People, policies and participation in Irish local government:
Aspirations, ambitions and ambiguity.

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Over the last thirty years partnership as a *modus operandi* has been added to the tool-kit of governing and has been used in many ways in different socio-political contexts. Partnership, in its various guises, has been promoted as a panacea for governmental ills, as a substitute for state action and as a democratic device. A wide literature has emerged conceptualising, analysing and assessing the effectiveness of partnership. The merits of the partnership approach have been perceived as its integrative force, its potential to concentrate remedial efforts, its ability to bring together actors from different sectors, its implementation utility and its problem-solving ability (OECD, 2001 and 2005; Geddes, 2006; Considine, 2005; Goss, 2001). Thus, for example, partnership approaches have been used for labour market interventions in Austria, Belgium and the USA; national economic and social policy-making in Ireland; social inclusion interventions in Spain and the Netherlands; equality initiatives in Sweden and Italy as well as local economic and rural development initiatives throughout the EU. Initially, the partnership mode was used for issue-specific interventions and emerged in an *ad-hoc* and context-specific manner albeit with rapid trans-national imitation and emulation. The public-private partnership mode also grew in usage, serving to reduce infrastructural deficits while relieving the financial pressures on governments at all levels and further embedding private management practices in the public arena. Since the mid- nineties there has been a growth in the use of partnership as a formal element of the state institutional framework. This reflects changing political perspectives and the growing emphasis on consultation, responsiveness, inclusion and flexibility. Although the government versus/and governance debate continues, there is widespread acceptance that governing today is a convoluted, contentious and dispersed process. A key issue in the development and mobilisation of countervailing power is the relationship between informal practices and formal structures and procedures (in other words, between 'agency' and 'structure'), the character of which contributes to the determination of a specific mode of governance (Healey et al, 2002b: 215). Partnership is frequently linked to the perceived move from government to governance, facilitating as it does the collaborative and flexible dimensions of governance. As Otaka argues "partnership is profoundly bound up with the issue of governance" (2001: 3). This paper examines the manner in which the partnership mode has been institutionalised at the level of local governance in Ireland. The paper begins by reviewing how partnership has been conceptualised and theorised. Following a brief overview of the evolution of Irish local government, the reform process which led to institutionalisation of the partnership mode is traced. Two new types of structure, Strategic Policy Committees and County Development Boards are then analysed and the positives and problems arising from these innovations are highlighted. These various strands of analysis are synthesised to lead to some tentative conclusions about their efficacy and impact as well as the issues of democracy and accountability they uncover.

Conceptualising and theorising partnership
In various government systems partnership has been promoted within the structures of public administration, social policy and national and local economy and has taken on different shapes and purposes. Partnerships have emerged as a result of innovation (by those seeking creative solutions to 'wicked problems'), imposition (by central government of a partnership *modus operandi*), inducement (e.g., the opportunities provided by EU structural fund interventions which are predicated on a partnership approach) and incorporation (the involvement of a range of non-governmental actors in addressing governance issues). The power of partnerships to

shape policies and affect allocation decisions varies significantly and Considine finds that 'types of partnering reflect different histories of corporatism, social democracy and liberalism' (2006:16). The multifarious nature of these partnerships mirrors the eclecticism of approaches to conceptualising and theorising partnership.

