

# Local partnerships for rural development: Ireland's experience in context

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## ABSTRACT

Ireland has one of the strongest records in Europe of using local partnerships to address the challenges of rural development. These include County Enterprise Boards, LEADER companies and Local Area Partnerships. This paper presents the results of recent survey research which compares the different types of Irish partnerships in terms of their origins, growth, activities and impacts, and assesses the Irish partnership experience within the context of research in seven other EU countries. Such a comparative approach provides insights which assume particular interest at a time when the Irish Government has adopted new initiatives to promote greater co-ordination of partnership activities at a county level.

*Key index words:* local partnerships, rural development, Ireland.

## Introduction

Over the past ten years Ireland has had a strong record of using local partnerships to address the challenges of rural development—possibly the strongest record in Europe. Depending on definitions of ‘rural’, ‘partnership’ and ‘rural development’, there were by the late 1990s over 100 partnership entities with a development focus and with participants from the State, private and voluntary sectors, which might also be defined as ‘rural’ in the sense of not serving a population in excess of 100,000 people and not serving a major urban area. Several studies discuss the emergence of these partnerships (NESC, 1994; OECD, 1996; Walsh *et al.*, 1998) and evaluations of their activities have been conducted in accordance with European Union (EU) requirements relating to funding (Craig and McKeown, 1994; Kearney *et al.*, 1994; Kearney and Associates, 1997; Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998; Kearney and Associates, 2001). Most of these studies are concerned with specific types of partnerships and few comparative studies exist. This paper provides an overview of the various types of partnerships, their origins, development, methods of operation and impacts, based on the existing studies. The paper also presents results from a recent survey of nineteen partnerships which forms part of a broader EU-funded study entitled Partnerships for Rural Integrated Development in Europe (PRIDE). Evidence from that study is also used to compare partnerships in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in Europe with the experience in Ireland. It is hoped that such a comparative approach will provide new insights to complement existing research findings and inform the initiatives that are being pursued to promote greater co-ordination of partnership activities through the County Development Boards (CDBs).

## Origins, development and operation of partnerships in Ireland

Partnerships are generally viewed as reflecting the rise of what is called ‘the new localism’ whereby local actors become involved in designing and implementing solutions to local problems (Goodwin 1998; Moseley 1999). In many European countries, local

administrative and territorial structures exist which form a framework for the organisation of new partnerships. The emergence of the new localism in Ireland differs from that in many other European countries because of our highly centralised administrative system. There is, effectively, only one layer of sub-national government; that at the level of the county which operates with limited executive powers and heavy dependence on central government for funding (Coyle, 1996). Partnership is, however, recognised by Government as having an important role to play in local development. An OECD (1996) appraisal of Ireland's Local Partnerships and Social Innovation concluded that "the inclusion of local development programmes within an Operational Programme framework of five years represents a strong endorsement by the Irish government and the EU of local development policies" (p. 48). Thus, the Irish experience assumes broader interest as does the opportunity to discuss that experience in the context of models elsewhere in Europe.

Several factors that have emerged since the late 1980s help to explain the scale of the partnership phenomenon in what is one of the most centralised States in Europe. From the mid-1980s on, there was growing concern for the intractable nature of a number of socio-economic problems, namely high and persistent unemployment, a sharp decline in agricultural employment, rural depopulation, poverty and social exclusion, together with a belief (which is contested) that a high proportion of those suffering are located in geographically confined 'blackspots', including several peripheral rural areas (Nolan *et al.*, 1998). During the 1980s dissatisfaction increased with the inability of a highly centralised State, with sectoral programmes, to achieve nation-wide socio-economic development and the efficient delivery of services at the local level, or indeed really to engage with 'social exclusion'. A vacuum in local government at a sub-county level provided an opportunity for the adoption of alternative approaches to development. Recognition of the success at national level of the partnership between the State and the so-called 'social partners' (employers, trade unions, sectional and community interests) as a mechanism for policy making and implementation during the early 1990s, led to a belief that this might usefully be replicated locally (NESF, 1997). Requirements of the EC relating to local involvement in development initiatives also contributed to the adoption of a partnership approach (Commission of the European Communities, 1988).

