

From exclusion to inclusion?

Reflections on the Celtic tiger

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Introduction

International (Considine & Giguere 2008) and Australian (Smyth, Reddel & Jones 2005) interest in the place of associations and partnerships to create more inclusive governance forms continues unabated. In this paper we trace the evolution of Irish partnership approaches by providing a brief summary of ‘flagship’ partnership initiatives and the primary influences that led to their creation. In doing so, we note that there were a variety of external and internal impetuses towards partnership— at European, national and sub-national levels of government—which manifested themselves in different partnership projects at these different levels. As a result, despite sharing many common attitudes and approaches, these partnership initiatives inevitably reflected different policy aims and ambitions. The consequences for changes to Irish governmental systems were twofold. On the one hand, the fact that partnership was simultaneously promoted in a variety of government levels and policy arenas meant that its impact was widely felt across the system. On the other hand, this widespread experience of partnership served to reinforce a broader paradigm shift in organisation of public policy (which has subsequently been interpreted as an attitudinal and value shift in favour of partnership). As a result we argue that it is possible to conceive of the institutionalising of partnership approaches. Still, this institutionalisation is a process whereby we are seeing a gradual convergence of various partnership approaches into one generalised model. We argue that this convergence (the one partnership approach fits all), while simplifying governance arrangements, raises significant concerns regarding the efficacy and legitimacy of new governance approaches which themselves may prove counter-productive to the original aims of partnership.

The path to partnership

Generally speaking, ‘the period since 1987 is widely seen as the era of partnership’ in the Irish state (O’Donnell 2008). Its genesis can be attributed to a number of developments at European, national and sub-national levels of government, which together made partnership possible. At European level, the signing of the *Single European Act* (SEA) in 1987, which provided for the single market, also paved the way for a number of reforms to EC regional policy. In addition to incorporating the explicit objective of economic and social cohesion into the EEC Treaty (Title V), a new article (130b) was inserted, enabling the European Investment Bank to support the objectives of cohesion as laid down in articles 130a and 130c of the SEA. The Act was accompanied by a review of Community financing, and a reorganisation of the Community’s Structural Funds,¹ embodied in the Delors I agreement (Commission of the European Communities 1990; Scott 1995). The European Commission, in pursuing the commitments made to solidarity in the SEA, began a general review of the aims and methods of Community policies related to economic development. In consequence, the 1988 reform of the structural funds introduced partnership as a key principle in the management and delivery of EU regional policy. Additionally, new objectives and

¹ Criticisms of the EC’s early attempts at regional development focused on their piecemeal approach (funding individual projects as opposed to programmes), poor targeting (in the first ten years 22 per cent of ERDF spending occurred in countries which had a GDP per capita above the EC average), and the degree of national control over ERDF spending (Wise & Gibb 1993, p.217).

rules of practice were established for financial intervention by the Community.² This administrative overhaul, together with increased resources, further advanced the practice, in operation since the late 1970s, of linking Community intervention to regional, multi-annual strategic programmes. It is clear that the changing patterns of governance visible within the various partnership experiments have been further supported by Ireland's EU membership (O'Donnell 2000), where 'compared to other European states, Ireland was uniquely susceptible to Europeanisation effects because of the nationwide consensus in favour of EU membership' (Adshead 2005). In attempting to respond to successive EU Structural Fund reforms, Irish governments were obliged to reorganise policy processes, giving greater voice to a wide range of stakeholders identified by the reforms. This, combined with the change of attitude at national level to government and policy-making, facilitated a change in the structure and style of government, which has been characterised as a move towards 'new governance' (Adshead & Quinn 1998).

At national level, the period since 1987 was one in which Ireland had left the sterling zone and was seeking to participate in European monetary and macroeconomic convergence, inflation was low, the openness of the economy was being greatly deepened and activist fiscal policy was both out of fashion (internationally) and out of the question (in Ireland) (O'Donnell 2008; Kearney et al. 1994). The first Social Partnership arrangement of 1987 began when the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Charles Haughey, called together representatives from business and trades unions in an attempt to solve the economic crisis that afflicted the country at that time. Despite their differences, government, trades union and business leaders were bound together by a consensus over the need to tackle the crisis and they all had something to contribute—that is, tax restraint, wage restraint and working hours respectively (Adshead 2006). More importantly, all could deliver their members into the agreement because all participants could see some benefit from it.

At local level, the growth of a consensus that the local government structure in Ireland was 'inadequate, over-burdened, and unable to respond to local needs' was paralleled by 'an increase of alternative local representation, activism, and community groups filling the vacuum and carrying out development work' (Adshead & Quinn 1998). These trends served to reinforce each other, so that coupled with the acceptance of the need to improve sub-national structures was an enormous increase in local development activity, exemplified by diverse activities emerging from different organisational backgrounds. Some were community-driven,³ some were motivated by funding opportunities from EU programmes and initiatives related to local development⁴, while other community or enterprise activities were fostered by government initiatives⁵ such as the creation of County Enterprise Boards⁶. In 1996,

² The European Commission sought to develop the principles of concentration, programming, partnership, monitoring and evaluation, and additionality (the principle that EC funding should be additional to, not instead of, national funding). For a detailed discussion of each of these principles, see McAlevey (1992).

³ Such as the Community Development Projects and Local Development groups, operationalised by the Global Grant for Local Development—a form of assistance provided by the ERDF and ESF, and managed by an independent intermediary, Area Development Management (ADM) Ltd, now known as POBAL.

⁴ Examples of these are NOW (New Opportunities for Women), LEADER (Liaisons entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale), and LEDA (the local employment development action programme). For details of others, see CEC (1994).

