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Diversity and Expansion: Charting the Needs of a Community in Change

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Introduction

The impact of social, economic and cultural change on community and the challenges this presents for community work has been the subject of much debate in the literature in recent years (NESC, 2006; Cantle, 2008; Putnam, 2007). In Ireland, many of the changes taking place have been influenced by modernisation, economic growth, new migration patterns and rural and urban expansion. As a result many communities face a number of challenges in responding to expansion and heterogeneity and more specifically the challenge of diversity. This in turn has had a direct impact on the role of community work and community development particularly in the areas of promoting community cohesion and social interaction.

This paper aims to explore some of the challenges presenting in Carrigtwohill, a small rural community in East Cork, which has witnessed profound industrial developments, consolidated by market influences and a dramatic increase in its population level. Many of these changes have taken place over a relatively short period of time bringing a marked change in the area's demographic profile, particularly during the 'Celtic Tiger' years. The attraction of a large number of external agencies and pharmaceutical industries to the area has also boosted job creation in the period of economic growth and led to a massive expansion in housing development. Coupled with this, the local community has witnessed a pronounced increase in ethnic diversity becoming home to an increased number of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

The research presented in this paper indicates that for many residents living in the Carrigtwohill area, these trends towards new migration patterns, greater mobility, more flexibility and diversity in living patterns and lifestyles has mainly been a positive experience in the community and has given rise to increased job creation, improved living standards and improved facilities in the immediate and neighbouring areas. However, for others, particularly those who have been long term residents in the area, the level of change has been

somewhat unsettling. In particular there has been a feeling among long term residents that the changes that have taken place have signalled a shift away from close knit ties in the community and a loss of community kinship. In this instance the move from rural to urban, from homogeneous to diverse, from close knit to atomised anonymous communities (McDonagh, 1998) is marked by what Crow and Allen (1994) refer to as a sense of 'loss of close knit community bonds' and the erosion of perceived traditional community values (Crow and Allen, 1994, Crow, 2002). At the same time the increased level of diversity presents specific challenges, particularly in a community that has previously had a relatively homogenous population. Cantle (2008) argues that in such cases it can often be that while some may welcome the prospect of living in a more culturally diverse society, for others it can signal the loss of traditional value systems. (Cantle, 2008)

The aim of the research study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of both long-term residents and those newly settled in the area, including those coming from different ethnic minority backgrounds. It also aimed to examine the role of community work in facilitating integration and how the Family Resource Centre could develop new ways in assisting the community in coming to terms with change. The study took place between 2008 and 2010 and employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods including a community-wide survey, community consultations, and a range of focus groups with local residents and community workers.

Background to the Research

The study was conducted at the request of the local Family Resource Centre (FRC) who were particularly interested in what additional services they could provide to promote the integration of new-comers in the area, but were also concerned with meeting the needs of long term residents in coming to terms with change. Of particular interest was the perceived loss of 'community' among long-term residents, resulting from expansion and the transition from small close-knit rural community to a growing urban town. The FRC was particularly interested in how a research project might inform the development of potential strategies for community workers and those directly involved with the work of the FRC.

Two of the overarching concerns expressed by the FRC were as follows:

a. Without positive, pro-active work from the FRC and others in the host community, newcomers would feel isolated and marginalised within the local community;
b. Traditionally strong cohesive community bonds which previously existed in a small local area were now being eroded causing concern for the FRC that some members of the community may feel a sense of loss and isolation.

Research Design

It was clear from the initial consultations that took place with the FRC that efforts were already underway at local level to ensure the inclusion of migrants in community activities. This took place through the provision of language classes, computer classes, and making links between the FRC and local churches in facilitating the integration of migrants. The FRC was particularly concerned with how migrants experienced living in the local community, how they interacted with others in the community and through what means integration took place between newcomers and long-term residents. It was also deemed important to consider the impact of change on long-term residents and what this signalled for some in the community in relation to issues of 'belonging' and 'sense of community'. Specific factors relating to 'loss' and isolation' and community values were viewed as significant. As a result a research plan was drawn up which included both qualitative research in the form of focus groups local residents and quantitative research in the form of an expansive community wide questionnaire reflecting the views of the community, inclusive of both new and long term residents.

Preliminary research was conducted using a series of three focus groups of local residents organised with the support of the FRC. These three focus groups included:

1. Adult Irish residents associated with the FRC,
2. Teenage residents associated with the local youth club
3. Ethnic minority residents associated with the local multicultural group.

