# Funding community education in Ireland
## Making the case for a needs-based approach

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- The term community education refers to organised adult education that happens outside of schools and colleges and is local.
- The study uncovers growing uncertainty in terms of funding for community education in Ireland.
- The once vibrant Community and Voluntary sector is still rooted amidst the local politicised activism that grows from ordinary people's dissatisfaction with the status quo.

**Purpose:** This report captures the experiences of 56 participating community education organisations across Ireland and aims to uncover trends and issues in funding models.
**Design/methodology/approach:** A mixed-methods research was undertaken in three phases. Phase one involved an online- survey, which asked about primary and secondary sources of funding, ease of administration, access and sustainability. Phase two consisted of one-to-one interviews with self-selected providers and in phase three, we returned to the participants of phase two with targeted questions specifically relating to the pressures to merge with non-independent, state providers of community education.
**Findings:** A disconnect between funders and providers, has been highlighted. Particularly the outcomes based funding model, which prioritises jobs activation over social inclusion. Funding is seen as restrictive, anti-innovative, bureaucratic and non-transparent.
**Practical implications:** A need for sustainable, multi-annual funding has been identified, with providers looking for greater acknowledgement and recognition of the vital role and true value of community education in Irish society.

## JSSE

## 1 Introduction

There are various definitions of *community education* (CE). At its broadest, CE refers to any organised adult education that happens outside of schools and colleges and that is local to its participants. Sometimes CE has a more politicised meaning, where the expression implies certain equality-based principles and a pedagogic approach that draws from the teachings of educationalists such as Paulo Freire (1972) and bell hooks (1994). These theorists turn their back on traditional approaches to education, where the 'expert teacher' pours canonical

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knowledge into the passive learner.  Instead, they interpret knowledge as subjective and as something that emerges from our lived experiences. Where community educators work from this approach, they work in a way that is dialogic, democratic and collective and that creates environments where knowledge is 'uncovered' and not 'covered' (Dorman, 2006). Typically, this reveals a structural inequality that is gendered, class-based and racialised.  As part of attempts to address this, community education seeks to increase civic engagement for those often effected by, but left out of, political decision-making.

Ireland has a long history of this type of community education dating back to the 1970s and 1980s and emerging from a feminist movement (Connolly, 2008), a politicised literacy movement (NALA, 2010) and an anti-poverty/community development movement (Fitzsimons, 2017). Together, these social movements evolved into a vibrant *Community and Voluntary Sector* (CVS) made up of many hundreds of civil society organisations scattered across Ireland.  Although largely independent from the state in terms of day-to-day management, these organisations were, in the main, funded through public grants.  This began with the European Social Fund (ESF) Poverty 1 and Poverty 2 projects of the 1980s – initiatives that emphasised models of self-help (Curley, 2007) and that targeted the needs of communities experiencing social exclusion, high unemployment and limited access to public services. In 1991, a domestic *Community Development Programme* was launched, closely followed by a structure of Family Resource Centres and a national network of Local Area Partnership companies.  By the 2000s, much community education was organised through this Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS), a sector that successfully eliminated some barriers to education including cost, transport, child-care and accessibility. It also addressed a complexity of needs such as literacy and numeracy, personal development and social and political awareness. The CVS also provided youth and disability services and supports for people experiencing addiction.  However, the sector didn't just provide services, rather it became a critical voice in challenging the absence of adequate state funded supports and unacceptable levels of poverty amidst certain communities.  It also acted as a conduit for civic engagement. This 'in and against the state' positioning (Lloyd, 2010) created tensions for the sector in term of its relationship with its funder and, since 2008, there has been a substantial downsizing of this sector, as forced mergers and closures eroded much of its autonomy (Harvey, 2012; Bissett, 2015; Bracken and Magrath, 2019).