⁵ Including county childcare committees, local sports partnerships, partnership-based urban and rural

the publication of the *Better Local Government* (BLG) White Paper marked a significant watershed (Government of Ireland 1996a). Prior to the White Paper, the local social partnership landscape was populated principally by non or less state-centred partnership structures/processes. After the White Paper, the foundation was laid for a gradual evolution towards stronger state-centred partnership processes. Thus, local social partnership in Ireland may be divided into two quite distinct phases, both of which are detailed in the review of the national and sub-national partnership projects below.

National Development Plans, 1989 and 1993

In 1988, the negotiations resulting in the reform of the EC Structural Funds presented a 'mixed blessing' for local and regional development approaches. While the negotiations cemented Ireland's successful bid for a lion's share of structural funding, this came at the price of treating Ireland as a single region. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the reforms, the Irish Government was obliged also to set up a number of 'sub-regions' (since under EC funding criteria, the whole island of Ireland was treated as a single region), in order that they might contribute to the preparation of a four-year National Development Plan (NDP) being submitted to Brussels. In fact, the development plan submitted in 1989 was based on a national programme rather than a regional one; and the input of regional groups was regarded by central government largely as a 'cosmetic exercise' to satisfy EC funding criteria (Coyle 1990). This, together with the desire to make the best use of structural funding—by coordinating development activities and by avoiding duplication of efforts or costs at local level—did contribute to pressures for change that had already built up elsewhere in the system. Even though the NDP did not address itself specifically to the issue of Irish regional development, it was obliged to acknowledge various programmes, initiatives and pilot schemes as part of a regional consultation exercise, so that by the time the second National Development Plan was introduced, there was a discernible shift of emphasis.

From a governance and partnership perspective, one of the most significant contributions of the first and second National Development Plans, submitted to the European Commission in October 1993 for the period 1994–1999, was the creation and operation of monitoring committees, at an overall plan level (i.e. the Community Support Framework (CSF) Monitoring Committee) and at sectoral or operational programme level. At EU instigation, these committees included representatives from the trade unions, business organisations and farming organisations, but also introduced into partnership processes organisations drawn from the community and voluntary sectors for the first time. These arenas proved to be valuable learning grounds and helped prepare this sector for later involvement in the national agreement processes that paralleled the NDP processes. In the most recent plan a central NDP monitoring committee has been established with civil society input. However, unlike

regeneration processes, and local and regional drugs task forces.

⁶ This multiplicity of structures is generally seen to have created a heavily populated local partnership landscape. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that efforts are now being made to increase cohesion between the actions and structures of the various entities. The purpose of this cohesion effort is to induce a 'radical shake-up' of the delivery of community services; and it involves both an expansion of territorial areas of responsibility and, in rural areas, a merger of the corporate entities that deliver the various area-based programmes at local level.

earlier plans there is no provision for monitoring structures at the operational programme level.

The EU influence on the NDPs also helped stimulate and shape the emergence of local partnership processes. The 1994–1999 plan included a specific Operational Programme devoted to Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD), building on the lessons of the area-based partnerships pilot initiatives begun in 1992 (see discussion below). The government presented OPLURD as a ‘key element’ in the strategy of the plan, ‘building upon the experience gained from the implementation of initiatives stemming from EC actions’ (Government of Ireland 1995). The inclusion of a structured local development programme in the National Development Plan was not only a major innovation in national planning, but also an important political response to local and regional claims that the spirit of partnership as envisaged in the 1988 reform of the EU Structural Funds was not being fully addressed in Ireland (Walsh 1995). Therefore, while the OPLURD did not *introduce* partnership practices to Ireland, it did increase their profile as a means of doing business, promoted those policy strategies that were already in existence and attempted to support their implementation within a coherent national framework (Adshead 2002). It is argued that this approach by government was an acknowledgement of ‘the limits of mainstream, centralised, government policy in solving problems of long-term unemployment and local degeneration’ (O’Donnell 2000). Thereafter, the Irish Government’s ‘conversion’ to local social partnership was such that it ‘made local development one of the themes of its 1996 EU Presidency, and found great interest in other Member States’ (O’Donnell 2000).

Social Partnership agreements, 1987–

The negotiation of national agreements or social pacts largely coincided with the design of the NDPs. To date, Ireland has completed six social pacts and has recently concluded negotiations on a seventh, designed to run to 2016. The first Programme for National Recovery (PNR) involved agreement between employers, trade unions, farming interests and government on wage levels in both the public and private sectors for three years (1987–1990), with a broader agreement on general developments in some social policy sectors (see O’Donnell and Thomas 1998). The second Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP), running from 1991–93, continued the practice of setting agreed pay increases for public and private sectors, plus a number of commitments to social equality (following reports made by the Commission on Social Welfare and the Second Commission on the Status of Women) and tax reform (Government of Ireland 1991). The PESP was also notable for initiating a pilot programme designed to provide an ‘area-based response’ (ABR) to long-term unemployment (discussed below).

