

AREA-BASED PARTNERSHIPS IN IRELAND: COLLABORATIVE PLANNING IN PRACTICE?

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Abstract

Ireland's local partnerships enjoy a reputation for innovation in local governance and energetic action on unemployment and poverty that is unmatched in Europe. The purpose of this paper is to examine their operation and effectiveness. This is especially important in the current context of local government reform and greatly improved economic circumstances in the country. The paper documents their role and functions, and considers their strengths and weaknesses. It discusses the conditions that facilitate and constrain their work, and identifies general lessons, while recognising the unique circumstances of Ireland.

Three main arguments are developed. First, the local partnerships demonstrate the importance of *flexibility* in public sector policy-making and resource allocation in order to facilitate innovation, integration and responsiveness to local circumstances. Second, they show the value of *partnership-working* to co-ordinate different agencies and actors, to stimulate their commitment and collective responsibility for problem-solving, and to ensure consultation and participation of disadvantaged groups. Third, they reveal the importance of complementary *national action* to capture local learning and to ensure it is reflected in mainstream departmental programmes and priorities. In the course of these arguments, the paper considers the value and relevance of the concept of collaborative planning.

Introduction

Studies of Ireland's recent economic success and social progress have focused on its national institutions and policies, particularly the tripartite partnership model of decision-making. Far less attention has been paid to similar institutions established at the local level. During the last decade these partnerships for local development have enjoyed a growing reputation among policy-makers and practitioners across Europe for innovation in local governance and energetic action on unemployment and poverty. The purpose of this paper is to examine their operation and effectiveness. This is timely in the context of the current reform of statutory local government and the emergence of new regional institutions.

The first section describes the emergence and development of the local partnerships. Section two discusses their role and functions. The third section examines their organisational structures. Section four considers their achievements, drawing on available research and interviews conducted during recent visits to Ireland. Section five distils general conclusions and lessons.

1. The development of local partnerships

Ireland's local partnerships emerged in distinctive economic, social and institutional conditions. The performance of the national economy during the 1980s was lack-lustre, following several decades of 'boom and bust'. Unemployment rose to almost 20% and emigration caused a steady loss of skilled labour. Widespread disenchantment with the conventional approach to national economic policy led to a new 'social partnership' model. This broadened influence over the levers of economic power by involving unions, business and farmers in decisions. This was later extended to the community and voluntary sectors, thereby creating 'four pillars' of partnership. An explicit problem-solving approach developed a shared understanding and brought practical considerations to the forefront, pushing fundamental values and grand visions into the background. The sense of common purpose among these disparate interests increased and a framework for serious bargaining between them was provided.

The first three-year agreement (1987-90) required the unions to centralise wage-bargaining and contain wage demands below inflation. In return, the government agreed to protect welfare spending from cutbacks and to reduce the tax burden on ordinary workers. This coincided with a favourable economic environment to bring about a speedy reduction in inflation and public debt. It also coincided with a recovery in employment and living standards. So it was widely viewed as a success and has been followed by four successive national agreements, covering a wide range of issues including wages and priorities for economic and social policy.

High unemployment, poverty, low educational attainment and out-migration from particular urban and rural areas, coupled with the historic weakness of local government, meant that pressures emerged in the late 1980s for a similar approach at the local level. The availability of European funds, encouragement from the community/voluntary sector and unions, and support within central government helped to lubricate the process of creating local partnerships. The second national agreement introduced initiatives in 12 pilot areas, building on some earlier EU initiatives. According to one of the prime movers, the current General Secretary in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), the basic objective was:

"to apply in the labour market context, at local level, the approach that was applied at national level, namely to have a problem-solving approach, to mobilise the resources of those who had a potential contribution to make and to be flexible in devising remedies, including a willingness to experiment" (McCarthy, 1998, p.42).

The weakness of local government meant that the partnerships were given relatively autonomous status. The country's political system has traditionally been centralised (in Dublin) and local authorities have had limited statutory powers or tax-raising abilities to address poverty and unemployment. Local partnerships were founded on the principles of consultation, participation and inclusion, and were seen by some as a way of renewing the culture of governance by making public organisations more dynamic and responsive to the needs of civil society: "We had a rigid system that was highly centralised" (McCarthy, 1998, p.47).

The creation of local partnerships

The result was a fairly loosely-defined experiment in area-based initiatives, with a prime concern for unemployment set in the broader context of promoting economic and social development. The second national agreement included a section called 'area-based response to long-term unemployment' and suggested various ways of getting them into jobs, including education, training, work experience, job counselling, placement in mainstream employment and self-employment/business creation.

Non-profit local companies limited by guarantee were formed in 12 areas. Their task was to co-ordinate state agencies and focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups. The directors included representatives of community interests (including voluntary organisations), public agencies and social partners. The initiative was supported by a small sum of European funding. A national organisation called Area Development Management Ltd (ADM) was also created to help set up and co-ordinate the local partnership companies and to allocate and monitor their funding.

The National Development Plan for 1994-99 was crucial in formalising government commitment to local development. The pilot initiatives were given a new lease of life and the area-based partnership model was extended to other areas. The basic objective was to extend, enhance and integrate employment-related services for the long-term unemployed. Other aims were to target young people at risk of early school leaving and under-achievement, to build organisational capacity in disadvantaged communities, and to improve the physical environment of such areas.

The National Plan was the basis on which the EU-funded Community Support Framework 1994-99 was negotiated. One of the CSF's nine Operational Programmes was Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD). Its principal objective was: "To counter disadvantage through support for communities which make a collective effort to maximise the development potential of their areas" (Government of Ireland, 1995, p.59). OPLURD led to the creation of 38 local partnership companies (20 in urban areas and 18 rural), plus 33 community groups in non-priority areas, with about a fifth of the funding level. The 38 partnerships cover roughly half of the territory of Ireland, including deprived areas within Dublin, smaller towns and their hinterlands, and rural counties.

