Citizenship as:

*the active role of people, communities and voluntary organisations in decision-making which directly affects them. This extends the concept of formal citizenship and democratic society from one of basic civil, political and social and economic rights to one of direct democratic participation and responsibility.*

The NESF Report on Social Capital (2003: 136) has defined Active Citizenship as:

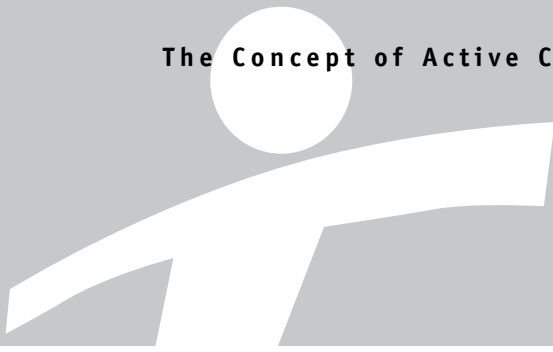
*the active exercise of social rights and shared responsibilities associated with belonging to a community or society; the concept is broader than just a formal or legal definition and encompasses social, economic and cultural rights and obligations.*

The NESF also acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of Active Citizenship (2003: 5):

*There is a continuum from informal, unstructured networks of friends, neighbours, relatives and others right up to more formal participation in intermediary structures between public agencies and the citizen. Social capital, active citizenship and community development are all inter-related. A broad concept of active citizenship relates, by right, to all members of society including those who are presently excluded on grounds of ethnicity, social position or other identities.*

In this paper it is suggested that citizenship should *not* be seen as exclusively or primarily in terms of a legal status, with rights such as equality before the law, and duties such as paying taxes or even as incorporation into a particular jurisdiction or cultural identity. Rather, the concept should be interpreted much more broadly to include these aspects as well as to refer *specifically* to Active Citizenship. **Active Citizenship refers to the voluntary capacity of citizens and communities working directly together, or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social and political power in pursuit of shared goals.** Three vital caveats, it is suggested, are in order:

- Citizens may exercise this capacity individually or jointly in a territory or community of belonging even though they may differ with respect to religious creed, ethnicity, nationality status or other dimensions;
- Institutions and practices of formal democracy, including local government the Oireachtas and the system of elected representatives, do not exhaust the meaning and application of Active Citizenship – they are potentially enhanced by it; and
- Active Citizenship is an inherently risky undertaking because by its nature it is voluntary, difficult to regulate, predict or channel – the various players from Government to Business to the Community and Voluntary sectors *need to cede some space to others.*



In a fast-changing Ireland, individuals may be more inclined to choose their own roles and identities in communities, workplaces and families. It could be claimed that commitments and identities are more likely to be shaped 'from below' – by individuals themselves – than by some traditional and permanent community or group to which they belong. Honohan (2005b: 175) has drawn attention to various aspects of Active Citizenship that in her view are desirable:

- an **awareness** of interdependencies and common economic, social and environmental concerns: *'they inform themselves of the social conditions of their fellow citizens and pay attention to political issues, contributing to policy decisions directly or indirectly.'*
- an **attitude** of civic self-restraint: *'giving more weight to common interests than prevails in the contemporary culture of individualism...Those who recognise interdependence are more likely to accept, for example, redistributive measures that maintain political equality, individual costs incurred in taking time to recycle, limiting their own pursuit of material wealth, engaging in activities of care, and giving time and energy to political concerns.'* Such an attitude implies a willingness to effectively challenge infringements not only of one's own rights, but also those of others.
- an openness to **deliberative engagement**: *'Citizens form their own judgements, are prepared to explain their own positions, to listen to other points of view, and to revise their opinions in deliberation...They are prepared to raise, and support others who raise, issues of concern in the public arena, and to defend the interests of fellow citizens subject to injustices as well as defending themselves.'*

Active Citizenship is as much about decision-making, politics, democracy and participation in the governance of communities as it is about 'helping out' and volunteering. However, volunteering and 'helping out' are also essential to supporting community well-being. Indeed, volunteering and 'helping out' is what political activists do.