Some conceptualisations are all-encompassing such as that of the OECD which views partnerships as: 'systems of formalised co-operation grounded in legally-binding arrangements or informal understandings, co-operative working relationships, and mutually adopted plans among a number of institutions' (OECD,1990:18). Prior focuses on the institutional impact seeing partnership as a means 'to create a new institutional capacity to achieve specific outcomes, in relation to a shared problem or need, by establishing a distinct ownership of that problem and directing specific resources to it' (1996:97). Others such as Rhodes emphasise the integrative dimension - 'partnerships provide a means of developing strategic direction and co-ordination within a polycentric terrain' (1997: xii). Considine distinguishes between earlier forms of community development and current forms of partnership arguing that the new forms pay more attention to issues of governance and institutional design. For him 'this important symbiosis between neo-liberal strategies and partnership initiatives is at least as important as the obvious conflicts between the two conceptions of public private relations' (2006:16). Skelcher *et al* (2005) draw attention to the various belief systems underpinning partnerships focussing particularly on the managerialist, consociationalist and participatory discourses which have normative implications for the working of partnerships. They classify partnerships into 'clubs, agencies or polities' with these institutional forms reflecting the dominant discourse as well as the purpose and scope of the partnership. Rodal and Mulder (1993) developed a typology of partnerships based on the extent to which power is shared ranging from consultative partnerships (where the primary purpose is for government to seek advice or obtain input) to collaborative partnerships (where there is joint decision-making, pooling of resources and sharing of ownership and risks). The limitations of partnership are well documented with Greer (2001), Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) and Goss (2001) highlighting the pitfalls and deficiencies of the partnership approach such as their potential for fragility, democratic ambiguity, group-think and lowest common denominator outcomes. What emerges from this limited literature review is the conceptualisation of partnership as 'both an instrument of public policy and a potential new form of organisation between the public and private sectors' (OECD, 2005:89). Thus, partnerships reflect new modes of governance and serve as a mechanism for tackling complex societal problems.

In Ireland partnership has served instrumental and organisational objectives and has been used as a means of addressing both economic and social issues. Since the end of the 1970s the relationship between the state, the economy and society in Ireland has changed and a consensual approach prevails. The 'National Agreements' of 1979 and 1980 implied a partnership approach which was amplified in subsequent national social partnership agreements. These agreements, from the *Programme for National Recovery* (1987-90) to the recently negotiated *Towards 2016 (*2007-2016*)* have been predicated on partnership and have changed dramatically the manner in which policies are drawn up. The programmes cover not only wage agreements but also the direction of public policy (particularly economic and social policy) and the mechanisms for its implementation. A wide range of actors is involved in negotiating the agreements. These include not only the traditional partners of corporatist models but also representatives of the voluntary and community and farming sectors. Other distinctive features of the Irish approach include the use of specialist working groups in formulating policies; the degree of influence of the non-governmental partners on the design, delivery and appraisal of policies and the active and often protracted deliberation that characterises the negotiation process. As a result of these partnership agreements, the policy climate has altered significantly over the past

thirty years and the range of actors involved in the policy-making process has considerably widened as 'the social partners have been effectively co-opted into the public policy-making domain' (O'Donnell and Thomas, 1998:125). Some commentators have assessed the national partnerships as leading to a 'a unique set of institutional innovations for creative, dynamic, and self-reflexive governance for social and economic development' (House & McGrath, 2004:30). Others like Teague (2006) are more cautious in their appraisal. However, the partnership mode has become irreversibly implanted at national level and has also been effectively cultivated at local level as the remaining sections of the paper will show.

Irish local government
In order to understand the significance of recent reforms which have institutionalised the partnership mode at local level it is necessary to highlight some aspects of Ireland's socio-political system. Although parliamentary democracy is strong in Ireland local democracy has not flourished. The power and autonomy of local government in Ireland is far more restricted than is the case in most other European jurisdictions and until the late 1990s little reform had taken place on the model put in place by Westminster during the 19th century. The Irish political system is strongly centralised with functions such as health, education and policing being carried out by central government departments. Formal relations between local authorities and central government are regulated through a single department - the Department of the Environment & Local Government which has administrative, financial and technical control over the lower units. The share of public employment at local government level in Ireland (12.7%), is lowest of the fourteen countries cited in John's comparison (2001:38), thus indicating the relative insignificance of the local public sector in Ireland and contrasting with the situation in the USA where 63.4% of public employment is within the local government sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004:44). Central government has, over the years, created a large number of regional and local bodies, some of them operating separately from local authorities and some linked to local authorities (e.g., fisheries boards etc.) but all operating within a system tightly controlled by central government. Central government holds tight financial control with local authorities in a dependent position. It was only in June 1999 (following a referendum) that directly-elected local government in Ireland was given constitutional recognition. Previously, local authorities had been regulated by statute, with central government having the power to defer local elections and limit the functioning and financing of local authorities.