Following from these initial focus groups it was clear that a number of issues were emerging relating to concerns over the loss of community cohesiveness and community bonds. Other issues emerging were directly related to the challenge and prospects for integration. Also

emerging were both mutual and differing perceptions around issues of diversity and cultural difference. Additionally, issues were raised relating to changing community needs directly linked with infrastructural supports and the pronounced growth in population. Having acquired such data from these initial consultations it was decided that the issues emerging would inform the construction of a more detailed community-wide survey. The exact layout and contents of the questionnaire was carried out in conjunction with the FRC.

It was accepted at the onset of the research that the complexity of integration was difficult to measure (ICI, 2008) and that the level at which integration took place was strongly associated with wider community structures and the level of community participation. How individuals and groups access services, employment and education and the capacity to build up relationships with others (both migrant and indigenous population) within the wider community was therefore viewed as important. Barriers to integration based on age, ethnicity, national origin, and migrant status were thus explored along with the degree to which people felt at home in the community.

It was decided that the survey sample should be administered to approximately 20% of households in the area (500 households) incorporating new and long standing geographical regions of the locality. It was anticipated that such a distribution would reflect both the perspectives of new settlements and long term residents in the area. The survey was conducted using volunteers from the local community and distributed to 500 households. A total of 363 questionnaires were completed.

After careful examination of the survey it was noted that there was limited representation from the migrant population and therefore it was decided to conduct further focus groups to ensure perspectives were inclusive of the whole community. Two focus groups were set up: one with African community residents and one with Polish community residents. Following from these a further series of focus groups were also organised with local residents (both new and long term residents) to discuss themes arising from the data analysis of the survey. A further series of meetings took place with the FRC to discuss the findings of the research and to explore in what ways the survey analysis might inform the future work of the FRC.

Issues Arising from the research

Initially the findings from the survey suggested that whilst there had been profound changes taking place in the area the vast majority of residents had a positive experience of living within the community. Findings from the survey appeared to indicate that residents had adapted well to diversity and that issues relating to infrastructure and lack of amenities were more pressing issues for residents.

The survey also revealed less contentment among residents in relation to:

a. The impact of expansion on a close knit community
b. The loss of cemented social relations
c. The loss of traditional rural living and values

The feelings of loss of community spirit indicated by respondents related specifically to an erosion of a sense of belonging in the community. Such feelings of loss were expressed disproportionately by older people and those who had long term settlement ties with the community. However, this did not necessarily reflect a reluctance to accept change or increased diversity. For example, some elderly respondents expressed empathy with those who came to Ireland to seek refugee status and did not apportion blame to newcomers for scarce resources. Rather, the dramatic changes that had occurred over a short period of time had signalled a loss of familiarity and close-knit community. It was this overwhelming sentiment which was deemed as one area of importance to the role of the FRC in facilitating integration.

While the majority of respondents in the survey did not appear to display any hostility towards migrants in the area there were some overt expressions of hostility from a small minority. It was also noted that the survey respondents were not representative of all groups living in the area. For example there was very little representation from African communities despite a large increase in the number of Africans living in the area. Equally the strong presence of Polish people living in the area was not reflected in the overall sample.
For this reason it was decided that follow focus groups with migrants would prove beneficial if the study was to be representative of all groups living in the area. Additional focus groups were also set up with local residents (both new and long term) to discuss the findings of the survey. In contrast to the data presenting in the survey, the focus groups with local residents

revealed a degree of overt hostility to migrants particularly those of African decent, and some of the comments suggested that not all residents were tolerant of diversity and differing cultural practices and values. One group mainly made up of long term residents revealed that there was an overwhelming consensus that an assimilative approach was favoured as a means of integration rather than one of tolerance and recognition of different cultures and backgrounds. There was also a clear distinction made between Eastern European and African residents. For example, some residents did not see members of the Polish community as unwelcome but made negative comments relating to African residents. Moreover, while Polish residents were seen as contributing to the economy through employment and paying taxes, there was a sense that African residents were 'a drain on resources' and over-reliant on welfare assistance and benefits. There was also a sense that Africans were sometimes less approachable, whereas many Polish people integrated through work and were working in local shops and viewed as more likely to communicate.

The focus groups specific to Africans and Polish residents also yielded differing perspectives and experiences of integration. The focus group with members of the African community, in particular, revealed how residents of African descent faced specific barriers in relation to integration, that were not experienced by Eastern Europeans and other members of the community. Such barriers included access to employment, education, social networks, housing, and community ties. Those coming from Polish and Eastern European backgrounds appeared to feel more accepted by the host community while those coming from African backgrounds often did not. In the focus group with the Polish community very little difficulty was expressed with integrating, despite the difference in cultural backgrounds. Such perceptions seem to fit with other research carried out in this field which suggest differing responses of the host community towards different incoming ethnic groups and different barriers between groups (e.g. Garner, 2004; McGinnity et al, 2006). Overall the Polish participants had a positive view of employment while Africans tended to face discrimination in applying for jobs.

