Social Partnership and Local Development in Ireland: The Limits to Deliberation

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Abstract

The Irish model of social partnership is considered distinctive as it is based on the principles of deliberative democracy more than adversarial bargaining. The deliberative features of the model are considered to be threefold. First, the negotiations to conclude national social agreements are not confined to the government, trade unions and employers, but also include a wide range of civil associations. Second, agreements are not simply concerned with wage determination, but cover a wide range of matters designed to promote social inclusion. Third, there is an effort to avoid agreements being overly centralized by promoting programmes at the local, territorial level. This paper examines the validity of this argument by assessing efforts to forge a local dimension to the social partnership model. The conclusions suggest that while the model has improved the delivery of public services, it is premature to claim that Irish social partnership represents a new model of labour market governance based on deliberative democracy.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, corporatist agreements have centred on trade unions making moderate wage demands in return for government commitments on tax and public expenditure. The ability of centralized trade unions and employer associations to police these agreements was widely seen as crucial to their sustainability. Outwardly, the Irish model of national wage agreements, which has been running since 1987, appears to conform to this established pattern of corporatist industrial relations. But one view, which enjoys considerable support, is that the Irish system of social partnership stands apart from corporatist deals of the past as it is based on the principles of deliberative democracy (O'Donnell and Thomas 2002). Proponents of deliberative democracy argue that parties interact with one another in a reasonable

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manner and use evidence-based arguments to reach agreements (Bohman 1996). The emphasis is on using persuasion to achieve consensus among competing parties.

Deliberative democracy is seen to have had an impact on the objectives and the institutional structure of Irish social partnership. The objective of the process is considered to be social inclusion rather than wage regulation. This broader objective is considered to impact on the institutional structure of social partnership in three ways. One is that the parties involved in negotiating the national social agreements are not only trade unions and employer associations, but also a wide range of civic associations. Another is that the social agreements have led to a new approach to policy making. A feature of many corporatist *quid pro quo* deals has been governments devising, implementing and monitoring agreed pubic initiatives on their own. Social partnership in Ireland, it is argued, has resulted in more open forms of policy making, which involve all relevant stakeholders at every stage of the policy process (O'Donnell and Thomas 1998). A final distinguishing institutional feature of the social agreements is that they have a strong decentralized orientation which encourages the inclusion of local civic and community associations in the formation and delivery of policies designed for their respective areas.

This assessment of Irish social partnership is interesting. If it is valid, it may have considerable implications for not only how we should view other social pacts in Europe, but also wider attempts to revitalize trade unions in different countries by encouraging them to link up with other civic associations in broad-based economic and social initiatives. But this assessment has a big weakness in that it has yet to be tested in any systematic manner. The absence of supporting evidence creates a question mark about the robustness of this view. The purpose of this paper is to examine the strength of the claim that Irish social partnership is an experiment in deliberative democracy by assessing the extent to which it has developed a local dimension based on a more open, inclusive form of policy making. In particular, it focuses on the Area Development Management (ADM) initiative, which created a wide number of area-based social partnerships.

The paper is organized in three parts. Section 2 describes the main institutional characteristics of the Irish model of social partnership. It also outlines the meaning of deliberative democracy and its implications for local governance in the context of social partnership. Section 3 focuses on the ADM Programme. Local partnerships have been used to implement the various projects initiated by the programme. The activities of local partnerships in two contrasting settings, Limerick and Dundalk, are examined to gain an insight into what they do and how they perform. Section 4 discusses the benefits and limits to these local partnerships. We particularly address the question: Has the opening up of a local dimension to social partnership led to the introduction of a form of 'empowered local democracy'? Section 5 concludes that while local partnership arrangements have produced benefits,

it would be misleading to claim that these herald a new departure in the character of local democracy in Ireland.

2. The Irish model of social partnership

The Irish model of social partnership has different institutional features than traditional corporatist industrial relations models. Whereas traditional corporatist arrangements usually consist of representatives from trade unions, employers and government, the Irish system of social partnership also incorporates civil associations that articulate the interests of the voluntary and community sectors as well as the farming sector. In practice, this broader membership base changes the negotiating procedures used to conclude national social agreements. Corporatist deal making normally involves tripartite negotiations between union, employers and government, but the Irish model is a 'four room' negotiating procedure.

The main employer and trade union organizations — ICTU and IBEC — constitute one room where the pay component of the agreement is negotiated. The business room is made up of employer organizations such as the Small Firms Association and the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland, which are not involved in the pay negotiations. The farming room consists of representatives of the agricultural community. The community room is made up of a variety of groups that represent the voluntary and community sectors. The negotiating process to reach a national social agreement starts with an open session where the participants set out the matters that they wish to see addressed. Then a multitude of bilaterals are held involving the different rooms on different subjects. The Department of the Taoiseach holds together this complex and fast-moving chain of negotiations. It is also responsible for turning the variety of individual bilateral deals that are made into a coherent document that is the basis of the social partnership agreement (Teague and Donaghey 2004).

The claim is that this institutional system has allowed the social partners as well as civic associations to have greater influence on the formation, delivery and evaluation of social and economic policies (O'Donnell and Thomas 1998). In terms of policy formation, a claimed novel feature of the social agreements is the creation of specialized working groups, involving government officials and representatives of the traditional social partners as well as specialized interest groups, to develop policies, or at least make recommendations for action, on particular economic and social themes. Thus, for example, the national agreement known as the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, which ran from 2000 to 2003, established 56 such working groups. In terms of policy delivery, various departments of government have committed themselves to introducing organizational reform to give civic associations a role in policy implementation at the local level. It is this local dimension that is particularly interesting as it potentially makes national social agreements less centralized and the vehicle by which social and

economic programmes can be designed and delivered by local communities (Baccaro 2002).