Although some Irish contributors have captured the ongoing work of community educators within this vastly diminished sector (Bailey et al 2011; Fitzsimons, 2017), little has been done to investigate the funding models that prevail. This paper seeks to address this gap by drawing from research with 56 community education providers, all of whom are members of a national Community Education Network (CEN).[1] The CEN describes itself as "a political platform of independent community education groups" (AONTAS CEN, 2008) and is open to all CE providers who 1) align with this vision and 2) are independent from the state in terms of their management and governance.  By drawing from Irish CE providers, we uncover just who is funding community education in Ireland and ask about difficulties managing the models that emerge.

The qualitative contributions you will encounter were provided amidst a mixed-methods research project of which there were three phases. **Phase one** involved distribution of an online-embedded survey that was circulated in 2017 to 150 CEN members via the *Online surveys* software programme licenced to Maynooth University. The survey asked about primary and secondary sources of funding, ease of access, sustainability, simplicity of administration, effectiveness in reaching their target group, and balance of responsibility across stakeholders (such as employers and learners).  It also asked for any further comments that research participants wished to share. Fifty-six members participated, representing over one-third of all members.  **Phase two** consisted of one-to-one interviews with eight self-selected providers who accepted an invitation to interview as part of their survey response.  Finally, **phase three** involved us, the researchers, returning to the participants of phase two with targeted questions specifically related to the pressures to merge with non-independent, state providers of community education. Six organisations re-engaged with this final phase which involved e-mail exchanges.

Before presenting findings, we begin with more detail on the formation and trimming down of the Irish CVS and locate this amidst a wider European discourse of lifelong learning.

## 2    FUNDING CE IN IRELAND

Whilst this paper focuses specifically on community education, it is important to remember that community education (CE) formed just one part of the wider Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) described in the introductory section.  Over the years, this CE has accessed funding from both European and domestic sources with the principal sources summarised as table 1.

**Table 1: Chronology of funding for community education**

| | |
|---|---|
| EU Poverty 1 and Poverty 2 programmes | 1980s |
| Irish government Community Development Fund | 1991-2013 |
| EU New Opportunities for Women (evolved into the rights, equality and citizenship programme). | 1989- present |
| The EU Peace and Reconciliation programmes | 1995 – present |
| Irish government Family Resource Agency | 1996-present |
| Irish government National Drugs Strategy (Funding Drug and Alcohol Task Forces) | 1996 - present |
| EU Women's Education Initiative/Education Equality Initiative | 1998-2006 |
| Irish government Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) programme | 2001-present |
| European Integration Fund | 2007-present |
| Irish government Dormant Accounts Fund | 2001-present |
| Irish government Local and Community Development Programme | 2009-2015 |
| Irish government Labour Market Activation Fund | 2010 - present |
| SICAP – funded by the Irish government and the European Social Fund | 2015 - present |

Whilst each of these funding streams emanated from the state, recipient organisations established themselves as independent companies with locally appointed, boards of directors and with charitable status. Much of the time, these organisations relied on one central financier but also leveraged additional funds, such as small grants and philanthropic donations (AONTAS, 2011, Fitzsimons 2017).  By 2008, the Irish CVS was thriving, employing over 53,000 people nationwide (Harvey, 2012, p. 21). Through a *Community Pillar,* its representatives were also negotiators in a series of national partnership agreements alongside the state, the Trade Union movement, employers, and farmer representative groups.

As detailed in the introduction, this vibrancy was short lived and today's reality is of a much smaller, less independent Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS). A key part of our argument is the changes that brought this about weren't apolitical nor a logical response to changing national economic wellbeing rather they had deep, socio-political motivations that formed part of a broader global neoliberalisation of civil society where a market-driven, individualist model of capitalism sought to colonise our social world. As one of us attests in another publication;

> "Although a spate of recent reforms are sometimes considered intrinsic to the recessionary period that began in 2008...a more accurate starting point is in 2002... [and the] monitoring of community sector work. These changes altered funder– funded relationships which, from this point forward, were shaped by the need to justify and quantify service delivery in terms of value for money and not to build capacity, promote empowerment and instigate social change as had previously been the case. " (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 13-14)

One starting point from which to consider the policy shifts that initiated this reform is the 1990s when previous community-led needs-based models started to fade in favour of more individualised concepts

of lifelong learning (Hurley, 2014). Since 2000, life-long learning has become the cornerstone of European policy on adult and community education, which, although seemingly unproblematic on the surface, was subterfuge for a harsh, employability agenda (Murray et al, 2014). The EC communiqué, a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) was particularly instrumental in advancing this discourse as, although it promotes active citizenship, it couches this amidst a person's participation in the work force. Education and training systems were told they "must adapt" to an altered economic environment (European Commission, 2000) as the memorandum encouraged flexible, measurable models of education that would maximise employment opportunities.