OPLURD allocated IR£80 million to the 38 partnerships over the period 1994-99. Each received a budget for the whole period of between IR£1m and IR£4m (IR£600,000 p.a. on average) to cover core staff, administration (such as office premises and other running costs), and the revenue costs of selected projects and services to be provided directly. Their budget was approved on the basis of a strategic plan they had to submit to ADM within a year or two of their establishment. This described the shared vision of the partnership and how it planned to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups in the local community. Plan preparation required consultation among local residents and groups concerned with the needs of the poor and unemployed. There was an emphasis on finding new and more effective ways of tackling problems. The plans also had to consider how the existing physical and institutional resources in each area could be used to best effect. The partnership funds were deliberately flexible in order to allow experimentation and to lever in additional resources.

The boards of the partnership companies were formed by consultation. They have a tripartite structure involving the social partners, public sector and community/voluntary sector. Each is expected to make a unique contribution and to gain something in return. None can hold a majority, so particular interests cannot dominate and decisions are made by consensus. Independence gives the partnership flexibility and creates space for new thinking. There is extensive dialogue and interaction among the partners and a shared understanding of problems develops. A growing awareness of

the interdependence between different organisations can help to co-ordinate resources more effectively, something historically missing at the local level in Ireland. A focus on practical problem-solving reduces ideological differences between sectional interests and fosters trust. A sense of collective responsibility and ownership can emerge which strengthens commitment to constructive action.

Yet, partnership working has proved time-consuming and demanding in other respects because it requires patient consultation, discussion and capacity building for some of those involved. Effective collaboration means listening, persuading and often altering established ways of doing things. Agencies cannot be compelled to do anything they don't want to do since the partnerships lack formal authority. Voluntary agreement and shared commitment are fundamental to the partnership ethos. Some important statutory authorities have little discretion to change their local practices because they operate according to national rules.

The relationship with central government

The links with government are particularly important because of the substantial powers that reside at national level. Policies that in many countries are determined locally or regionally, but are shaped centrally in Ireland, include social services, education, vocational training, inward investment and tourism. This is in addition to the common functions of national governments, such as unemployment benefits, social security, health, agriculture, trade and industry. The vital role of central government was apparent in the wording of the 1994-99 OPLURD, which stated that the goal of the local partnerships was to:

“improve co-ordination and evaluation at local level of mainstream programmes and policies to ensure their effective delivery to the long-term unemployed and the socially-excluded and from this experience to contribute to the national policy making process” (quoted in Government of Ireland, 1999b, p.38).

This has been more challenging than envisaged. One of the main ways the partnerships relate to government departments is through official representatives on their boards. Their role was assumed to be to transmit requirements for changes in departmental policy and procedure from the partnerships to national decision-makers, who would respond constructively to the improved knowledge and practical advice emerging from the local level. This has proved far from straightforward in practice. There has also been some ambiguity about the position of official representatives, which we return to later in this section. Several departments are involved in the local partnerships, usually through their regional offices: (i) the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, through its agency FAS (the national training and employment authority); (ii) the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (responsible for social welfare, community development initiatives and self-employment); (iii) the Department of Education and Science (though its vocational education committees and regional technology colleges), and (iv) the Health Boards (particularly their community care programmes).

ADM has an important mediating role between the local partnerships and government. Ireland is unusual among countries with local partnerships in having an intermediary organisation like ADM. It facilitates dialogue and negotiation on policy and procedural matters, and can protect the partnerships from ad hoc and unhelpful intrusion. For example, the government and ministers have by and large allowed ADM to determine financial allocations to the partnerships without interference. ADM works within government policy but is a private company and independent of

government. It seeks to extend and enhance local experience with technical support, to identify and promote good practice, and to inform national policy development (ADM, 1997). The partnerships also created a smaller organisation called PLANET to help co-ordinate their work and to develop a common voice on relevant issues. It was established informally as early as 1991 by the original 12 partnerships, but did not employ its first staff member until 1998.

The partnerships also interact with a range of other organisations and establishments, such as the local branches of national associations dealing with specific disadvantaged groups (such as travellers and the disabled), local chambers of commerce and other business associations, centres for the unemployed, training institutes and many local voluntary bodies.

The relationship with local government

The relationship with local authorities is also important. It is currently in a state of flux because of local government reform and the completion of the 1994-99 OPLURD. The partnerships were set up partly to supplement local authorities because of their narrow range of functions, inward-looking culture and bureaucratic style of operation (Walsh, 1998). The partnerships are more inclusive in their constitution, spatially-targeted, problem-oriented and bottom-up in approach. Their participative style contrasts with the representative approach to democracy and hierarchical administration of local government. Until 1999, local authorities could only be represented on the partnership boards through officials rather than elected politicians, which caused friction and resentment in some areas. Following a review of the issue, the boards are now required to include local councillors. This appears to have improved relationships and introduced a new dynamic to some partnerships, contrary to some concerns about the process becoming too politicised.

The limited financial base and restricted statutory functions of local authorities means they tend to focus on infrastructure and the regulation of development, without a broader interest in local social and economic conditions. They also tend to adopt a reactive stance in relation to economic development rather than a more pro-active approach. Being large organisations with routinised internal procedures, they are not generally considered very responsive to changing circumstances. A recent government task force on the future of local government stated bluntly that: "the ability of local authorities to respond flexibly to emerging problems is not well developed. At elected and official levels, changes in organisational culture will need to be promoted to accommodate new roles for local authorities" (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 37). Nevertheless, it applauded their standards of financial and political accountability and their democratic mandate.

The same task force stressed the need for closer co-ordination between local government, local partnerships and state agencies. Their effectiveness was said to be reduced by operating independently and without a strategic vision for their areas. County Strategy Groups had been created in the mid-1990s to try and link local authorities more closely to the local partnerships, Enterprise Boards and other development groups, but they lacked authority and had proved ineffective. Instead, the task force proposed the creation of broader County/City Development Boards (CDBs). This idea proved very influential and the CDBs were established in the first few months of 2000. Their primary functions are to draw up a comprehensive strategy for local economic, social and cultural development and to oversee its implementation. The strategy is to be completed by January 2002 and is intended to serve as a template guiding all public services and local development activities.

