

## **The Anti-Drug Movement in Dublin**

**Catherine M Doyle**

A recent graduate of the Masters in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

### **Introduction**

This article is based on a qualitative research study which I undertook in 2013 with activists, involved in the initial community response to the drug problems in Dublin. In the late 1970s and early 1980s particular working class areas of Dublin's inner city developed a community drugs problem. A community drugs problem is characterised by a large number of people using drugs in a small area (Cullen, 1991). When the drug problem first presented itself in Dublin, it was concentrated in two main areas of the city, the Hardwick St flats on the North side, and St Theresa's Gardens on the South side of the city. Initially, the problem began with heroin, which was killing working class children, as young as fourteen and fifteen. Families and whole communities were devastated by what later became known as 'the heroin epidemic'. Over time the problem has become much worse and now involves poly drug use.

Initially, the people in the areas most affected by drug misuse tried to access help from the state, but soon realised they were not a high priority with state agencies. This realisation led to the formation of one of the most remarkable social movements in Ireland in recent history. The Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD) in the 1980s and the Concerned Communities Against Drugs (COCAD) in the 1990s – essentially these were two phases of the same movement – set out to tackle a problem that nobody else was addressing. This mobilisation was a major achievement by a group of working class activists with limited education and almost no resources. It has been largely ignored in academic literature, and I think this is mainly because it was a working class movement, and class and social inequality have been lost sight of in

mainstream social movement studies. This point is argued in depth by contributors in Barker et al. (2013).

I have lived in communities that are seriously affected by drugs problems. My interest in education as an adult grew from trying to understand and deal with a family drugs problem. I was interested in researching the beginning of the drugs problem, and finding out how long-term activists first got involved with the CPAD and COCAD and how they viewed the drug problem from their present perspective, and how their activism had changed over time. For all of my interviewees their involvement was ‘a massive learning process,’ as one of them put it. But did structured community education contribute anything to this? Could it have contributed more? And what lessons can be drawn for today?

### **Background and Context to Unemployment and Marginalisation**

The drug problem in Dublin can be regarded as a class issue. It developed in working class communities in a context of high social inequality and the marginalisation of working class interests and concerns. A typical case is the Dublin Docklands area. Breen and Rees (2009) have emphasised the importance of the labour-intensive dock work that was essential for loading and unloading ships and storage of cargo. This was swept away by containerisation and the introduction of roll-on/roll-off ferries from the 1950s on. No replacement industries were encouraged to locate in the area by the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), or other government agencies involved, despite the large available labour pool. The Docklands areas developed a serious long-term unemployment problem, and this contributed to a negative perception and marginalisation of the area. Added to this, the housing stock in the area was old and in poor condition. O’Toole (2005) gives an excellent account of how decent and committed parents, such as her own, who were striving to give their children a structured life and provide for their needs, could be dragged down and demoralised by this context of severe deprivation.

The same things can be said, to a greater or lesser extent, about St Theresa’s Gardens and the Hardwick St flats, and many other inner city areas. The rapid change of the

capitalist economy in Ireland from the 1960s onwards brought a decline of traditional industries, which disproportionately affected the lives of people living in the inner city, where the numbers unemployed were well above the national average (Murphy Lawless, 2002). In their study of urbanisation, Bannon et al (1981) reported that at least ten thousand jobs were lost from the inner city in the 1970s. In addition, people living in the flat complexes had low attainment in the official educational system, which decreased their chances of gaining employment, so that over time the unemployment problem became multi-generational (Murphy - Lawless, 2002). However, despite the economic and physical hardships of living in these areas, people had a sense of community. Women watched over each others' children, they pooled resources to improve life for themselves and their families. They attempted to gain help from the state, but the state bodies largely ignored them. It was their frustration at the continued deterioration of the areas, when drug dealing and drug using became so blatant that it was no longer safe for residents to use the stairwell of the flat complexes, which forced them to take independent action. The reality of state neglect was so obvious that it is commonly acknowledged in mainstream academic literature on the drug problem, in O'Gorman's work for example. As she describes it;

in 1983, in the absence of an adequate response from the statutory bodies, residents of the inner city areas most affected by the opiate epidemic mobilized in a social movement called the Concerned Parents Against Drug (O'Gorman, 1998:3).

