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The Irish Taskforce on Active Citizenship – the CLEAR analysis.

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Biography

Clodagh Harris is a lecturer in the Department of Government, University College Cork. Her publications include *'The Report of the Democracy Commission: Engaging citizens-the case for democratic renewal in Ireland.'*(ed) 2005 Dublin: New Island and *'Power to the people? Assessing democracy in Ireland'* with Hughes Ian, Clancy Paula and Beetham David 2007 Dublin: New Island.

The Irish Taskforce on Active Citizenship – the CLEAR analysis.

Introduction

Recent debates on citizenship in Ireland have ranged from a minimalist legalistic approach to the definition of who is and is not entitled to Irish citizenship to efforts to encourage active citizenship by strengthening social capital and enhancing citizen engagement in Irish democracy.

An active citizenry ensures broad deliberative participation and can strengthen democracy as decisions to which more people contribute are likely to be better and ones to which people are more liable to adhere (Honohan 2005:173). Recognising that democracy requires active citizens, for 'without citizen participation and the rights, the freedoms and the means to participate, the principle of popular control over government cannot begin to be realised' (Beetham et al 2002:14) this paper will critically examine the active citizenship debates of the Democracy Commission, the Democratic Audit and the Taoiseach's Taskforce on Active Citizenship (hereafter referred to as the Taskforce). It identifies the CLEAR framework as a relevant tool for assessing official schemes to encourage participation, and applies it to recent recommendations on active citizenship in Ireland.

Examining active citizenship

Citizenship tends to be discussed in terms of the relationship between the State and the citizen where rights and responsibilities are confined to territorial boundaries. Liberal theorists view the protection of and the maximisation of individual interests as the core role of a political system and thereby stress the legal dimension of citizenship. Communitarian perspectives, on the other hand, highlight individuals' relations within society and argue that citizenship is 'socially embedded' (Taskforce on active citizenship 2006:1). The latter perspective is most closely linked to active citizenship, particularly in the context of the recent Irish debates on the topic which have drawn on theories of civic republicanism.

The liberal and communitarian perspectives are reflected in Honohan's two dimensions to active citizenship, status and practice (2005:170). Legal status grants certain rights such as equality before the law, freedom of speech and association etc and certain duties or obligations such as obeying the law, paying taxes and so forth. In this sense being a citizen is essentially a matter of laws and of fixed rights and obligations. The practice of citizenship, on the other hand, refers to people's attitudes and behaviour and involves such things as participating in self government, sitting on juries, informing oneself about the democratic process, supporting the public good and defending one's country.

Concepts of citizenship have become more relevant in the context of recent social, economic and demographic changes in Irish society. For the first time in living memory Ireland is experiencing significant immigration. This and other developments, such as the

Belfast Agreement and Ireland's membership of the European Union have challenged traditional concepts of Irish citizenship.

Ireland is not unique in facing the challenges (or opportunities) presented by immigration and EU citizenship. Irish initiatives, such as the Democracy Commission and the Taskforce, to promote citizen (re)-engagement and community and voluntary participation are similar to projects elsewhere such as the Power Inquiry in Britain (2006), The Dutch National Convention (2006), and The Council of Europe's Green Paper on the Future of Europe – trends analyses and reforms (2004).

An assessment of the recent debates on citizenship in Ireland reveals that the 2004 referendum on citizenship specifically focused on legal status. In contrast the Democracy Commission[1] and the Taskforce concentrated on the practice of citizenship and, in the case of the Taskforce, voluntary and community activity.

Established by An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in April 2006, the Taskforce reflected his personal interest in Professor Robert Putnam's work on declining social capital. It also responded to the Democracy Commission's final report[2] which contained clear recommendations to address declining levels of political participation, promoting what it referred to as active democratic citizenship.