The CDBs have a partnership structure with members drawn from four sectors; local government, local development (including the local partnerships, LEADER groups and Enterprise Boards), state agencies and the social partners operating locally. The public organisations are expected to co-ordinate their activities at local level, especially around social exclusion/inclusion. The CDBs are attached to 34 County/City local authorities. They have employed Directors of Community and Enterprise with some administrative and technical support to drive the CDBs. This represents a major institutional change with important implications for the local partnerships. They could perhaps become the co-ordinators of activity at the smaller scale of localities or neighbourhoods, or more focused deliverers of a narrower range of services. We consider the situation further in the final section.

2. The role and functions of the partnerships

The current partnership activities are quite wide-ranging between areas, albeit with a common emphasis on reducing unemployment and exclusion. This reflects their diverse circumstances and local orientation, where there was something of a policy vacuum before. The obstacles to labour market reintegration facing the unemployed are also varied. At the risk of understating the variety and failing to capture the richness of their initiatives, they can be categorised under seven broad headings (see below). Some fill gaps in the existing network of service provision, expand their scale or widen access. Others provide services that are tailored more closely to the needs of individuals. Some involve the transfer of knowledge, skills and information between organisations. Some partnerships are inclined to do things themselves while others seek to encourage other bodies to provide the services in order to avoid the administrative burden and financial cost. In rural areas there may be more emphasis on direct service delivery because of the lack of other providers, while in urban areas facilitation and co-ordination of existing organisations may be more common. Some areas of work are effectively prescribed by central government, such as a programme of childcare support. The partnerships have generally developed at a different rate and in different ways, depending on pre-existing conditions, such as whether 'natural' communities could be identified (i.e. based on shared problems, territories or histories) and the extent to which an infrastructure of community organisations already existed.

Enterprise creation and development. This covers the provision of advice and assistance to people starting their own businesses, including small loans and grants, help with book-keeping and marketing, and training in business skills, particularly for the long-term unemployed. Most partnerships work closely with the regional offices of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, which administer the Back to Work Allowance. This is a substantial tapered subsidy to people who have been unemployed for a year or more who become self-employed or start their own business. The Allowance was pioneered by the original 12 local partnerships in 1992. Following their efforts it was extended nationally in 1998.

Services for the unemployed. This includes employment advice, counselling, work experience, training courses and job placement services to enable the long-term unemployed to compete more effectively in the labour market. Many local partnerships also operate Local Employment Services (LES) in their areas. These offer intensive personal guidance, counselling and employer-liaison services in a non-threatening environment and an accessible location.

Community development. This encompasses actions to enhance the skills and organisational capacity of local communities and sectional interest groups to promote and participate in initiatives to address social exclusion and encourage economic development. It may involve financial and technical help with setting up organisational structures, such as registered companies or trusts, or training people to provide facilities which generate an income or offer supportive community services.

Complementary education and training. These measures support adults with few qualifications and skills to participate in education, including improved literacy and numeracy, secretarial and computing courses, community development and childcare. Manual skills are insufficient for many of the jobs becoming available in services and advanced manufacturing. Many of the local partnerships have provided special training

courses or worked with the schools and colleges in their areas to improve provision.

Preventive education. This covers initiatives to discourage early school leaving and to improve participation and achievement by young people from poorer backgrounds. The justification is that Ireland has experienced low educational attainment among a minority of the population for many years. Many of the partnerships have been working with local schools on projects to reduce the drop-out rate and to improve attainment by disadvantaged pupils.

Infrastructure and environmental actions. These include projects to improve local amenities (such as neighbourhood centres, shops and childcare services) and enhance the quality of the environment and tourism facilities. Many partnerships have extended their activities over time from employment-related services to a wider range of initiatives, such as childcare and environmental improvement.

Promoting institutional and policy change. The partnerships are ultimately concerned with informing, influencing and reforming established government departments and agencies. They want them to be more responsive to local needs and better co-ordinated to provide enhanced services and facilities. They bring authorities into closer contact with the community, thereby promoting a culture of dialogue, transparency and active support. They do so through the partnership board, working groups, community meetings and other consultative events. At the outset the partnerships were not seen as permanent fixtures by the government, although their duration and succession arrangements were not spelt out given their experimental status.

3. Organisational structures

The partnership boards typically have between 20-25 members. The largest representation is often from the community/voluntary sector, followed by the public sector (government agencies, training colleges, health boards, local authority officials and politicians) and the other social partners (employers, trade unions and farmers (in rural areas)). The partnerships typically operate through about five or six working groups or sub-committees covering themes such as enterprise development, services for the unemployed, community development, education and training, environment and infrastructure, childcare and young people. They involve a wide range of people in developing practical strategies and actions. They include several board members and often a larger number of other individuals drawn from external organisations with a particular expertise in the field concerned. These working groups are the 'engine-rooms' of many partnerships, providing the dynamism, project ideas and links into wider networks that make things happen. The partnership board provides the broad direction and performs a formal function in deciding which project proposals are supported financially. The pace and direction in which the partnerships develop depends on the capacities and aspirations of the partners and community organisations.

The 38 partnership companies employ about 700 people altogether. Each one typically employs between five and ten core staff (a manager, administrators and several functional specialists) and usually more than this number of project staff and secondees engaged on specific activities. Much of their activity is based on EU funding. Each of the partnerships had an assured budget from ADM of between IR£0.5-1m per annum between 1995 and 1999 to cover core costs. This was also used to lever in additional activity through mainstream government programmes and funding from other public and private sources. Funding for most capital projects, such as community centres and business premises, has had to be raised separately.

Accountability is a complex matter for the partnerships. They are effectively accountable to different interests and in different ways: to their funders through their detailed monitoring and financial reporting procedures (e.g. quarterly throughput and financial reports to ADM); to local residents and social groups through community representatives on the board and community forums; to other social partners and state agencies through their board representatives, and to many other individuals and organisations actively involved in particular projects through their working groups and sub-committees.