### **Development of CPAD**

The Concerned Parents began as a protest by women in the Hardwicke St flats, and St. Theresa's Gardens in 1982/83. These women felt they had no alternative, due to official indifference and failure, but to respond to the chronic problems (Murphy-Lawless 2002, and Meeting Room, 2010). They demonstrated publicly in their areas, calling for an end to the drug dealing. The dealers soon responded by threatening the women with violence. This led to the CPAD's leadership and main membership being taken over by men (Darcy, 2008).

As it developed, the CPAD engaged in mass marches through the streets, vigils on drug dealers' flats, and round-the-clock vigils to keep suspected dealers from entering the flat complexes to sell drugs, or addicts from coming in to buy them (Lyder 2005, O'Gorman 1998, and The Meeting Room, 2010). Finally, action was taken to drive those who would not stop dealing out of the community. Aggrieved local people believed that if pushers could be expelled from the communities and prevented from (re)entering, they could notably reduce local supply and, as a result, local addiction (Meeting Room, 2010; and interviews with activists, 2013).

When community activists failed in their attempts to gain help from the state, they themselves were forced to take over a security role. Did they do this in a cool-headed, disciplined and fair way? Bennett (1988) argues strongly that the answer is yes. The CPAD Central Committee invested vast amounts of time on investigation to make certain of the facts, before anyone was even accused of dealing drugs. The accused person would then be given the chance to defend himself at a public meeting. He would be warned to stop dealing before any further action was taken. If this warning was ignored, in some cases the CPAD proceeded to eviction (Bennett 1988). In addition, according to Flood (2010) when dwellings were entered to carry out evictions, great care was taken not to damage property. Furniture etc. was passed out along a chain of hands and placed carefully on the ground outside.

However, while this might have been true of some confrontations with drug dealers, it was not true of them all, according to my interviews. This is confirmed in the Meeting Room video by John 'Wacker' Humphries, who indicates that impatient activists sometimes took 'the shorter way' by throwing furniture out the window. In November 1987, after a mass meeting in Ballymun a crowd marched on a flat, and furniture was thrown out of a seventh floor window (Lyder 2005). As a result of the Ballymun incident, the state brought out some of the heavier 'armour of coercion'" (Gramsci 1999). Four leading activists involved in the confrontation were charged, convicted and imprisoned by the non-jury <sup>1</sup>Special Criminal Court, which was set up

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<sup>1</sup> The (juryless) Special Criminal Court was created in 1972 as an amendment to the Offences Against the State Act 1939 (Irish Statute Book 1972, online) in order to deal with terrorists and criminal organisations.

specially to try alleged members of the Irish Republican Army (Darcy, 2008:2). As Darcy points out, the state was treating the anti-drug campaigners as terrorists.

Members of <sup>2</sup>Provisional Sinn Féin and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) did have an involvement in the CPAD. In fact, they were invited to get involved at a very early stage by a priest and activist in the north inner city, Fr. Jim Smyth, after the campaigning local women had been threatened with violence by drug dealers. The Provisionals' involvement was controversial because they had an illegal army, involved in the continuing war in Northern Ireland. They were heavily repressed by the government of the Irish Republic and regularly attacked by most of the Irish media. As time went on, their involvement in the CPAD was a focus for the state's aggressive hostility to the movement. Lyder has argued that the Provisionals did not manipulate or dominate the CPAD and that their members who were involved were basically local parents, responding to the drugs problem (Lyder 2005). My research showed that activists had mixed feelings about Sinn Féin/IRA involvement. There was definitely a feeling that this community problem was being exploited for non-community purposes. On the other hand, the IRA was a good deterrent against violent drug dealers.