The deficiencies in the Irish system were well documented. Barrington delineated an attenuated civic culture which he saw as the cumulative consequence of democratic, social, economic, cultural, infrastructural and institutional deficits caused by "a serious case of politico-institutional underdevelopment and maldevelopment" (1993:6). NESC (the National Economic and Social Council) also highlighted "the low level of public involvement in local government matters, the low level of turnout for elections and the low esteem in which local authorities are held" (1996:262). Such dissatisfaction heightened the demand for and the willingness to accept changes in the system, changes which are still evolving.

These institutional and attitudinal problems were compounded by the existence of a 'parallel universe' of local development bodies. Traditionally, Irish society has been characterised by a spirit of co-operation and self-help fostered historically by community agricultural practices and, since the 19th century, the establishment of philanthropic societies and voluntary organisations including the co-operative movement. This trend continued throughout the 20th century with the establishment of Munitir na Tíre (a parish-based organisation aimed at co-operative community

involvement) in the 1930s and an upsurge of community organisations since the 1970s. Some of these were issue driven e.g., expansion of the trade union movement or the emergence of women's organisations, some aiming to combat social exclusion and others focused on animation, capacity building and fostering innovation (Adshead & Quinn, 1998). From the 1970s to the mid 1990s many of these organisations sought to redress the perceived gaps in government policy and provision and articulate the concerns and perspectives of the marginalised. The opportunities inherent in some EU programmes also provided financial support and ensured legitimacy for some local development groups. For many years, such bodies operated outside of the formal local government system and concerns were raised about the configuration and representativeness of the organisations and their place in the democratic and institutional structures (OECD 1996, Varley 1998). Thus, the climate in the mid-nineties was ripe for change.

Reform
Towards the end of the 20th century globalised modernisation prompted unprecedented social, economic and political change leading to 'a pandemic of public management reforms' (Pollitt and Brouckaert, 2004; Lynne, 2006). Ireland was not immune. The tenets of New Public Management and the creed of communitarianism are reflected in national reform strategies such as the Strategic Management Initiative (1993) and the Delivering Better Government (1996). Such perspectives also underpinned developments at local level and impelled the move towards integrated public services. For Ireland's local government system, the 1990s were a decade of unparalleled change – general competence was granted in 1991, constitutional recognition in 1999, the financing system was reformed in 1997-1998 while the key document *Better Local Government, A Strategy for Change*, published in 1966 and implemented by a succession of different national coalition governments, underpinned a series of reforms which continue to affect the workings of Irish local government. The range of reforms was influenced by other key documents such as the *Report of the Advisory Expert Committee on Local Government Reorganisation and Reform* (1991), the *Devolution Commission Reports* (1996 and 1997), the *KMPG Report on the financing of Local Government in Ireland* (1996), *Towards Cohesive Local Government - Town and Country* (1996), the *Report of the Constitution Review Group* (1996) and *Modernising Government: The Challenge for Local Government*, 2000. The reform trajectory emanating from these documents influenced the Local Government Act 2001 (which consolidated much of the discrete legislation pertaining to local government) and the Local Government Act of 2003 which abolished the dual mandate, thereby preventing politicians from holding seats at both national and local levels.

These reforms of Irish local government structures and processes evolved in an arena where partnership was the mantra. As highlighted earlier, since the economic crises of the 1980s social partnership has been the framework in which national economic and social policies and strategies have been agreed and implemented (Adshead & Quinn 1998). The partnership mode had also emerged at subnational level with 'bottom-up' partnerships being established to deal with local social exclusion issues or to avail of the opportunities created by EU regional policy interventions such as the LEADER programme (McDonagh, 2001). While a contested concept, (OECD 1996, Cassels, 2003) partnership is widely accepted as an effective policy-making and implementation tool serving both efficiency and participative purposes. The creation of partnership at all levels coupled with the establishment of bodies such as the NESF (National Economic and Social Forum) and COMHAR (the National Sustainable Development Partnership) as well as the collaborative approach adopted in producing various national policies and strategies

(e.g., in the spheres of social inclusion, anti-poverty, childcare and rural development) has placed the partnership and networking approach at the centre of the Irish system. Thus, partnership has become a dominant discourse within the Irish socio-political domain.