In theory there should be strong two-way relationships with the individual partner organisations, mediated through empowered representatives. There should be detailed feedback and interaction in both directions to ensure effective communication and influence. However, these linkages are complex and contain ambiguities, particularly for the public sector representatives. The nominated officials cannot be mere delegates of their organisations, mandated to pursue particular policies or to implement national decisions. They need discretion and some autonomy to participate meaningfully and promptly in partnership forums, given the dialogue and negotiation involved. However, it is also difficult for partnership decisions to be binding on the partners, since there are many other factors determining their policies, particularly for national agencies removed from specific local situations. If these bodies leave their representatives to their own devices without active support or guidance about the extent of their involvement, and

if the officials concerned lack authority to take decisions and make changes to their programmes without approval from above, the impression is easily given to the other partners that they are 'free agents' serving in a voluntary capacity, rather than proper representatives with formal responsibilities. This is widely seen to weaken the connection with their nominating organisation and to limit their ability to influence mainstream policies and procedures. In the absence of strong organisational backing, much depends on the personal commitment, capabilities and seniority of the individuals concerned, so experience is very uneven (ADM, 1998a). Some people engage actively in the partnership and devote considerable energy to securing departmental support, while others are more passive and non-committal.

Similar points about individual commitment and organisational support apply to the other main partners as well. Both attributes appear to be necessary for effective partnership relationships. Many of the community representatives are elected, which tends to strengthen their authority to make decisions in the partnerships. Their procedures for reporting back to their communities are more variable, however. Local councillors joined the boards of many partnerships during 1999, which removed an anomaly and generally improved relationships with local authorities. It is difficult to compare the effectiveness of the complex partnership system of accountability with the formal electoral accountability and financial reporting procedures of government because of the big differences involved. Nevertheless, some have suggested that the partnerships are inherently less stable and more fragile because of their lack of democratic legitimacy, ambiguous political status, and reliance on informal support and patronage (OECD, 1996; Parkinson, 1998; Walsh, 1998). There is certainly considerable misunderstanding, uncertainty and even suspicion in some quarters about the accountability and constitutional position of the partnerships. Yet, there has never been a case of fraud or misappropriation, probably because of the strong commitment of many of the people involved and the reporting systems that have been put in place.

4. Achievements

It is difficult to summarise or generalise about the achievements of the local partnerships. As a largely bottom-up process, the approach generates considerable variety and unevenness. The very nature of partnership working also makes it difficult to attribute credit to particular partners or the partnership as a whole. We provide three complementary forms of assessment. First, they are assessed using the available quantitative data from monitoring their activities and outputs. This focuses on the scale of service delivery, rather than quality or ultimate outcomes. Second, they are examined in terms of their less tangible role in building institutional capacity to promote development. This is essentially qualitative and dependent on illustrative cases. Finally, their role in promoting policy and project innovation has always been important. This is best judged through specific examples.

Providing customised services

The ADM Performance Monitoring System is one source of information on the activities and outputs of the partnerships. It is based on data supplied by each of them to ADM according to a standard format. Comprehensive data on all the partnerships (and the community groups) is available up to the end of 1999 (ADM, 2000). It indicates a generally high and rising level of activity since the mid-1990s.

Enterprise creation and development. During 1999, 4,260 people set up in business with partnership support, 90% of whom were long-term unemployed. The corresponding figure in 1998 was 5,144. The decline may have been attributable to the more buoyant labour market in 1999, encouraging people to seek employment instead. By the end of 1999 a total of 17,000 business start-ups had been supported since the partnerships were created.

Services for the unemployed. Some 21,000 people used such services during 1999 (23,500 in 1998). Of these, 5,396 were placed into jobs (4,766 in 1998) and most of the rest were placed into work experience or attended courses to help with job searching. A total of 19,706 direct job placements had been achieved by the end of 1999 since the partnerships were created.

Community Development. In 1999, 1,742 local community and interest groups received funding, advice and guidance, with a similar number in 1998. This is believed to have increased the capacity of marginalised groups such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, lone parents and travellers to participate in decisions and activities affecting their localities.

Complementary education and training. An estimated 11,400 adults on low incomes were assisted to participate in education and training activities in 1999 (7,100 in 1998), 70% of whom were over 25. Altogether, 29,800 people had been assisted under this measure by the end of 1999. The most popular courses were on computers, personal development, accounts, foundation work, childcare and community development, in order of priority.

Preventive education. During 1999, an estimated 29,000 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds participated in homework clubs and supervised study, supplementary literacy and numeracy education, and projects aimed at particular groups such as travellers (20,400 in 1998).

There has been a big increase since 1997, attributable to the appointment of education co-ordinators in each area that year.

Infrastructure and environmental actions. The partnerships initiated a total of 1,300 environment and infrastructure projects in their areas by the end of 1999, including refurbishment of buildings for childcare, community activities and small enterprises; support for heritage projects; cleaning up open spaces and other public amenities, and housing improvements.

Information on the beneficiaries of partnership support across the country confirms an emphasis on targeting disadvantaged groups. Nearly half (49%) of all participants during 1999 were long-term unemployed, compared with 55% in 1998. "The participation of long-term unemployed people remains a very important indicator of the Programme's focus" (NESF, 1999, p.15). Other beneficiaries included lone parents, smallholders in rural areas and short-term unemployed people. More than half (54%) of all participants were reported to have very low educational qualifications.

Institutional glue

The partnerships also have an important, albeit less tangible, role to play in strengthening local capacity to tackle exclusion and promote development. They provide a crucial brokerage function or 'glue' to bring local and national actors and resources together in a way that could not have happened before, bearing in mind the organisational structure and culture of government in Ireland. Such process-related effects are inevitably difficult to gauge.

"It is very difficult to measure impact. It is one thing to look at the throughput of activity in directly funded programmes, but in a sense that is the least important bit of the Partnerships. Such programmes get people around the table initially to talk about what needs to be done, but that is not really the important thing. The most important impacts are the subtle influences on thinking and on the way in which mainstream programmes are delivered, both locally and nationally" (McCarthy, 1998, p.46).