Table 1: Social pacts and governments in office 1987–2005

| Programme | Government |
|---|---|
| Programme for National Recovery (1987–1990) | Fianna Fail minority government Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition (formed July 1989) |
| Programme for Economic and Social Progress (1991–1993) | Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition Fianna Fail/Labour coalition (formed Jan. 1993) |
| Programme for Competitiveness and Work (1994–1996) | Fianna Fail/Labour coalition Fine Gael/Labour/Democratic Left coalition (formed Dec 1994) |
| Partnership 2000 (1997–2000) | Fine Gael/Labour/Democratic Left coalition Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition (formed June 1997) |
| Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000–2002) | Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition (re-elected 2002) |
| Programme for Sustaining Progress (2003–2005) | Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition |
| Towards 2016. Ten year framework Social Partnership Agreement (2006–2015) | Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat/Green coalition (elected 2007) |

The pay provisions of the third Programme for Competitiveness and Work (1994–1996) followed much the same pattern as the two preceding pacts, ‘with another local bargaining clause, but with much more attention being given to non-pay issues’ (Roche & Cradden 2003). While both the PNR and PESP contained references to the desirability of worker participation, the Programme for Competitiveness and Work made this ambition more explicit in its terms of reference for a review of the Competitiveness and Employment Protection Unit, which had been established in 1993 within the Department of Enterprise and Employment to advise employers on alternatives to redundancy (Dáil Debates, 1993: 436/1137). ‘What was being sought with increasing insistence was for partnership at national level to be complemented by partnership in the enterprise, plant and office’ (Roche & Cradden 2003).

Negotiated with the so-called ‘Rainbow Coalition’ (Fine Gael/Labour/Democratic Left), the fourth agreement, Partnership 2000 (P2K), was considered by many to be the most ambitious yet and reflected a significant shift in emphasis. Alongside commitments to pay increases and tax reduction, there was an explicit endorsement that ‘developing partnership in the workplace’ was key to building a more competitive Ireland (Roche & Cradden 2003). This pact was also notable for its inclusion of representatives from the community and voluntary sector, which, combined with a thematic approach to objectives and priorities, tended to broaden the programme’s sphere of interest (National Economic and Social Forum 1997). As a result, Partnership 2000 laid a stronger emphasis on dealing with inequality, long-term unemployment and social exclusion than had other pacts. P2K was responsible for the creation of the Equality Authority (which replaced the Employment Equality Agency), a commission on wage differentials, a commission on the family, and a

review body for special education. Additionally, the programme signalled a measure of agreement on action to modernise the public service, enlisting the social partners in support of the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI), plus an explicit endorsement that ‘developing partnership in the workplace’ was key to a more competitive Ireland (Roche & Cradden 2003).

The fifth Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) (2001–2003) continued the tradition of pay increases and tax cuts (though it was not responsible for national minimum wages, which had been introduced by government in April 2000). This pact sought to deepen and extend the workplace partnership process begun in the preceding Partnership 2000 agreement, while acknowledging the more diverse demands created by the inclusion of the ‘community and voluntary pillar’. As a result, it developed earlier programmes by involving the ‘social partners’ in over twenty working groups, under the aegis of five ‘frameworks’ designed to deal with different dimensions of public and social policy. A Performance Management Advisory Group was set up to oversee the implementation of performance indicators in local government. A Public Service Benchmarking Body was established to examine public sector jobs and rates of pay relative to the private sector. The National Framework Committee on Family Friendly Practices was established to oversee such policies in the workplace, while an initiative to provide targeted investment in disadvantaged areas was later developed into an urban regeneration programme called RAPID⁷.

Additionally, the PPF spawned working groups in areas as diverse as agricultural training, lifelong learning, emigrants, tax credits, public service pensions, social welfare and insurance, services for people with disabilities, housing, health sector improvements, sheltered workshops, community employment, maternity benefit and electronic payment. Arguably, the range and breadth of initiatives in the PPF held out the real possibility that Social Partnership might collapse under the weight of its own enthusiasm. Consequently, the next Programme for Sustaining Progress (PSP) (2003–2005) attempted to rationalise the new policy measures by creating ten Special Initiatives (housing and accommodation; cost and availability of insurance; migration and interculturalism; long-term unemployed, vulnerable workers and those made redundant; tackling educational disadvantage; waste management; care of children, people with disabilities and older people; alcohol/drug misuse; including everyone in the information society; and ending child poverty) (Government of Ireland 2003).

The most recent national agreement, Towards 2016, negotiated in 2006, has reinforced the national agreement process as the primary partnership governance mechanism in Ireland, through which virtually all other governance processes are filtered. The implementation of the Agreement relies largely on the existing instruments of the National Development Plan (2007–2013), the National Spatial Strategy, the Nation Action Plan on Social Inclusion and, at EU level, the Lisbon Agenda. And while a small number of additional partnership institutions have been established, the Agreement is supported and monitored by partnership structures developed under previous agreements (Government of Ireland 2006).

⁷ Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) is a government initiative focused on 45 disadvantaged urban areas and provincial towns, designed to increase investment by government, improve delivery of public services, and enhance opportunities for communities to participate in strategic development.

National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 1997–2007

While the national agreements referred to above made some effort to address social policy concerns, the National Anti Poverty Strategy (NAPS), introduced in 1997 following a commitment by the Irish Government at the UN Social Summit in Copenhagen, represented the first attempt by any state to adopt an explicit strategy and set of targets against which progress towards reducing poverty could be monitored. In addition, NAPS originally identified five priority areas for government action with associated targets: educational disadvantage; unemployment; income adequacy; disadvantaged urban areas; and rural poverty.

On the one hand, the NAPS was quite clearly an initiative spawned by a centre-left government and the imprint of this government's ideas could be seen in other major complementary policy initiatives. The insertion of articles 136 and 137 into the Amsterdam Treaty, enshrining the first unambiguous EU reference to combating social exclusion, during the Irish hosting of the EU Presidency in 1996, and the 'Rainbow Coalition' stewardship of the fourth national concordat, Partnership 2000 (1997–2000) are other notable examples. On the other hand, the broader political and economic circumstances made the moment propitious for such a project. While the inclusion of the community and voluntary pillar in the social partnership arrangements reflected the government's acknowledgement of the importance of civil society in public policy deliberations, this point had already been conceded by the previous Fianna Fáil / Labour coalition government with the creation of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) in 1993. Set up under the Office of the Tánaiste (deputy Prime Minister), which was itself an innovation demanded by Labour's inclusion in the coalition, the NESF was 'designed to include women's organisations, the unemployed, the disadvantaged, youth, the elderly and people with a disability' in order that they might influence public policy (Spring 1997).