There is another dimension to Active Citizenship: families. Parents who take their children to local sports activities are contributing as active citizens as indeed are family members who make an enormous, sometimes heroic, and difficult to measure contribution as 'active citizens' to public welfare by caring for the elderly, the young or persons with disabilities. It is worth stressing the role of families as well as various other informal social networks – these are typically neglected areas in debates about Active Citizenship, social capital and democracy. Involvement, citizenship and belonging as ways of relating and responding are typically first experienced and learned in families and communities. In families and various local communities, children and adults learn this practice – thinking about various issues from the simple to the complex; cooperating and living with others; talking with and listening to others; using information as a basis for decision-making and action; and taking action towards agreed goals. In many respects it could be asserted that families form the basic nucleus of Active Citizenship. However, even if families can help young people to acquire habits and values relevant to the exercise of democracy – like primary and second-level schools they are necessarily not fully democratic in themselves. Some degree of incremental growth in responsibility and autonomy for young people as they develop towards adulthood is desirable.

## 4. The rise of 'social capital'

If the term 'active citizenship' has undergone a rapid increase in usage in recent years, its close relation 'social capital' has experienced a meteoric rise in use – at least in academic debate as well as in some policy-political discourse too. Are Active Citizenship and 'social capital' conceptually identical twins or distant cousins? Before considering the inter-relationship among concepts such as social capital, Active Citizenship and community development, in the next section, it is necessary to consider the meaning of social capital as it emerged as an important concept in the academic literature of the last 15 years.

In recent decades, the names of three writers, in particular, have come to the fore in the development of the concept of social capital internationally: Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Sociologist, James Coleman, (1988:598) has defined social capital by its function. He wrote:

*It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – within the structure.*

Coleman underlines three crucial components of social capital as:

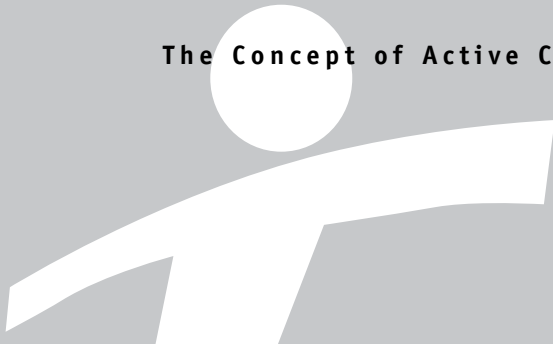
- obligations and expectations;
- information-sharing in social networks; and
- sanctions and norms in social networks.

Although the term 'social capital' is used by many researchers and some policy makers, it is less commonly used or understood among the general public. The concept is simple to grasp once it is described in terms of ordinary, everyday experience. It may be intangible and difficult to assess but this fact does not make its presence in social relationships any less important for personal or shared well-being.

A parent who can draw on networks of support in times of crisis to mind children or to seek advice knows that he or she has access to a vital resource. People who sense that their neighbourhoods are good places in which to live and in which 'people look out for each other' and help out, experience the benefit of social capital at neighbourhood level.

A young person living in an inner-city complex may have an extensive network of peers, family and friends that offer support, advice and information. However, he or she may lack contact with people from outside the immediate area or social circle. This may represent an impediment to finding a job or access to wider social opportunities.

A neighbourhood community in which people feel at home, part of some collective identity or pride of place and history and capable of acting together to achieve common aims ('collective efficacy') is likely to be a better, safer and happier environment for young and old alike. Such a community can mobilise this 'capital' in times of environmental disaster, personal tragedy or economic shock as well as at other times.



More formally, social capital has been defined in the OECD Report, *The Well-Being of Nations* (OECD, 2001: 41) as:

*networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups.*

Putnam (2000: 19) has used a somewhat tighter definition of social capital than that used by the OECD:

*...connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.*

Although differences arise among users of the term in relation to a precise definition, there is broad agreement that trust, norms (of reciprocity) and social sanctions are at the core of the concept. Coleman and Putnam have both drawn attention to the role of social networks and associated norms of reciprocity as facilitating agents for collective action and, frequently but not necessarily, across socio-economic or ethnic divides. Conflict based on class or social interest is possible but not the primary focus of social network analysis according to this view.

A key point in Coleman's approach to social capital is that it is defined by its function – what it does. Two dimensions are present in all of Coleman's discussions of social capital: (i) social structure; and (ii) facilitation of social action by individuals within a given structure. Coleman acknowledges that social capital that has value for individuals in one setting may actually harm others. Hence, a functional definition of social capital (what it does) does not deny the possibility of a strongly negative impact in specific cases. Putnam says that 'a society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital' (Putnam, 2000: 19). It is also the case that a well-connected, but immoral, society may be rich in social capital (and active citizenship).