There is sufficient evidence from interviews and reports to suggest that progress is occurring on several fronts. The partnerships appear to have brought about new relationships between individuals and organisations, stimulated informal alliances and practical agreements between different actors, involved many interest groups and authorities in dialogue and tangible action around development, and strengthened the ability of local communities to influence wider resource allocation processes by bringing them to the table and equipping them to participate (see e.g. ADM, 1998a, 1999). The incentive of flexible EU funding has been a useful lubricant. One might expect such effects to have some additional longer-term benefits in affecting the way decisions are made and increasing commitment to tackle local disadvantage.

An important issue is whether mainstream policies have actually changed as a result. There is some debate about the extent to which this has happened. The partnerships have brought selected government agencies into closer contact with local organisations. This has exposed them to pressure to make services more responsive to individual needs and local circumstances. Some have begun to consult service users more routinely, adapt their programmes accordingly, and even involve community-based organisations in delivery. Many of the partnerships have also managed to secure ongoing funding from government for projects they developed with EU support. Yet, the key features of national policies have proved difficult to alter from the local level without stronger commitment from above. In some cases there is a different basic philosophy involved, such as compulsory rather than voluntary participation in labour market programmes. National

economic development and education authorities have been difficult to interact with because of their lack of regional or local offices. The pressure to spend EU funds has also distracted attention from considering mainstream policies more systematically. An interdepartmental task force report suggested recently that the partnerships have had "limited success" so far in improving the co-ordination and effectiveness of mainstream programmes and in contributing to the national policy-making process (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.38).

The task force did not acknowledge the progress achieved in some areas. Although local actors express frustration at the pace and extent of system-wide change, they also recognise that some improvements have occurred and that the discretion available to the regional offices of national agencies is being used more effectively. For example, the Community Employment Scheme run by FAS often funds projects that are devised in consultation with local partnerships. There are also instances where FAS training programmes have been altered following representation by the partnerships. These sorts of changes should help to make mainstream programmes more effective. Some partnerships have persuaded national agencies to expand the scale of activity in their areas and to incorporate pilot projects into their mainstream budgets.

The partnerships have also managed to involve diverse sectional interests in an unusual framework for joint problem-solving. Many individuals and organisations have committed considerable time and resources to address the priority needs of their areas. The formation of the partnerships "represents a major institutional achievement ... (B)uilding these organisations can be seen as an important investment in the 'infrastructure' of local development" (NESF, 1999, p.16). Visiting these areas one is struck by the calibre of the people involved and their commitment. Individuals have been drawn in from different walks of life who clearly believe they can make a difference to local conditions by working together. They would not have remained involved if it was a waste of time. The partnerships have been able to harness considerable personal effort and initiative beyond the formal obligations of official representatives. This additional energy might otherwise have gone untapped.

The extent of personal commitment is clearly a strength, since it means that they may devote extra effort, use whatever discretion and influence they have to alter their own organisations' programmes, and not take established rules and procedures for granted. Yet it can also have limitations if their organisation's involvement remains at a personal level and if their ability to exert influence depends only on their personal standing. If the higher levels of an organisation (particularly the statutory bodies) are detached from the process there may be no significant or lasting changes made to their policies and procedures. Overall experience appears mixed and it is difficult to generalise without more substantial evidence. Power and authority seem to be strongly centralised in some departments and agencies, but less so in others. The ambiguous position of official representatives appears constructive in some cases but not in others. There are examples of strong organisational co-operation and flexibility, as well as reluctant participation and disinterest. Individual personalities are important as well as the formal policies and culture of the organisation concerned (see e.g. ADM, 1998a).

Giving voice to disadvantaged groups and communities appears to have been a major achievement. The partnerships have consulted and listened to social groups who do not normally get much opportunity to participate in the policy process. They have acted as important conduits for particular local needs and demands to be expressed to all kinds of external organisation. This has helped to bring about new services or to modify existing arrangements by widening access or enhancing the quality of provision. The partnerships have also provided some of the resources, support and expertise needed to build up community-based organisations through joint

planning, training, advice and guidance (a range of examples are provided in ADM, 1999). In most areas the process started with the appointment of a community development worker who was a key resource to local groups.

Some partnerships have attached particular importance to community capacity building in the interests of sustaining activity beyond their own life-time. This has led to a big growth in the number of community groups. Their credibility and accessibility have improved the uptake and effectiveness of national employment and training programmes which use them for delivery or to widen access. In the past, the culture of the public sector was often seen as unresponsive to the needs and views of ordinary people, but the partnerships appear to be helping to alter attitudes. They are also promoting stronger commitment to the principles of consultation, participation and inclusion, implying greater recognition for citizens rights, even if there is still some way to go.

These various 'process' achievements have produced tangible benefits beyond the original partnership remit, including action to address new social problems. Drugs and disability are two examples. Some of the partnerships have taken initiatives to support and rehabilitate people with serious drug addictions or severe physical disabilities that may never be able to enter the labour market. The knowledge, expertise and community networks that have been established have also helped in the design and speedy implementation of several national initiatives, such as the Drugs Task Force (NESF, 1999). The latest national agreement among the social partners recognises their importance in tackling concentrated disadvantage and promoting social inclusion and community development (Government of Ireland, 2000).

Some partnerships have been less effective at involving the social partners (employers and unions) than the statutory sector and local community. Part of the problem is the weak structures and policies of these groups at the local and regional scales, since they are strongly oriented towards the national level. Where they exist, the regional offices are often too stretched to be represented on their local partnerships. In contrast, the local chambers of commerce seem to be more closely involved, although they lack mechanisms for systematic reporting across the country and for identifying common lessons to inform national policy. The social partners do not appear to have maintained a clear policy towards local development, despite strong support in the early 1990s. Indeed, the relationship between the two levels of social partnership - national and local - seems to contain ambiguities. As a result, local representatives appear to have no clear role or mandate to get involved, so if they participate it is on a voluntary basis. They are not expected to promote any particular policies at the local level, nor to report back consistently on any actions taken or experience gained. Individual union members are also hampered by an inability to get time off work to attend partnership meetings that are scheduled during the day.

