



RESILIENCE IN TOUGH TIMES – CIVIC SOCIETY'S RESPONSE

HOSTED BY **PRESIDENT MARY MCALEESE**

ÁRAS AN UACHTARÁIN, FRIDAY 29TH JANUARY 2010



“The desire to help, to make a difference is the hallmark of the volunteer and faith in our ability to change things for the better is the seed corn of hope”.

PRESIDENT MARY MCALEESE

President Mary McAleese hosted a Forum at Áras an Uachtaráin on Friday 29th January 2010 to highlight the issue of “Resilience in Tough Times – Civic Society’s Response”.

The Forum arose from the fact that throughout her term of office, President McAleese has placed great importance on the role of civic society and especially on community-based action as fundamental elements in the strength and resilience of our country.

In furtherance of this aim, the President has been meeting with community-based groups and individuals over the past months and, as a result, hosted this Forum to highlight and encourage the constructive local community efforts to help those who are struggling in these tough times.

Participants at the Forum included representatives from, among others, Civil Defence, Jigsaw, SpunOut, St Vincent de Paul Society, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, Samaritans, Sophia Housing, MABS, Citizens Information, The Ageing Sector, IFA, USI, ICA, Trust, Suicide Prevention Organisations and The Carmichael Centre for Voluntary Groups.

THE PRESIDENT’S OPENING REMARKS

Opening the Forum, the President extended a warm welcome to all those who had made the journey to Áras an Uachtaráin. Some had travelled considerable distances to attend. Speaking of the damage wrought by floods and severe winter weather, against a backdrop of difficult economic circumstances, the President acknowledged that these were challenging times, indeed, “disappointing times” for the country. Disappointing though they were, they had also proven to be times which highlighted the solidarity of communities. Setting the positive, optimistic tone that was to pervade the day’s proceedings, the President stated that, in the adversity, the reaffirming of citizens’ ties to each other had been life enhancing for many. Praising the voluntary effort, the President spoke of those she had met throughout the country immediately following the frosts and floods and she commended those volunteers from associations who had “held back the tide of fear”. Although “nature did its worst”, it had been a time when “human nature did its best”. These efforts represented a seed-corn of hope for the future, a kernel of faith in our society’s ability to adapt, change and face the challenges adversity can sometimes present to us.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FORUM

The Forum was chaired by Mr. John Bowman who, in his introduction, stated his belief that crises such as the recent difficult circumstances the country had experienced, were by their nature also opportunities to take stock and move forward. He urged participants to grasp the occasion offered by the forum to propose “positive, “forward-looking solutions” as well as identifying the lessons that could be learned.

FORUM PRESENTATIONS

Invited speakers then set the scene for further debate by presenting examples of best practice of civic engagement, the aims of which are to connect and support communities and individuals in ways that build up resilience.

Bill Smith of the Civil Defence spoke of that organisation’s response to the recent calamitous weather conditions and emphasised that the Civil Defence represents a link between the front-line services and the community and that the success of its intervention depended, in no small part, on the local knowledge, that only local communities can provide. He offered the view that, in turn, the actions of the Civil Defence inspire resilience in the community. He thanked the President for having visited affected areas to thank volunteers. This recognition of the value of volunteerism, he stated, was vital in inspiring further resilience in communities. This, along with the Civil Defence’s role as intermediary, provided a link to ensure people felt “we’re all in this together”.

Sean Coughlan of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) explained how his organisation seeks to harness the drive and determination of business-minded people to solve some of society’s problems. He offered concrete examples of positive problem solving being applied in difficult situations. He summed up the attitude behind this approach with the words of one social entrepreneur that SEI had supported – it was, according to Veronica McKechnie of Kids in the Kitchen, a case of seeing “a world of possibility”. Some of the projects SEI supported, such as the West Cork Rapid Response, were local and community based. Others, such as Grow It Yourself brought people together and



SpunOut.ie is a website offering “a safe online space for young people.”

allowed them to connect and help each other. All were examples of people responding positively and tenaciously to adversity, he said.

William Corless of SpunOut.ie described how his organisation’s website offered “a safe online space for young people” where they could engage with decision makers and find help and advice for problems and difficulties they face. He told the Forum that 50,000 young people use this independent and youth-powered service each month.

Kieran Murphy of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul suggested that the previous 18 months had been “a challenging, but also an interesting time”. Although there had been an increase in requests for the society’s help, of up to 30% in some urban areas, and a shift towards more requests for basic needs, there had also been a marked increase in volunteerism. This represented a change when compared to the previous, more “affluent” decade. Sounding an optimistic note, Mr. Murphy said he believed that crises were also times of opportunity. Quoting Leonard Cohen, he said that: “There is a crack in everything - it’s how the light gets in”. In our current situation, he said that the light coming through the crack was the resilience of civil society. Volunteers are “shaped, change and enriched” through volunteerism. It is important, therefore, to create opportunities for people to get involved because these opportunities represent the “spaces from which spring our new perspectives”.

John Fitzmaurice of Jigsaw asserted that early intervention was important when mental health problems emerge in families and communities. He emphasised that it is also important not to be misled by stereotypical views of each individual who seeks assistance. He reported that in Galway, where Jigsaw is based, more young males than females were seeking help. Young people needed to be able to turn to others and talk to people within their own support networks, where long-term support ultimately lies. Within these networks, young people will look for support, he said. He went on



Jigsaw...“when we make what we already have work for people, young people will be as resilient as we allow them to be.”

to highlight that “when we make what we already have work for people, young people will be as resilient as we allow them to be”.