Social Partnership, Deliberative Democracy and Local Development

Deliberative democracy, which is a highly popular concept in political science, is essentially about the identification and resolution of policy problems through informed debate and preference-changing dialogue. Collecting evidence and interpreting and discussing it in a reasonable manner are regarded as central to the deliberative process (Dryzek 2000). Thus deliberative democracy focuses on how political and social institutions can promote collaborative action that aims to mobilize effort and knowledge to advance widely supported economic and social priorities. The emphasis is on devising policy solutions to economic and social matters in ways that seek to reconcile particular interests that were considered to be in collision. Creating shared understandings and consensus-building activities are the two mainstays of this approach (Mansbridge 1983).

Deliberative democracy is considered to lead to a superior form of decision making for four reasons (Elster 1998). First of all, the emphasis placed on open dialogue may unlock untapped knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of existing methods of doing things. Second, those involved in the policy-making process have the opportunity to acquire new skills and greater know-how about particular policy methods. Third, the promotion of collaborative and joint action may induce a richer mode of decision making, by encouraging participants to justify the positions they adopt with high quality reasoning. More informed, better thought-out decisions not only foster shared understandings between the different participants, but also deepen the wider legitimacy of policies. Fourth, the encouragement of consensus-building and trust-enhancing modes of interaction may atrophy the boundaries between the different constituencies that are involved in a policy network. New relationships of interdependence may emerge that strengthen the collaborative ethos of the process.

An interesting debate is ongoing about whether or not deliberation, which emphasizes consensus and sharing understanding, is compatible with rational choice accounts of decision making that focus on instrumental bargaining. Some argue that the systems are irreconcilable while others suggest that advanced political systems are now sufficiently sophisticated to accommodate both approaches even within the one policy arena (Saunders 1997; Young 1996). Although interesting, this debate is not of direct concern to the analysis here. A more important matter is the institutional structure of a deliberative governance regime. A considerable amount has been written on this topic, but in relation to local development the most informed and integrated account of deliberative policy-making institutions is that outlined by Fung and Wright (2003). Their model of deliberative governance has three important design properties. The first is delegation. Public policy decision-making is seen happening mostly at the local level so that communities directly

affected by an initiative can shape its content. Giving communities such a voice would not only be a step towards 'decentralized empowered governance', but would also release useful information about the 'absorptive capacity' of particular areas to sustain a particular programme.

The second design principle is centralized supervision and co-ordination. Local decision-making bodies are not seen as autonomous, but are continually monitored and to some degree held accountable to a centralized forum that invariably includes government officials and departments. The purpose of the national policy framework is not to act in a command-and-control manner, but to promote a form of co-ordinated decentralization. In practice, this means that the national centre supervises the finances of the decentralized body, helps solve any identified problems that are considered beyond the reach of local communities, and evaluates performance to learn from the successes (and failures) arising from local programmes.

The third principle can be called transformation through pragmatic action. Fung and Wright (2003) suggest that local programmes should focus on practical action to build sustainable and worthwhile initiatives for disadvantaged communities and individuals. Participation for the sake of participation is shunned, as such schemes are considered unsustainable. At the same time, the hope is that pragmatic action will generate a greater sense of empowerment in local areas so that intervention on one matter encourages action on others, thus triggering a cumulative effect that not only brings tangible improvements to local neighbourhoods, but also deepens participatory democracy.

Thus, with regard to local development, the deliberative governance framework promotes a form of networked governance which involves local inclusive bodies engaging in problem-solving activities to the betterment of disadvantaged communities and groups in the area (Denters *et al.* 2003). The administrative centre acts in a supervening manner, particularly in terms of monitoring and evaluation. Actually, the Irish government was remarkably locked into this form of thinking, as in 2000 it published a document outlining the organizing principles that should influence the design of decentralized social partnership arrangements. The vision it sets out is for 'a facilitative and enabling framework which promotes the growth of civil society' (Government of Ireland 2000: 42). At the centre of this framework are 'open' government departments engaging in dialogue and discussion with local civic associations to promote decentralized, bottom-up initiatives in communities.

Although certainly attractive, there can be little doubt that this form of deliberative policy making holds out many challenges for those participating. Consider some of the issues facing civic associations. Many of these groups have their origins in campaigning and mobilizing activities. Deliberative policy making requires them to moderate this role and to develop the capabilities to articulate well-informed opinions inside a variety of bodies (Osterman 2002). Moreover, they have to show a willingness to modify, if not change, their position if presented with persuasive counterarguments. Thus, to

TABLE 1
Civic Association Competences for Deliberative Policy Making

Knowledge/learning competences	*Advocacy/entrepreneurial competences*	*Organizational competences*
Routine knowledge resources	Ability to mobilize members	Financial and staffing resources
Internal capacity-building abilities	Ability to agenda-set	Membership base
Internal 'epistemic' assets	Ability to organize external alliances	Organizational and decision-making structure
Ability to monitor internally and externally	Ability to promote wider understanding of issues	Internal communication and policy-making systems
Ability to diffuse best practice ideas	Balance between deliberation/mobilization activities	Ability to promote organizational identity and culture

participate meaningfully in deliberative policy making, civil associations need to have a range of competences, some of which are outlined in Table 1. Apart from the matter of capabilities, there is the difficult matter of whether or not community groups should completely turn away from campaigning activity and focus most of their energies on deliberative discussions. One option would be to combine both activities, but reconciling the consensus-orientated culture of deliberation and the adversarial ethos of mobilizing is a difficult task. The key point is that putting deliberation into practice is a highly challenging goal.