Promoting innovation

The partnerships can perform a valuable function in experimenting with new projects and promoting policy innovation. Indeed, they were set up to devise more imaginative solutions to long-term unemployment (McCarthy, 1998). The local focus, needs-driven agenda, flexible resources and multi-sectoral approach are helpful in trying out new ways of addressing problems and exploring opportunities creatively. Government funding for programmes to be piloted in particular areas has also spawned new ideas and initiatives. Some of these have since been 'mainstreamed', i.e. adopted nationally or offered secure long-term funding.

The Local Employment Service is a good example of innovation. The LES emerged from a national task force report on long-term unemployment

in 1995, following successful innovation through local initiatives, particularly the 'Contactpoint' programme of Northside Partnership (OECD, 1998, p.57; NESF, 2000, p.32). The aim was to give long-term unemployed people better access to employment opportunities by providing an integrated gateway or access point to a wide range of guidance, counselling and job-placement services. The concept was to enable a flexible, person-centred and planned response to individual needs with a view to getting them a job or suitable opportunity for progression towards employment. It was introduced in 14 pilot areas in 1996, including the original 12 local partnerships. It was then extended to four more areas in 1997 and another seven in 1999. All the new LES were introduced under contract to local partnerships, indicating confidence in the partnership model and recognition of the need for an integrated approach based on good relationships between community groups, state agencies and local employers.

The service is currently being extended nation-wide and linked into a more fully integrated national employment service with common objectives and targets. There will be new management arrangements and a new national advisory committee. The local partnerships are concerned that control will be centralised and their influence reduced. This might mean that local flexibility and the personalised approach are compromised through greater standardisation and setting of national priorities, and that the established local networks among communities, employers and service providers are weakened. The counter argument has been that the LES needs more strategic direction in line with national employment objectives and that geographical unevenness in the availability and quality of provision needs to be reduced (NESF, 2000). There are some tensions between national and local aspirations, including the extent to which participation by the unemployed remains voluntary and confidential to the LES. The final outcome of the reorganisation is not yet clear.

Another example of innovation is the Area Allowance Scheme to assist the long-term unemployed become self-employed. This was piloted in the original partnerships in 1992 with incentives to help people move off welfare benefits, under the supervision of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. In 1998 these incentives were extended nation-wide (and renamed the Back to Work Allowance) after the scheme proved popular among unemployed people and successful at generating and sustaining new businesses. Many of the start-ups quoted earlier qualified for this support. Most would probably also have received business advice, counselling or training from the local partnership. Nationally, the number of people on the Area Allowance Scheme rose rapidly from about 200 in 1992 to 800 in 1995, 1,500 in 1996, 4,300 in 1997 and 7,400 in 1998, partly as a result of the increase in the number of partnerships from 12 to 38 in 1996/97 (ADM, no date). A fairly comprehensive survey of 269 people who were on the Scheme in 1992/93 in six partnership areas revealed that by 1998 (i.e. at least five years after starting up), 126 people (47%) were still in business, 50 additional full-time jobs existed in these businesses, 69 people (26%) had taken up alternative employment and 74 (28%) were unemployed. This compares well with experience of start-ups elsewhere, especially bearing in mind that the people concerned were long-term unemployed and at that time the Scheme did not provide any welfare subsidies after the first year.

A third example is Community Employment (CE), a national scheme introduced in 1994 to support worthwhile activities in the social economy while at the same time offering temporary work experience to long-term unemployed people. CE replaced three smaller programmes and expanded rapidly so that by 1996 it was Ireland's largest labour market programme, with 40,000 participants on average (OECD, 1998). The local partnerships have played an important role, particularly in assisting voluntary and community-based organisations to secure funding for relevant activities, and in developing suitable projects to meet local and national objectives.

Through a joint committee involving FAS, ADM and the local partnerships (via PLANET), an important framework agreement was negotiated in 1998 to promote greater co-operation at the local level between FAS and the partnerships. For example, during 2000 a series of workshops is being organised for local partnerships and FAS regions to discuss good practice in this area. The framework agreement also provides some flexibility to set objectives and targets locally, through working groups made up of people from the partnerships and FAS. These groups also seek to identify examples of innovative projects and to address the barriers that obstruct good project development.

The CE scheme has become more a series of separate local measures funded centrally, rather than a standard national programme. Typical projects have been in arts and recreation, environmental and property improvements, advice and support services, school assistants and caretakers, tourism facilities, and health and welfare services.

Other examples of innovation are not part of national initiatives. Several partnerships identified a growing and partly hidden problem of poor farmers with smallholdings threatened by reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and an ageing population. An advisory service was established to improve household incomes. The concept was subsequently extended to other rural partnerships. Several partnerships have also identified serious problems of truancy and early school leaving. The schools could not provide extra guidance and support to deal with the issues properly, so the partnerships raised funding for intensive outreach, school-based and home liaison services to restore confidence and remotivate those concerned.

Local ideas, initiatives and lessons from experience need to be spread more widely to justify the investment in the partnerships and to make a more significant impact on national policy-making. The main conclusions of an earlier OECD study visit to Ireland were that the partnerships had been extremely innovative, but that there should be more formal mechanisms for generalising local successes and incorporating the changes they suggest into the main functional administration of the government (OECD, 1996). Although there is undoubted scope for more to be done, especially to promote systematic learning at national level, the situation appears to have improved somewhat since then. For example, more conduits now exist for the partnerships to exchange information among themselves, to transfer experience to other local development groups and to engage with central authorities.

For example, ADM has organised interactive workshops and seminars, published guidance handbooks and pamphlets to identify and disseminate good practice, and promoted common initiatives among the partnerships. It has also begun to establish formal mechanisms to inform government policy and to influence the procedures of departments and state agencies, such as the joint committee with FAS on Community Employment discussed above. ADM works closely with seven departments: Education and Science; Social Welfare; Tourism, Sport and Recreation; Agriculture and Rural Development; Taoiseach; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Justice, Equality and Law Reform. In addition, PLANET now has the capacity to represent the partnerships in wider policy-making forums and to inform them of relevant policy developments through briefing papers and workshops. It also provides a network for regular internal contact and communication to facilitate exchange of experience and mutual learning.