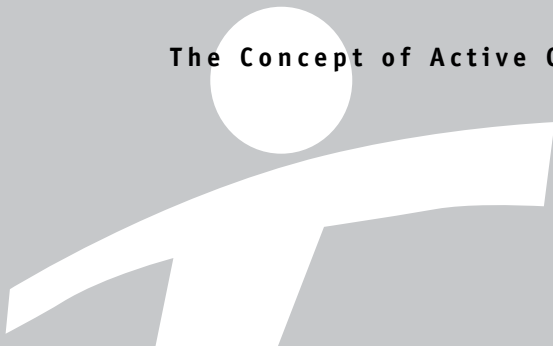
The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 241-258) has defined social capital as:

*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.*

Even though social capital inheres in social relationships and networks, Bourdieu understood social capital as an individual or collective property with a strategic use even if not consciously so. Some degree of durability, stability and continuity in relationships is implied in the concept. The volume of social capital possessed by anyone is related to the size of his/her networks as well as the amount of economic and *cultural capital* possessed by those in one's networks. Social capital is combined with (and sometimes transformed into)<sup>3</sup> other forms of capital – human, cultural<sup>4</sup> and financial.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'fungibility' is used to describe the potential for each form of capital to be converted into other forms.

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu understood cultural capital as the ideas, practices and artefacts that are highly valued in a given society – presumably a close ally of social and human capital.



## ***5. Disentangling Active Citizenship, social capital and community development***

Terms such as citizenship, Active Citizenship, social capital, community, community development and community empowerment are confusing to many citizens. Some of these terms are less familiar and used than other terms. Many people have their own 'favourite' term among these. Even the same term can mean different things to different people. Some clarification is in order.

People form part of a community – any number of communities. We naturally belong by virtue of birth or place or care or acquaintance. Our sense of where we belong, to whom and with whom changes as we go through life<sup>5</sup>. But, community belonging remains a critical and life-giving part of who we are at each stage of life. It helps shape how we view the world, what we value and strive for and with whom we are prepared to share such precious resources as time, effort, information. We choose our communities. But, often our communities choose us and our choices are limited by distance, time, information and inherited values and beliefs.

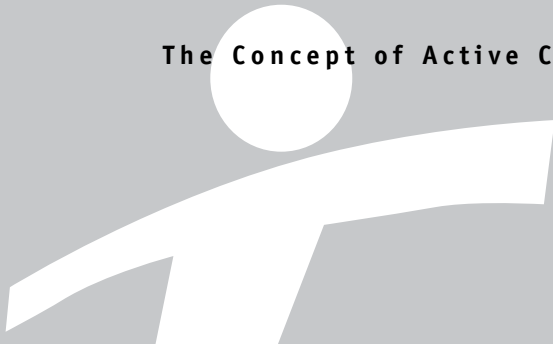
So, in every community there are people, relationships and norms of behaving and thinking. These are in a constant state of change and flux as people encounter new situations and relationships. Some values, beliefs and relationships remain fairly constant and are communicated from one generation to another. The cultural transmission of values, ideas and practices is a complex process. The development of communities can be held back or moved forward (depending on how we define progress and development) by members of communities or by other communities. Community development could be understood as 'intricate networks of purposeful conversations about the issues that matter most to people' (Lillis, 2006).

In conversation, people define who they are, what they want and how others think. Communities create and re-create themselves through conversation. If the art of conversation is neglected by any community or public agency, community development is the worse for it.

One way of thinking about community development is to draw attention to the rich array of resources that reside in communities. Usually, we think of the 'factors of production' – land, labour and capital (defined as physical capital used in the production of goods and services) – as those things that create value in the economic sense. But 'capital' is not the preserve of economics. 'Value' can also be defined by what people need and create in the service of others – it may not be equated to economic production or market price or value in that sense. Furthermore, what goes to empower a community to achieve its goals could be defined in terms of (i) people, (ii) social relations among them, (iii) institutions and (iv) physical tools, facilities, nature, etc. Some economists refer to people-resources as 'human capital'. Recently, many social scientists<sup>6</sup> (although by no means all) understand social relations as a form of capital that enables communities to get things done. The norms and sanctions inherent in reciprocal relationships among members of a

5 The terms 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital are frequently used to distinguish between social ties among, respectively, alike and not alike persons in a social network.