3. Local partnerships and the ADM

The first moves in Ireland towards a partnership-based approach to local economic and social development came with the establishment of the ADM initiative as a pilot programme in 1992. Twelve area-based local social part-nerships were set up by ADM with the responsibility of co-ordinating the activities of state agencies aimed at local disadvantaged groups. These local partnerships were given a wide remit, but in essence they had three core responsibilities: (1) help the long-term unemployed back into the job market; (2) assist the development of local economic and employment projects, with a special emphasis on promoting entrepreneurs within low-income commu-nities and establishing new businesses in the social economy; (3) support more traditional community development projects, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Each area partnership had to establish a board that consisted of represen-tatives from community interests, public agencies and the traditional social partners. Equal representation was given to each pillar. Decisions were to be made by consensus. A national partnership board was set up to co-ordinate

the area partnerships and to allocate and monitor their funding. Turok (2001: 5) describes ADM as 'a fairly loosely defined experiment in area-based initiatives, with a prime concern for unemployment set in the broader context of economic and social development'.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 1994–1999 mainstreamed this pilot programme (Department of Finance 1994). As a result, area-based partnerships were extended across the country. The extension and consolidation of the programme was due in no small part to the EU-funded Community Support Framework (CSF). One of the CSF's nine Operational Programmes was Local Urban and Rural Development (OPLURD), which had the objective 'to counter disadvantage through support for communities which make a collective effort to maximise the development potential of their areas'. Mainstreaming the pilot programme ensured that Ireland met the funding criteria of OPLURD. Thus by the mid-1990s 38 area partnerships (20 in urban areas and 18 in rural areas) had been established in the country.

Although the various partnerships are nominally tied together in a networked structure and are supervised by a national partnership board, in practice each locality enjoys a fair degree of day-to-day operational autonomy. When the partnerships were first set up in 1992 it was envisaged that they would have few formal links with local government. But this link was strengthened in 1999 when the local partnerships were required to include local elected councillors on their boards instead of local government officials. Some studies suggest that politicians at the local level were angered by their restricted input into the local partnerships (see OECD 1996; Walsh 1998). A frequent line of criticism was that the bypassing of local government led to the area partnerships lacking public accountability and not being open to public scrutiny. In a nutshell, area partnerships in the beginning lacked democratic legitimacy.

In terms of funding, OPLURD allocated IR£80 million to the 38 partnerships for the 1994–1999 period. Each partnership received a budget for the whole period of between IR£1 million and IR£4 million to cover core staff, administration and the revenue costs of selected projects and services. The budget of each local partnership was approved on the basis of a strategic plan submitted to the national partnership board of ADM. The strategic plan was obliged to outline the shared vision of the area partnership and describe how it intended to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups in the local community. A stipulation was that in preparing the plans, partnership boards had to consult with local groups representing the unemployed and other marginal groups. Although each area partnership was encouraged to develop new and more effective means of tackling problems, ADM developed a number of operational programmes to frame the activities of local partnerships. These programmes are outlined in Appendix 1. Thus, while there was a lot of talk about local experimentation, in practice, if any of the local partnership developed initiatives which fell outside the scope of the operational programmes, it is doubtful whether they would have received money.

Overall Performance of the ADM Initiative

The performance of the ADM programme has not been extensively investigated, but the view of Government and the social partners is that it has performed satisfactorily. On the positive side the national office of the programme appears to operate in a pretty cost-effective way as it has succeeded in keeping the central administrative costs associated with running individual programmes to about 7 per cent of the total budget. Focus groups held by some evaluations suggest that those directly involved in implementing the programmes on the ground — full-time development workers, community groups, other public agencies and volunteers — are satisfied with the services provided by the national office. The financial control and planning systems operated by the ADM central office are regarded as high quality.

On the negative side, a number of criticisms have been levied against the ADM. First of all, and perhaps most seriously, the initiative has been accused of lacking democratic accountability. As already stated, it was not until 1999 that a formal connection was made between partnership boards and elected politicians either at a national or local level. In addition, some members of area partnerships that received funding from ADM are also members of the national Board of ADM, which opened the possibility of a conflict of interest. There has been no accusation of financial malpractice, but given that the total budget of the ADM in 2002 was approximately €90 million, it might have been prudent to have had in place a more elaborate governance structure from the start. A second criticism is that project appraisal of particular initiatives lacked rigour, particularly in terms of calculating possible deadweight and displacement effects. A related criticism is that insufficient monitoring and evaluation of programmes has been carried out to permit the centre to codify best practice. Learning-by-monitoring procedures were not well developed.

Varied assessments were made of the individual programmes that were implemented by the ADM (interviews with officials from the Department An Taoiseach). The Rural Transport Initiative received the strongest evaluation reports. About 34 individual projects have been set up and these absorbed €6 million in 2002 alone. But as a result of this funding it is estimated that in 2002, 200 new routes were introduced, which were being used by 2,000 people every week. Moreover, it is estimated that 500 people are involved on a voluntary basis with these projects, which suggests that the projects have widespread local community support. The performance of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Project (EOCP) programme has not been rated so highly. It is considered to have progressed slowly, particularly in terms of the number of new childcare places created relative to the total amount of money that has been spent. It is estimated that €176.5 million was earmarked to projects yet the number of childcare places increased by only 49 per cent. In other words, the programme is not offering good value-for-money. The Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) is also not highly rated as it too is considered to have progressed slowly and has not reached its

designated targets. Thus at the aggregate level, the ADM appears neither to have been a big success story nor an unmitigated failure. It has performed satisfactorily, producing a range of benefits, but containing a number of shortcomings.