New structures

The confluence of the rhetoric of reform and the discourse of partnership shaped the revised structures for local governance. The existence of various local partnerships and the national promulgation of partnership as a *modus operandi* impacted on the structures put in place as part of the reform of local government. The 1996 White Paper, *Better Local Government*, set itself the following aims in order to enhance democracy.

- to recognise the legitimacy of local government as a democratic institution
- to enhance the role of the elected member
- to broaden involvement in local government

(DoE, 1996:15)

Central government's aim to reform local government was linked to its ambition to integrate local government and local development. To achieve these aims a number of new structures were created, based on a partnership approach. Each local authority established Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), mirroring the authority's major functions. Although some local authorities created SPCs in 1998, it is really since 2001 that SPCs have been operationalised. Reform also included the creation of County Development Boards (CDBs) which came on stream in 2000 and are charged with the social, cultural and economic development of their particular local authority area. It is with the formation, operation and influence of these structures that the remainder of this paper is concerned.

Strategic Policy Committees

The White Paper, *Better Local Government* outlined a framework for integration of local government and local development and one of its underlying principles was that

> the partnership approach involving the community, social partners and State agencies on a multi-sectoral basis must remain part of the system (DoE 1966:30)

In the section on strengthening democracy, the programme declared that

> the partnership approach to national economic and social planning will be mirrored in the representation on the Strategic Policy Committees of local interests (e.g., industry, voluntary organisations, farmers, environmentalists) relevant to the committees' work (DoE 1996: 76)

Thus, the notion of partnership was fundamental to the creation of the SPCs. The Local Government Act of 2001 gave the SPCs a statutory basis and delineated their function in the following terms:

> to consider matters connected with the formulation, development, monitoring and review of policy which relates to the functions of the local authority and advise the authority on those matters (Government of Ireland, 2001, Section 48).

In order to achieve these aims, the most frequent combination of SPCs is Housing, Planning, Environment, Transportation and Recreation/Culture. Not less than one third of SPC members are drawn from bodies relevant to the committee's work, thereby expanding involvement in local government while ensuring that elected representatives hold the majority of seats in all SPCs. Guidelines from central government specified that the SPC structure should involve at least one nominee from the various sectors - agriculture, environmental/culture,

development/construction, business/commercial, trade union and community/voluntary/disadvantaged. Table 1 illustrates the composition of SPCs currently in operation in Limerick County Council.

Table 1. Limerick County Council – SPC structure and membership

SPC	SECTORAL REPRESENTATIVES				Elected Representatives
	Community & Voluntary (including Environment, Conservation, Culture and Disadvantaged)	Development / Construction & Business/ Commercial	Agriculture/ Farming	Trade Union	
Planning & Development Policy (18)	3	2	1	0	12
Social, Cultural and Community Development (15)	3	1	1	0	10
Housing Policy (15)	4	1	0	1	12
Environmental (15)	3	1	1	0	10
Transportation & Infrastructural Policy (15)	2	2	1	1	12

A national review of the SPC system showed that the community/voluntary/disadvantaged sector had the highest percentage of representatives, making up almost one third of the country's total (IPA 2004) This finding reflects the situation in Co. Limerick. Chaired by elected politicians, the SPCs focus on policy areas and furnish recommendations to Corporate Policy Groups (CPGs) and to the full council. They are supported by Directors of Services, drawn from the council's staff. Corporate Policy Groups, a cabinet-type structure, consist of the chairpersons of SPCs, who are always elected councillors, and the council chairperson/mayor with the professional manager also attending.
These committees were designed to enhance the role of the elected councillors but the SPCs have also served to expand the range of actors feeding into the policy process. In Limerick, many councillors have opted for involvement in two SPCs. Reaction to the SPCs has been mixed. Criticisms included differing levels of engagement among partners, the paucity of policy issues in some spheres, difficulty in keeping the focus on policy rather than operational issues, inter-party politics and the inadequacy of feedback structures (Boyle et al., 2003, IPA 2004, author's interviews).