As with many European countries, the subsequent loss of independence experienced, created a situation where many civil society organisations became trapped between the market and the state. Had neoliberalism worked, this marketisation might not have been a problem. However, the trickle-down economics that neoliberalism promised hasn't materialised (Harvey, 2005) and its legacy of business norms, such as accountability, performativity and measurable outputs into public sector spaces (Lynch et al, 2012; McGlynn, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017) have meant that spaces once led by social need have been revolutionised into spaces that are led by industry need instead. In terms of community education, this has principally been through an increasingly rigid employability agenda.

Community educators in Ireland initially welcomed the memorandum's inclusion of active citizenship (Connolly 2006, p. 114) but also cautioned against the potential for education to be principally viewed through the lens of employability and human resource development (AONTAS, 2001). One year later, the 2001 communication, *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, claimed a Europe-wide consultation had mandated the communiqué in a way that "confirms lifelong learning as a key element of the strategy... to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world" (European Commission 2001: 3). In the decades that followed, a plethora of policy interventions promoted this discourse, culminating in the *European Strategic Framework for Education and Training* (ET2020), which was adopted by the EU in May 2009. At the same time, the European Social Fund ( ESF) re-oriented its objectives towards its current objective, which views education as a route to employability and labour market activation[2].

Ireland's response to this policy agenda was a substantial downsizing of the Community and Voluntary Sector, something Bissett (2015, p. 174) interprets as a "strategic turn...which signalled a sharp authoritarian turn in the state's position vis-à-vis the community sector". This took the form of forced mergers and harsh funding cuts totalling a 59% reduction in state funding to the community sector (Harvey, 2012). We don't have space to go into each of these restructurings here, so will focus on that which has a wider European context namely the eventual emergence of the *Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme* (SICAP) in 2015 which was part-funded by the European Social Fund. SICAP has three stated goals: to support and resource communities experiencing exclusion and inequality; to implement life-long learning initiatives through community development; and to engage with the unemployed to improve their 'work-readiness'. Not all organisations received SICAP funding and its introduction fundamentally changed the landscape of community development provision in Ireland. This wasn't the only significant change as, two years earlier, and outside of the CVS, there had been a restructuring of Further Education as 33 National Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were streamlined into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across the country, each of which reported to a new national overseer called SOLAS. The SOLAS national *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy* (2013) adopted an outputs-based, economic model that prioritised employability over everything else and that relegated community education to little more than a way to attract so called 'hard-to-reach' learners into vocational programmes (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 163). From the early 2010s, SOLAS took ownership over funding for literacy supports and community education services. Another noteworthy change was reforms in social welfare provision through the creation of one stop-shops (called Intreo centres) for managing a person's welfare, education, and training needs. These changes all contributed to a now established connection between a person's entitlement to social welfare, and their participation in education and training (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 144-148).

By 2019, the revised landscape that had emerged was markedly different to the vitality we described earlier. Research by Bracken and Magrath (2019) documents the extent of community education closures between 2008-2018 finding not only were there mass closures (116 verified), but that there was also

mass defunding, as a result of the previously cited private sector-like 'mergers' of Community Development Projects (CDPs) and CE projects. While on the surface, these mergers appeared to save organisations from closure, in many cases projects lost premises, lost permanent and part-time jobs and perhaps most importantly, were unable to provide vital services to the communities they were serving. Those organisations that were defunded but managed to survive, did so mainly because of their determination and commitment to their communities (Bracken and Magrath, 2019). The same research also reveals that, in seeking new financial options, many organisations have been forced to adapt their services to suit the limited funding models available.