Formally launched after extensive consultation in 1997, the original aim of NAPS was threefold: to achieve greater integration in policy initiatives by identifying themes cutting across government departments; to establish 'poverty proofing' of all government initiatives and key policy areas; and, most significantly from a governance perspective, to develop the participation of people living in poverty whose lived experience might inform policy solutions and bring greater urgency to the debate about poverty (Adshead & Murphy forthcoming). The absence of such voices in decision making has in the past been identified as one of the weaknesses in corporatist or neo-corporatist governance mechanisms (Peters 2004). As such, NAPS was a potentially innovative cross-cutting institutional mechanism that widened the concept of governance by validating consultation with people experiencing poverty and affirming the role of NGOs in policy making. Although a change of government in 1997 diluted political support for the strategy, the incoming Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat government allowed the institutional mechanisms to remain in place.

Opinions regarding the efficacy of the NAPS since then are mixed. In the first review of the NAPS, provided for in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000–2002), the Combat Poverty Agency noted that 'the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in the implementation of the Strategy has been limited' and despite the fact that there were seven National Anti-Poverty Networks in existence,⁸ there

⁸ The Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed (INOUE); the Community Workers' Cooperative

appeared to be no direct, formal or consistent mechanism for their involvement within the NAPS (Combat Poverty Agency 2000). Following the national review, mechanisms for the incorporation of civil society were amended. Additionally, the National Economic and Social Forum was charged with convening an annual NAPS Social Inclusion Forum, to facilitate the 'government's commitment to consult with all relevant stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty and the groups that represent them, in the fight against poverty and social exclusion' (National Economic and Social Forum 2006). The Social Inclusion Report is sent to a variety of government actors,⁹ though there is no formal provision for any of these to report back to Forum participants.

The NAPS was acknowledged by its chief political architect, the then Minister for Social Welfare, Proinsias De Rossa, as an initiative designed to affect the policy *process* as much as policy *outcomes* and as 'a mechanism for changing the mindset of the decision-makers in our society, to factor in a consciousness of poverty into all public policy decisions' (De Rossa 1997). In practice, however, these aims have proved rather more ambitious than the execution. One reason for this is that while the NAPS initiative combines traditional government administration with relatively new 'social partnership' policy infrastructures, concerns have been expressed about the capacity of the disparate community and voluntary groups and pro-poor advocacy groups to participate fully within the 'new governance' consultative fora (Adshead & McInerney 2006; Adshead 2006). In addition, the partnership structures of the NAPS have effectively been collapsed into the national agreement mechanism. In the process, the NAPS has withdrawn from the challenge of developing governance arrangements more amenable to the participation of those articulating a social inclusion agenda, preferring instead to 'piggy-back' on the mechanisms of a well-established orthodoxy of social partnership dominated by powerful and largely self-interested economic actors.

Area Based Regeneration initiatives 1991–

In 1990, the National Economic and Social Council highlighted the problem of long-term unemployment and advocated a specialised government programme, directed specifically towards local area-based responses, so that local people might be empowered to direct development to local needs and priorities (National Economic and Social Council 1990). Under the *Programme for Economic and Social Progress* (1991–1993) an area-based response (ABR) to long-term unemployment was piloted as 'an integrated approach designed to implement a community response in particular local areas to long-term unemployment and the danger of long-term unemployment' (Government of Ireland 1991b). Twelve ABR areas were selected (eight urban and four rural), each with a board comprising six directors from the local community, six from the social partners, and six from the state agencies in the area (Adshead 2002).

(CWC); the Irish Rural Link (IRL); the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN); the Forum of People with Disabilities (Forum); the Irish Travellers Movement (ITM); and the One Parent Exchange (OPEN).

⁹ The Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion and all government ministers; the Senior Officials Group; the Office for Social Inclusion, the Social Inclusion Units in government departments; local authorities and the Social Inclusion Consultation Group; as well as all NAPS-related organisations and groups represented at the meeting.

This basic partnership structure has been largely maintained, with the addition since 1997 of local councillors to the boards.¹⁰

In September 1992, following negotiations with the Irish Government, the European Commission established the Global Grant for the period 1992–95, comprising a 64 per cent contribution from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and 36 per cent from the European Social Fund (Adshead 2002). It was valued at IR£8 million and was to be administered by Area Development Management Ltd (ADM), an intermediary organisation created for this purpose in October 1992 (Hasse et al. 1996). The Global Grant continued to support the twelve area-based partnerships set up under the PESP, as well as a number of other small-scale, local development groups.¹¹ The condition of support for all projects was the submission of ‘an integrated area action plan drawn up in consultation with local groups and bodies, public agencies and local representatives of the social partners, as the eligible body sees fit. This plan will set out the basic strategy whereby it seeks to achieve its objectives of economic and social revitalization in its area’ (Commission of the European Communities 1993).

