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Oireachtas Committee Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Climate
Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020:

Citizen Engagement and Dialogue

November 6th 2020

Brian Ó Gallachóir, Clare Watson, Alexandra Revez, Evan Boyle, Connor McGookin, Aoife Deane, Ed Byrne, Clodagh Harris, Ian Hughes, Fionn Rogan, Niall Dunphy and Ger Mullally

HOST INSTITUTION



PARTNER INSTITUTIONS



OPENING

- *Dr. James Glynn from MaREI presented evidence on carbon capture and offsetting to the Committee on October 29th 2020. He acknowledged in his evidence (point 17) ‘the role of early dialogue and societal buy in. Behaviour change and demand reduction will be required. The national objective is unlikely to be met by technological means alone.’*
- *During the discussion with Committee Members, a number of questions focussed on citizen engagement and dialogue and the Committee requested further information from MaREI on these topics.*
- ***This submission responds to the Committee request**, summarising insights from recent MaREI research on the societal dimensions of the energy transition, with a particular focus on citizen engagement and dialogue. There is an urgent need for a more strategic approach to stakeholder and citizen engagement with a focus on inclusion, participation, deliberative methods, collaboration, and activation.*
- *More detail on the points raised here are added as an accompanying set of appendices.*
- ***MaREI would welcome the opportunity to present this to the Committee in the new year, should the opportunity arise.***

KEY POLICY INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

- 1) The role of communities is seen as **essential** in the energy transition, and yet it is **poorly understood**. Drawing on a three year MaREI research project¹ engaging with Irish energy communities, some key **insights** emerge:
 - a) Energy citizenship is an accepted ambition, but **energy communities are struggling** to operate and to upscale their activities.
 - b) Communities are very diverse with **different needs and capacities** (e.g. rural dispersed, urban high density, age profile, socio-economic profile, gender, ethnicity, etc.)
 - c) There is significant **untapped potential within intermediary groups** (e.g. tidy towns groups) that are not directly associated with the energy transition.
 - d) We **expect a lot** from volunteers. They need to be supported and adequately resourced.
 - e) **Core funding** for the employment of **skilled staff and for administrative costs** in communities is lacking and this needs to be addressed.
 - f) A lot can be learnt from an **evaluation** of the community energy experience.
 - g) Approaches to support community energy should be developed that respond to the **varied capacities** of different communities.
 - h) Evaluating community energy projects should include evaluating **societal capacity development**, alongside evaluating CO2 savings.
 - i) **Practical support** should be provided for intermediary organisations, such as Tidy Towns, if their role is to be maximised.
 - j) Community energy does **not guarantee** community acceptance, however, more transparent and inclusive decision-making processes can help ease tensions.

- 2) MaREI hosted a workshop in 2019 with community engagement practitioners (co-funded by the National Dialogue on Climate Action) entitled *How do we Engage Communities in Climate Action? Practical Learnings from the Coal Face*². The key insights were
 - a) **People are at different stages of the climate action spectrum** - Some are aware of climate change and many are already acting or ready to act, others are still unconcerned and hard to motivate.
 - b) **We need to begin each engagement from 'where people are at'** - This will allow us to support the 'converted' to continue acting, while also encouraging those who show little interest to get involved.
 - c) **Move from awareness raising to action** - Participate in active honest engagement. When people say what they want, focus on what they can do about it. Don't just organise public meetings.
 - d) **Get the messaging right** - Messages need to be tailored to the particular audience (e.g. rural, urban, age, gender, socio-economic group). How they are communicated, and by whom, is critical.
 - e) **Target key community leaders and tap into existing groups** - Work with leaders who are respected by the community. Go to people rather than expecting them to come to you.
 - f) **Engage young people** - Involve and enable young people in decision-making. Ask them what they think are the solutions, and how they can be implemented. It is their future.
 - g) **Communities need support, capacity building and resources** - People are time poor, so there needs to be a shift beyond volunteerism. Realistic resources need to be provided by state agencies to support local people in taking action. Existing barriers to local climate action need to be identified and removed.

- 3) A second workshop in 2019, organised by the Imagining 2050 project team, drew on the practical experience of researchers in the field of community engagement in climate action. Entitled *Innovative- Methods of Community Engagement*³,
 - a) the key message lies in demonstrating and communicating the value of engaging communities **within a greater network** of activities, techniques and groups.
 - b) additionally a number of strategies emerged to **reach out to more alienated** or disengaged groups and these included the value of intermediaries and partnerships, promoting peer-to-peer learning and strengthening strategies through resourcing.

- 4) Climate justice remains a priority for Ireland and across Europe that needs development, in particular⁴ (based on scoping analysis of key research), adequate tools to assess the social impacts of climate policies for different groups as well as develop an intergenerational approach to climate justice.

- 5) Our Imagining 2050 project (short video [here](#)) has given us new insights into citizen engagement on climate action, drawing on our engagements in [Ballinacollig](#) and in [Athlone](#). In addition we've gained a perspective on [why we need a technological dialogue around climate change](#).

- 6) Language used is important. Research drawing on citizens perceptions across Europe suggests the emphasis should be placed on **the energy citizen not energy consumer**. The citizen is 'owner' of their energy supply, and has an ability to actively participate in the energy market as well as important decision-making processes⁵.