Walsh's (1998) analysis of the various local partnerships launched in the 1990s suggests that they shared a number of key features in terms of structure and administration. They were characterised by a formal institutional structure; administration by a Board (usually of some 15-20 members) membership of which was drawn from a diversity of public, private and voluntary interests; a commitment at least to a strategic and integrated approach to local development; local autonomy in agreeing priorities and allocating funds; and financial and policy support from both national government and the EU. A strong emphasis was placed on issues relating to unemployment and social exclusion. There were three main partnership initiatives during the 1990s: LEADER II, the County Enterprise Boards (CEBs) and the Local Partnership Companies (LPCs) which were administered, respectively, by the Department of Agriculture and Food, the Department of Enterprise and Employment, and by Area Development Management Ltd, a specially-established intermediary company. Detailed profiles of each are contained in recent evaluation reports (Kearney and Associates, 1997; Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998; Walsh *et al.*, 1998). Key differentiating features are identified here.

The LEADER II programme comprised 34 Local Action Groups and covered all of rural Ireland— a total of 2.2 million people, 61 percent of the national total (Kearney and

Associates, 1997). Thus the average population of a LEADER II area was 65,000 and the average geographic extent 2000 km<sup>2</sup>. In all some 100 million euro of public money (national and EU) were allocated to the 34 LEADER II groups. Each LEADER group was administered by a board, representative of the partners, and had typically five or six staff— a general manager, an administrator and also project development and ‘animation’ officers. Overall, LEADER II groups were concerned to promote rural tourism, small and medium enterprises and ‘capacity building’ in the voluntary and community sectors. Many partnerships predated the introduction of LEADER II and in 1999 were quite well established and broadly based local development organisations.

More important than LEADER in quantitative terms were the two sub-programmes of the Local Development Programme of the 1994-99 EU-Ireland Community Support Framework which related respectively to ‘Local Enterprise’, and ‘Integrated Local Development of Designated Disadvantaged and Other Areas’. The ‘Local Enterprise Programme’ was launched by the Government in 1993, two years before EU funding permitted it to be greatly increased in scale. Its aim, briefly, has been to promote the creation and growth of small enterprises and micro businesses (with less than ten employees). To this end it has offered advice, training, finance and support to potential entrepreneurs, especially those with a personal history of unemployment. The ‘Local Enterprise’ sub-programme was run by the CEBs which are local partnerships, based on county and county borough areas. Of 35 CEBs, about 25 may be considered wholly or in large part ‘rural’ in their coverage. Over the five years 1995 to 1999 they were allocated a total of some 140 million euro, half of it from the EU via the Community Support Framework. The links with the local county and county borough authorities have been quite strong and the chief executive of the local authority is always the chair of the Board.

The ‘Integrated Local Development of Disadvantaged and Other Areas’ sub-programme for the support of LPCs was focused especially on unemployed and other excluded people— offering them education, training and other forms of support— and on local community development. Excluding those in Dublin and the other larger towns, about 20 partnership companies served rural or largely rural areas. The OECD (1996) review of local partnerships concluded that these LPCs “simultaneously pursue area-based economic development and the local integrated implementation of national programmes connected to it, and they do so in a way that blurs familiar distinctions between public and private, national and local and representative and participative democracy” (p. 9). Some of these partnership companies were also LEADER companies in that they received funding from the LEADER programme. Many of these LPCs have been involved in local development for eight or more years. Twelve of them began life under the Government’s 1991-1994 Programme for Economic and Social Progress which had the aim of piloting an area-based approach to the problems of long term unemployment and social exclusion (Craig and McKeown, 1994).

A typical process of partnership working is as follows. The partnership Board devises a strategy, business plan or action plan, with the help of some degree of consultation of local interests and of partner organisations. The plan is approved by the Government body having responsibility for overseeing the programme nationally and is promised a certain amount of funding. The partnership publicises the programme and its strategy and invites project proposals; it may also initiate projects itself. Joint funding is sought from the partner agencies and from other sources. Staff and possibly Board members visit project proposers and eventually some proposals are approved. Projects are then monitored and supported.