Local Partnership in Action: the Cases of Limerick and Dundalk

To augment this aggregate picture, two local partnerships — one in Limerick and the other in Dundalk — were examined to assess how these arrangements have operated at local level. These two local partnerships were selected for a variety of reasons. First of all, neither place was inside the Dublin area, a factor considered important as partnerships in and around the capital city are better positioned to get access to more specialized resources and expertise. Furthermore, both localities selected have had their fair share of problems, although these differed in character. Dundalk is a town in the northeast part of the country, near to the border with Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it obtained a bad image during the 'Troubles'. In particular, it was considered a town were republicans 'on the run' from the British security forces would relocate: it was frequently referred to as El Durado.

Limerick City, which is located in the southwest part of the Republic, is generally seen as suffering from a number of problems. One claim is that the city, like the region in which it is located, has been relatively neglected by successive governments, which have been more preoccupied with upgrading Dublin and the surrounding area. Another claim is that the development that occurred in the 1950s was not well thought out as it created large isolated housing estates on the periphery of the city that subsequently generated a range of social problems in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, both places were seen as locations that had a series of problems that were open to be addressed by partnership type initiatives.

The PAUL Partnership in Limerick and the Dundalk Employment Partnership are the two organizations that implement ADM-related programmes. Both have similar missions, which involve supporting integrated local economic and social development by managing programmes targeted at countering disadvantage and exclusion and promoting reconciliation and equality. Equally, the organizational structure of each partnership is broadly the same. The key decision-making body is the Board of Directors made up from communities, state agencies, social partners, voluntary groups and elected representatives. In each case, directors or senior management from the public health and education agencies in the locality sit on the Board, which indicates a high level of commitment from these organizations. Civic association representatives are drawn from the most prominent local community and voluntary groups. These groups nominate their representatives to the Board rather than the Board appointing them unilaterally.

Much of the work of the two partnerships is tied to the 'mandates' that have been received from the national partnership board of the ADM. In particular, as mentioned earlier, they are obliged to develop projects that

relate to programmes such as EOCP and LDSIP. As a result, the two partnerships tend to do similar things, although there are some differences in areas of work. The converging and diverging features to the work of the two partnerships are developed in greater detail as follows.

Enterprise creation and development

Each partnership seeks to promote self-employment and enterprise development among five targeted groups — the long-term unemployed, lone parents, travellers, people with disabilities and women. Both partnerships have an Enterprise Support Centre that operates as a 'one-stop shop', providing guidance and advice to both individuals and groups seeking to advance their enterprise initiatives. The centres provide workspace and office facilities for individual small businesses. In addition, intensive support is given to small business owners on matters such as business planning support, bookkeeping, financial advice and guidance, grant and loan application assistance, marketing advice and mentoring.

Both partnerships also co-ordinate the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme: during 2002 Limerick approved 60 applications whereas Dundalk approved 37. In addition, each partnership has provided small grants to community groups and individuals to develop enterprise ideas and establish or expand small enterprises.

The partnerships deliver or sponsor education and training courses to promote sustainable self-employment. These range from business start-up courses aimed at the long-term unemployed to sessions on matters such as bookkeeping, which are mainly aimed at participants on the Area Enterprise Allowance Schemes. In addition to these business start-up programmes, 'soft supports' are provided to existing clients so that they can receive help from experienced business mentors mostly on tax and financial planning issues. Each partnership also pursues separate initiatives on this theme. Thus the PAUL Partnership is actively pursuing proposals to establish a Mid West Social Economy Fund to provide finance for social economy projects while the Dundalk Partnership has set up a number of working committees to develop business plans for new social enterprises.

Local employment services (LES)

Each partnership operates a local employment service with the primary purpose of providing a professional, confidential and community-based service to enable clients who are long-term unemployed or otherwise distant from the labour market to access meaningful employment opportunities. This is achieved by means of a number of measures: (1) job clubs that give career guidance and mediation; (2) comprehensive, user-friendly and up-to-date information; (3) an effective network with partner organizations, community groups and employers; (4) innovative outreach strategies to deliver a local service to clients (e.g. a mediator attends Limerick Prison to establish contact with clients before release).

Education and training

Providing education and training programmes is a key aspect of the activities of both partnerships. Most of these programmes are targeted at young people and other disadvantaged groups and cover a wide range of activities. For example, outreach programmes provide IT facilities and tuition in local communities, specifically for parents and homemakers. 'Taster' courses to encourage progression to third level education have been delivered for people who would not normally consider this route to improve their human capital. Early school leaving projects have been designed to encourage students to remain in the formal education system. Sporting programmes, summer activities and educational trips have been organized, all aimed at promoting school participation. Intervention programmes have been set up aimed at encouraging parents to become the prime educators of their children.

Community development

In addition to promoting enterprise and labour market activity, each partnership is engaged in mainstream community development work. Both work with local communities in an attempt to improve living conditions in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. PAUL Partnership in Limerick, for example, supports five community-based action centres which provide three key services: (1) services to the unemployed — an information service on education and training; (2) referral to other service providers; and (3) secretarial services for community development. The Dundalk partnership also has established resource centres in the most deprived parts of the town. These centres act as a referral point to other agencies, but in addition provide assistance to the local community groups to develop integrated plans for their areas. A number of innovative environmental projects as well as projects aimed at particular groups such as the disabled and lone parents have resulted from this activity. Both partnerships also sponsor training projects on capacity-building; presentation and negotiation skills; management skills and facilitation; and group skills.