- 7) Concepts such as 'energy citizen' tend to ignore crucial questions of unequal agency and access to resources. Energy citizenship needs to be reconceptualised to incorporate **more collective and inclusive contexts for action**⁶.
- 8) The [Dingle Peninsula 2030](#) project (short video available [here](#)) is a very innovative rural energy community transition to a low carbon future. It is providing very interesting insights into the **diffusion of sustainability**, with many more insights available in early 2021.
- collaboration and trust building are critical to success.** The Dingle Peninsula 2030⁷ project brings together Dingle Creativity and Innovation Hub, ESB Networks, North East West Kerry Development, and MaREI in a very novel partnership.
 - MaREI supported the development of the Dingle Sustainable Energy Community's [Energy Master Plan](#) and has drawn out the lessons learned⁸. Financing can be challenging, the survey proved time intensive with low response rate, barriers were identified in accessing data and challenges can arise if consultants do not have community engagement skills.
 - MaREI is developing an energy and emissions web portal for Ireland at county level. This can be a significant resource for Local Authorities and Sustainable Energy Communities.
 - Some insights are emerging relating to individual events (for example a **LED bulb swap**⁹ short video [here](#)) e.g. people are generally interested in improving the energy efficiency of their homes but may be unable or unwilling to make the significant investment that may be required for a retrofit
 - The **Dingle Secondary School Climate Hack**¹⁰ (short video [here](#)) pointed us to focussing on developing an idea rather than calculating CO₂ savings or a cost estimate. The most important element of the event is to give young people an opportunity to make suggestions. The climate hack has informed our engagement with the Department of Education on how climate action might be integrated into the maths curriculum.
- 9) MaREI's DIIS (Deep Institutional Change for Sustainability and Well-Being) project (short video [here](#)) aims to critique and re-imagine the foundational social institutions in society in order to examine how they can be better configured to address the existential challenges we face. With regard to democracy, inclusive citizen participation and community engagement in co-designing policy the preliminary findings¹¹ of the DIIS project include:
- Democratic institutions **need to be more inclusive, participatory and deliberative**, in order to resist the threat of 'democratic decline' and tackle global threats, including the climate crisis.
 - Ireland has '**blazed a trail**' internationally in its use of Citizens' Assemblies to decide on matters of constitutional reform as well as 'wicked problems' such as climate change. They, and more recently the Climate Assembly UK and the French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climate, have demonstrated the feasibility of new democratic practices that empower citizens and influence policy. They have been welcome developments but are, at the end of the day, **only the tip of the iceberg** in terms of inclusive citizen and community participation on climate action.
 - New spaces for citizens and communities** to revisit the meaning of democracy itself in our era of deep transformation are needed to tackle intractable policy challenges that require long term solutions but are impervious to short term electoral cycles. These spaces should **emphasise fact, future and other** regarding approaches and recommendations.

- d) These new participatory and deliberative spaces should invite citizens, communities, civil society organisations, policy makers etc., to work together and separately to **revisit and reimagine the form of democracy, sustainability** and human flourishing that is best for Ireland. It would involve deciding the core values and principles that should underpin and guide our response to the climate (and other) crisis(es).
 - e) These spaces should also deliberate on our role as citizens and communities in collectively shaping sustainable futures in Ireland and how Ireland can contribute to democracy, **sustainability and climate justice** internationally.
 - f) The DIIS project aims to further re-imagine democracy based on principles of citizen participation, the inclusion of marginalized voices, including children, young people and those of future generations and climate justice.
- 10) MaREI is also undertaking collaborative research with community engagement practitioners in eight **public bodies** in Ireland to develop some good practice guidelines for community engagement processes. While a flexible approach to engagement must be taken due to the diverse forms which communities take, some universal good practices are emerging:
- a) build a **profile of the community** as a first step. Review other projects- map out the area and identify any groups previously engaged with. This is **time intensive but essential**.
 - b) engage with a wide range of local stakeholders, early in the project. Build **early relationship** with those with strong opinions.
 - c) Parameters should be made **clear** from the outset. **Transparency** is a vital factor for successful engagement. Be clear about what's open for consultation and what's not.
 - d) **Pulse checks** throughout the engagement process. Reasons for moving from one step to another throughout the consultative process must be justified and understood within the community
 - e) Consultation reports should show where and how **feedback has been used**.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2020 CLIMATE BILL

We warmly welcome this bill, but have a number of recommendations

- 1) We suggest strengthening, throughout the Bill, the role of **early dialogue, citizen engagement and the societal dimensions of climate action**. Section 3 subsection 3 may be an appropriate place to capture this.
- 2) We also suggest incorporating the **principles of citizen participation**, the inclusion of **marginalized voices**. Section 3 subsection 3 may be an appropriate place to capture this.
- 3) The Bill should expand on **measures to achieve climate justice** by including the need to create tools to assess and address climate justice for different groups (including **children, young people** and those of **future generations**) and to establish an intergenerational approach to climate justice issues.
- 4) It appears confusing to have the sections (6A-6D) on 'carbon budgets' as sub-sections of a section (6) on sectoral adaptation plans. These are **very distinct**. We suggest **moving** sections 6A-6D to a new section 7 focussing on carbon budgets.

- 5) It is crucial that the preparation of the local authority climate action plans (in section 14A) involves a **meaningful and purposeful dialogue with citizens**. In this regard, existing practices (as used during the drafting of County Development Plans or Local Area Plans) should be enhanced to include **deliberative discussions** bringing together key stakeholders such as; planners, citizens, business leaders, non-profit organisations, etc. We further suggest the Bill opens an opportunity to explore, at local authority level, the opportunities for community based / grass roots approaches, e.g. **participatory carbon budgeting**.
- 6) While not to suggest prescribing community engagement approaches, the development of some **good practice guidelines** at policy level can assist **public bodies** and organisations (section 15) in developing their own engagement procedures.

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