Professor Tom Collins of NUI Maynooth stated that disasters in general were good at calling attention to the inadequacies of bureaucracy and the possibilities of volunteerism. He believed that a challenge to be faced, however, was keeping that spirit of volunteerism alive when the particular disaster abates. He spoke about the successive challenges that generations of Irish people had faced, the inequalities in education and how it does not adequately “redistribute opportunity and chances”. For this reason, the voluntary sector must, in his opinion, have a redistributing impact. The voluntary sector is, in his words “uniquely endowed” and all of the participants in the forum could become vehicles of education because people’s learning is prevented by “the limits of their own experiences”.

OPEN DISCUSSION

There was widespread agreement among contributors, during the open forum which followed, that these were exceptionally difficult times. However, resilience could be seen among those who had decided to react and respond constructively to circumstances. There was, in the words a participant, “a tremendous good story here, but also a challenge”.

Concern was expressed by some as to the effects of financial constraints. Others however, such as a representative of the Women’s Networks, stated that creativity and open-mindedness often helped to overcome financial difficulties and that funding was not always the seminal issue in the case of many worthwhile initiatives. Many were more committed to doing the work that needed to be done, she said, despite the support infrastructure being weaker than before. Another participant representing the SVP stated that “a lot can be done with a little”.



“Volunteerism is robust in Ireland, and up to the challenge of inspiring resilience and rallying a sense of community in these challenging times”

Many of the organisations present indicated that there had been an increase in the spirit of volunteerism since the onset of the recession. For instance, Age Action Ireland stated that it had received four offers of help for every distress call they received during the episodes of flooding. A Civil Defence officer pointed out that there had been a recent increase in the number of people joining his organisation also. He added that the Civil Defence offered opportunities to people, of all levels of skills, to contribute.

Contributors agreed that there was clearly an appetite to help, but that sometimes an awareness of the available channels might be lacking. They said that it was vital that the consultation process be open to all and pointed out that it was important that an overly top-down approach be avoided, as it could result in depression and apathy. Representatives of West Cork Rapid Response were among those who pointed out that “workers will come in when they see a channel”.

The role of the State in fostering resilience and channelling the goodwill and volunteerism, which clearly exists, was also discussed. While some felt that their efforts could at times be hamstrung by bureaucracy, others, including a representative of the Dyspraxia Association Ireland, felt that the bureaucracy and state organs were sympathetic. However, a common-sense approach, based on research and providing measurable outcomes, was important to indicate where energies could be best applied.

Participants indicated that many services could be provided by the voluntary sector at a fraction of what it would cost the State. The opinion that decision making in some areas needed to be streamlined was expressed. Contributors believed that people needed to come together to avoid wasteful duplication of services and that collaboration to

strengthen the voice of the voluntary sector was also important. It was felt that many projects have been shown to work, but have been implemented sporadically, or in pockets. It was agreed that the major challenge facing the voluntary sector was ensuring that these common-sense approaches filter up to decision makers.

Participants agreed that resilience and reactivity are a built-in self-defence against setbacks and were identified as skills which could be nurtured and developed in even the youngest members of society. Professor Collins stated that evidence showed that early intervention was necessary, at pre-school age in fact. He was of the view that it was often too late to intervene, as the children grew older, and that intervention was sometimes futile at the age of 14-15 when up to a quarter of the cohort had, in his words, “switched off”.

There was widespread agreement that local knowledge is vital for effective responses to difficulties and that this fact may have been undervalued at times by the State. It was also generally accepted by those attending the Forum that displays of resilience and positivity create a “ripple effect” with further positive consequences.

CONCLUSIONS REACHED BY THE FORUM

- » Resilience and reactivity are a built-in self-defence against setbacks. They were identified as skills which could be nurtured and developed in even the youngest members of society. If this is to happen, civil society must have a role, filling the gaps that currently exist.
- » Localism is a powerful and useful force in Irish society and needs to be valued. Local knowledge and initiative had proven vital to recent relief efforts and had to be tapped into effectively in future.
- » The voice of the voluntary sector could be strengthened if efforts are co-ordinated more closely. Current services can be fragmented. A forum where organisations could come together on an ongoing basis might be considered.
- » The sector needs to measure and evaluate the work it does in a meaningful manner. This is especially the case when dealing with agencies and government departments. It is necessary to show how resilience is fostered effectively by the efforts of volunteers.
- » The State has a role to play, but it cannot create a sense of community. It can, however, encourage and support community.
- » Volunteerism is robust in Ireland, and up to the challenge of inspiring resilience and rallying a sense of community, in these challenging times. The recent floods and frosts, in the words of the President, had “given us a window into that capacity”. Often, however, the media are slow to pick up on the good news and not enough credit is given, or taken, for just how good we are.
- » Community is a resource, a “bulwark against the capriciousness of life”. Often, however, the full potential of this resource remains untapped.
- » The resilience shown by people inspires faith and spurs others to action. This change, in turn, increases resilience and the virtuous circle is repeated. Providing adequate accessible channels for people to get involved and contribute is vital.

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