An important new area of work for both partnerships is providing support for asylum seekers and new migrants. The work with asylum seekers mainly involves helping them process claims for residency and ensure that they are properly treated in terms of housing provision and access to benefits. Programmes have been set up to combat racism at community level. Both partnerships have developed citizenship initiatives for new migrants. Much of this activity focuses on building up self-help networks, providing language courses and assisting people to access jobs, but it also has involved other interesting schemes such as encouraging migrant families to become active and interested in their communities.

Family support and welfare rights

Family support and welfare rights is another sphere of work common to both partnerships. The aim of this activity is to empower families and to improve their quality of life. In seeking to do this, the subgroup aims to raise awareness

of family support issues, provide support for new services and to lobby for changes affecting families. Among the activities of the group in 2002 were: (1) organization of a major conference on women's health; (2) support for the development of services for older people via senior citizens groups; (3) support for a domestic abuse project; and (4) support for training for asylum-seeker young mothers.

Innovative Projects

While there is a big overlap in the activities of the two partnerships, each have developed programmes that are fairly distinctive. Examples of these innovative projects from each partnership are given as follows.

Limerick Local Social Capital Programme

The Limerick Local Social Capital Programme ran from 1 September 1999 to 28 February 2002 and was run collaboratively by PAUL Partnership, Ballyhoura Development and West Limerick Resources. The Limerick programme was the only social capital pilot on the island of Ireland. The European Commission provided €1 million funding and an additional €115,950 was provided by the partnership organizations. Both Limerick City Council and Limerick County Council underwrote the total project. During the lifetime of the project 169 grants were made available to individuals and organizations supporting the development of social capital.

The Dundalk Community Media Centre

The Dundalk Community Media Centre was created as a facility for schools, community and voluntary groups as well as individuals with a specialized interest in art, filmmaking and the creative industries more generally. The centre currently employs seven people who are assisted by 60 volunteers. A number of interesting projects have been set up since it opened in 2002. The centre has been granted a five-year licence by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland to operate a community radio initiative known as Dundalk Weekend Radio. Training is also provided for community and voluntary groups on media and press communication. Schools use the facilities to allow students to experiment with a wide range of media and communication activities that range from completing a video on environmental projects to using the technologies to help improve job-interviewing techniques of students.

4. Community associations, social partnership and local development

In assessing the role or engagement of community groups within local partnership arrangements, three interrelated issues are addressed. One is whether or not community groups in either area had the competence to make an effective input into the activities of the local partnership proceedings. Another is whether or not the local partnerships, as a gateway to resources, enabled

the community groups to work effectively in three traditional spheres of activity — local capacity building, disseminating packages of social interventions and strengthening campaigning activities. The third is whether the creation of local partnerships caused community groups to develop in unforeseen ways or function in a different manner.

A characteristic of the community groups in the Dundalk and Limerick areas was that they were relatively unexceptional, possessing all the strengths and weaknesses that are usually associated with these organizations. Some of these characteristics are set out in Table 2. Table 2 outlines the extent to which the community groups had the competences identified earlier to work in deliberative policy-making arrangements. The profile that emerges from the table is of groups that are reasonably representative of their designated local community or constituency. Each endeavours to operate in an open and financially responsible manner. They are reasonably well resourced in terms of staff, but not to the point where they possess expertise on particular matters. Thus, most groups would not be able to work up on their own a well-argued case for a particular initiative without external assistance or to keep abreast of external policy developments that may be of some relevance to them.

However, they have detailed knowledge of their local area in terms of being able to identify individuals or families that are in some way vulnerable or are the cause of trouble. They are also a good barometer of the mood of the local

TABLE 2
Civic Association Competence and Local Partnerships

Competence	Dundalk			Limerick		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Routine knowledge resources	✓			✓		
Internal capacity-building activities		✓			✓	
Internal 'epistemic' assets	✓			✓		
Ability to monitor internally		✓				✓
Ability to monitor externally	✓				✓	
Ability to diffuse best practice ideas	✓			✓		
Ability to mobilize members		✓			✓	
Ability to agenda-set	✓					✓
Ability to organize external alliances		✓				✓
Ability to promote wider understanding of issues	✓				✓	
Balance between deliberation/ mobilization activities	✓			✓		
Financial and staffing resources		✓			✓	
Membership base		✓			✓	
Organizational and decision-making structure		✓			✓	
Internal communication and policy making		✓			✓	
Ability to promote organizational identity and culture	✓				✓	

community on certain matters. In addition, over the years they have been reasonably good at building alliances with local politicians, business leaders and professionals to advance their particular interests. While activities of this type have permitted them to build a local identity, they have not used this asset to launch campaigns on big issues. For the most part, the groups engage in fairly low scale agitation on behalf of an individual or a family on matters such as housing or social benefits.

The Local Partnerships and Community Capacity Building

The two local partnerships have operated more or less as what are referred to in the literature as 'new social intermediaries' (Dresser and Rogers 2003). These organizations set out to address different facets of social exclusion by promoting employability and enterprise development. They do this in a number of ways. First of all, each partnership attempts to increase the flow and sharing of information among policy making on the dynamics of social exclusion in the respective localities. By creating new fora to discuss and formulate strategy on poverty and exclusion, the partnerships draw agencies, employers and community representatives into interactions and exchanges which might otherwise not happen.

A number of benefits have arisen from these interactions. Better understanding has been gained about the strengths and weaknesses of existing programmes. More is learnt about particular forms of disadvantage and exclusion in specific neighbourhoods. Both these benefits have lead to improved policy making and delivery. Thus, in both Limerick and Dundalk, statutory agencies relaxed eligibility criteria associated with particular programmes to allow individuals access to financial allowances that they would not have received otherwise. Flexibility has also been shown in the implementation of particular initiatives to prevent the exclusion of certain communities. New forms of multi-agency collaboration have been launched to address the problems of identified disadvantaged groups, particularly in the areas of education and training. At the same time, while information sharing and better communication channels have improved since the arrival of the area partnership arrangements, it would be an exaggeration to say that all problems have been effectively solved.