Chaired by Mary Davis, the chief executive of Special Olympics Ireland, the Taskforce consisted of representatives of the community and voluntary sector, the trade union

movement, the business sector, the churches and senior civil servants, and so forth. Its remit was to:

> 'review the evidence regarding trends in citizen participation across the main areas of civic, community, cultural, occupational and recreational life Ireland, to examine those trends in the context of international experience and analysis, to review the experience of organisation involved in the political, caring, community, professional and occupational, cultural, sporting and religious dimensions of Irish life regarding influences, both positive and negative on levels of citizen participation and engagement and to recommend measures which could be taken as part of public policy to facilitate and encourage a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of Irish life and the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture'

Recognising that active citizenship may include membership of ' a residents' association or lobby group, or volunteering to help out in a local sports club or simply being active and caring about the local neighbourhood, the environment as well as larger global and national issues', the Taskforce focused on 'civic participation and formal volunteering/community involvement' (2006:2-3).

By comparison the Democracy Commission spoke of active democratic citizenship emphasising political engagement over volunteering and community activity. This was in response to its terms of reference which included:

- ‘gathering available information on opportunities for and barriers to real participative democracy within Irish political institutions, with particular emphasis on social inclusion and the under 25s;
- reviewing international best practice and identifying options for new forms of democratic political institutions; and
- assessing alternative forms of citizen participation and political representation’. (Harris 2005:18)

Active democratic citizenship it argued

‘emphasises freedom in self government where citizens, who do not necessarily share cultural or ethnic identity but are independent in terms of a common fate, form an involuntary community to act in solidarity, share common goods and jointly exercise some collective direction over their lives’ (Harris 2005:xx).

It concluded that active democratic citizenship includes:

- A cognitive dimension. This involves an awareness of interdependence, that all groups and individuals in society are dependent on one another and that society shares public goods that can only be ‘realised if there is a significant body of citizens who have a sense of common concerns and who are prepared to take into account in their actions the common good’ (Honohan 2005:172).
- A dispositional dimension. This comprises civic self-restraint that is taking on responsibility for what happens in society such as recycling waste, voting, taking part in jury duty and so forth.

- A practical dimension. This requires openness to deliberative argument and refers to how citizens engage in politics. 'The point of active citizenship is to bring about deliberative participation among those who, while having many different interests and perspectives, share a public sphere and common future' (Honohan 2005: 174). Openness to deliberative debate is underpinned by a commitment to tolerance and recognition and acceptance of the multiplicity of perspectives that exist in modern societies and the need to respect and consider them. The active citizen is not necessarily an obedient citizen and may challenge authority, where necessary, not only for his/her own interests but in the interests of others in society when these are threatened.

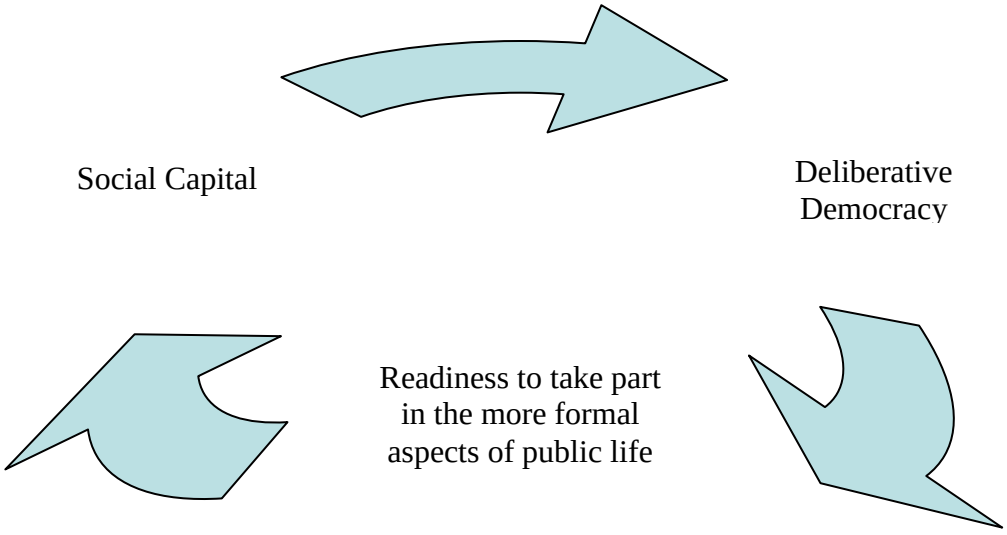
Like the Democracy Commission, the Taskforce drew upon theories of civic republicanism which it described as 'the capacity for collective self-government and the individual's sense of social concern as a member of a polity' (2007b:3). In its final report the Taskforce stated 'in our view, being an Active Citizen means being aware of, and caring about, the welfare of fellow citizens, recognising that we live as members of communities and therefore depend on others in our daily lives' (2007a:2) This is reflective of the cognitive dimension. It also incorporates dispositional and practical dimensions defining active citizens as those who: 'respect and listen to those with differing views from their own', 'play their part in making decisions on issues that affect themselves and others, in particular by participating in the democratic process', and 'respect ethnic and cultural diversity and are open to change'(2007a:2).