A decade later, when drug dealing spilled out into the surrounding communities, people mobilised for the second time and COCAD was formed (Darcy, 2008:1; Lyder 2005). As argued earlier, CPAD and COCAD can be treated as the same movement in two phases. In both phases a problem seems to have developed with vigilantism (this was highlighted by several of my interviewees). This seems to have injured the movement's morale, causing it to lose support in its base communities and leaving it more vulnerable to state repression. I have argued that a lack of free and open

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army were the legal political wing and the illegal armed wing of the same radical movement, the Irish republican movement. This movement split during the crisis in Northern Ireland in 1969, producing Workers Party/Official IRA, who were influenced by Marxism, and Provisional Sinn Féin/IRA, who were traditional Irish nationalists. The split was extremely bitter because the Workers Party/Official IRA was convinced that the Dublin government had a hand in the split and helped to set up the Provisional Sinn Féin/IRA (Hanley and Miller 2009).

discussion in the movement was one contributory factor in this, and relevant community education could have helped towards countering such problems.

### **Hegemony and the working class communities**

Cox and Mullan (2001) have made the point that social movements exist wherever there is society, and they have continuity in different forms. 'They do not "revive" so much as develop, or "fade away" so much as retreat'. The CPAD could also be seen as part of a much longer history of working class struggle in Dublin. Working class communities do not just passively accept social inequality and deprivation. There are always community members trying in a wide variety of ways not just to cope with immediate problems but to make some change in the basic situation. I describe the drugs issue as a class issue: it arose in working class areas, it was neglected by state agencies basically because of their class bias, and the working class communities themselves were forced to confront it. Therefore CPAD can be seen as a phase of class struggle.

Gramsci said that 'the state equals political society and civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (Gramsci 1999: 263). Hegemony is where the mass of the population gives more or less spontaneous consent to the way that the ruling group is directing society. This is the preferred or normal way of ruling. However, when consent is not given, the 'armour' is brought out: the coercive apparatus of police, courts, prisons, if necessary the army. In the Dublin situation the community activists were not giving consent for the state to keep its monopoly of policing, while at the same time it was taking totally inadequate police action against drug dealers/pushers.

Hegemony in society is not at all something fixed. In fact, the pattern of social alliances is shifting all the time. If we take Ireland as an example, over 50 years there has been an enormous change in the patterns of hegemony, from 'Dev's Ireland' to the Ireland of the 2000s (Cox 2001:11). While some of the activists show a clear understanding of the class inequality and injustice built into the system, they do not

show an equal sense of the possibilities of change in the future. That sense of possibilities needs to be promoted more in working class communities.

It is clear from the findings that activists learned a great deal in terms of dealing with the various practical aspects of the drug problem. Also, they can justifiably claim that their efforts and those of other anti-drug activists helped to force change in the provision of services and the state's adoption of a more serious approach to the drugs issue. The problem remains of how to make working class concerns and interests more central and how to force the state to give them higher priority. Where the drug problem is concerned, it has to be stressed that the current situation remains totally unacceptable. There is a very serious problem of drug-related violence in the communities. This is something which constantly places the people who live there under stress, even if they or their own family members are not victims. The activists emphasise this strongly, pointing out how much worse the situation has become since 2000, and saying that a movement like CPAD would not even be possible now.

One weakness of the anti-drugs movement initially seems to have been its isolation. The anti-drugs campaigners had high credibility in their own communities. However, when in due course both CPAD in the 1980s and COCAD in the 1990s were targeted and attacked by the state, the movement was not able to resist these attacks effectively. One aspect of this was certainly that the movement was relatively isolated. It was confined to Dublin and even there, to the most deprived working class communities in Dublin, and it had little impact outside these communities.

Gramsci was very insistent that the workers of the north of Italy could not make major social change in Italy on their own. They needed to have an alliance with the poor rural communities in the south (Gramsci 1978). Similarly, an effective working class movement in Dublin would need to win support and build social alliances outside of Dublin, and it would also need to make more impact on other social groups in Dublin. This raises the need for more strategic thinking. A question worth raising is how Marxist community education can help in this.

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