



European Foundation
for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
Loughinstown House, Shankill, Co. Dublin, Ireland. Tel: (01) 826888 Telex: 30726 EURF EI Fax: 826456

**JUST ORDINARY PEOPLE:
SOCIAL CHANGE AND LOCAL ACTION**

Produced by

Lindsay Knight

for the

**European Foundation for the
Improvement of Living and
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EVROPEJSKI INSTITUT ZA POBOLEŠANJE AF LEVJE OS ANGELOVPLAČANJE
FONDAÇÃO EUROPEIA PARA A MELHORIA DAS CONDIÇÕES DE VIDA E DE TRABALHO
FONDAZIONE EUROPEA PER LA MIGLIORA DE LAS CONDIZIONE DE VIDA E DE TRABAJO

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JUST ORDINARY PEOPLE:
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As we near the end of the twentieth century we can feel justly proud of many achievements. Political and social action and advances in technology and scientific knowledge. All these have meant great benefits for many of us. More babies survive the trauma of birth, more children grow up hale and hearty, men and women are living longer and can look forward to an active old age.

Many of us enjoy a much higher standard of living than previous generations. This often means more leisure time and a wide range of activities with which to fill that time.

But this is only part of the story. In every developed country there are too many people, young and old, who are not sharing in the general affluence. There are areas in most towns and cities where people are suffering from a concentration of different problems. Many of these people are unemployed or subsisting on low wages. There is a growing number of single parent families and most of them are struggling to make ends meet. Low incomes and poor living conditions mean that many of them suffer poor health.

Too many people still live in substandard housing, increasingly segregated within the inner city or on the peripheral estates which lie like grim encampments on the edge of towns and cities. In fact, some of these estates are now being demolished, like this one.

In every country the numbers of elderly people are growing. Some do enjoy a fruitful retirement, but many exist on small incomes, leading lonely and isolated lives. There are tensions between different ethnic groups, between existing communities and those seen as outsiders. Years after their arrival immigrants may still feel unwelcome and discriminated against.

West
Indian
Man

"I walk, I walk, no job. Whenever time you go to a place you hear, 'It's sorry, there's no vacancies'. Sometimes when I go home I had to shed tears, tears come out my eyes to see what I leave my country and come over here. If I could walk the sea, I'd walk it home, yes man."

Low paid work in the service industry is perhaps all that's left for unskilled workers. Too often such work is insecure, on a casual basis and working conditions are poor.

Unemployment is often a major problem, as this doctor from Dublin explains.

Dublin
General
Practitioner

"Mainly the poverty is brought on by unemployment and people just trying to survive on very small amounts of money. Examples would be, say, families with maybe four or five children, husband and wife, and trying to survive on £90 or £100 a week."

**Unemployed
Man**

"I'm not working at the moment. I've had a long spell of unemployment. I was working for myself, but it didn't pan out so I won't harp on about that. But I love working. I'm a cabinet maker originally by trade, but I've mostly done carpentry and things like that."

Cities, or parts of cities, are left behind as old industries die and there is a vacuum before new industries arrive to take their place. Many people, but perhaps especially the young, feel alienated and cast aside; some turn to crime and drugs, a growing problem in our cities.

The lack of work and of decent housing are among the various reasons that traditional communities are breaking up, extended families living miles apart.

This psychiatrist working with people from a large estate outside Dublin, sees the effects of all this.

Psychiatrist

"The problem I see most commonly is that of isolation. The hallmark, the characteristic, of Tallaght is youth. Everyone in it is young, they're married and they've small children. The young women, the young mothers, are very isolated from their original family, there's no community wisdom in Tallaght, there's no grannies and grandads, there's no aunts and uncles, there's nobody to look to for advice."

And everyone, rich and poor, suffers the many environmental problems of modern life - congested traffic, noise, the weariness of commuting and pollution.

So who or what can solve such problems. Many people try to cope on their own, using families and friends to provide childcare or help with housing; and over the past twenty years or more many other people are joining together to work for change. For some it may seem to only way. They get more or less support from local authorities, the church and other outside agencies.

**Dublin
Priest/
Teacher**

"In my experience, there are very few decision makers here in the inner city, you know people who decide what this community should have. Most of those decisions are made in offices, civil service, corporation, our Dail - our national parliament, and the people of the inner city sort of get what's left over. The only way around that is for the people of the inner city to organise themselves as they are doing, to get a greater awareness of what's happening to them."

The value of community action is increasingly recognised by government at all levels - local, national, regional, the European Community. Governments are therefore encouraging communities to respond to and act on issues like childcare, poverty, unemployment and crime. For every group of people taking action is different. Some groups spring up to fight a single campaign, some last for years, taking on different issues as they arise.



The benefits of community action are not just the obvious ones.

**Public
Health
Professional**

"Most important things seem to be that people have a decent standard of living, but perhaps even more important, that they should actually be in control of their own lives, they should be participating, they should feel empowered, they should be controlling their own communities, managing their own housing, managing their own work if possible. These kind of things are things which lead to people being in control of their lifestyle and being able to avoid the risks to health."