However, the SPC structure does serve as an innovative method of combining aspects of both representative and network governance. The provisions which ensure a numerical majority for elected members on the committees and the retention of the policy-making function by the full elected council safeguard the processes of representative democracy. The SPCs are perceived as enhancing the electoral mandate of local government by giving councillors 'the opportunity to engage in a more in-depth manner with local policy issues' (Boyle *et al*, 2003: 34)

The involvement of the sectoral interests brings to the system some of the benefits of the network governance approach and allows sectoral interests to make 'a more structured input into policy deliberations' (*ibid.*, 35).

Despite initial wariness by members, the SPC structures have led to a positive relationship between the various sectors involved. Yet, because the focus of the SPCs is policy rather than operational, effecting a cultural and attitudinal change is proving a slow process (Callanan, 2005; IPA, 2004). This is not surprising in view of the clientilist/patronage political culture which prevails in Ireland, the dominance of party political issues and the absence of a tradition of policy engagement by elected members. The issues of representativeness and accountability remain pertinent. Selection processes for SPC members vary hugely. Community fora are used in many cases as a funnel for nomination to SPC and other bodies – this is the process in use in County Limerick. Databases of civil society groups have been drawn up by many local authorities (Co. Meath, for example has listed 650 groups) and every effort is made to involve as many groups as possible in the selection process. Nevertheless it is impossible to guarantee true representativeness. The feedback loops between the sectoral representatives and their 'constituencies' seem *ad hoc* and the IPA review recommended that each sector should have a clear system in place but as yet no evidence of such systems has become available. Engagement with the SPCs by citizen groups is variable and often issue-related with their attendance at meetings sporadic. This is commented on by Callanan, (2005), and supported by interviewees from outside the voluntary sector.

The SPCs represent a new way of working for all concerned - a formal role for sectoral nominees who previously operated outside the institutions of local government; a shift in focus to policy-making as well as a sharing of jurisdiction for elected representatives and a move to facilitative rather than techno-authoritative approaches for local authority personnel. Callanan (2005) asserts that 'among the positive developments identified in the research was that the concept of partnership at local level had been embraced by an overwhelming majority of those contacted during the review' (2005: 921). The influence on policy formation is positive as greater deliberation is enabled and the experiences and expertise which the various sectors bring to the committees is advantageous as is the opportunity to discuss policy issues in a non-adverserial atmosphere. There has also been a positive socialisation outcome with the various sectors gaining greater understanding of each other's roles and of the complexity of policy issues and implementation. The limited number of places available restricts the range of members involved (particularly from the voluntary and community sector which is so variegated) and limits the openness of what was conceived as an inclusionary forum. Furthermore, because of the restricted membership, perspectives can be limited. But obviously expanding the size of the committees would make them unwieldy.

County Development Boards

The creation of County Development Boards was a further instrument for the broadening of Irish local government. An inter-departmental Task Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development had been established in 1998 and its first report recommended the creation of County/City Development Boards (CDBs.). Initially, the Task Force focused only on the integration of local

development and local government but subsequently widened its focus to include all public and publicly funded services, provided locally. By 2000, CDBs had been established in all 34 local authority areas. Their importance in the Irish political landscape was underscored by references to them in both the *National Development Plan 2000-2006* and later in the *Programme for Government* published after the 2002 general election. The recently published social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* and the *National Development Plan* 2007-2013 both explicitly affirm the role of CDBs in implementing national strategies, thereby cementing their place in the institutional architecture.

 The CDBs bring together representatives from the four key sectors, namely, local government, local development, the social partners and state agencies. Membership of CDBs tends to replicate the following pattern: local government (7), local development (6), state agencies(9), social partners (5). Thus, the boards are designed to provide a governance framework and co-ordinate activity at the local level. In conjunction with the creation of the CDBs Community and Voluntary for a were created in each local authority area to facilitate local communities in having an input into the CDB processes. A new senior position, Director of Community and Enterprise, was created within local authorities and the directors and their staff provide dedicated service to the CDBs.