There has also been an increase in the amount of informal networking and exchange of information between and within each of the partnerships as relationships have developed. This has added to the general dissemination of good practice and identification of common issues, although it gets little recognition in official documentation. Finally, there have been more attempts to evaluate particular partnership programmes and projects, as

recommended by the previous OECD report, although further work of this nature going beyond case studies is still important.

5. Conclusions

The changing context

The partnerships have operated in a favourable context of unprecedented employment growth and institutional stability during the late 1990s. The current environment is one of greater change and uncertainty. The economic boom has shifted the spotlight of national attention from growth to distributional concerns. It has also improved the prospects of socio-economic problems being successfully addressed. Rapid economic growth has cut unemployment and increased living standards for those in work, although substantial spatial and social disparities remain. As long-term unemployment has fallen, the composition has altered so that a higher proportion face barriers to employment requiring specialised support, including poor literacy and numeracy, lack of childcare facilities, various disabilities and substance misuse. This may mean they are more difficult to place into jobs (NESF, 2000). Meanwhile, the tighter labour market and congestion in some places have put pressure on the national social partnership to promote a more equitable allocation of the rewards from prosperity and greater targeting of investment and growth towards areas of need. The tighter labour market has also created opportunities to draw inactive and marginal groups into the workforce, such as lone parents, women returners, people with disabilities and unqualified school leavers. This depends on appropriate guidance, training, support and welfare/tax structures being in place. Poverty and social inclusion have clearly become more important issues on the national agenda (Government of Ireland, 1999a, 2000).

These challenges and opportunities suggest a continuing, albeit modified, role for the partnerships. They cannot replace national policies to reduce poverty and exclusion, but they can complement them well. They can assist national authorities to target disadvantaged communities and connect with excluded households. They can treat the problems of particular areas and groups in the round and co-ordinate responses, based on a better understanding of local circumstances. Their employment policies require closer links between the demand and supply sides of the labour market, and a greater understanding of the needs and constraints facing local economies. Issues such as infrastructure and transport need to be addressed since they affect employers' location decisions and ability to recruit, as well as access to work for the unemployed. Policies to promote progression in the labour market become important to prevent people getting trapped in low paid jobs. The quality of neighbourhood facilities and environments also become significant as people's incomes rise and they exercise more choice about where to live. Different problems have different spatial patterns, demanding sensitivity about the appropriate scale of response.

Coincidentally, there are important institutional changes in progress which will impinge on the form and functions of the partnerships. The reform of local government and the introduction of County/City Development Boards (CDBs - see section 1) are the most obvious examples. The partnerships were partly established to supplement local authorities, so if the latter are being strengthened and the principle of partnership working is being incorporated, the purpose of the local partnerships needs to be clarified to avoid duplication and confusion. The important changes associated with EU funding for Ireland have also altered the circumstances and created

uncertainty about the relationships between different organisations at different spatial scales.¹ The point emerging is that it is difficult to prescribe a particular role for the partnerships in isolation of these other developments. Their function depends on wider considerations than those discussed in this report. Nevertheless, it is clear that the partnerships have many positive features which should be retained in some shape or form and built upon for the future.

Partnership strengths

Some of the positive attributes of the partnerships stem from their nature as network arrangements rather than more self-contained structures:

- (i) Their practical problem-solving approach, needs-driven agenda and action-orientation have resulted in the provision of new and enhanced services and facilities which have directly assisted many poor and unemployed people. Through local consultation and practical knowledge of conditions on the ground they have identified gaps in existing services which they have sought to fill, directly or by activating other bodies. Their independence has often added to the quality and credibility of their services among local people.
- (ii) They have brokered informal alliances and cross-sector networks that have improved the flow of information between functional authorities and helped better to co-ordinate their employment and social programmes. They have brought together within the same working groups and sub-committees individuals and agencies that had little contact with each other before. There has been mutual learning and improved understanding all round, as well as increased commitment and dynamism from some quarters.
- (iii) They have given disadvantaged communities and groups a more direct say in the way some policies are made and resources allocated. They have provided a platform to enable them to articulate their needs more coherently and directly to the relevant functional organisations. They have also strengthened the capacity of communities to organise services, apply for funding and learn from experience elsewhere. These are important foundations for efforts to address the isolation, powerlessness and political exclusion experienced by many disadvantaged groups.
- (iv) These changes have introduced new ways of thinking into the public sector, starting a process that may help to bring about an organisational culture that is more responsive to individual and local circumstances, and more dynamic and developmental in approach. Senior officials in government departments and agencies have been exposed to attitudes, pressures and modes of operation that they have not experienced before. As a result, some national programmes and services have been tailored better to suit local conditions.
- (v) The partnerships have responded to changing circumstances by broadening the agenda of local development to a wide range of economic and social concerns. The area-based approach means

¹ They include the introduction of a new National Plan for the period 2000-2006, regionalisation of key aspects of its implementation including new Regional Assemblies to oversee local policy-making and resource allocation, the reduction in Objective 1 coverage for the South and East of the country, and more general changes in the Common Agricultural Policy which will have significant effects on rural areas.

taking places seriously and addressing the issues they face in the round, i.e. 'joined-up' or integrated policy-making. In some places this has extended to scope of activity to transport, environment and economic development issues. These have a direct effect on local employment opportunities and on peoples' access to them. The partnerships have also identified and acted upon new themes, such as absenteeism and early leaving from school.

- (vi) Some of their initiatives have been innovative and some of the lessons have been applied more widely in Ireland with beneficial effects. They have also been influential further afield, given the level of international interest in the Irish experience. Much of the energy and creativity appears to have emerged from bringing disparate interests together around a problem-solving agenda with few institutional constraints and preconceptions, and a relatively flexible package of resources.

These features have prompted informed local commentators and independent evaluators to recommend that the partnerships be given an enhanced role after 2000. For example, a recent review by the influential National Economic and Social Forum stated: "We conclude that the Local Development Programme has brought considerable benefits and we recommend that it should continue to be supported in the new National Development Plan (2000-2006)" (NESF, 1999, p.18).