Housing can make or break community life. In the past in many neighbourhoods, people have been dispersed to peripheral estates, friends and families have been split. The threat of such a move led to strong local action in a small area of Liverpool's Toxteth, known as the Weller Streets.

**Weller
Street
Residents**

"The community, the people, the people was the good thing. Everyone was so neighbourly and so helpful to one another and if you needed something you could always go and ask somebody, you know, could they help you out and they would. It was the people that made the Weller Streets. They wanted to rehouse us, all spread out, Kirby, Netherly, Cantwell Farm and we didn't want to go out, we wanted to stay in Liverpool."

"I couldn't just go to Kirby and make a new life for myself, at my age, which loads of other people couldn't do. They're going to take ill and maybe die - broken hearts. So we decided "No, we'll stay with the young ones and we'll go with the young ones. We'll all be together, where our roots are."

So, after numerous meetings, the people from the Weller Streets decided to set up a housing co-operative, the first in Liverpool and one of the first in Britain to design and build its own housing.

"You know, we didn't really know what to do, so we asked different people for advice and that, you know and no-one could give us it because there was no co-ops in Liverpool, so we sort of had to go from scratch and learn as we went along, you know."

**Weller
Street
Residents**

"The councillors, Labour, Tory, Liberal, all the councillors, "You'll never ever do it", they said "You'll never be able to do it, you won't be able to beat the bureaucracy." We said "OK, well fair enough". Next week we had another meeting and we decided to go and have a go and we did and we beat the bureaucracy."

Six years later the first houses belonging to the co-operative were completed and the Kellys were one of the first families to move in.

"Well, when we designed it that's what we said we wanted, a village in Liverpool 8."

"A village in the town".

"'Cos we hadn't had gardens or anything like that, none of us knew a thing about gardens or plants or anything 'cos we never really were used to them you know."

"This wasn't just a new house for me in particular, this was an achievement for the committee. We got a new house in the end like but it was more important getting the achievement, you know."

"We were that made up with it we all thought we were on our holidays, we were expecting someone to knock on the door and say 'Your time's up, out'."

The housing co-op is still expanding. The next group of houses is about to be built, so this single mother and her small daughter are meeting with the architect to choose the design.

"I think co-op's are for everybody, as long as they want to, you know, anyone can do it. I mean we work, I was a cleaner, we had the milkman, Billy, we had, everybody was just in an ordinary job, you know and people were saying 'You don't know nothing about it, you'll never do it', but we learnt to do it as we went along."

The Weller Streets housing co-operative may decide to expand into other areas, such as job creation, like other housing co-ops elsewhere. It has just proudly celebrated its tenth anniversary and its achievement of keeping a community together.

Niagra neighbourhood in downtown Toronto faced a different threat twenty years ago. It's one green space was taken away from the local residents and privatised by developers. Art Gray led the fight against this, after setting up a residents' association. Like many groups, the Niagra Residents' Association is dependant on charismatic, hardworking leaders such as Art Gray.

"And then all of a sudden out of the clear blue sky, before anybody knew it, we had a six foot fence going around the whole park, bleachers going up, and then we found out it was a private enterprise, soccer outfit, so we went to city council and we fought and fought and fought and finally they give in, they changed it back to a park and this is the way we're going to keep it."

He and others have stayed with the Association, battling on many fronts and they attract new members all the time. At a recent meeting, people put themselves up for the committee, giving their different reasons for wanting to join.

"Hi, ladies and gentlemen, members of the board, my name is Fred Donnell, and I've run the service station on Queen and Belwoods for the past twenty-one years and tonight I get involved into this thing because I think it's something which is part of my life now because I have to spend most of my time over here, I like to get involved into this community to see if we can do some change here. If we can do something for the better."

"I moved to Toronto from Victoria B.C. in April this year and I live with my family in the Summit. I have two small children, one who's here, and I became involved in the Association because of my concern about the lead pollution and I've been very active in the lead committee."

One of the most vital battles still to be won has been against the lead smelter in Niagra. Lead levels were found to be as high as 400 times the norm and 600 properties will have their top soil removed. This is vitally important because high levels of lead damage the health of small children.

"I was very concerned because in inner city areas there's a lot of background pollution and if you live in an area where there's something extra as well you really think that you're pushing your luck, so I took the children to the hospital and I was told that the lead levels in their blood were average for inner city urban children. It was a real personal concern because you wonder all the time, every time you touch something in the neighbourhood, are you taking lead onto your hands and you're always trying to remember to wash your hands and to watch the newspapers to see what reports there are on further monitoring in the area. Just in yesterday's newspaper there was a report that in South Riverdale they're still finding lead above permissible levels in the air in the area and I wonder, well, what's it like in this area?"

Men like Art Gray are often the moving force in formal community organisations, but it is often women who initiate local action. They work in the home, caring for small children, many are single parents joining together for comfort and support. They have strong networks of friends.