## 3   Research findings

As stated in the introductory section, 56 out of 150 CEN members participated in an online survey that posed a series of open-ended questions about the nature of funding for community education and the experience of working within these funding models. These responses have been analysed using open-coding which reveals the following themes: the challenges of managing multiple, often insecure funding; compliance with an outputs-oriented employability agenda; enforced changes to their work-practices; and maintaining autonomy. Although these headings are interconnected, each will now be discussed sequentially drawing from qualitative survey contributions, transcript from transcripts of one-to-one interviews, and email exchanges (as per phase three). Where relevant we have differentiated different funding streams.

### 3.1   The challenges of managing multiple, often insecure funding

Seven different government departments are named as funders. These departments carry responsibility for 1) education; 2) social protection (including welfare payments); 3) justice and equality; 4) health; 5) children; 6) communications, climate action and environment; and 7) housing, planning and local government. Seventeen organisations receive a substantial part of their funding from whichever state-run Education and Training Board (ETB) is geographically closest to them – money that originates from the government *Department of Education*. Eight organisations cite their principal funder as the part-European (Programme for Employability) funded SICAP programme which is domestically funded by the government *Department of Rural and Community Development*. Four are funded through the Community Services Programme (funded by their local authority under the auspices of the *Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government*). Four rely on learner fees as their principal source of funding, one relies mostly on philanthropy and one organisation cites loans as their principal source of funding. For other providers there are primary grants from the *Health Service Executive* (who fund and manage Ireland's healthcare system), child-care grants, funding for addiction related supports and funding as part of a housing regeneration initiative.

Overwhelmingly, organisations require more than one funder to survive, something that reflects previous research (AONTAS, 2011; Fitzsimons, 2017). Six accept additional philanthropic donations, three access loans and, the majority of organisations (30 out of 56) charge some sort of fee to learners. Five organisations rely on secondary funding from the government *Department of Social Welfare* meaning some participants enrol on programmes to retain full social welfare payments. Two receive other forms of community grants. There is also a heavy reliance on ad hoc supports, including staff at times working without pay. One survey respondent writes that "substantial voluntary effort enables our organisation to survive". Another describes "always scrimping and scraping, underpaid staff for the work they do" and another tells us how they "depend on some local contribution to enable us to do our work". One interviewee, funded via SOLAS, is keen to highlight disparity with wages paid to her staff when benchmarked against their peers employed directly by the state to do much the same job describing how her employees "go above and beyond", and yet are "completely and utterly undervalued and underpaid".

It is worth noting there were some reports of positive, strong working relationships with funders and one contributor is thankful of the 3-year funding stream they have under SICAP.  Another provider, who is part-funded by an ETB, describes how their funding is "very flexible" as the provider has a "good understanding of community education" and an awareness that "education means more than just jobs". More frequently though, these providers are dissatisfied with the state and with the challenges of remaining true to the principles of community education amidst such a precarious funding landscape. One participant whose organisation is funded as part of a Community Services Programme describes funding as "very precarious" and from another, this time funded through a Childcare support programme we learn how funding is "not secure, nor is it consistent we, and other community providers, are in dire need of core funding for our community education provision".  For some, this balancing act has the potential to compromise their ethos and vision.  One reveals how they "try to obtain money while maintaining our integrity" continuing "sometimes a balance has to be found between "following the money at all costs" and "purity with poverty".  This tension is also captured in the comment "we are trying to find a fit that respects and honours those that we work for and at the same time continue to access the resources we need and there is a serious tension there" This next contribution, raises the same tensions:

> Our centre has been hit really, really, hard in the last few years, in terms of funding. One of the things that has emerged is that there is no real guiding policy for the community education sector.... so, in the absence of an overarching policy, which really dictates where money goes, then you are at the mercy of whatever is going.

> A different voice reminds us this is a generative theme stating "we try, often with difficulty, to ensure that money is not the determinant of whether a worthy piece of work is taken forward".