Given the absence of local government structures with executive powers at a sub-county level, the issue of local democracy and accountability in the context of the new partnerships has led to heated debate. Walsh *et al.* (1998) report allegations that the various local partnerships undermine the status and role of local government structures and of elected representatives, indeed of local democracy. Political tensions have resulted in many areas. There have been suggestions of unorthodox financial procedures— even of the misallocation of funds— in part because the partnerships were not ‘grounded’ in traditional local government structures. Where local authorities were actively involved in a local partnership the relationship tended to take one of two forms; the local authority could be (i) an ordinary partner, represented by an official and on an equal footing with all the other partners (this was common in the more rural areas) or (ii) a leading agency, represented by one or more elected representatives and often providing staff and possibly office space (often the case in the more urban areas).

### **Impacts and outcomes of local partnerships**

A number of recent reports which evaluate the various partnership programmes generally report on the ‘numbers of jobs created’, of ‘small firms started’, of ‘unemployed people placed on training courses’, of ‘local people starting their own businesses’ (Craig and McKeown, 1994; Kearney *et al.*, 1994; OECD, 1996; Kearney and Associates, 1997; Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998; Kearney and Associates, 2001). But these ‘output’ figures are of questionable value because they are unable to establish what would have happened anyway without the programme; thus, for example, have the various jobs been genuinely ‘created’ by the work of the partnership or just ‘accommodated’? More important in the present context are achievements of a broader nature relating to increasing the development potential of the area. These issues are the focus for discussion here and were addressed in the questionnaire survey reported below.

The various commentators attribute a number of key achievements to some at least of the three main types of local partnerships considered. Particular importance is allocated to building up the capacity of voluntary and community organisations in the area so that they become more active both in the planning and delivery of the local programme itself and more generally in their own community, although questions have been raised relating to representation (Storey, 1999). Securing ‘co-finance’ for local projects which would not otherwise have been forthcoming is another highly regarded achievement. Considerable success is recorded in ‘levering’ into the development process a good deal of ‘voluntary input’, not just the time and expertise of the board members themselves, and in creating a ‘learning process’ so that the various agencies and individuals involved become more aware of, and more skilled in, local development (Kearney *et al.*, 1994). Other achievements include bringing about a number of ‘joint ventures’, which would not have happened otherwise, involving at least two of the agencies involved in the partnership. The forging of a stronger link between the State and ‘excluded people’, especially the unemployed is identified. More generally, partnerships are viewed as generating a momentum for local government reform in order that local authorities can play a more dynamic and leading role in the partnership process.

Less successful features of some at least of the partnerships are also identified in the literature. These include: limited success in changing employer attitudes to the recruitment of long term unemployed people; a very limited input from the local community itself in some cases; a frequent failure to secure a commitment of the various partners to undertake new

programmes of their own in parallel to those being sponsored by the partnership; and a failure to secure a real 'catalytic effect' on the partner agencies themselves.

The factors which underlie such success or its absence have also received attention from the various commentators. The tradition and experience of local partnership and clearly defined methods of operation are viewed as being of particular importance in promoting success. Issues of legitimacy, possible confusion for clients arising from the number of partnerships in existence and uncertainty relating to long-term funding are viewed as problematic (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998). There is also a clearly defined need for specialised training and technical skilling for personnel.

### Survey results

Survey evidence is now presented from the 'extensive survey' undertaken in Summer 1999 by the PRIDE research project, and in all covering 330 local rural partnerships in Finland, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden and the UK (Esparcia *et al.* (2000) review this survey at the European scale). The object of that postal survey, using a nine-page questionnaire translated into six languages, was to get a broad basic understanding of rural partnerships, across much of rural Europe, prior to detailed case study work in 24 of them (none of the latter in Ireland). For the Irish part of the survey, a sample of 50 partnerships was drawn from a complete list of LPCs, LEADER II partnerships and CEBs serving, with one exception, a population of less than 100,000 people and not serving a predominantly urban area. The questionnaire schedule was sent to each of the 50 partnerships. By the end of August 1999, nineteen partnerships had replied (a response rate of 38 percent which is broadly in keeping with the experience of postal surveys of this kind) all of them providing full answers and often including helpful literature elaborating on their completed questionnaires. In all but one case it was the partnership's Chief Executive who had completed the form; in the other instance it was its information officer. Clearly the amount of statistical analysis that can be performed on a sample of nineteen is strictly limited but this has not prevented the emergence of some interesting findings. The responses also provided coverage of the three different types of partnerships serving a range of population sizes and therefore afford a comparative perspective. In the following consideration of the evidence from this survey, some data will be presented relating to all nineteen partnerships, but rather more attention will be devoted to the evidence relating to three distinct groupings: four County Enterprise Boards, six Local Partnership Companies (each without LEADER II Programmes— or, in one case, presenting information which excludes consideration of the LEADER II Programme which it managed) and nine LEADER II Partnerships (or, more accurately, partnerships whose prime purpose, again with one exception, was to deliver a LEADER Programme)