The *Programme for Competitiveness and Work* (1994–1996) substantially expanded the focus on local development and emphasised the specific links between national Social Partnerships and the parallel National Development Plan process 1994–1999 (Government of Ireland 1994). Highlighting the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD) introduced under the NDP, the PCW introduced additional support for different forms of area-based partnerships via the establishment of City/County Enterprise Boards (CEBs). It proposed that the Local Development Programme would be implemented by a variety of structures, including the County Enterprise Boards, the new LEADER programme and Area Partnership Companies, with the Partnerships to focus on designated disadvantaged areas and to emphasise enterprise, community involvement and initiatives, group and individual projects/enterprises, addressing barriers to employment creation, assistance for unemployed persons to develop the confidence and skills to re-enter the labour market, and enhancing community life within disadvantaged areas (Government of Ireland 1994).

In more recent times, the 2000–2006 National Development Plan introduced the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP), which was also subsequently incorporated into the national Social Partnership process. Currently, the LDSIP is delivered by 38 Partnership Companies, 30 Community Groups and two Employment Pacts.¹² This represents a significant expansion on the original 12 area-based structures established under the PESP, and illustrates how such structures have now become securely embedded in the local governance landscape. Nevertheless, these local partnerships do reflect a far less state-centred locus for action and have even been described as ‘the primary conduit for radical localism in public policy, reversing a longstanding hegemony of government centralism’ (Walsh et al. 1998).

¹⁰ In what was sometimes seen as a snub to local government structures, until 1997 elected representatives were actually prohibited from becoming members of the partnership boards.

¹¹ Some 28 other local community groups, as well as the Dublin Travellers Education and Development Group (DTEDG) (now Pavee Point), a community development organisation of Travellers and settled people, also received assistance.

¹² See <<http://www.pobal.ie/live/LDSIP>>

Better Local Government White Paper

In 1996, the publication of the *Better Local Government* (BLG) White Paper prefaced a move towards a more state-centred form of local social partnership (though both forms now operate side by side). This reflected a concern that:

Through lack of resources and inability to respond to problems which transcend their traditional functions, local authorities have tended to be bypassed by the growth of new forms of community development organisations, many of which are attracting State and EU support (Government of Ireland 1996a).

The White Paper built on the recommendations of the first interim report of the Devolution Commission (Government of Ireland 1996b) and proposed changes in local social partnership arrangements in two specific directions, via the introduction of Strategic Policy Committees and County Development Boards.

Strategic Policy Committee (SPCs) were established for all major service areas in each local authority and were intended to strengthen the role of councillors in the policy and decision making process within local authorities. Together, the chairs of the SPCs and of local council would form a Corporate Policy Group, to reinforce the role of elected representatives and act as a democratic counterbalance to the executive local authority manager.¹³ In addition to placing the task of strategic development deliberately within the aegis of local government, the introduction of the SPCs was accompanied by a decision to reserve one-third of the available places for relevant sectoral interest groups—thereby bringing a formal social partnership process into all local authorities for the first time and mirroring national partnership formulas (Government of Ireland 1996a). Significantly, however, different social partners were to select their representatives in different ways. Trade unions, business and farming interests were allowed to nominate their local representatives via their national peak organisations, while the community and voluntary sector was obliged to undertake a local process of selection. This has inevitable accountability implications, with the traditional social partner representatives of reporting to their national organisations and community representatives reporting to new, broadly based fora. In a small number of instances, specific community platforms have been established with a distinct social inclusion focus (Harvey 2002).

Alongside the enhanced role of local councillors via the SPCs, County/City Development Boards (CDBs) were established as part of a broader effort to widen the influence of local government. This is considered to have been a response to the Devolution Commission report, which emphasised the need to integrate local government and local development systems as well as increasing the role of local government in local development. Composition of the CDBs reflects a further use of a standard partnership formula, closely resembling those already in place: members are

¹³ Though the county is the most important unit of local government, its range of functions is limited, relating primarily to physical infrastructure and public recreation facilities. The virtual non-existence of a local revenue base and the prescriptive nature of the relationship between local authorities and the national Department of the Environment and Local Government results in a low level of local autonomy that might easily justify Irish local government's more accurate depiction as local administration. Within this, the balance of decision making power between the executive manager and elected representatives rests firmly with the former.

drawn from the local authority, state agencies and the various civil society interests represented in the national social partnership. A key function of this local structure is to enhance coordination, cooperation and integration of effort among existing bodies, largely through the production of a ten-year development strategy. The allocation of the CDB chairperson function and the employment of CDB staff under the local authority aegis served to enhance the role of the local authority in the local development process. In addition, many of the existing area-based partnership structures, and indeed some independent though state-funded civil society organisations, were expected to present work plans to the CDBs initially for 'endorsement', though more recently this has been softened towards an information sharing function.

Irish partnership – one model or multiple models?

While there are some links between national and local partnership initiatives, it is by no means the case that both have emerged from the same process or ideological spawning grounds. Early initiatives were primarily economically motivated and oriented. The partnership dimensions to the first NDP were to comply with EU funding requirements and clearly the motivation was a desire to access EU development funds, not to change government styles. Around the same time, the partnership dimensions of the first Social Partnership agreement reflected a shared understanding of the scope of economic crisis as much as a shared sense of responsibility for dealing with it. It is doubtful that in either case partnerships were conceived of as the first steps to significant governance shifts. Thus, the early NDP and social partnership arrangements were largely state-led. The perception of partnership took a little more time and experience to evolve. Moreover, with a clear economic focus, not only were the aims and objectives of early partnerships clear, but so too were the criteria for judging their success. Reinforced by international and EU approval, Ireland's economic boom both rationalised and justified partnership approaches to government. The balance of power between state and social partners shifted a little and the ethos of partnership began to evolve. At domestic level, by the time of the third national partnership agreement, the *Programme for Competitiveness and Work* (1994–1996), the 'partnership process' had become strongly embedded as the cornerstone of Irish governance (Government of Ireland 1994). All the main political parties had been involved at one stage or another of the partnership process and business and union representatives began to acknowledge 'the cultural shift' to partnership governance (Interviews B, C). From the government's point of view, there was an acknowledgement of the collective comfort in those peak-level engagements that people brought to the table (Interview C). In the words of one seasoned social partner: 'We have established ways of solving problems ... And it's always resolved sitting around a table, it's not resolved from people marching or people going on strike or taking extreme positions or whatever' (Interview D). While recognising the benefits of such norms, however, others have wondered whether or not they bring with them the potential for stagnation (Interview F).