The Irish democratic audit's report differs from those of the Taskforce and the Democracy Commission, as its focus is not exclusively on increasing citizen involvement and engagement. It states that active citizenship involves two separate but related ideas social capital and deliberative democracy (Hughes et al 2007:439), where studies of social capital tend to focus on volunteering and the value of social networks (Putnam, 2000) and where deliberative democracy focuses on civic participation and mechanisms for citizen input to decision making. In this regard its definition of active citizenship is similar to those of the Democracy Commission and the Taskforce. However, the audit adds a third related idea 'people's readiness to take part in the more formal aspects of public life, such as holding a public office, whether paid or unpaid' (Hughes et al 2007:439). Using the Democratic audit framework[3] developed in the UK by Professors Beetham and Weir the authors conclude 'just how widespread active citizenship is in all these senses, and how representative of all sections of society provides a litmus test of the vitality of a country's democracy' (ibid 439-40).

This analysis of discussions of active citizenship in Ireland concludes that it includes social capital, deliberative democracy and readiness to take part in the more formal aspects of public life. Each of these areas complements the others. Mechanisms of deliberative democracy have the capacity to enhance social capital. Similarly it is argued that to limit 'deliberative democracy to institutional actors and actions misses the most significant cultural resource on which a deliberative democracy depends, the associational network of civil society' (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 2002:266). Civil society networks offer sites and opportunities for citizens 'to encounter the diversity of fellow

citizens with whom they share bonds of mutual dependency, mutual concerns and a mutual need to co-operate for the common good' (ibid). They can provide the social capital, defined by Putnam as 'the features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (1995:67). The strength of civil society networks and deliberative mechanisms hinge on the readiness of citizens to take part in the more formal aspects of public life which is in turn facilitated by strong civil society networks and opportunities for deliberative participation.

Diagram 1 – Areas of Active Citizenship



Promoting Active Citizenship in Ireland - the CLEAR analysis

Democracy requires opportunities for citizen involvement and engagement. This paper's analyses show that it requires an active citizenry with a 'sense of wider social concern and the capacity to participate deliberatively in self-government' (Honohan 2005:179)

and a readiness to take part in the more formal parts of public life. Both the Democracy Commission and the Taskforce were established in response to concerns over declining levels of citizen participation. In the case of the Democracy Commission this concern focused on low levels of electoral and other forms of political activity in particular groups in Irish society. The Taskforce's concerns were wider looking also at the falling numbers of participants in community and voluntary activity.

Similar to many other democracies, Ireland has been experiencing declining levels of electoral participation. In a 25 year period, turnout in Irish general elections dropped from 76.3% in 1977 to 62.7% in 2002 (Laver 2006:185). This trend was bucked by the 2007 general election which witnessed an increase of 4.6 percentage points to 67.3% in electoral turnout. It has been suggested that this may be partly the consequence of a major review of the electoral register. This increase is to be welcomed yet the 2007 figure is still lower than levels 30 years ago which featured in the low to mid 70s.