#### *The structure of the partnerships*

The administrative county was the usual area of operation for all but the LEADER groups whose boundaries tended to be much more variable. As for the population size served, the nine LEADER areas averaged about 50,000 inhabitants with seven of those surveyed lying between 40,000 and 60,000 and the others having a population of 24,000 and 31,000. The four CEBs served populations of 24,000-110,000 with a mean of around 65,000 and the six LPCs covered areas with 25,000-109,000 inhabitants with a mean of about 60,000. Thus, there seemed to be a general sense of 50-60,000 as being broadly optimal, with an acceptance too of the need to respect local circumstances.

Some variations in the size of the partnerships were identified. The CEBs typically had ten to fourteen members, the LEADER local action groups between fourteen and thirty individuals on their boards and committees, and the LPCs between eighteen and 28 member organisations or individuals on theirs. In nearly all cases these partnerships were widely drawn from four 'constituencies', namely State agencies, the so-called 'social partners', the local voluntary and community sector and the local authorities. Some also included unaffiliated individuals or business people. There were significant differences between the three categories of partnerships under consideration. In particular, the LPCs, concerned as they are with combating social exclusion, had a much higher proportion of their membership - up to a half it seems - drawn from the local voluntary sector and from community groups. It is also noticeable that the local authorities were generally less well represented than were the other three 'constituencies'.

The mean number of employed staff also varied considerably between partnership types. Crudely construing 'part-time' as half of a full-time equivalent, then the staffing levels were as follows: the four CEBs all had four or five paid staff, the LEADER groups ranged from 4-16 paid staff (with a mean of 9) plus a 'special case' (see below) which had 35 paid staff. With the LPCs, staffing was at a higher level, the range being from 12 to 34 with a mean of 19. This appears to reflect the fact that the task of these companies was more to deliver a service to disadvantaged groups and individuals rather than (or in addition) to awarding grants. The 'special case' was a partnership that delivered the LEADER II programme as one of a number of large, well funded, programmes; but only about a quarter of its funding related to the LEADER programme and, pro rata this would suggest a LEADER staffing component of about nine. In most cases, the partnerships also referred to 'volunteer input' complementing that of salaried staff, but generally this appeared to be the time devoted by the Board and committee members- a not inconsiderable contribution but one which may fall short of a band of volunteers acting on the ground in an unpaid but quasi-professional way.

The annual budget of the partnerships indicated a broadly similar scale of operation. In the case of the CEBs the range was IR£500,000 to IR£750,000 with a mean of IR£610,000 (about 800,000 euro). With the LEADER groups the range (excluding the 'special case' referred to above) was IR£520,000 to IR£1.3m giving a mean of approximately IR£800,000 (about 1.1m euro). And in the case of the LPCs, the corresponding figures were IR£400,000 to IR£1m- a mean of about IR£700,000 (about 950,000 euro). Clearly all of the various programmes were in large measure funded from the EU's Structural Funds, and reached the partnerships via central government. Very little of the funding came from local sources: in the case of LEADER where a 50 percent matching funding requirement applied, voluntary labour may, in certain circumstances, have compensated for monetary investment.