However, where both groups highlighted positive experiences of integration was in the schooling system. This proved a valuable place for parents of migrant children to meet and develop relationships with other residents in the community. Many of the Africans commented on how sport had been a positive way to integrate and build new friendships, particularly where their children were attending local clubs such as the GAA. When asked if

friendships had been made with the settled population Polish participants appeared to have more positive experiences than Africans. While the Polish participants indicated they had a mixture of Irish and Polish friends this was less true of the African community. Follow up meetings with the Family Resource Centre in 2011 suggested that feelings of hostility and discrimination have become more heightened and widespread in the community particularly since the onset of economic decline.

The Role of Community Workers and the Family Resource Centre

Government responses to migration and increased diversity in Ireland have tended to be largely laissez-faire with limited meaningful planning with regard to the promotion of integration. While the 1999 Integration Strategy *Integration: A Two Way Process*, was welcomed by many NGOs working with migrants, its impact has been limited due to lack of comprehensive planning and vision at a macro level. This has been further compounded by the lack of provision of resources and planning at local level and the absence of any meaningful consultation and negotiation with local communities. This in effect has meant that the assumed responsibility for integration has often shifted from state to local community, placing increased pressure on community projects and community development without the necessary accompanying structural supports and resources. The research indicates that Carrigtwohill is one community like many others facing such challenges. Despite the growth of Carrigtwohill and accompanying increased ethnic diversity in the area it is clear that planning for integration and community cohesion has been largely absent. Some efforts have been made by the FRC to facilitate integration, for example, through the provision of integrated art classes for children and parents, computer classes and languages classes. However, these have tended to be delivered in an ad hoc way and have been hampered by lack of resources and the absence of any comprehensive strategic planning. The research points to some areas where the FRC could have the potential to address some of these issues. Increased opportunities for meaningful contact (and thus awareness-raising) between members of different ethnic groups and the host population is one element. The research has indicated that sport and schools are two areas where positive interaction has already taken place and could be built upon through a community wide approach that could include the input of local schools, local GAA and the FRC. Another element relates to anti-discrimination, human rights and diversity training. Such training would also need to be community wide, involving local schools, sports and local

business. There is also a potential for the FRC to develop networks with local media through which awareness raising could be promoted.

The FRC also needs to develop its own strategy and build on its existing work through networking with other organisations and finding new ways of promoting social interaction, community cohesion and the anti-discrimination agenda. This could potentially be done through the delivery of educational and leisure activities and social needs provision. Such a strategy would need to include the needs of both the newcomers and the host population if the needs of the whole community are to be addressed. It would also need to include a programme of training and development for the FRC's own community workers.

The research points not only to the challenges of integration but also highlights issues relating to 'belonging', 'identity'. 'kinship' and the perceived 'loss of community'. Therefore in developing a strategy a multi-layered approach is required that takes into account not only the needs of newcomers but also explores how long term residents in the host community adapt to change. Such an approach requires not only the input of the FRC but would also need to include the involvement of the wider community including the local Council. It also requires more innovative and creative ways of engaging the local community through building levels of trust and connectedness that have the potential to improve social relations between groups.

Concluding Remarks

The research suggests that there are a number of challenges currently presenting for the local community in Carrigtwohill relating to expansion, social change, diversity and integration. It is evident that the FRC and others in the community have an important role to play in promoting mutual understanding, alleviating distrust, and educating about differing cultural values, rights and expectations. Putnam (2000) talked about the need to develop 'bridging' capital between diverse groups within the community in order to promote co-operation and reduce potential for conflict. In the process members of different ethnic groups may come to 'bond' as they find that difference is not so great after all. Thus opportunities need to be created in the community where different ethnic group members can come together with Irish nationals for mutual benefit. Clearly local community groups could have an important part to play in this but they need the support and resources to do this. Integration, however, requires more than the involvement of just the community sector. The wider statutory sector has a major responsibility also, in terms of positive

planning for social change and the adequate provision of services to meet new and evolving social needs. In the absence of the latter the danger is ever present that a situation of scarce and inadequate resources will encourage a climate of scape-goating of minority groups in society. In the current economic climate with cuts to vital services and to the funding of community development work, the work of organisations like the FRC is critical and needs to be valued rather than undermined by the state.

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