The research also uncovers a divisiveness where providers are competing for the same funding and alongside other civil society organisations, whose focus might not be education.   This practice of pitting providers against each other can force some out of existence, as illuminated by this contribution: "community education is probably the bottom of the food chain. We are being squeezed out – it really does feel like that at the moment. Little organisations like ours are being culled".  Some feel that they are being "shoehorned" into prescriptive funding models that one respondent believes are "wholly inadequate" and "unfit for purpose".  This situation is compounded by a sense across many responses, that some of those responsible for decisions about funding don't really understand the, often-politicised function of community education.  To demonstrate:

> For me, the whole thing stems from not understanding what community education is in the first place. I do think that people in certain positions think that all we do is basket making and flower arranging courses.

This same interviewee suggests some ETBs incorporate "a community education ethos within...and the experience and willingness to link in with the independent providers and look at the best outcomes for learners".  However, she continues, "I do feel that community education is being squeezed out from an independent service and the policy direction seems to be pushing it towards another arm of the ETBs, one that is more vocational in its focus". A different provider described their interactions with funders as a "pretty horrific" experience adding:

> It's a case of people who have different terms of reference to what we are working with, and who have little or no appreciation of a community education approach to learning and education and are being informed, possibly, by their own limited experience of the world and the department they are in.

Sometimes the hand-to-mouth nature of funding means organisations can be actively recruiting for a programme before funding is secure. This provider, who is principally funded by an ETB, writes: "we work on the assumption that it will be the same as the year before. It would be useful at the very least if we knew going into the New Year what the budget is".

As reported earlier, the majority of these providers charge some sort of fee to learners. Some debate emerges about this. One survey respondent tells us "charging learners for basic accredited programmes below level 7 is against our principles of open access to education as a fundamental right". This isn't the only such statement as another survey participant shares "Our target group is primarily marginalised people who were failed by the public education system. Asking them to pay fees to access basic education is an additional barrier and discrimination". There is also a sense, from a few contributors, that employers could be doing more to fund education they benefit from. One respondent is dissatisfied about what they perceive as "little or no contribution" from employers; their dissatisfaction echoed by another voice unhappy that "it is not a balanced responsibility at all. The Community Education sector is not funded adequately by the government and rarely by employers". A final excerpt related to this theme comes from a survey participant whose organisation receives a direct-grant to support those in addiction recovery. It captures a sense of mistrust in both government and employer involvement, in particular with a concern about what is interpreted as the privatisation of much work once carried out through state-funded, egalitarian led organisations.

> ...Employers are disinterested. Stigma is still widespread. Learners are grateful for any intervention and assistance. Community is under attack whilst particularly the voluntary (NGO) sector are deliberately encouraging and benefitting from outsourcing often operating of business models. Private companies do not do community education!

As well as the challenges of managing day-to-day uncertainty, another consequence of newer models of funding are repeated reports of arduous administrative burdens. Comments range from "a bit bureaucratic but generally it is fine" (ETB funded) to "the insecurity, inadequacy and delays associated with the provision of funding increase workload. Furthermore, the level of operational oversight, reporting is not proportionate" (also ETB funded). Another reports an "incredible amount of duplication data collection on paper and through IT" (SICAP funded). We also hear about "different levels of administration depending on the funding stream – it is not a streamlined model due to the inconsistency of funding" and of how "the red tape around the audits and the burden put on a voluntary board...when they are not working here". There are many more comments on this theme as well as some questions about the intrusiveness of some of the personal data sought about learners. There is also an administrative burden connected with chasing funding, time some of these participants felt could be used more efficiently on innovative education and student-centred practices. One respondent goes so far as to say "sourcing funding in a hugely competitive market has completely taken over my job".