6 Social scientists may include economists, political economists, sociologists, political scientists and social psychologists. The perspectives of historians, social ethnographers, philosophers, artists and others could be added.



social network (family, neighbourhood, association, enterprise, polity) are a form of capital that can be used to achieve important social outcomes – even if they are very difficult to measure, price or exchange for other forms of capital.

Finally, the term ‘Active Citizenship’ refers, as already stated above, to the *voluntary capacity* of citizens and communities working directly together, or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social and political power in pursuit of shared goals.

One way of summarising the complex inter-relationship between these terms is to propose that:

Community development is a very broad concept describing a process or *flow* of conversation, change and movement in any given community; social capital is one of a number of *stocks* of resources that communities can draw on<sup>7</sup> while Active Citizenship describes the *manner* in which some forms of community development takes place: (i) active, (ii) democratic and (iii) citizenship/belonging. Such development is *active* when it involves people in decision-making and follow-up action rather than leaving them as mere passive recipients of others’ aid or subjects of authority or uninvolved ‘customers’ of some service. Development is democratic when it involves people talking, working and deliberating together to arrive at agreed approaches to solving issues that are viewed as important to them. Community development involves *citizenship* understood in the broadest sense of civic republicanism as belonging to a community founded on equality, solidarity and freedom or voluntary participation.

<sup>7</sup> Usually for positive outcomes – but possibly for negative outcomes too. All forms of capital can be used for good or ill.

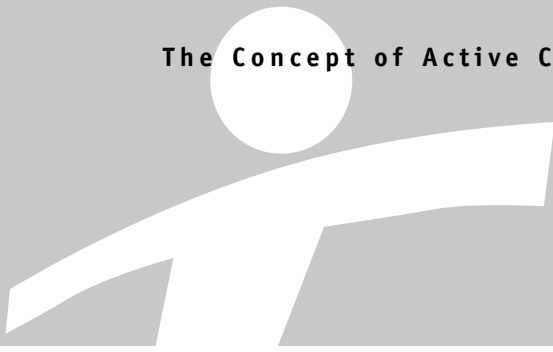
## **6. Where does Active Citizenship sit in debates about public policy in Ireland and Europe today?**

One hundred years ago, various movements based on sport, nationalism, unionism, trade unionism, religious endeavour and missionary effort, language, culture and co-operative enterprises came to the fore in Ireland. The reasons for this are many and complex. However it could be maintained that a spirit of self-help and mutual-help combined with political and institutional forces to raise engagement compared to what it had been before. Following independence in 1921, the strong emphasis given in the 1937 Constitution of Saorstát Éireann to the dignity of citizens, the role of the *family* and the principles of social *subsidiarity* and *solidarity* provided an important context for the evolution of social policy in the post-war period. The subsequent expansion in *state welfare provision* as well as community support outside the family provided a new context in which responsibility for education, care and welfare is understood. Today, fewer social services in areas such as health, education, youth work and poverty alleviation are undertaken by religious organisations or interests. Voluntary and community endeavour are much more strongly supported and financed by State agencies.

At the centre of the debate about what it means to be an active citizen in a democracy are values, conversations and belonging. We belong to each other in a community in which there are many communities – sometimes with divergent values and identities – but all sharing some common sense of responsibility and shared civic space. The institutions of elective democracy in the Oireachtas and local government can be greatly supported by a spirit of democratic dialogue, engagement and deliberation all the way up from being active in our own neighbourhoods and immediate networks to engagement with the political process at local, national, EU and international level. Citizens of the 21st Century seek to be involved, to be caring and to be co-responsible as members of societies – local and international – and not just consumers and producers in a global economic system.

At the core of a debate about citizenship in a European context is the extent to which the institutions at inter-governmental or supra-national level can accommodate diversity in values and culture while, at the same time, building a common sense of identity and adherence to 'European' values of democracy and citizenship. This is a difficult balance to strike, let alone at the Member State level. In a post-cold war Europe, new currents have emerged propelling Europe towards an ever-wider membership to the East as well as deeper integration at the political and not just economic levels. Parallel to these, forms of nationalism have been strengthened with the advent of new nation states following the collapse of the old communist orders. Here in the West, many countries have sought to redefine citizenship, including the legal requirements for admitting new citizens who have arrived as immigrants in recent years. The issue of admission to citizenship has been connected to the idea of wider social solidarity with the claim that people are more likely to accept a public welfare system and common set of public services if they identify enough with others in society who may have different cultural backgrounds.