Placed in a European context recent Irish levels of electoral turnout figures can be located between figures of 77.7% and 84.5% in the 2005 German and Danish parliamentary elections respectively and figures of 60% and 61.4% in the 2002 French National Assembly and the 2005 UK parliamentary elections (www.idea.int).

Research commissioned by the Taskforce found that levels of volunteering and active engagement in the community have increased in the four year period between 2002 and 2006 (2007c:5). Yet despite this increase Ireland still lies below the OECD average for

membership of political parties, local political groups, labour unions and professional associations (OECD 2005: 84-5).

In its final report the Taskforce made particular recommendations to promote and support active citizenship in Ireland. The CLEAR model provides a framework for investigating the nature of these recommendations. Developed by Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, CLEAR is specifically concerned with citizen participation and provides a 'diagnostic tool for assessing official schemes to encourage participation and discusses remedial measures that might be taken to tackle problems' (2006:281). In particular it provides public authorities with a method for 'understanding where the strengths and weaknesses of their existing participation structures are and helps to identify policy responses that might be pursued' (Lowndes et al 2006: 285-6)

An acronym for five factors that promote participation CLEAR stands for: **C**an do (people have the resources and knowledge to participate), **L**ike to (there is a sense of attachment that reinforces participation), **E**nabled to (there is a set of supporting institutions that makes participation possible) **A**sked to (people are mobilized through direct invitation from public authorities or the efforts of a range of NGO, voluntary and community organisations), **R**esponded to (participants have seen evidence that their views had been considered by public authorities and those engaged more regularly in the political process) (Stoker 2006: 96). Its key factors and policy targets are reproduced in table 1. **(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)**

Table 1 Factors promoting participation: it's CLEAR

Key Factor	**How it Works**	**Policy Targets**
Can do	The individual resources that people have to mobilise and organise (speaking, writing and technical skills, and the confidence to use them) make a difference.	Capacity building, training and support of volunteers, mentoring, leadership development.
Like to	To commit to participation requires an identification with the public entity that is the focus of engagement.	Civil renewal, citizenship, community development, neighbourhood governance, social capital.
Enabled to	The civic infrastructure of groups and umbrella organisations makes a difference because it creates or blocks an opportunity structure for participation.	Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication via compacts.
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference.	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to (not necessarily agreed with) and able to see a response.	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond –through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback.

Reproduced from Lowndes et al 2006 p286

Its creators' argue that the five factors are 'neither hierarchical nor sequential' and 'effective participation does not necessarily depend on all the components being present' *(*Lowndes et al 2006:2).

An analysis of the CLEAR model reveals that it incorporates the three areas of active citizenship: social capital, deliberative democracy, and the readiness of people to take

part in the more formal aspects of public life. The social capital area is evident in the 'Can do', 'Like to' and 'Enabled to' sections which emphasise capacity building, civic renewal, investment in community infrastructure, and communication channels. The deliberative and readiness to take part dimensions can be found under the 'Asked to' and 'Responded to' sections which focus on mobilisation, public participation schemes, and a responsive public policy system.

CLEAR and the Taskforce's Recommendations

The author has chosen CLEAR as a tool against which to examine the Taskforce's recommendations as the establishment of the Taskforce by an Taoiseach and the full acceptance of its final recommendations by him render it official policy on active citizenship.

The CLEAR analysis reveals a number of issues. Firstly it can be argued that the social capital dimension of active citizenship is strongly incorporated into the Taskforce's final report. Assessing the recommendations that fall under the 'Like to' category it can be seen that there is a strong emphasis on education at a number of levels. In addition a number of the recommendations in this section such as: the national Presidential awards, formal citizenship ceremonies, and active citizenship week can be easily implemented and are relatively light in terms of financial resources. The recommendations pertaining to education in contrast will require more administrative and financial resources. Yet some of them are already underway. The National Council for Curriculum and

Assessment (NCCA) as part of its review of the senior cycle in Irish second level education is in the process of extending CSPE (civic, social and political education), currently offered at junior level, to senior level albeit with a different title.