The Boards were charged with preparing an agreed vision and a 12 year social, economic and cultural strategy for their county/city. In preparing their strategy, Limerick County Development Board established five working groups to identify and research the relevant issues and widespread consultation took place on various themes. Eventually, balanced geographic development and quality of life were agreed as the key themes and twelve priority actions were agreed. Cork City Development Board initially identified twenty six strategic issues and distributed them for comment to 35 service providers and 600 voluntary and community organisations. Ultimately, seven strategic themes were chosen to form the basis for the strategy. These two examples illustrate the types of approach used by local authorities in preparing their strategies with data collection and consultation forming an essential part of the process.

The resulting strategies, published by 2002 are key instruments in the move towards improved co-ordination at local level. In the vision statement underpinning the strategies, many CDBs champion the notions of participation, collaboration and partnership. A consultants' report reviewing the strategies suggests that 'the County/City Development Boards generally, and the CDB Strategies in particular, are a new approach to the challenging topic of providing more "joined-up" government at local level in Ireland' (Fitzpatrick, ERM, 2003: 9). The preparation of the strategies was perceived as very successful, achieving co-ordination between the various sectors and setting out clear priorities. However, this author's assessment of the documents would be that many, but not all, of the strategies were high on information and aspiration and rather low on concrete actions and that implementation would be more problematic than agreeing a strategy.

Since 2004 the role which CDBs play in efforts to promote social inclusion has been strengthened by central government. They have been mandated 'to consider and endorse work plans prepared by community and local development agencies' (Government Press Release 4-02-04). Some perceive this expanded role as creating complexity and community bodies resent the endorsement power since it does not also apply to state agency plans. However all bodies involved in the CDB are expected to proof their organisational strategies against the priorities identified in the strategies – a positive step towards joined-up government. During 2005/ 2006, at the behest of central government, each CDB reviewed the implementation of its strategy and an overall analysis of the reviews is expected to be published early in 2007. South Tipperary is regarded as one local authority which had embraced the strategic approach and geared its strategy towards realisable actions. Thus, by mid-2005

'more than half the CDB actions being implemented were at the highest level of collaboration' (STCDB, 2005:2) with many civil society organisations involved in this collaboration. Such outcomes indicate success for the partnering approach of the CDB.

Interviews with CDB members for the purposes of this research indicate satisfaction with the concept and realisation of the CDBs; the operational and strategic inter-organisational linkages; the improved focus resulting from collaboration; the clearer targeting of interventions and the dividends from the county or city-wide focus. One interesting finding from the interviews to date is that the unequal distribution of resources among partners on the CDBs is not a serious issue whereas the literature would highlight this as a potential stumbling block. They also agree that the creation of CDBs has increased the capacity of local authorities by creating awareness of the input of all partners and by the connectivity achieved in having elected members on both the CDB and SPCs. Nevertheless, they also assess that levels of 'buy-in' and commitment vary among the partners. Among the problems identified by interviewees were the dependence of the CDB system on voluntary commitment of boards/agencies/organisations which can vary hugely; budgetary problems such as lack of resources and lack of financial autonomy in local authorities and difficulty in accessing and combining resources from the myriad of agencies; the slow pace of progress because achieving 'collaborative advantage' takes time and skill; continuing fragmentation at national level – issues such as traveller support or drugs strategies are dealt with by different government departments and are expected to be dealt with in a collaborative partnership at local level but these issues are not aligned to the CDB structures and processes. So not all the dots have been joined up !

The CDB process has been assessed as 'a serious attempt to address the deficiencies associated with the four models of developed governance: representative democracy, pluralist democracy, corporatism and clientilism' (Keyes, 2003:295). O'Broin has been more critical and rightly points out that 'the bargaining and negotiation process envisaged in any governance system is largely absent' (2003:46). The CDB structure appears to have worked well in the preparation of the strategy documents. It is however, the implementation phase that is the real test of the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the boards and it is too early yet to make an assessment on their progress.