A further benefit is that each partnership has provided new resources to strengthen the internal capacity of local groups and to help them operate in a more visible and organized way. Thus, each partnership employed community development officers to provide expert assistance to groups in such things as helping them communicate more effectively with members, giving advice and training on how to operate meetings, solve problems and develop activities that would advance their interests. Each partnership also funded resource centres in deprived housing estates and neighbourhoods to help different community groups organize local activities. These resource centres have been used to run events such as mother and child clubs, old-aged pensioners clubs, adult literacy classes, etc. Although these activities are not distinctive to the

Irish case — community groups are doing similar things in virtually similar ways around the globe — the support provided by the Dundalk and Limerick partnerships did permit a wider range of community-related activities to be launched in the respective localities. This support also increased the internal capabilities of community groups to make arguments about the limits of local public policies.

A further undisputed benefit arising from the partnerships was the creation of new employment brokerage services, which improved sorting and matching in the labour market. Unlike most other countries in Europe, Ireland does not have a public employment service, which, on the one hand, advertises job vacancies and training opportunities and provides career guidance and advice on the other. This is a particularly important service as many groups such as the long-term unemployed and lone parents require individual employability plans that integrate guidance on personal and career choices with training and learning packages. Both in Limerick and Dundalk the creation of these services by the area partnerships was positively welcomed by local employers, communities and public servants. And the high numbers that use the facilities suggest that a valuable and much needed service has been set up. Using a partnership framework to deliver employment support services is an interesting development as it goes against a tendency emerging in other countries of transferring such arrangements from the public to the private sectors.

Yet another benefit that has arisen from the two partnerships is that better conditions have been created for the local monitoring of public policy delivery. Community groups are rarely shy in coming forward to advocate and lobby for more resources and new programmes from government. But they are reluctant to engage with government in monitoring and evaluating initiatives, which require them to share information and be self-critical to potential sources of future funding. Because community groups do not fully trust public agencies, the ability to monitor and evaluate policy programmes is reduced. In turn, the capacity to design more effective policies in the future is also weakened. The partnership arrangements have provided a partial solution to this problem. In both Dundalk and Limerick the community groups regard the partnerships as operating at arm's length from government and thus tend to engage in a richer dialogue concerning the potential and limits to developing particular schemes. In addition, programmes have been implemented in a more targeted manner.

A fourth benefit of the partnership arrangements is a new engagement from the local business community. One interviewee described it as a modern form of the old Irish concept of *meitheal*. In nineteenth-century rural Ireland a common practice, particularly at harvest times, was a voluntary system of collective action, involving informal networks of farmers helping each other to complete tasks. As a result of this activity a strong sense of community and collective identity emerged in many rural areas. Partnership, it was argued, has revived this type of action by encouraging local business people to get involved in the process. This involvement took several different forms. Some prominent local business people played an active role in Boards of

Directors of each partnership — the chairpersons of each partnership were well known and respected local business individuals. Other individuals participated in 'projects' established to advance particular ideas. Still others provided specialized assistance to business training programmes in the areas of marketing and accountancy, most of the time without charge. In both Dundalk and Limerick, the contribution of the local business community to economic development was identified as a significant benefit arising from the area partnership process.

Social Entrepreneurs and the Local Partnerships

The above discussion shows that the area partnerships have been instrumental in the development of policy packages that helped address aspects of social exclusion at the local level. Many community groups benefited from these packages and became involved in the delivery of these services. In so doing they were fulfilling a traditional role of community groups of providing services and activities to members that either address particular problems or improve the quality of life of individuals living on the margins of society. Another traditional function of community groups is to campaign at the local level against so-called 'faceless' bureaucracies. For the most part, community groups in neither Dundalk nor Limerick get involved in this form of activity, at least not in any sustained or high profile way.

Two reasons exist for this lack of a campaigning role. One was that many elements of the public bureaucracy did not operate in a 'faceless' manner and in fact were only too willing to engage with local community groups to find new and better ways to deliver services. Thus, the public authorities in charge of housing actively sought a community input into plans to improve facilities in relatively deprived neighbourhoods in both Dundalk and Limerick. To some extent, this openness negated the need to launch campaigning initiatives. Another reason is that the introduction of a relatively wide range of new programmes to provide social services that had been absent for many years changed the incentive structure facing community groups. Instead of initiating campaigns on social and economic matters, it made greater sense for community groups to engage with the new local partnership bodies to obtain finance and resources that would bring material benefits to their local constituencies or areas.

Community groups in both areas were very adept at securing funds from these new sources. A key factor in this success has been the role played by local community leaders. These able and motivated individuals acted as social entrepreneurs, injecting dynamism and energy into the activities of voluntary and community groups (Alvord *et al*. 2002). Consider the Moyross Enterprise Community Centre, which is located in a relatively deprived housing estate on the periphery of Limerick. This community business initiative is lead by a highly energetic and shrewd community leader who is a resident of the estate. In the early 1990s, under his leadership, the community business was able to add considerably to its portfolio of activities. For example, with the

help of PAUL Partnership it was able to persuade Fás (the public training body) to fund a range of community projects under the Job Initiative Scheme. In total, these projects employ 26 full-time and 45 part-time staff. One project involved the local community gaining a contract to maintain the local sports fields and amenities, thereby increasing the sense of neighbourhood ownership of this facility.