When it comes to an examination of the Taskforce's recommendations on the deliberative dimension of active citizenship it can be argued that implementation will be more difficult due to heavy resource implications and issues of political will. Measures to promote and support deliberation range from the capacity building potential of an Independent Electoral Commission (which may or may not be deliberative in its approach) to measures to enhance participation at the local level (for example the establishment of civic fora and local civic participation structures). Certainly in terms of public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive the onus is firmly placed on local authorities. This is not surprising as it is the level closest to the citizen. Placing the burden squarely on the shoulders of a local government system that is recognised as one of the weakest in the EU[4] without some reciprocal increase in its powers seems unfair. In part recognition of this, the Taskforce called for more research and debate on the merits of 'a major programme of reform, including a significant decentralisation of a decision-making power and associated reform of revenue-raising capabilities at the local level' (2007a:25).

Lastly, the third aspect of active citizenship, which the democratic audit report refers to as 'people's readiness to take part in the more formal aspects of public life' will be facilitated by the implementation of the recommendation to introduce public service

programmes to provide some time off for volunteering, and treat verifiable areas of community activity and volunteering as relevant items for inclusion and recognition in job applications and evaluations of job performance. (INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

At the launch of the Taskforce's final report in March 2007, the Taoiseach accepted all its recommendations and announced the establishment of an active citizenship office and the appointment of Mary Davis as chair of the implementation steering group to oversee the office and its work.

The return of Mr Ahern to the office of an Taoiseach in June 2007 shortly after his party, Fianna Fail, won its third general election in a row bodes well for the implementation of the Taskforce's recommendations as the enhancement of active citizenship has been one of his 'pet' policies.

It is therefore not surprising that the programme for government negotiated by Fianna Fail and its junior coalition partners the Green party and the Progressive Democrats[5] contains sections on active citizenship and volunteering, electoral reform, and local government reform. An analysis of the programme for government reveals that its provisions come down heavily in favour of the implementation of the recommendations pertaining to the social capital dimension of active citizenship. The section on active citizenship and volunteering, for example, specifically makes reference to the introduction of: a national active citizenship theme, a national active citizenship week, a formal citizenship ceremony, and national presidential citizen awards (2007:50). It also

calls for an audit of existing community facilities and measures to identify how better use can be made of schools at evenings and week-ends.

In terms of the deliberative dimension of active citizenship, the programme includes the establishment of an electoral commission to take responsibility for electoral administration and oversight. Its capacity building potential would seem to be limited to overseeing the electoral register. Furthermore the suggested reforms of local government focus in the main on management and administrative structures and how these can be made more responsive to customers (2007:50-1). Although the programme makes reference to directly elected Mayors, the establishment of town councils in towns that have shown significant population growth, and the review of legislation to ensure that the decision making process is rebalanced in favour of directly elected councillors no mention is made of increasing the powers of local authorities or of diverse and reflexive public participation schemes.

Stating that the government will also examine ways of developing a 'system of academic accreditation in recognition of volunteering skills' the programme is keeping an eye to promoting peoples' readiness to volunteer and take part in community activity (2007:50).