## 3.2    Compliance with an outputs-oriented employability agenda

A second dominant theme to emerge is the explicit difficulties coping with a strong employability agenda the outputs of which must be measured. As we will demonstrate, this model is interfering with some contributor's sense of their capacity to combat exclusion outside of the provision of work-related training. One survey respondent notes that it is "becoming increasingly difficult to honour commitment to be learner-centred when outcomes are only viewed through a labour market lens" (ETB funded), while another states that "...there are competing priorities, but the employability objective dominates" (again ETB funded). We hear about how "the current situation tends to favour labour activation which is not always in the interest of individual students or communities" (Direct grant from the Higher Education Authority). Another describes a "battle that has to be fought as the dominance of the economic argument puts at risk investment in education that serves a social agenda", for another "it is very important for the community to have their own voice and the flexibility to move at their own pace and identify and understand their own needs. Less emphasis on targets and outputs and more on outcomes".

And again, "it is a contradiction asking an organisation to work with the most vulnerable in society yet have high targets set against this. Quality and depth of work is compromised for breadth" (SICAP funded project).

It's not always the concept of having outcomes that is the problem. To quote one interviewee:

> I don't mind being outcomes-based, but it depends on whose outcomes. We are working with the most marginalised and the most disadvantaged; I wish everyone we took on stayed the course, but the reality is people are homeless, have addiction issues, health issues and it can take a long time of dipping in and out of services before they are successful.

This perspective on outputs isn't isolated, rather emerges across the majority of interview conversations and amidst many survey responses. Other comments include, "if we are talking about a realistic model, there must be some basic understanding of what outputs actually mean in community education", or, "what we are most worried about is that if the focus continues on labour market activation as the only valued outcome by funders, then it will further distance our programme and those that are vulnerable".

There is also a sense of pressure for learners to progress, often into low-paid, precarious work, regardless of whether or not this is the right thing for them. This progression is conceived of in terms of what one interviewee describes as "learners going on to further education or employment", something this provider believes is not always a "realistic", "beneficial" or "achievable outcome, particularly for those struggling with health issues or mental health issues". She believes sometimes, the benefits of attendance alone can be vital, something that is not valued as an outcome. But as this is less measurable, it can be under-appreciated by funders. Another difficulty is with accreditation, favoured for its measurability but difficult for some participants to access because of a lack of individualised grant-aid for learners such as those that university students can avail of. This provider writes: "Education and training for accredited programmes below level 8 on the NFQ should be funded publicly as a right to everyone, regardless of age or method of provision or delivery".

## 3.3    Enforced changes to their work-practices

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a third theme that emerges is that this altered environment has led to changes in the work these projects would ideally like to be involved in. We hear about difficulties providing ancillary supports such as additional tuition and, for a number of providers, valuable outreach work where historically community educators have stretched outside of their project to build relationships with the wider community. One shares, "we have little or no resources to put into outreach work which is critically important" (SICAP funded). Another participant, this time in receipt of funding from an ETB, claims the model they use "does not suit the delivery of outreach".

Difficulties in maintaining outreach and ancillary work isn't the only challenge. This contributor, funded via SICAP explains how "to date we have stopped providing training which needed pre-development because there is no staffing costs to manage and organise this training". There is also pressure to certify all of the courses that an organisation offers, an arrangement that undoubtedly makes outcomes easier to quantitatively measure. This is not unconnected from the labour-market agenda, as one voice explains,

> We see the push for accreditation as being much higher on the agenda. The labour activation model has come to the fore, which is a bit unfortunate. I feel it's short-sighted. Social inclusion can lead to labour activation, but it's a valid option in its own right.

## 3.4    Maintaining autonomy

What the findings reported on this far have revealed is a combination of factors that, together, create a culture of uncertainty for community education providers.  We have chosen one of many excerpts to capture this when a survey respondent writes: "[The] sector is fighting for its survival as the cutbacks of recent years have hit hard. Despite the turnaround in the economy, there is a total lack of government investment in the sector and it is unclear how it can survive into the future if the sector is not adequately resourced".  For these practitioners, and indeed for others that promote community education as a form of social activism, independence from the state is an essential feature.  There seems little doubt however that the forced mergers relayed already have contributed to reports of a loss of autonomy as smaller organisations struggle in terms of their capacity to juggle multiple funding streams. When asked why independence is important, a recurring theme is to retain community education's capacity to have its finger on the pulse through its positioning at the heart of communities.  Independence retains that sense of distance from the state, something welcomed by many of the participants of community education.  As this contributor explains:

> In general, it is important that we are seen as not part of the establishment, but as a community owned service. This makes the relationship with the community very different, and usually community organisations can reach people that ETBs can't get to.

