



**Irish Traveller Movement
submission to the Taskforce
on Active Citizenship
November 2006**



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The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the debate on Active Citizenship and recognises the importance of contributing to this process. We recognise that it is timely to look at how people in Ireland participate in civil, social and political structures and how the development of measures to increase participation will have benefits for all society, in that “the quality of life in society and the ultimate health of our communities depends on the willingness of people to become involved and active”. For the purpose of the submission, the ITM has not rigidly followed the suggested nineteen questions in the consultation document, but has focused on the areas that we feel warrant more focus on how Active Citizenship can be developed to improve the participation of Travellers and all members of society.

The ITM

The ITM is a national network of organisations and individuals working within the Traveller community. ITM was established in 1990 and now has over eighty Traveller organisations from all parts of Ireland in its membership. The Irish Traveller Movement consists of a partnership between Travellers and settled people committed to seeking full equality for Travellers in Irish society. This partnership is reflected in all of the structures of ITM.

The Irish Traveller Movement was formed to be a national platform, through which Travellers and their organisations are enabled to:

- Highlight the issues faced by Travellers and to press for real solutions.
- Debate ideas and formulate and promote culturally appropriate initiatives.
- Provide those active at a local level with support and solidarity.
- Develop alliances at national level.
- Challenge the many forms of individual, structural and institutional racism with which Travellers have to deal.

The strength of the ITM as an organisation comes from its membership, in that the local experiences, needs and issues faced by Travellers are relayed to the ITM from its member organisations all over the country and that it provides a real platform for Travellers from all over the country to come together and lobby for real change for Travellers.

What does Active Citizenship mean?

The ITM understands Active Citizenship to mean more than participating in representative democratic structures (defined as “civic participation” by the Taskforce) or involvement in formal volunteering, but that Active Citizenship also means involvement in **participative democracy**, namely that people are involved in developing policies that directly affect them. Indeed, at the launch of the Consultation process in Croke Park on September 14th, chair of the Taskforce, Mary Davis, strongly agreed that participative democracy was a core part of Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship and Participative Democracy

The ITM believes that Active Citizenship can only be expressed through the meaningful participation of those who are to be affected by policies in their development. The ITM is not alone in believing this, and Government policy provides many examples of how Active Citizenship should be expressed. For example, the White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector (2000) sees that Active Citizenship is “*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” [emphasis added].

It is clear to see that the above definition of Active Citizenship is incompatible with current State policy regarding Traveller-policy development with the formation of the High Level Officials Group on Travellers Issues (HLOG); a policy-developing arena for senior civil ser-

wants that purposely excluded Travellers and Traveller organisations from that policy development. The ITM sees that one of the key areas of Active Citizenship is participative democracy, where individuals and groups are empowered to be involved in “decision-making which directly effects them”- which contrasts with the HLOG.

In launching the consultation process of the Taskforce on September 14th the Taoiseach saw the role of Active Citizenship being vital to the future of the country as “a healthy democracy depends on the extent to which citizens engage in the issues that affect them. Our job in Government is to ensure that communities are supported in that process”. One way the Taoiseach and the Taskforce on Active Citizenship could ensure that communities are supported in the issues that affect them would be to meet prior commitments to participation and not purposely exclude Travellers from this process.

The Government has numerous previous commitments to the active, meaningful participation of Travellers and Traveller organisations in the development of policy relating to Travellers; examples which manifest a commitment to Active Citizenship. For example, the Task Force Report on the Travelling Community (1995) one of the recommendations was “*that the social partners, in drawing up future National Agreements, should take account of the needs of disadvantaged groups such as Travellers and **should involve Traveller organisations where the needs of Travellers are being discussed***” (recommendation AR4, p. 69, emphasis added). This commitment to participation of Traveller organisations where the needs of Travellers are being discussed was reiterated further in the Task Force:

*“The public sector can also foster Traveller participation and partnership in planning. This will give Travellers a sense of belonging, in the broader Irish society, as Travellers. It will strengthen integration, respect and sense of ownership and responsibility. The commitment to such participation was clearly made in the Attorney General’s presentation to the UN Human Rights committee **‘it is Government policy that the Traveller community will participate in policy decisions which affect them’**”* (The Task Force Report on the Travelling Community, p. 79, emphasis added).