It is rather surprising that the National Development Plan does not acknowledge an explicit role for local partnerships, especially bearing in mind their prominence in the previous Plan. Instead it identifies a range of measures to address social inclusion, some of which are geared to particular groups (such as young people, women and the unemployed), and others to particular service functions (such as education, childcare, community development and tackling crime). It recognises the importance of co-ordinating the planning and delivery of these services at the local level, but states that the CDBs will play a key role in this. In a subsequent speech, the Minister responsible for local development stated that there was no sinister motive in not specifically mentioning the partnerships (Flood, 1999). The Department of Finance had written the Plan around subject-specific themes rather than departmental programmes. He indicated continued government support for the partnerships, but hinted that a "more focused contribution" was envisaged once the CDBs were established.

This could mean that the scope of the partnerships gets restricted to more of a delivery role involving a narrow set of services, especially if the CDBs are able to pursue a broader co-ordinating function effectively. A delivery role would limit the partnerships' potential to influence policy and to draw together actors around a flexible, needs-driven agenda of local development. A partnership structure may also be unnecessary and even inefficient for a focused delivery role. So, the creation of the CDBs may result in the transfer of the current strategic and networking functions from the partnerships, with some loss of experience and momentum in the process. The CDBs may prove to be better at co-ordinating statutory bodies given their institutional location, but perhaps at the expense of community involvement.

The recent agreement between the national social partners supported the objective of local development in disadvantaged urban and rural areas based on a partnership framework (Government of Ireland, 2000). The existing local partnerships were not specifically mentioned, while the strategic role of the CDBs was endorsed. The rural white paper 'Ensuring the Future' also supported the role of the CDBs, confirming the importance now attached to them. In the latest budget the government earmarked funds for the local partnerships to continue for the time being after their EU funds expire. They are currently developing their own strategic plans. The final character of

these plans is uncertain at the time of writing - there will clearly have to be dialogue with the government and probably the CDBs about their scope and content before they are approved.

Weaknesses

Naturally there are also weaknesses in the partnerships that need to be recognised in a balanced assessment. These are partly a function of external constraints and structural issues, and partly a reflection of their internal organisation or approach, which is attributable in part to relative newness and inexperience. It is inevitable that the partnerships have developed unevenly, because of their crucial internal dynamics and the variable experience of different partners and the local community.

- (i) They have direct control over fairly limited resources, far less than any statutory partner. Promoting significant change in their localities requires paying more attention to using their networks to harness wider resources and to get greater flexibility into mainstream programmes. Their own resources and any 'special' funds are likely to have greater leverage if other organisations are encouraged to get more involved. Partnership activity should not focus on deploying core funds whenever a problem or an issue arises. Such funds may be used to best effect by trying out particular policy ideas, which, once established, should be funded on a more durable basis by other organisations. Mainstream partners need constant encouragement to respond to partnership agendas, to discuss appropriate responses to emerging problems and to deploy their resources accordingly. Central government could give a stronger lead in this respect. This would help to reduce the uneven experience of mainstreaming across areas and departments. Senior decision-makers may not appreciate the benefits that stem from closer co-operation with local partners, including policies tailored better to local circumstances and services delivered more efficiently.
- (ii) Many of the partnerships have not been particularly strategic in their approach. Operational pressures have been important, including the need to draw together disparate organisations and individuals with different backgrounds; to move forward incrementally in order to build trust, expertise and credibility, and to be seen to be responding to emerging problems and opportunities with specific initiatives. This may have encouraged an emphasis upon direct service provision, resulting in a range of sometimes loosely-connected projects. More could be done to analyse overall conditions in the locality, to develop a shared vision for its future and to persuade more powerful agencies to respond to the development priorities on a larger scale and in a more durable way than the partnerships can manage. The relationship between direct service/project delivery and broader strategy development is a question of balance and both processes are important ultimately.
- (iii) The agendas of some partnerships may have been narrower than appropriate. They have done more to promote social projects and person-oriented initiatives than physical improvements and economic development. As a result, their links with employers, property developers, financiers and the private sector generally have been weaker than with community groups and public sector bodies. A broad agenda is critical in areas with the weakest economies and fewest institutions to promote development, such as some rural

localities. They face considerable challenges at present and in the future with the expected decline in farming. Training and job access programmes without measures to boost labour demand may result in 'churning' and displacement of other vulnerable people from the job market. A broad view is also important in urban areas where the barriers to employment go beyond skills and motivation to include poor transport connections, discrimination by employers and lack of childcare. Improving the skills of individuals without the quality of neighbourhood conditions may mean that those who get jobs and improve their incomes simply leave the area. People and place policies need to be pursued in tandem, the precise combination depending on local conditions. It is important to tackle the underlying causes of unemployment and deprivation, and not simply to treat the symptoms. National action on infrastructure improvements, the regulation of development and welfare reform may be needed alongside targeted local measures.

- (iv) There is a danger that the valuable experience, learning and trust that has built up within the partnerships is dissipated because it remains within the ambit of the individuals involved and is not embedded within institutional policies and procedures. Despite recent improvements in co-ordination and networking, there are still too few mechanisms in place to report on and generalise the lessons of that experience more systematically at local and national levels. Current monitoring systems are more useful for basic reporting purposes than for providing management information which would help identify what happens, how and why it happens, and how efficiently it was made to happen. The efforts of the recently-established task group involving ADM, the partnerships and community groups to make the existing system more useful both for management purposes at local level and for strategic analysis at national level are to be supported. Any future mechanisms to capture experience should not unduly constrain the relative flexibility and variety of the partnerships with over-centralised systems. However, they should seek to reduce some of the uneven experience across the network by extending the lessons of good practice from the most successful to the rest. They could also help the partnerships get greater credit for their achievements and convey to national government powerful messages about the benefits of local flexibility, responsive administration and integrated use of resources.

Note: The paper draws on research undertaken by the author for the OECD and due to be published later this year in a report called *Enhancing Governance Through Partnerships*.

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