Another initiative involved the community group working with PAUL Partnership, the city council and the housing authorities, and a range of business development agencies to convert a row of derelict houses into small businesses units. Seven units in total were created and these are all now occupied. Not only did this facility allow individuals to open business ventures in their local neighbourhood, but it also ensured that vacant houses that in all likelihood would have been vandalized were put to productive use. Yet a further scheme was the community group working with various agencies and the local police to set up a community security scheme that involved setting up a system of CCTV cameras around the estate to address problems of vandalism, drug pushing and other forms of anti-social behaviour.

Thus, community leaders acting as social entrepreneurs were successful in getting money from various social exclusion programmes. But research into social entrepreneurship suggests that it can have a downside (Alvord *et al.* 2002). For example, social entrepreneurs can monopolize community groups, to the extent that in some instances they dominate internal communication channels and ensure that most resources gained are directed towards advancing projects they consider as important. A further drawback is that the chase after extra resources leads to less emphasis being placed on building the internal capacity of community groups by recruiting new members and strengthening organizational and democratic structures. Thus social entrepreneurship has the potential to 'becalm' community organization. It would be wrong to say that the leaders of the community groups in the two areas monopolized affairs, but most of the activities of the groups appeared to be dedicated to securing finance from various agencies and initiatives. As a result, a real danger in the Irish context is that the recent proliferation in programmes targeted towards ameliorating social exclusion may promote more social entrepreneurship activity and less civic mobilization.

New Decentralized Institutions without Civic Mobilization

Thus, the best way to depict the area partnerships in the two areas is as an underdeveloped form of network governance on employment and economic development matters. It would be excessive to suggest that these partnerships represent a fully fashioned example of the model set out by Fung and Wright (2003). The Irish case falls short of their ideal type model. The high quality interactions between the centre and the local areas, which Fung and Wright envisaged would lead to national bodies supporting local programmes, have

not materialized, or least not in any convincing manner. Administrative decentralization has been achieved, which has resulted in a fair degree of uniformity across local partnerships in terms of what they do and how they go about doing it. But little evidence exists of the centre providing substantial or sustained support to local stakeholders that would have enabled them to launch genuinely experimental initiatives. Whereas the centre has secured strong financial control and accountability over local projects, there is little indication of it engaging in evaluation and assessment activities that would tease out the benefits and limits of local initiatives. Nor is there much evidence of national initiatives promoting connections between the various area partnerships so that these could learn from each other. Thus, neither the ADM initiative as a whole nor the local partnerships in Limerick and Dundalk can be described as exemplars of the deliberative governance model developed by Fung and Wright.

At the same time, it has to be recognized that this model sets down enormously exacting performance standards. The ADM needed to have been exceptionally high performing over a period of time to match the preconditions established by the two authors. Thus, Fung and Wright probably set the bar at too high a level for assessing the activities of experiments in deliberative institution building. But even taking into consideration the exacting benchmarks set down by Fung and Wright, it still has to be concluded that the ADM has shortcomings. In the Irish case, there is too much fragmentation in the design and delivery of local economic and development policies that seek to address social exclusion. Consider the NDP 2000–2006, which established a strategic framework for public sector expenditure and investment to advance growth and prosperity in the Republic (Department of Finance 2000). Approximately €19 billion was earmarked to be spent on social exclusion measures over a six-year period. A close reading of the plan reveals that these measures were to be managed by eight separate government departments, implemented by thirteen different agencies and delivered by a large number of institutions. No cross-departmental framework was considered necessary to co-ordinate and integrate the large number of interventions that have been established. This is hardly the most appropriate institutional framework for the pursuit of deliberative policy making.

The problem was made worse by the absence of strong representative institutions at the local level (Chubb 1992). Historically, the policy-making functions of local government in Ireland have been more or less limited to housing and planning. Thus, there was little that could have been done at the local level to make more coherent the many social inclusion programmes. But things are changing. At the end of the 1990s the remit of the county and urban councils was extended by central government to include local economic and social development. For the first time, local authorities were given the authority to establish County and City Development Boards (Callanan 2004). This move should strengthen the democratic legitimacy and accountability of area partnerships. The unwritten assumption was that increasing the involvement of local councillors in economic and community development would

lead to more difficult questions being asked about the internal organizational operations of civic associations and the degree to which they genuinely gave a 'voice' to under-represented groups and neighbourhoods. Furthermore, it would permit more challenging questions to be asked about the feasibility and even the desirability of some of the funded social inclusion projects. In other words, giving representative democratic institutions a greater role in local economic and social development may encourage a more effective system to evaluate and monitor the role of area partnerships.

The working method adopted by the two assessed local partnerships was a form of deliberative policy making (Fung 2003). Each arrangement seeks to advance its designated objectives through the creation of working or project groups on a particular topic. These working groups, which normally consist of a small band of people, examine in detail the feasibility of a particular proposal or evaluate the costs and benefits of opening up a particular policy pathway. In essence, these function as 'epistemic' committees rather than arrangements to promote participation. The focus is on the collection and analysis of evidence and information. Community groups normally have representatives on these groups, but given their capabilities it is not clear whether they have the expertise or knowledge to make a genuine contribution. Nevertheless, many of these working parties have produced interesting, well researched and well-argued policy proposals.