By the time of the *Better Local Government* and NAPS initiatives, 'government by partnership' was assumed to be a more reflexive and dynamic mode of governance, which could be applied to much broader policy problems such as strengthening local democracy and tackling social exclusion, as well as fostering local development and achieving economic growth. This assumption not only increased the complexity of the

policy problem-load that partnership was required to address, but also changed the terms used to evaluate its success. That partnership approaches should be found wanting as a consequence was in some respects inevitable. Notwithstanding its acknowledged shortcomings (Adshead & McInerney 2006), consultative policy making was by this time a well-established *modus vivendi*, supported by developments within and outside the state and reinforced by a recognisable set of norms and values.

Still, whether or not there is a common understanding of these institutional norms is often contested. The role of the community and voluntary pillar is frequently commented upon by the social partners. For this pillar, participating offered the potential to represent previously unrepresented voices (Interview H) and there is a view that over time the group has established itself more strongly (Interview J). From the 'traditional' social partners, many argue that the addition of this pillar has brought a healthier balance to the process, though their weakness is a limited capacity to bring answers to the table. Still, concerns exist among 'traditional' social partners that the lack of coherence within the community and voluntary pillar means that they are often 'too idealistic' and that their multiple demands are in danger of creating a 'governance mire' that could strangle the process (Interview A).

It is important to emphasise that the story of Irish partnership governance is not just about formal institutions. Participants in its various processes have cautioned against overstating the role of formal institutions, 'as ... there is a very informal dimension' (Interview M). Social partnership was seen not to 'constrain us in any way ... there's an awful lot of consultation goes on in government departments [-] that doesn't require social partnership (Interview E). Results seen as accruing from these informal processes range from increasing the capacity of senior civil servants (Interview F) to advancing the ability to 'influence by osmosis' (Interview L). This perspective is echoed by another participant who considered that: 'The real win is actual influence and the participative process whereby you are very close to the centre in terms of what is happening. I mean it's a kind of scary close' (Interview N).

The views of the community and voluntary pillar participants are perhaps inevitably mixed. While some see national partnership as a means to place perspectives on key issues such as long-term unemployment on the agenda and to mitigate the 'dominant effects of economic liberalism' (Murphy 2002), others wonder if this can ever be achieved within a framework that prioritises the imperatives of the state and the dominant partners in the 'corporatist' project and effectively 'co-opts community participants into a process which may at time be diametrically opposed to its own interests' (O'Carroll 2002).

New modes of governance – new problems for government

While there exists a varied literature on what a shift from established forms of *government* to new forms of *governance* might entail, still there is no common definition. According to Pierre (2000), governance has a 'dual meaning'. One the one hand, it refers to the empirical manifestations of state adaptation to its external environment in the late twentieth century; and on the other hand, governance also

denotes a conceptual or theoretical representation of coordination of social systems. Whichever definition is employed, there is little doubt that a central element in the literature on governance models is the role of the state and the extent to which it has or has not remained central in decision-making. Within this context, it is supposed that the move from 'old governance' to 'new governance' signals 'profound shifts in authority relationships' (Michalski 2001; Pierre 2000), where a more prominent role for non-state actors is seen as an important factor, so that the evolution towards a (new) governance mode is dependent not just on governments themselves, but on a wider range of civil society actors. In these 'new governance' models, policy outcomes are typically achieved through a combination of formal bureaucracy, which provides public accountability, and informal networks, which facilitate access to local knowledge (Sabel 2001).

In consequence, new governance models are often characterised by an expanded presence of bargaining or communicative institutions, as opposed to the relative domination of state bureaucracy and political institutions associated with traditional government frameworks. Kooiman's (1999) social political model, for example, is centrally occupied with the issue of how different actors (those who govern and who are governed) interact with each other. Following from this, most discussions on the emergence of new governance cite the impact on accountability and legitimacy, seen as both positive and negative (Papadopoulos 2003; Peters 2004). While new governance processes have the potential to enhance transparency, they may also contribute to the creation of closed arenas of debate and bargaining. The 'uneasy relation of 'governance' with democracy' has been explored in some detail by Papadopoulos (2003), in particular the trend towards the replacement of the 'influence of the demos' associated with traditional government forms, with that of organised interests. For some this means that traditional institutions of representative democracy are displaced by non-state actors, usually business and trade unions, who have assumed the character of 'private governments' (Schmitter, in Held 1987).