In the National Action Plan Against Racism (NPAR) the Government

sought to “*enhance the participation of cultural and ethnic minorities in policy consultative forums and research*” (National Action Plan Against Racism, p. 147). The NPAR adds that:

“There are a wide range of consultative mechanisms through which broader civil society can participate in broader policy development. The key challenge is to ensure that these policy forums provide sufficient opportunity for representative organisations working closely with cultural and ethnic minorities to participate effectively and that they proactively seek to make reasonable accommodation of cultural diversity and promote positive action measures in their deliberations.” (p. 147).

The development of the High Level Group as a policy-developing forum on Traveller issues without the input from Traveller organisations contrasts with Minister Frank Fahey’s comments in the introduction to the National Action Plan Against Racism that “*the Travelling Community is now very much involved in working with Government and other partners in the development and implementation of policy and practice*” (National Action Plan Against Racism, p. 19). The National Anti-Poverty Strategy called for developing “*ways of further increasing and improving the participation in the process of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion at local, regional and national level*” (p. 47). The National Development Plan 2000-2006 points out that “*encouraging marginalised communities to help themselves by identifying their own problems and working towards their solution in a planned and integrated way with the agencies of the State, will be an essential part of the process*” (p. 196). In the introduction of the White Paper on a framework for supporting voluntary activity and developing the relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector (2000), Dermot Ahern TD points out that one of the main features of that report is the “*introduction of mechanisms in all relevant public service areas with consultation with Community and Voluntary sector groups to allow the communities they represent have an input to policy-making*” and that report calls for participation “*between those who make policy and people affected by policy choices*” (p. 90). The White Paper also explicitly commits the State to recognising that “*Community and Voluntary groups, who providing services or undertake community or*

local development work with statutory funding, have a right to be consulted about policy in relation to the design and delivery of services/ programmes” (p. 31).

There are many other examples that state that Government policy is to seek the views of those being affected by policy; all examples of participative democracy, and hence sound exemplars of Active Citizenship that the Taskforce should note. The Taskforce should also note that these commitments to Active Citizenship are not being met and that in one mechanism to improve Active Citizenship in the State would to cease undermining active participation and Active Citizenship by rolling-back on commitments made to involve Traveller organisations in the development of policies that will affect Travellers.

A real contribution to Active Citizenship that the Taskforce can make is to ensure that the State acknowledge its commitments to participation of Travellers and Traveller organisations in the development of policies that affect Travellers and not support a return to the failed practices of the 1960s where settled civil servants and politicians decided what was best for Travellers.

Active Citizenship and Community Development

Given that participative democracy can be seen as a crucial part of Active Citizenship, the Taskforce should be keenly aware that Community Development Groups are by their very nature involved in participative democracy. The Task Force should recognise the important role that Community Development Groups are already playing in promoting Active Citizenship. The Taskforce should be cognizant that the Government, in the White Paper on Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary sees Active Citizenship as:

“a political activity which gives citizens the opportunity to shape the society in which they live. Groups are given the opportunity to become involved in identifying local needs and developing strategies to meet these needs. Active citizenship is also about the strengthening of Community and Voluntary organisations. In modern society this process is particularly important in combating the potentially negative effects arising from centralisation of both economic and political decision-making and the consequent alienation of significant numbers of people, such as

the long-term unemployed” [emphasis added]. (White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector, p. 65).

The Taskforce should recognise that Active Citizenship is about the “strengthening of Community and Voluntary Organisations” and by allowing groups to “become involved in identifying local needs and developing strategies to meet these needs”.

Active Citizenship must be about **meaningful participation** and not tokenism masquerading as consultation. The Taskforce needs to promote Active Citizenship as a process for all voices to be heard, including voices that are critical of State actions. Community organisations and Traveller groups need to be funded, as stated above [“strengthening the Community and Voluntary organisations” to “identify local needs and developing strategies”] but not funded only to agree only with State agencies.

If the Taskforce is serious about developing Active Citizenship that “will contribute to a better quality of life for everyone” it must stress that participative structures are at the core of Active Citizenship; and that these structures must promote honest exchange of ideas, and that Community Groups are able to freely and confidently dissent from State policy and publicly critique it, free from the fear of funding being withdrawn *ala* the Citizen Traveller Campaign.

Participative democracy cannot work under the premise that groups acquiesce to negative State policies for fear that criticising Government policy will mean that they will no longer receive State funding; policies that may impact negatively on any community must be challenged by the representatives of that community in order for active citizenship to really exist.