The importance of an independent board of directors is also highlighted more than once, the benefits of which are the ability to more readily adapt to the needs of communities where those most affected hold some managerial oversight. This responder shares:

> Independence is very important for our autonomy. Voluntary boards are often made up of members of target groups and are more able to identify local needs. Independence affords the opportunity to be more in control of our actions. It's also important that there is an infrastructure owned and managed by the local community.

But these local board as struggling in terms of future planning, captured when this survey respondent writes:

> The changes taking place with regard to funding arrangements make it more difficult to protect existing provision not to mention being able to plan for the strategic development of community education programmes. This research is timely is highlighting these critical issues.

## 3.5    Other findings

Other findings that emerge include a call to action in terms of lobbying policy makers to provide robust policies that guarantee multi-annual core funding that recognises the values, diversity and principles of community education.  Contributors acknowledge the work of the AONTAS CEN, in advocating for this change but temper this with a sense that the energy expended in trying to influence policy rarely pays off.  One participant laments:

> I spend an awful lot of time on submissions and consultations and I really wonder if it's actually being listened to. My fear about any new policy is that, the likes of ourselves would not be listened to.

There are suggestions for a better database of providers, new methods of evaluation, that reflect the diversity and richness of the sector and greater collaboration and cooperation across providers.  One interviewee wants "some sort of national dialogue" that would allow funders, administrators and providers to reflect on their experiences working in the sector or to imagine alternatives.  This platform

could act as "the scaffolding, rather than the building itself" and could identify "how can we work with people, rather than just working for them". Other themes that are beyond the scope of this particular publication include concerns about national literacy levels, rural isolation, better supports for early-school leavers in rural communities.

## 4    Discussion – towards a needs-based model of practice

The world view we espouse is that these provider-experiences are part of a neoliberal influenced co-option of civil society where day-to-day practice is forced towards actions that support a marketised ambition of continuous economic growth that can be to the detriment of other forms of growth such as social, personal and political. As European policies have altered domestic policies, not only in Ireland but across EU member states, this research demonstrate the impact on practitioners when their work is pulled in this direction.

These findings uncover some positives, in terms of relationships with some funders. They also reveal that, despite the many challenges these community educators remain committed to addressing inequality, creating opportunities for civic engagement and responding to the variant needs of communities. However, the tension between bottom-up, politicised, collective, egalitarian ways of working and a top-down reductionist neoliberal, individualist agendas are exerting pressures on community educators caught between incongruent ontological outlooks. There is nothing wrong with linking education to employment, in fact much early community education that emerged during the recessionary years of the 1980s did just that. What this research demonstrates is what happens when an employability agenda becomes the principal purpose, with the wider benefits and ambitions often relegated to the side-lines.

We wonder if the advocates of this wider interpretation of community education should be more vocal about this incongruence and look towards alternative policy-based discourses to support their work. Whilst the EU education related budgets arguably continue an employability focus, what about a re-orientation towards programmes funded through Energy, Climate Change and Environment. Both the *European Social Fund* (ESF) and the *European Regional Development Fund* both offer opportunities to support educational initiatives and cross-border cooperation between member states. In terms of other European opportunities, €439 million was allocated to the rights, equality and citizenship programme (2014-2020).