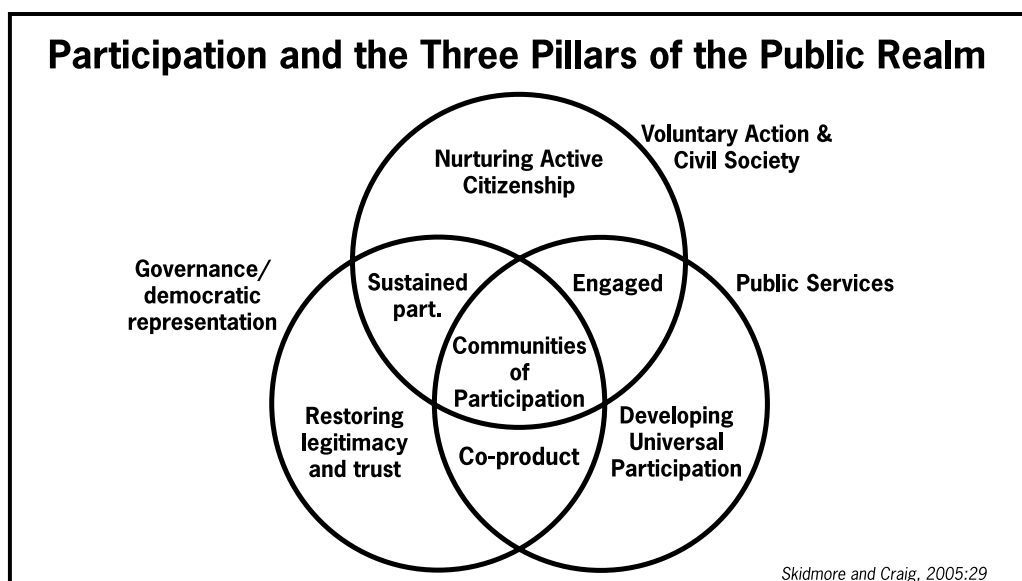
It would be all too easy to focus exclusively on the requirements of formal citizenship, including profession of loyalty to the State and acquisition of key areas

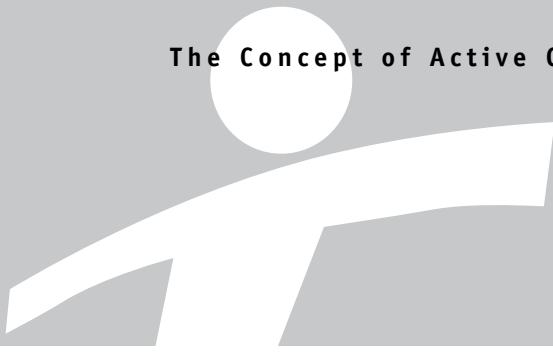


of knowledge and language relevant to living in the country. There is a need to broaden the idea of citizenship to comprise a sense of civic duty, interdependence alongside rights and responsibilities. Indeed, the very notion of cultural assimilation needs to be contrasted by notions of inter-culturalism based on a common civic set of values and identities. The challenge is to identify what this common set looks like in any given country or time. Honohan (2005a) refers to the contrast of: 'citizenship as cultural identity and citizenship as shared fate'.

A well-funded public service covering health, education, training, employment and housing requires active citizens. It is difficult to see how Government can deliver services without the active involvement of citizens at all levels from planning, design to delivery. Paul Skidmore and John Craig (2005) in their paper on the connection between public service and Active Citizenship have pointed to the challenge of creating 'communities of participation' that reside in the overlap areas between (i) voluntary engagement, (ii) public service and (iii) institutions of democracy.

Their core argument is that people will engage in the community if they are enabled and encouraged to do so as partners by public service providers and institutions of democracy. Citizens can and will participate if they see that their efforts make a real and positive difference. Strengthening of the overlapping spheres between voluntarism, public service and democracy can enhance social capital and, at the same time, improve the quality of services delivered and the quality of democratic debate and dialogue. Hence, promotion of Active Citizenship, in the sense of volunteering and community engagement, is not necessarily an invitation for public services or Government to pull back and reduce their activity. It is a question of acting differently and in a way that ensures balance, partnership and overlap. The relationship is best captured, perhaps, in the overlapping diagrams suggested in the paper by Skidmore and Craig (2005:29).