Table 2 Applying CLEAR to the Taskforce Recommendations

Key Factor	Taskforce Recommendations
Can do	• Establishment of an independent Electoral Commission to encourage electoral registration and participation • Renewed emphasis on effective consultation with associated training for public servants • Strengthen funding schemes to support capacity building in the community and voluntary (C&V) sector • Introduce public service programmes to: recognise and provide timeoff for volunteering and treat verifiable areas of C&V activity as relevant items for inclusion and recognition in job applications and evaluations of job performance. • Promotion of the group insurance scheme amongst relevant organisations and groups
Like to	• Expansion of education for citizenship in the school sector and the youth and adult education sectors. Development of information material and short courses on Irish citizenship that would be made widely available. • The Higher Education Authority to lead an initiative to promote, support and link together citizenship initiatives across the Higher Education sector including 'service learning' and volunteering. • Adoption and promotion of a national active citizenship theme each year culminating in active citizenship week • Introduce National President Citizen Awards to recognize outstanding contribution to civic and community life • Development of a certificate for completing at least three months volunteering/community involvement • Encouraging initiatives that engage with newcomers to Irish society through incentivised Government programmes • Introduction of formal citizenship ceremonies to mark someone's admission to Irish citizenship
Enabled to	• Local Authority prioritisation of community and recreational facilities provision within development plans • A local authority audit of existing community facilities to be undertaken by the end of 2008 • Make better use of schools at evenings and week-ends to act as community hubs • Develop an initiative to help community and voluntary organisations meet compliance costs • Reorganise county/city community and voluntary fora on the basis of local authority areas renaming them civic fora
Asked to	• Establish an active citizenship office to allow continued dialogue with the representatives of C&V organisations • Encourage the use of community fund provisions and following a local plebiscite community initiative schemes • Experimentation with other forms and modes of local democracy e.g. citizens' juries by local authorities • Recognition of local structures such as community councils and so forth under the Local Government Act 2001 • Require public agencies at the local level to consult civic fora during the development and implementation of their policies
Responded to	• Establishment of an active citizenship office to work with relevant stakeholders on active citizenship initiatives.

Table 3 Applying CLEAR to the Democracy Commission Recommendations

Key Factor	**Democracy Commission Recommendations**
Can do	• The extension of social and political education to senior cycle in second level education. • Promoting citizenship issues in primary schools and democratic citizenship within community education programmes. • Provision of training and materials to support teachers of democratic citizenship education. • Establish an Independent Electoral Commission in Ireland.
Like to	• Central government to devolve powers to local government in tandem with decentralisation of revenue raising powers. • The direct election of Mayors to local authorities in Ireland.
Enabled to	• Increased spending to support the self-organisation of marginalized groups. • Promoting greater democracy in school structures
Asked to	• Extending the postal voting option to all registered voters in Ireland. • Introducing e-voting for all elections. • Introducing legislation which gives homeless people, travellers and others with a transitory lifestyle the right to register using an address near a place where they 'commonly spend' their time. • Introduce electronic voting for all elections in Ireland • Developing new participatory structures e.g citizens' juries, deliberative polls and participatory budgeting at the local level • Introducing legislation that permits indirect initiatives. • The election of delegates from popular assemblies to Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) to enhance the participatory structures of local democracy in Ireland. • Local authorities should have a statutory role for the overall development of their areas. SPCs should play a key role in developing such integrated plans.
Responded to	• Developing new participatory structures e.g citizens' juries, deliberative polls and participatory budgeting at the local level • Introducing legislation that permits indirect initiatives. • The election of delegates from popular assemblies to SPCs to enhance the participatory structures of local democracy in Ireland. • Local authorities should have a statutory role for the overall development of their areas. SPCs should play a key role in developing such integrated plans.

CLEAR and the Democracy Commission and Democratic Audit

The relevance of the CLEAR framework to the recommendations of the Democracy Commission and the conclusions of the Democratic Audit is questionable. Firstly neither report is official policy. Both reports stem from projects initiated by TASC, an independent think tank, based in Dublin. The Democracy Commission chose to focus on what it termed 'active democratic citizenship' placing emphasis on deliberative mechanisms, and institutional and legislative reforms. Less attention was paid to civil society networks and social capital. This is evident within table 3 which documents the application of the CLEAR framework to the Commission's recommendations. The majority of the Commission's recommendations are located in the 'Asked to' section corresponding with the deliberative dimension of active citizenship. The recommendations pertaining to the social capital dimension of active citizenship found in the 'Can do', 'Like to' and 'Enabled to' sections are related primarily to capacity building, training and education. It is important to note that many of the Commission's recommendations fell outside the CLEAR remit. Recommendations to extend the remit of the Standards in Public Office Commission, to increase the scrutiny powers of the Senate, to extend the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, and to establish a Press Council, to name but a few, were made with a viewing to promoting transparency and accountability and could not be neatly categorised within the framework. It is possible that they might have fallen under the 'enabled to' section as they may 'create or block and opportunity structure for participation'. However an analysis of the literature on