But the development of worthwhile schemes through these procedures occurs without any noticeable increase in popular democracy. In other words, local partnerships may be putting down the first building blocks of a new system of social intermediaries *without* advancing civic participation or mobilization. As a result, the danger is that the new network governance system may end up developing worthwhile projects and services and being more sensitive to the views of the non-government sector without being institutional facilitators for participatory democracy: civic associations run the danger of becoming too integrated into an administrative system set up to deliver essentially government-determined local economic policies. In other words, a superior form of policy making is created without democratic engagement being improved (Goldfrank 2002). Although government may reap some benefits from this situation, civic associations may lose out. In particular, civic associations may find themselves in a weaker position to challenge prevailing norms, rules and institutions that influence labour market policies and outcomes through mobilization efforts and campaigns. They become too compliant, resulting in the public policy establishment pursuing initiatives that are within its comfort zone. In addition, civic organizations are not challenged about their vision of the future (Osterman 2004).

5. Conclusions

The trend when discussing social partnership arrangements at the local level is to laud them as breakthrough experiments that are paving the way for a

new form of economic and social governance. The vision is of a new decentralized deliberative democracy framework that seeks to upgrade the formation, delivery and evaluation of programmes designed to obtain social inclusion (OECD 1996; Sabel and Zeitlin 2003). This vision is attractive, but the evidence from Ireland is that while such initiatives bring positive benefits, they do not enliven local democracy to any great extent. There are specific factors to the Irish situation that have contributed to local partnerships not being fully successful. The traditional over-centralization of Irish political institutions was not an auspicious background for this policy departure. The early decision to separate conception from execution by designing the nature of the programmes at the centre and then restricting the activities of the local partnerships to chasing finance and delivering services did little to further the experimental character of the initiative. The net result is that local partnerships have neither paved the way for a radical overhaul of democratic structures nor challenged traditional ways of organizing government.

Clearly there is something to the argument that the Irish model of social partnership has initiated interesting initiatives outside the realm of the narrow wage bargaining. It was a bold move to include the civic associations in the national social partnership negotiations and to launch initiatives that went beyond the traditional *quid pro quo* corporatist deals. But perhaps the move was not bold enough. After initiating the drive towards local partnerships, the national partnership framework did not get involved in the initiative in any significant way. Trade unions did little to adopt internal structures to strengthen the push towards local development. No systematic initiatives were launched to increase the capacity of civic associations to fully engage in local partnerships. No arrangements were put in place for the social partners to evaluate the positive and negative features of local initiatives.

Without these supplementary actions local partnerships have not operated as a gateway for empowered local democracy. Even the opportunity for trade unions to forge new alliances with civic associations outside the realm of the employment relationship has not been fully exploited. Thus it would appear that the Irish social partnership model has operated in too centralized a fashion to ensure the effective implementation of its vision for Irish society and economy. Herein lies the dilemma for proponents of deliberative democracy in the sphere of employment relations, or any other sphere of economic and social governance for that matter. On the one hand, to stand any chance of being successful, experiments in deliberative democracy need to be accompanied by significant institutional change (Putnam 2000). On the other hand, the social partners, because they are not convinced that the initiative will be a full success, tend not to risk introducing the necessary institutional changes. Thus the initiative ends up in a limbo position whereby it promises a great deal without totally delivering. All in all, the evidence does not appear to sustain the claim that the Irish social partnership model has been successful

at placing deliberative democracy at the centre of industrial relations structures.

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Appendix 1: Operational programmes managed by the ADM

Equal Opportunities Childcare Project (EOCP) is to enable parents to avail of training, education and employment opportunities through the provision of quality childcare supports. The principal objectives of the EOCP are to improve the quality of childcare in Ireland; to increase the number of childcare facilities and childcare places; and to introduce a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services. For the period 2000–2003, the programme was allocated €176.5 million.

Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) is a National Development Plan (NDP) programme aimed specifically at addressing social inclusion issues at a local level. The LDSIP involves the provision of funding to partnerships, community groups and employment pacts 'that adopt a

partnership approach to tackling local issues on the basis of comprehensive, integrated local action plans designed to counter exclusion'.

The LDSIP specifically targets disadvantaged groups including travellers, disabled, lone parents, older people, ethnic minorities and young people at risk. The principal means of achieving the objectives of LDSIP is via actions supporting services for the unemployed, community development and community-based youth initiatives. For the period 2000–2006, €279.34 million has been allocated to the LDSIP programme.

Revitalizing Areas by Planning, Investment and Development Programme (RAPID) has three key objectives: (1) to develop a specific integrated policy focus across the social inclusion measures identified in the NDP, directed at the social groups who are excluded, especially where cumulative disadvantage is pervasive; (2) to tackle in particular the spatial concentration of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion within the 25 identified designated disadvantaged areas; and (3) to stem the social and economic costs of social exclusion by developing a range of integrated measures so that the physical, social and community infrastructure of designated communities is developed to allow them harness.

Rural Transport Initiative is funded by the Department of Transport under the 2000–2006 NDP. The aim of the initiative is 'to support the development of pilot community-based public transport projects in rural areas with a view to addressing the issue of social exclusion in rural Ireland, which is caused by the lack of access to transport'.

The initiative is primarily targeted at those living in rural areas and specifically involves developing new models of transport provision which are innovative and responsive to local rural needs and doing so in partnership with local stakeholders.

PEACE II is an EU Structural Funds Programme which builds on the achievements of PEACE I, promotes reconciliation and reinforces progress towards a peaceful and stable society. The Area Development Management (ADM) and the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) have joint responsibility for managing €92.6 million, of which 59% falls under measures for which ADM have direct responsibility. The ADM reports to the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and to the Special EU Programmes Body.

The programme has two specific objectives, namely addressing the legacy of conflict and taking opportunities arising from peace. The programme is targeted at the six southern border counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo and more specifically at those groups, sectors and areas which have been most affected by the conflict. The priority areas for which the ADM and the CPA have responsibility are economic renewal; social integration, inclusion and reconciliation; and cross-border co-operation.