Conclusions

The way in which Ireland's new local government structures operate is predicated on partnership with multiple linkages of state and non-state actors taking place in changed and changing institutional structures. There is an attempt to move non-governmental actors from passive acquiescence to active involvement through consultation and sectoral representation. Both SPCs and CDBs are bridging the gap between representative democracy and forms of bounded participative/associative democracy. Callanan asserts that 'the Strategic Policy Committees and the County/City Development Board structures...carry an implicit acknowledgement that both representative and participative models have a meaningful role to play in identifying local needs and aspirations and in local policy-making' (2003:498). However there are limitations in the democratic component of the reformed structures. The weighting in favour of elected representatives on SPCs and the allocation of the chair to an elected representative suggests limitations on the degree of influence exerted by other partners. Although the structures foster partnership, some partners have clearer democratic credentials than others since the sectoral partners are often selected rather than elected and there is an absence of clear feed-back structures and consultation processes among the sectoral

organisations. Even where sectoral representatives are chosen through a participative mechanism, representativeness is not guaranteed since, for example, the community and voluntary sector in Ireland is so multi-faceted that the sectoral representatives themselves may not be representative of their constituency. Because SPC policy proposals have to be ratified by the whole council there is perceived to be a line of accountability within this process. The CDB mandate requires an annual report to be submitted to the local authority but the lines of accountability of the individual partners to their parent organisations are not specified. It would seem that the accountability issue is not yet totally clear. South Tipperary CDB has taken an innovative approach to ensuring accountability by using a results-based accountability approach (RBA) to measure performance and make informed choices.

The new structures seem to have had a positive influence on local political practices since they have brought the various sectors together in a spirit of partnership. As the IPA review group comments 'an important by-product of the SPC process has been a better relationship between elected members and groups representing different interests within the local area'. (2004:42). However, there is a risk that Institutionalisation of the voluntary sector may lead to co-optation and may possibly have the potential 'to gatekeep the sector and to bind it with procedural webs that rob it of its dynamism' (CWC 2000: 70). Involvement in the SPCs and CDBs is also time-consuming for partners and some have felt intimidated by the jargon and the range of technical documentation with which they are required to familiarise themselves. Furthermore, the links between SPCs and the CDBs need to be developed and attitudinal and cultural change on behalf of the individuals and partner organisations will be needed if the new reticulated structures are to reach their full potential (Forde, 2005; Callanan, 2005).

The new structures foster networking and interaction and have been actively nurtured by central government. Ongoing governmental support has been provided through the Inter-departmental Task Force, the appointment of Directors of Community and Enterprise and the provision of support for community bodies through the Combat Poverty Agency and Pobail, for example. However, neither the functions nor the financial dependence of local government have been significantly changed nor have wider powers or responsibilities been granted to local authorities. It must also be remembered that the new structures were designed and continue to be directed by central government in a manner in which managerialism and contractualism are more evident than true partnership.

How might one classify these new partnership-based structures within the genre ? They certainly fall into Considine's 'new form' categorisation and warrant classification as 'collaborative' within Rodal and Mulder's typology. In the taxonomy used by Skelcher et al they would seem a hybrid of 'club' and 'polity' with the centrally derived social inclusion role of CDBs bringing elements of 'agency' to the mix. In accordance with the OECD's conceptualisation they serve both instrumental and organisational objectives. Yet, their formal linkage and centrality to the reformed structures of local government makes them distinctive and they are innovative in the way they combine elements of 'dialogic democracy' with the representative form. However their potential may be stymied by their surroundings!

Have the new structures been superimposed on fossilised foundations and embedded political cultures which could stifle the innovative opportunity? Will the philosophy of 'more than service providers' create a climate of what O'Broin describes as 'policy-making rather than policy-taking' (2003:50)? Having carried out research at the embryonic stages of the new structures, Adshead deemed them as a move away

from 'governance as hierarchies to new forms of network governance' (2003:119). Keyes (2003) expressed optimism about their transformative potential. However caution is advocated since central government still rules OK ! Sabel, who in 1996 was impressed by the democratic experimentalism of the local partnerships operating in Ireland, was less effusive in his recent writings and highlights the persistence of centralism. For him 'waves of reforms including the once promising area partnerships, have apparently changed the contours of local government, only to reveal as they subside, the reefs and sunken structures of the old system' (2006:9).

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