There are many types of community involvement and governance from very informal social relationships at one end of the spectrum to highly public and regulated forms of engagement at the other. In between, various types of civic associations and forms of participation mediate the relationship between Government and other formal institutions and civil society. New forms of social engagement such as the new social movements centered on gender, environment or other issues continue to spring up. These may challenge some existing movements and structures based on more paternalistic or clientalist approaches to community need.

Public agencies may not be able to directly invest in informal social networks – but can offer appropriate support and advice – and thereby harness some of the energy and dynamism of local engagement. The provision of suitable ‘spring boards’, incentives and signals is important. The local level is a natural one in which to consider initiatives, measures and responses which strengthen network ties and tap into shared norms of co-operative behaviour. Bowles and Gintis (2002) observe:

*Far from being an anachronism, community governance appears likely to assume more rather than less importance in the future. The reason is that the types of problems that communities solve, and which resist governmental and market solutions, arise when individuals interact in ways that cannot be regulated by complete contracts or by external fiat due to the complexity of the interactions or the private or unverifiable nature of the information concerning the relevant transactions.*

Much of the discourse around ‘social capital’ has focussed on volunteering and informal social networks and, to a lesser extent, on civic participation. At the same time, discourses on active citizenship have tended to focus mainly on civic participation and less on volunteering, associational membership and informal social contact and support. All perspectives are important. Honohan describes two complementary dimensions of active citizenship – ‘the sense of wider social concern and the capacity to participate deliberately in self-government’ (2005b: 179). She observes (2005b: 180):

*We should be wary of exhortations to be more active or civic spirited, or to join voluntary associations in order to strengthen social capital, unless ordinary citizens are given a larger voice in decision-making, opportunities for meaningful participation and the material conditions necessary for active citizenship in the two senses outlined here.*



## ***7. Unresolved questions and further research***

If citizens are to engage more they need to find an appropriate way and set of structures. Institutions of elected democracy provide the core skeleton for Active Citizenship through which all eligible citizens can vote in parliamentary or local authority elections every few years as well as exercise indirect influence on legislation and public policy through representation, campaigning or information-sharing. In addition, through the development of social partnership in Ireland over the last 20 years many groups from business, trade union, farming, community and voluntary sectors can exercise considerable influence in brokering agreements on important areas of social policy, public sector management and income, welfare payments and taxes.

Some questions may be asked: does traditional representative democracy, now augmented by social partnership, provide an adequate basis on which democracy can flourish into the current century? How does this relate to global and European concerns? And, are various groups or sectional interests enabled to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities in a way that is fair and effective? A number of issues have emerged in recent years and were reinforced in the course of the deliberations of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship. These refer to:

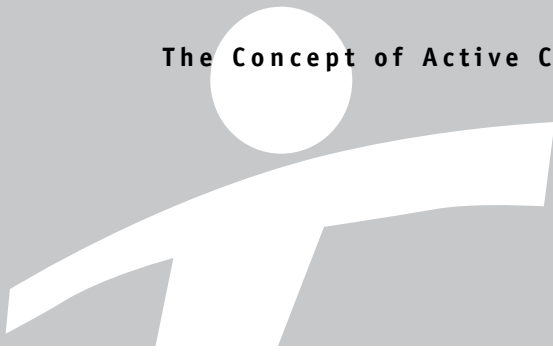
- A perceived democratic deficit especially but not exclusively at the local level where some communities and citizens feel powerless to influence decisions about planning, public services and other areas;
- A low level of participation in politics, community organisations, volunteering or neighbourhood activities driven by personal choice or forced economic circumstances;
- A risk of social fragmentation or rift where the better-off can buy out of the public sphere and into private health, education, leisure and gated communities etc.; and
- A lack of appropriate structures in which citizens – all citizens – can debate with others on matters of common concern; listen to other points of view; come to agreements and take appropriate action.

Care is needed in how the concept and value of Active Citizenship is promoted. Lest it be interpreted as a call to return to some ancient and homogeneous moral authoritarianism and single version of 'the common good', Active Citizenship as a concept, goal and set of values invites different communities and individuals to work together towards shared goals – while respecting inherent differences in assumptions, beliefs, choices and behaviour provided that these do not destroy social cohesion.