Up until recently, it was hard to suggest anything other than capitalist-oriented policies that supported economic growth and suggesting a return to a needs-based approach was often not taken seriously. But increasingly, European discourse on perpetual growth is under threat as people question its sensibility in the face of environmental catastrophe and ever-growing levels of inequality. Out own sense is that this makes it easier to galvanise support for a refocus on sustainability, civic engagement and day-to-day community-need as legitimate ambitions for our work. We thus encourage community educators to be brave enough to encourage an agenda that problematises employability and that re-focuses our attention on the principles that underpin their work. One way to do this might be to return to the needs-based research that typified the emergence of much civil society activism in the first place (Fitzsimons, 2017) and to consider their work through three core values. The first is to appreciate the importance of *inclusionary philosophies* that are committed to equality amidst a recognition of diversity both in need and in educational approaches. Secondly, we suggest a *commitment to self-assessment*, where local people are central to identifying their needs, both individually and collectively. Thirdly, there should be an *assurance of a range of outcomes*, where the importance of vocational, personal-development and political education is appreciated – both accredited and non-accredited.

Table 2 compares a needs-based approach underpinned by these principles with the commonly used outcomes-based approach that these community educators describe.

**Table 2: Comparisons between a needs-based model and an outcome-based model**

| Common features of a needs-based approach | Common features of an outcomes-based approach |
|---|---|
| Appreciates that the impacts of community education are often long-term and difficult to measure. | Measures direct, pre-determined outputs from specific programmes delivered within set timeframes. |
| Relies on insider information, therefore appreciating the knowledge, resources and expertise within communities that are often the key to addressing local issues. | Draws from top-down policies in determining the specific outcomes to be measured. |
| Emphasises the strengths and assets of a community and the individuals within it. | Emphasises the perceived deficits within individuals and population groups |
| Makes collective provision for the supports required to remove barriers to participation | Offers some supports which are determined through individualised assessments |
| Promotes strategic collaboration across a multiplicity of providers and supports | Principally focuses measurements on publicly funded provision. |

One way to combat the demoralising dimension of policy consultations and engagement with funders that is revealed through this research is to be more strategic about which top-down initiatives the providers of community education should engage with and to treat all with scepticism. Crowther and Shaw (2014) offer a helpful framework to guide this manoeuvring through their model of *strategic participation/strategic non-participation*. The authors suggest civil society organisations should participate in consultation processes with policy-makers only when to do so enhances democratic efficacy and expands the pool of those involved in decision making beyond the few. Conversely, they suggest they don't participate when to do so is ineffective and when they can instead use their time to create bottom-up, community-based spaces, where political capacities can be strengthened. By being particular about the terms of engagement, this could free up space for providers to re-assert the importance of a needs-based approach as fundamental to their way of working, an approach that encourages a praxis oriented phenomena that can support well-being and self-awareness, can connect with others in advancing social justice and that can collectively consider ways in which we can care for the environment we share with others.

## 5   CONCLUSION

This study uncovers growing uncertainty in terms of funding for community education in Ireland and showcases the often-stressful working conditions for those employed at the coal-face endure. These providers are engaged in a delicate dance with the state, their principal funder, as they respond to the requirements of an employability policy discourse whilst at the same time seeking to respond to the requirements of the community they are at the heart of. So long as the labour-market oriented policy discourse exists, it is difficult to envisage any change. Perhaps there is hope. In March 2019, an AONTAS event *The Impact of Community Education on the Lives of Women*[3], launched a discussion paper that proposed a more holistic approach through an all-island, National Community Education Strategy. If nothing else, the event put multi-annual, sustainable funding on the national agenda and encouraged the providers of community education to trust in the communities within which they operate. The roots of the once vibrant Community and Voluntary sector are still there amidst the local politicised activism that grows from ordinary people's dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although community educators are sometimes reluctant to share behind-the-scenes difficulties with their participants (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 238), we encourage them to be vocal about the unstable nature of their circumstances and to open up conversations with the participants of community education that reveal the limitations they work amidst. To do this would embody trust in their adult learner's capacity to analyse their own circumstances and to self-determine their actions in response to the current policy landscape.

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### ENDNOTES

[1] The CEN is convened by AONTAS, a government funded, National Learning Organisation.   AONTAS is a member-based organisation made up of both independent and state providers of adult education.  The CEN is open to members and non-members.

[2] Taken from (http://www.esf.ie/en/About-Us/, 2017).

[3] For full details see https://www.aontas.com/events/adult-learners-festival-policy-event April, 2019