It is in this context that we address our examination of new governance developments in Ireland. Much of the recent fascination with the Irish 'Partnership State' (O'Donnell 2008) suggests that the Irish case provides an exemplar of new modes of governance that is 'distinguished by a unique set of institutional innovations for creative, dynamic, and self-reflexive governance for social and economic development', a theme taken up by diverse commentators (Hardiman 2005; House & McGrath 2004; Larragy 2004; Meade & O'Donovan 2002; Murphy 2002; O'Donnell 2001; O'Donnell & O'Reardon 1997; Sabel 2001; Teague 2006). It has been suggested that 'the willingness of successive Irish governments to relinquish their unique role in policy-making, for the inclusion of agreed "social partners", demonstrates a changing attitude towards government' (Adshead & Quinn 1998). This alleged shift has been variously characterised: for some it represents a move towards more corporatist styles of policy-making (Hardiman 1992) involving new governance networks (Hardiman 2005). For others (O'Donnell & O'Reardon 1997, 2000), Irish social partnership offers something more than traditional quasi-corporatist arrangements, warranting its depiction as a new form of post-corporatist concertation, characterised by 'deliberation' and 'problem-solving', between a wider range of interests than the traditional confederations of capital and labour and where 'the capacity to shape and reshape parties' preferences are seen to be prominent features of the dealings between

the social partners, interwoven into a process that also involves 'hard-headed bargaining' (O'Donnell & O'Reardon 2000).

In this final section of the paper, we examine the way that new modes of partnership in Ireland have evolved within a 'new governance' context, in terms of the changing role of the state, the involvement of civil society, the institutional development of partnership structures, and finally, the implications for government accountability and legitimacy. We conclude with an assessment of the Irish case in relation to each of these issues.

Role of the state

Within both national and local manifestations of partnership governance, the state, comprising the bureaucracy and elected representatives (Richards & Smith 2002), plays a central role. It is clear that the state has played the dominant role in the design and implementation of Irish partnership processes. While the EU was directly influential through its role in the early NDP monitoring structures and also in the way that its partnership-based funding criteria helped shape the subsequent local area-based partnership structures, the Irish system of 'government by partnership' is not a direct consequence of European integration, but was primarily nationally conceived and developed. Still, widespread references to Ireland's 'moving on' from a UK model to a 'European model' for managing the economy point to the increasing salience of European attitudes and approaches. Joining the EU is regarded as 'an essentially liberating' experience, that has 'created a positive, outward-looking attitude that affects business, the educational system, and politics (Fitzgerald 2000; see also Fitzgerald & Girvin 2000; Laffan 1999).

Distinct national and local patterns emerge in how the state has determined and engaged in partnership. At national level, according to one perspective, social partnership is 'theatre' and the government plays two roles: 'as a facilitator; but also as an employer' (Interview L). Others suggest that the state's concerns extend beyond these roles and that 'achieving particular macroeconomic objectives is one of its principal objectives within this governance arena' (Interview A). There is little doubt that the state is the key driver of the partnership process and that this role is assumed, in particular, by a small core of strategically placed civil servants (Interview J). While there is clearly strong national administrative and political buy-in, enthusiasm for partnership appears to diminish as distance from direct engagement increases, inevitably producing concerns as to how partnership-based policy outputs are implemented. Ultimately, the mix of strong buy-in from some senior civil servants, and more traditional approaches to decision making adopted by others, reflects the reality of a 'filled in' rather than a 'hollowed out' state (Marinetti 2003).

At local level, the embedding of partnership approaches is less concrete, and there appears to be a more grudging acceptance of partnership governance processes, perhaps due in part to the fact that these processes have virtually all been designed by and handed down from national government, sometimes in concert with the EC. There has been little local consultation and, until recently, local elected representatives were excluded from many local partnership structures. However, the trajectory of local partnership governance is towards stronger state involvement and control, and away from the quasi-independent networks that existed previously.

Role of civil society

Civil society plainly plays a vital and, in many cases, powerful role within partnership governance in Ireland. This fact notwithstanding, there are clear patterns of power and dominance. Within national governance, a hierarchy of civil society actors exists. There is general agreement that the core relationships are between government, employer organisations and trade unions (Interview C). In the words of one former participant: 'there is the key inner circle' comprising the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), the main employers' organisation (IBEC), and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Interviews K, H, F, L). The 'outer circle' is occupied by the representatives of various farming organisations and of the community and voluntary sector who, in national bargaining arenas, have to rely more heavily on their moral, communicative and persuasive powers, as opposed to the more instrumental, economic powers of persuasion of the dominant economic actors. In consequence, the concerns expressed within these arenas are less to do with achieving public good and more to do with generating consensus (largely by the dominant 'inner circle') regarding the appropriate costs and benefits accruing to participants. The fact that there is little potential to generate such benefits through participation in local governance processes explains why there has not been a corresponding investment by business and trade union interests. Conversely, the community and voluntary sector has engaged more enthusiastically at local level, although its ability to do so is severely limited by resources and capacity.

All in all, participation by civil society in local and national governance processes is largely subject to the discretion of the government of the day, though greater freedom to shape participation does exist at local level. And while the participation of the more powerful economic interests is largely a given, for the community and voluntary sector, the state's discretion to invite or 'uninvite' may prove to be an ongoing source of difficulty.

Institutional developments

Irish partnership governance has generated a multitude of institutional formulae that have produced a sometimes bewildering layer of structures, processes and products. At national level, however, formal partnership institutions are lean and focused and produce distinct policy outcomes. At local level, by contrast, they have proliferated to such a degree that in many instances their functions have become occluded to the non-expert observer. More importantly their capacity to generate either policy or project-based outputs is more limited.