"The only people that will give women their rights is women themselves."

These women in Liverpool were friends already when they started attending a weekly women's health class. They're here meeting their tutor again. All four are single parents, one widowed, the others divorced, managing on small incomes. During the classes, they began to realise what appalling health facilities they were having to endure in Speke, an area on the outskirts of Liverpool.

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Art Gray,
Community
Leader

Nominans
for Niagra
Residents'
Association

Mother
of two
Children

Dublin
Woman

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"This is our doctor's, and you know when you go for a prescription and the doctor's is closed, this is where you have to talk through to order your prescriptions and things."

"We formed Speke Women's Health Action Group at a public meeting which we thought was good, we got about 60 odd people to that. We voted on committee members, we thought that was quite nerve racking, we'd never actually had to stand up at a public meeting and introduce ourselves, but we did, with the support of each other we managed it."

Speke Women's Health Action Group

"We wrote hundreds and hundreds of letters and all Puddin's fingers were worn to the bone typing these letters and we sent them out to everyone. We didn't get a lot of replies to start off with, the doctor's never ever replied to us. We kept them informed as much as we could, we sent them everything that was this meeting, so we had a meeting one night in the probation office, we'd have another meeting at the school, we'd have another meeting - wherever we thought it was convenient for people to meet, we'd try to have a meeting there to see if it would bring more people in."

They visited other health centres in the area, so that they could plan just what they wanted.

"When we saw Prince's Park Health Centre and what was on offer, the treatment rooms and everything, and we thought about what we were putting up with, there was no way we could continue, I mean, what is wrong with the people of Speke, why can't they have these things? I mean, in the end we did get angry and I think that anger carried us over a lot."

"We contacted the papers and things like that and sort of brought pressure to bear, saying "Look, we're trying to get this Health Centre". It sounds sort of as if we did it very easily, we didn't, it didn't come naturally to us, talking to people, at this stage we were still very, very shy. We eventually wrote a letter to the area Health Authority, saying that Speke needed a Health Centre and they wrote back saying that they didn't think Speke needed a Health Centre and that they thought Speke was, in their words, adequately covered. And we asked them, eventually, "Have you seen the doctors' surgeries in Speke?" and it turned out that they hadn't. So eventually they agreed to come out the same week to see the facilities on offer, in Speke. They visited the local clinic, and I still don't know whether or not they went to see the doctors' surgeries, but within a week we got a letter saying that yes, we could have the money and we were going to have a Health Centre."

Speke Women's Health Action Group



This campaign is a perfect example of how local action gives so much more to the people involved than just success in a particular fight. Every one of the four is now pursuing further education, voluntary work or full-time work; sometimes a combination of the three.

Diann is working at the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Speke as an advice worker.

Diann from the Women's Group

"I've found I've got more confidence in myself. I'm able to talk to people in authority which I would never have dreamt of doing before. I'm actually questioning our doctors, what kind of drugs they're giving you, if you need them, whereas you just wouldn't dream of doing that prior to becoming involved in both the Health Centre and the Self-Help Group."

It is hard enough for well established communities to organise for change, the problems facing newcomers, especially immigrants from thousands of miles away, can make them feel very isolated and helpless.

Emigrée from Czechoslovakia

"I came nineteen years ago from Czechoslovakia with my husband and three children. We had no money and all we had was two suitcases with new clothing so that we can survive the Canadian winter, as we were told. It felt very lonely to come here, especially when also you don't know the language. I know that I was writing pages of letters and I think those letters really saved my sanity. I also remember that once when I was walking on the street, one of the neighbours just passed me and she stopped and smiled at me and said, you know, something like "How are you?" and I felt so touched that anyone cared how I am that I just started to cry and cry."

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Recognising the lack of community facilities, especially for young families, Marie set up the Delta childcare network. It is staffed by young mothers, working together to help meet the needs of women like themselves.

There are many different types of local action, but each share some common ground, the need to protect the people in the community, or to strengthen the neighbourhood, or to build a new one. The goals may be providing better health facilities, jobs or improving the environment.

Member of childcare network

"...before, because I could call Roselyn up. We all give our phone numbers to each other and if it's an emergency or you just want to go to the store, and it's raining or whatever, then I'll take in her little girl for her and she can do what she needs to do."



It takes hard work, skills and resources. It often feels like the small "us" against the huge "them", and of course, local action is not the panacea for all problems, nor is it everybody's cup of tea. The challenge is to raise the standard and quality life for all. This confronts policy makers everywhere, whether in the city or town hall, workplace or the voluntary sector. They have to find ways of supporting local action, but they must also improve the conditions which led to the problems in the first place.

*Woman
from
Weller
Street*

"Healthy and happy, well happiness, as Kate said, is your family and your friends and helpful people, and healthy is good housing, good schools for your children and a few bob."

*Woman
from
Speke*

"I mean, to say we're just housewives is a derogatory term, but that's what we are, we're just ordinary people, who decided that we wanted something bad enough to kick up a fuss about it."