### *Origins and development of the partnerships*

Most of the partnerships surveyed were, in a European context, quite long established. Of the partnerships devoted to the LEADER programme one was launched in 1988, the rest in 1991-92 and 1994-95, respectively, so as to be ready for the start of the LEADER I or II programmes. All of the CEB partnerships were launched in 1993, as were most of the LPCs in 1995-6. At the time of their launch, ten were intended to last for up to five years in the first instance, though many of the LEADER companies were launched with a longer time horizon or else with no set expectations regarding their duration. All nineteen were 'companies limited by guarantee', some respondents adding that they had charitable status.

The reason for the initiation of the partnership was sought (not what key issue was to be addressed but why a partnership approach was invoked to address that issue). Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of pertinence of a list of suggested options. Their responses were scored using an 'importance index' which ranged from 3 for 'very important' to -1 for 'not important'. The resulting total scores are presented in Table 1. Clearly three main factors underlay the creation of the partnerships sampled: a desire to address in a co-ordinated way problems hitherto treated in isolation, if at all, by the agencies involved; a desire to involve the local community as a partner in its own right; and, more pragmatically, a desire to create the necessary vehicle to take advantage of the largely European funding that was likely to become available. Pre-existing co-operation, it seems, was weak. Therefore opportunities for collaborative effort seem to be an outcome among the partnerships surveyed, rather than being an initial contributory factor to partnership formation.

Table 1: Reason for adopting a partnership approach.

Reason	Importance Index
To address common needs and projects	47
To involve the local community	39
To secure access to funding	37
To pool resources	29
To make new links	27
To implement projects jointly	18
To strengthen existing co-operation	16

Respondents were asked about the key factors influencing (i) the creation and (ii) the development of the partnership and were presented with eight options to check (Table 2). The maximum possible score in any instance was 19. Key individuals, European and national policies and programmes and the voluntary sector emerge as having played influential roles in both the creation and subsequent development of the partnerships but once up and running, the 'local community'— meaning the various community groups brought into the partnerships— had an influential role. The weakness of both local government and the private sector in this developmental sense is apparent. However, there are important differences to note between the types of partnership. Thus, key individuals played a more important role in the creation and development of LEADER companies than of CEBs where the key influences were European and national policies and programmes and local government. In the case of the LPCs, the key influences were European, national, local community and key individuals.

A list of the various roles and responsibilities that individual partners might play in the partnership was presented as a list of possibilities to the respondents. The roles most commonly cited were 'bringing information and expertise' and 'strategic planning', i.e. most partners appeared to be valued for the knowledge and perspective that they brought and for their contribution to the broad strategic direction of the partnership's work. That said, a smaller number of partners were involved in representing the local community or in the actual implementation of the programme. Moreover only about one in six partners brought any funding to the partnership, reflecting a heavy reliance for funding on the national Government and the EU. More specific contributions— administrative support, office space and staffing— may have been made by individual partners depending on local circumstances.

Table 2: Key factors influencing the creation and the development of the partnership.

Influencing factors	On creation	On development
Key individuals	15	10
European policies and programmes	14	14
National policies and programmes	12	10
Voluntary sector organisations	11	12
Local community	8	15
Local government	5	5
Regional policies and programmes	4	8
Private sector organisations	4	7

### *Partnership objectives and actions*

An open-ended question which sought the main objectives of the partnership produced a wide range of responses or else invitations to “see the enclosed annual report”. These replies were difficult to categorise. In effect, interpreting the term ‘rural development’ in its widest socio-economic sense, all of the partnerships were to some degree in the same business (Table 3).

Table 3: Partnership objectives.

Objective	Respondents citing (%)
To create or maintain employment opportunities	84
To initiate and implement development strategies	79
To promote/consolidate cultural/territorial identity	68
To promote rural, integrated, sustainable development	47
To improve the welfare of the area	47
To promote and market local produce	47
To provide training and education	42

Perhaps as interesting as the above are the categories of response which did not score highly and which may have more relevance elsewhere in Europe than in Ireland: combating depopulation, enhancing the environment, reinforcing pre-existing cooperation links. In short the Irish partnerships are quite firmly about social and economic development. There are significant differences between the different types of partnerships, however, which some key recurring phrases capture quite well. Thus in the various replies: the CEBs referred to enterprise culture, business advice and information, management development, business start-ups and supporting small businesses; the LEADER groups referred to community development and empowerment, economic development, human resource development, integrated development and creating employment; and the LPCs referred to targeting disadvantaged groups, combating social exclusion, helping the unemployed and other specific groups, providing ‘second chance’ education and training, and empowering communities. Clearly each category of partnership had its own mission. But equally clearly

these missions overlapped and, given that the partnerships' areas of operation were frequently geographically superimposed, this would appear to raise interesting questions about possible synergy or duplication (Shortall, 1994).