CLEAR shows that the 'enabled to' section pertains to the development of civic infrastructure and community networks.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

The audit's remit on the other hand differed greatly from that of the Democracy Commission and the Taskforce. Its objective was to offer a comprehensive overview of the state of democracy in modern Ireland. Using a methodology based on the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) Assessment Framework (Beetham et al 2002), it assessed Ireland's performance in areas ranging from citizenship law and human rights to representative and accountable government, and from civil society and popular participation to democracy beyond the state. It aimed to measure democratic reforms over time and facilitate international comparisons. Drawing upon international indicators and models of good practice it outlines the areas in which Ireland performs well, is 'in flux', or is doing badly.

Active Citizenship is assessed in the political participation section which asks if there is full citizen participation in public life. In this area the audit concludes that Ireland lies below the OECD average in terms of membership of political parties, local political groups, labour groups, professional associations and church or religious groups. It also expresses its concern that although women are more likely than men to be 'community activists' and are equally involved as them in 'political activism' this is not reflected in the gender composition of public office (Hughes et al 2007: 440).

Conclusion

The CLEAR analysis of the Taskforce's final report shows that its recommendations span all five key factors but are most heavily concentrated in the social capital 'can do', 'like to', and 'enabled to' categories. Civic renewal, community development, the promotion of social capital and enhancement of civic infrastructure all feature strongly in the Taskforce's recommendations and in the programme for government. This contrasts with the Democracy Commission's active democratic citizenship approach which lays greater stress on the deliberative and readiness to take part in the more formal part of public life sections. The fact that a number of the Commission's recommendations hinged on institutional and legislative reform made them unsuitable for the CLEAR treatment. Transparency impacts on citizen participation. But measures to improve transparency and as a consequence accountability cannot be located within this 'diagnostic tool for assessing official schemes to encourage participation and discusses remedial measures that might be taken to tackle problems'. The expansion of the 'enabled to' section to include them could overcome this.

In the democratic audit, active citizenship falls under the section on political participation and is one theme amongst fourteen. Providing a snapshot of the state of Irish democracy in 2007, the audit's purpose is to generate debate and awareness, and more significantly act as a benchmark against which future Irish audits will be measured.

From a CLEAR analysis it can be concluded that the Taskforce's recommendations go furthest in terms of active citizenship. All three dimensions can be found within it with

the deliberative section relying, in part, on the establishment of and remit of an independent Electoral Commission and the Active Citizenship Office. At the time of writing the Active Citizenship Office is nascent and the Electoral Commission has yet to be established. Time will show their capacity building, deliberative, and responsive capabilities.

NOTES

[1] Democracy Commission was established by two think tanks on the island of Ireland, TASC (Dublin) and Democratic Dialogue (Belfast) in response to concerns about declining democratic participation. Its final report 'engaging citizens- the case for democratic renewal' spoke of active democratic citizenship and made specific recommendations to engage citizens through: democratic citizenship education; increased and enhanced opportunities for participation, particularly in local democracy; the removal of procedural obstacles to electoral participation; strengthened powers for the legislature and improved transparency and accountability to assist public understanding and scrutiny of political decisions, to name but a few.

[2] Two of the Taskforce members sat on the Democracy Commission, Sr. Bernadette MacMahon of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice and Mr David Begg, General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Chair of the Democracy Commission.

[3] For more information on the Democratic Audit Framework see the Democratic Audit and International IDEA websites www.democraticaudit.com and www.idea.int.

[4] For more information on the Irish system of local government see chapter 13 in Hughes et al 2007

[5] This Government also has the support of four independent TDs.

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