Active Citizenship and ethnicity

The Taskforce states that it is looking for possible “barriers” that exist that prevent people from fully participating as active citizens in Ireland. One barrier that exists is the refusal of the State to recognise

Travellers as an ethnic minority. The NESF states that “*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*” (NESF, Policy Implications of Social Capital, 2003); and therefore, all identities should be welcomed in the process of Active Citizenship, and that Active Citizenship should recognize those multiple identities.

In order for **all** citizens to participate equally in the process of Active Citizenship, the Taskforce needs to be aware of the role of culture and ethnic identity. As the Equality Authority has pointed out “*Culture and identity will shape the needs of a group. Policies and programmes that respond to needs will only be effective to the extent that they take into account the culture and identity of the group concerned*” (Traveller Ethnicity: an Equality Authority Report 2006, p. 9). Therefore in order to guarantee that the process of Active Citizenship fully includes Travellers, the Taskforce needs to recognise Travellers as an ethnic minority group. The recognition of Travellers as an indigenous ethnic group in Irish society is backed up a body of academic evidence, and even though Travellers are recognized as an ethnic group in both Northern Ireland and the UK, the government simply refuses to acknowledge this fact – not due to any academic evidence, but because they can, an obvious expression of a pure exercise in state power; a principle that fully negates any idea of Active Citizenship.

Here is one clear example where a positive development with regard to Active Citizenship can be met: that in order for real Active Citizenship to occur, Traveller ethnicity needs to be recognized by the Government.

Principles of Active Citizenship

It will be important that any policy measures developed in relation to supporting Active Citizenship by the Taskforce are underpinned by strong principles of inclusion, respect for diversity and promotion of plurality. The ITM recognises that some groups that come together to make a difference are often defined as being involved in active citizenship; however it is conceivable that a residents organisation that opposes Traveller accommodation in their area or the arrival of new communities may see themselves as participating in active citizenship

(often referred to as “negative social capital”). In order to avoid such scenarios arising, it is of paramount importance that the Taskforce must set out defining principles what it means to engage in Active Citizenship.

This is a very clear and simple step that would allow the Taskforce to reiterate what Active Citizenship and that for groups to participate in this process they must give a very real commitment to principles of anti-racism, equality and inclusion.

Education and Active Citizenship

At the launch of the consultation process on Active Citizenship on September 14th it was clear that many felt that the “concept” of Active Citizenship would be enhanced by being part of the school curriculum. The ITM would endorse the notion, if it were understood that inculcating a sense of Active Citizenship among young people could only be done if Active Citizenship were based on truly intercultural education that valued all its citizens equally and respected and catered for diversity in education. The NESF sees that education will be vital in developing “social capital”: *“Learning to co-operate, communicate and engage for a more open, tolerant and active civil society is, potentially, a major part of a policy response to the development of social capital”* (NESF, 2003, *The Policy Implications of Social Capital*). The ITM feels that any development of the concept of Active Citizenship in education requires adherence to the principles outlined above- namely that equality and respect for diversity would be embedded in the whole-school environment.

Concluding remarks

The Irish Traveller Movement sees the importance of Active Citizenship and applauds the focus that the Taskforce will bring to analyzing it with a view to supporting as many individuals as possible to engage in Active Citizenship. The ITM has made this submission aware of the importance of Active Citizenship given that our member organisations, being involved in the process of Community development, have constantly performed the task of Active Citizenship

in empowering Travellers to engage in policy development that will shape their community and the huge contribution that this process makes to society.

In order to really develop Active Citizenship in Ireland, the Taskforce must take full stock of the comments of Honohan cited in the Background Working Paper on the Taskforce on Active Citizenship:

“We should be way 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 sense outlined here”

The Government, and the Taskforce, if truly committed to the concept of Active Citizenship, can make a huge contribution to the quality of life of everyone. The Government cannot harangue Communities for not being involved in civic society if they are purposely excluded; Travellers (and other ethnic minorities) can only participate as Active Citizens if their ethnicity is recognized and meaningful participation includes the space for organisations to voice concerns and criticize the Government without the threat of funding being removed.

Active Citizenship can become a much stronger reality if those suggestions, which require very little on behalf of State in terms of new policy development (often requiring nothing more than meeting existing commitments), were implemented. Then, the State, in promoting “Active Citizenship” would truly have made a valuable contribution to a “better quality of life for everyone”.

For more information, please contact the Irish Traveller Movement on 01-6796577 or see our website www.itmtrav.ie