The main focus or foci of the partnerships was elicited from a given list and their responses were scored on an 'importance index' using a four point scale which gives a sense of the overall rank order (Table 4). The listing accords closely with, and therefore serves to corroborate, the comments made above on the partnerships' objectives - with environmental conservation, cultural heritage and physical regeneration clearly not being mainstream issues. But again some differences between the three categories of partnerships are apparent, with those three sets of concerns plus 'recreation/tourism' being more firmly 'off the agenda' of the CEBs and the LPCs than of the LEADER groups. For the latter it is clear that rural tourism was seen as having great development potential and for many LEADER groups the environmental and cultural heritage was similarly seen as a local resource to be exploited for economic development.

Table 4: The main focus of the partnership.

Issue/Policy area	Importance Index
Economic regeneration	52
Community involvement	52
Integrated sustainable development	49
Social inclusion	45
Agricultural change	42
Recreation/tourism	31
Environmental conservation	26
Cultural heritage	25
Physical regeneration	22

The main reported activities of the partnership illustrate how the partnerships went about seeking to attain the objectives previously defined. Again respondents were presented with a list of possibilities and asked to indicate the degree of importance of each (Table 5). The table suggests that the funding of projects was the most significant single activity in which the Irish partnerships were involved - but that all but one of the options presented were important. Only lobbying appeared to be of limited importance. This basic pattern is repeated amongst the three categories of partnerships, i.e. all were significantly involved in a range of the activities commonly associated with local development agencies.

All of the partnerships had indicated the importance to them of involving the local population and they were asked 'how does the population get involved in the partnership?' Again a series of options was presented to the respondents who were asked to indicate the degree of importance of each (Table 6). The categories in the table are quite varied in character and it appears that 'involvement' takes a wide range of forms. Social surveys were not widely used and, most striking, local politicians were not seen as playing a major representational role. More important were (i) indirect 'channels of democracy' notably the informal representation of the community that comes from involving in the partnership a wide range of community-based groups and local voluntary bodies and (ii) a variety of consultation

exercises including public meetings and workshops. Only in the case of the CEBs, which are more closely linked to the local authorities, were elected local politicians seen as exercising this representational function. For the LEADER groups and the LPCs they were seen to play only a very modest role; community and voluntary groups being clearly a more effective (but inevitably selective?) line of communication with the wider local population.

Table 5: The main activities of the partnerships.

Activity	Importance Index
Providing funding for activities and projects	53
Dissemination of information	51
Production of action plan	51
Mobilising the local community	48
Implementation of projects	46
Delivery of a service	45
Exchange/co-ordination between partners	43
Lobbying	30

Table 6: Involvement of the local community.

Activity	Importance Index
Through community groups	51
Consultation exercises	47
Implementation of projects/measures	47
Public meetings	46
Through other key individuals ('other' means not locally elected politicians)	39
Planning workshops	39
Special community events	34
Information gathering surveys and questionnaires	34
Evaluations/evaluative surveys	34
Through locally elected political representatives	30

### Impacts

Partnerships were asked in open questions about the key outputs of the partnership to date and the objectives which have been most successfully achieved. An attempt was made to categorise the answers post hoc using a schema. In the case of 'outputs', four scored much more highly than the rest, namely; the provision of infrastructure and facilities, an improvement in the quality of life, the reinforcement of co-operation links, and community involvement and mobilisation, i.e. broadly-based community outcomes.