The institutional dilemmas visible in local partnerships may in part explain this. The creation and deliberate distancing of the initial area-based initiatives from local state institutions—generating distinct and alternative institutional identities and processes—raises questions why the state institutions at national level chose to bypass state institutional structures at local level. Perhaps the answer lies in the views of one former Taoiseach who wondered if 'our failure to address seriously the need to devolve authority to local bodies lies more in successive governments' still remembered unhappy experiences of past local authority behaviour than in an active desire by government to retain power for its own sake' (Fitzgerald 1998). More recent local authority behaviour and the varied acceptance of post-1996 institutional

innovations indicates that these concerns cannot yet be set aside and there may be a continuing resistance within local government to embrace partnership governance alongside traditional executive-dominated local administration. It is evident, for example, that since the introduction of the County Development Boards there has been a gradual local reshaping of institutional configurations, especially in the allocation of human resource supports, often to the detriment of the new local partnership institutions.

Generating policy or project outcomes is also a function of capacity. An examination of the institutional aspects of partnership governance reveals differential institutional capacity among the various actors. While the more powerful economic actors—the state, business and trade unions—typically possess an array of technical and human resources, the community and voluntary sector struggles to find coherence. The absence, for good reason, of a peak organisation within the community and voluntary sector partly explains this lack of coherence both nationally and locally. However, it may also be that the sector has not fully thought out just why it wishes or needs to engage itself in social partnership processes that are not centrally concerned with its imperatives (Dryzek 1996). At the local level, this problem is even more deeply rooted. There has been little discretion or support to generate locally appropriate models of participation or representation, the emphasis instead being on the creation by central government of a one-size-fits-all model of representation often controlled by state institutions. This has inevitably led to poor local organisation of community and voluntary organisations and has opened up the potential for elite capture.

Accountability

Although occasional concerns about accountability within national partnership governance processes do emerge (O’Cinneide 1998), debate on this is limited. Where it has taken place, discussion has tended to focus on the minimal engagement between most national social partnership structures and democratically elected representatives. It is suggested that ‘political consensualism is made worse by the creeping corporatism of the last twenty years, which ties in major interest groupings—including voluntary bodies—with the government system. This shifts the real debate from Leinster House to closed committee rooms where there are no elected representatives’ (O’Cinneide 1998). It is certainly true that virtually all significant national partnership processes are carried out in the absence of elected representatives and this is a flaw. It is equally true, however, that these processes—while designed by civil servants—have been repeatedly sanctioned by elected governments (and could be changed by them at any time). Therefore, rather than decrying the absence of political representatives from these policy arenas, a more useful investigation might focus upon the reasons for such absence and why the leadership of the different political parties has not chosen to take action upon it.¹⁴

Moreover, the argument that political representatives do not have a role in the policy-making processes of the national agreement mechanisms is largely spurious in the Irish case. First, the Irish system of government is such that the Dáil (Parliament) has

¹⁴ The model of the National Economic and Social Forum might be relevant in this discussion as it does contain representatives of the political parties in the Dáil. The engagement of the political representatives with the Forum could be explored to ascertain their willingness or availability to involve themselves in detailed policy discussions.

little role in most policy making processes, so that it is perhaps unfair to single out the partnership processes. A more fruitful debate might focus on the desirability and/or ability of the Dáil as it currently functions to involve itself in detailed policy debates. Second, national agreements and any significant related policy directions are increasingly reflected in the government's budgetary processes, which are of course subject to scrutiny by the Dáil. Still, there does not appear to be any impediment to placing national agreements in their entirety before the Dáil for examination.

Ultimately, the foundation of this whole debate needs to be traced back to the accepted rationale for social partnership, as we now know it. It was (and is) designed principally to serve economic purposes at a time of economic crisis, and while its social policy agenda has widened somewhat it is still dominated by economic concerns. The fact that its ability to sustain itself in times of high growth and low unemployment is increasingly questioned is evidence of this. Social partnership was not conceived as a component of an evolving governance model and therefore it is inevitable that its role in relation to the Dáil, and particularly its democratic accountability as defined within the framework of representative democracy, would prove problematic. However, it is possible that the tensions arising from this uncertain relationship might spur a broader debate on national governance and the role of participatory democracy within it.

At local level too, the relationship between social partnership processes and the political system has been problematic. Little formal explanation for the exclusion of elected representatives from pre 1996 partnership structures is evident. Equally, there is limited explicit rationale for establishing local development partnership structures as opposed to locating these within the local authorities, thereby 'circumventing traditional local organs of public administration, including local government, to address difficult social problems at the local level' (Walsh et al. 1998). Past decisions have contributed to a sense of distance between local partnership structures and elected representatives and a degree of mutual distrust between the two. This tension appears to be stronger in the relationships between elected representatives and representatives of community or voluntary sector organisations (Boyle et al. 2003). It is of course interesting that the community and voluntary sector representatives are singled out for such attention (perhaps because they are regarded as emerging political competitors). Still, a potentially positive element of the evolving partnership structures is the capacity to build a stronger synergy between civil society and elected representatives at local level and to foster complementarity rather than competition. Whether or not this potential can be realised remains to be seen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the Irish landscape is populated by multiple manifestations of partnership governance, at both national and local levels. And while this might on the surface suggest experimentation and diversity, in reality partnership governance has increasingly gravitated towards a single, basic framework. In this, the state plays the dominant role within a range of formal and informal institutional arrangements, though there are contrasting experiences of how this works in practice between the national and local levels. It is at national level that the strongest institutional mechanisms can be observed. From the examples looked at earlier it becomes clear that the institutional apparatus of the national social partnership process

is now the dominant arena. Alongside the state, a distinct and embedded pattern of civil society participation exists, with its own clear hierarchy of power, influence and impact. Social partnership clearly works for those who have a shared vision and a shared understanding of the process of partnerships and of its objectives. For others, who do not enjoy this same synergy of perspectives but who see participation in partnership processes as important, the tangible benefits are less immediate.

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