As a criticism of some strands of liberalist political philosophies, Honohan has pointed out in her RTE 2005 Thomas Davis lecture (Honohan, 2005a): 'But this is too limited an account of freedom; it overlooks threats to freedom that do not come from the state, but from individuals or groups that can exercise arbitrary or

unaccountable power: e.g. established elites in religious or cultural communities, corporations who endanger the health of their workers and consumers, and media cartels who control the news available to the public.'

In other words, freedom is more than just freedom from excessive (or corrupt) Government: it is freedom to 'live the good life' in the widest sense by making better use of talents, economic wealth, education and access to democratic institutions. Realising such freedom may represent – in the long-run – the best bulwark against corruption and bad Government. To realise this goal, Governments and other civil institutions in Europe may need to do more – not less – to make it possible for individuals and groups to participate fully – culturally, economically, socially and politically.



## References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1986) 'Forms of capital', in J. Richardson (ed) *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis (2002) 'Social Capital and Community Governance,' *Economic Journal* 112 (483): 419–436.
- Coleman, James (1988) 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, Supplement: S95–120.
- Coleman, James (1990) *The Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Dagger, Richard (1997) *Civic Virtues: rights, citizenship, and republican liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Government of Ireland (2000) *Supporting Voluntary Activity, Government White Paper*. Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, Dublin: Government Publications.
- Harris, Clodagh (ed.) (2005) *The Report of the Democracy Commission: Engaging Citizens, the case for democratic renewal in Ireland*. Dublin: TASC and Democratic Dialogue.
- Healy, Tom (2005) 'The Level and Distribution of Social Capital in Ireland' forthcoming in the *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, Dublin.
- Honohan, Iseult (2002) *Civic Republicanism*. London: Routledge.
- Honohan, Iseult (2005a) Thomas Davis Lecture Series – Reclaiming the republican tradition. <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thomasdavis/rams/14april.smil>
- Honohan, Iseult (2005b) 'Active Citizenship in Contemporary Democracy' in Clodagh Harris (ed.) *The Report of the Democracy Commission: Engaging Citizens, the case for democratic renewal in Ireland*. Dublin: TASC and Democratic Dialogue.
- Lillis, Séamus (2006) 'Learning from the seminar' in Séamus Lillis (ed.) *Engagement – Transforming Learning Third Level and Community – Seminar Report*. Cross Border Centre for Community Development: Dundalk Institute of Technology.
- National Committee on Volunteering (2002) *Tipping the Balance. Report and Recommendations to Government on Supporting and Developing Volunteering in Ireland*.
- National Economic and Social Council (2005) NESC Strategy 2006: *People, Productivity and Purpose*. Report No. 114. December 2005. Dublin: Government Publications.
- National Economic and Social Forum (2003) *The Policy Implications of Social Capital*. Forum Report No. 28. Dublin: Government Publications.
- O'Ferrall, Fergus (2000) *Citizenship and Public Service: Voluntary and statutory relationships in Irish healthcare*. Dublin: The Adelaide Hospital Society.
- OECD (2001) *The Well-Being of Nations, The Role of Human and Social Capital*. Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Oireachtas (2005) *Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland*. Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Sixth Report. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Peillon, Michel, Mary Corcoran and Jane Gray (2006) *Civic Engagement and the Governance of Irish Suburbs*. Studies in Public Policy, No 21. Dublin: The Policy Institute, Trinity College Dublin.
- Pettit, Philip (1997) *Republicanism: a theory of freedom and government*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon Schuster.
- Sandel, Michael (1996) *Democracy's Discontent*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Skidmore, Paul and John Craig (2005) 'Start with People: How community organizations put citizens in the driving seat', London: Demos. [w.demos.co.uk/files/startwithpeople.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/startwithpeople.pdf)



The background is a solid yellow color. On the right side, there are two white, curved, brushstroke-like shapes that appear to be part of a larger graphic design.

**Taskforce on Active Citizenship**  
2-4 Merrion Row, Dublin 2.  
Tel: (01) 619 4332  
Email: [info@activecitizen.ie](mailto:info@activecitizen.ie)  
Website: [www.activecitizen.ie](http://www.activecitizen.ie)