It is more revealing, however, to explore the words typically used by respondents for the three categories of partnership. In the case of the CEBs, outputs mentioned at least twice

related to business information and advice, to the success of small and micro businesses, to the number of businesses assisted or of jobs created and to the upgrading of business skills. Of the LEADER groups, most referred to the successful creation of new jobs, sometimes with a suggested figure attached to this claim. But other outputs were clearly held to be as important - communities stimulated, developed or mobilised, community projects launched, the building of 'capacity' in the local community, the reduction of social exclusion. And amongst the LPCs the outputs most frequently mentioned related to the creation of employment/reduction of unemployment, the development of an enterprise culture where previously it was lacking, the delivery of 'second chance education' and the provision of particular assistance to disadvantaged groups in the form of child-care, after-school clubs, training and finance for small holders and support for travellers. These outputs reflect the differing remits allocated to the partnerships. In the context of the 'achievement of objectives' all respondents claimed that although much remained to be done, their objectives were being attained.

A question was included which sought evidence of wider 'ripples' of development and change going beyond the formal remit of the partnerships ("has the partnership brought about any other broader changes within its area or within the partnership?"). Some interesting points were made although considerable variation was present in the responses. Thus, some CEB respondents spoke of a new synergy between chambers of commerce and local government, a better local appreciation of the potential of small businesses, and enhanced respect for the resources and opportunities presented by the locality. Some LEADER respondents reported a revitalised community and voluntary sector, a greater sense of self help and 'community ownership', a cultural change with the wider acceptance of the 'bottom up approach' to development, and a realisation by State agencies and local communities that they can and must work together. Some LPCs reported an increased readiness by State agencies to focus their efforts on identified disadvantaged groups and to engage in strategic and co-ordinated planning at county level to that end. They also stressed an improved local awareness of the nature and force of social need in the vicinity and improved community involvement in seeking to assuage it.

Of course it is impossible to say whether these replies include an element of 'wishful thinking' - the reporting of broader 'partnership' benefits that the respondents very much hope have been achieved. The fact that such observations recurred in many of the replies seems to give them some credence, but without follow-up research, treating these statements as 'testable hypotheses', it is impossible to be sure.

### *Strengths and barriers to effectiveness*

A final set of questions, all of them open-ended, invited the respondents to reflect more generally upon their strengths, the challenges that they faced and to speculate about their future. The individual replies provide considerable insights (Table 7). Two factors were mentioned in some way by more than half of the respondents as strengths and opportunities contributing to success: 'a co-operative atmosphere' and 'the presence of key people' (leaders, managers etc.), and two other factors were mentioned five or six times, 'the existence of valuable local resources', and 'local knowledge, know-how, tradition and identity'. These factors coincide broadly with the key strengths identified by commentators. By contrast, whereas the latter identified aspects of good work practice as being important, these were not referred to by the respondents, who instead emphasised external factors - 'the buoyant economy' and 'the availability of funding'.

Table 7: Reported strengths and challenges/difficulties of local rural partnerships in Ireland.

Strengths	Challenges / Difficulties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A co-operative atmosphere</li> <li>• The presence of key people (leaders, managers etc.)</li> <li>• The existence of valuable local resources</li> <li>• Local knowledge, know-how, tradition, identity</li> <li>• The commitment of Board and staff members</li> <li>• Access to funding</li> <li>• Broadly-based community and agency involvement</li> <li>• A buoyant economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of motivation on the part of some local individuals</li> <li>• Problems relating to funding: insufficiency and delays; problems in securing co-finance; future uncertainty</li> <li>• Insufficient co-ordination between different levels and different bodies</li> <li>• Excessive bureaucracy and ‘turf protection’ by some agencies</li> <li>• Short nature of work programmes</li> <li>• Insufficiency of skilled developmental staff</li> </ul>

As for ‘challenges and difficulties’ what emerges is in many respects the mirror image of the same points, essentially an insufficiency of the strengths just identified. Internal community weaknesses are identified (‘lack of motivation to become involved’), as is a need for training, but external factors relating to agencies (‘lack of co-ordination, bureaucracy’) and funding dominate. By contrast with the commentators, issues relating to ‘legitimacy’ were not referred to. However, the issue of legitimacy emerges, indirectly, in comments by LEADER respondents. Comments include: “State agencies are on our board to defend a proven approach”, the “intermediary body is only interested in accounting for money, not with the degree to which projects are worthwhile” and “we get opposition from the local council to our work as it pressurises them to take a different approach”. In short there seems to be frustration in some quarters that the partnerships’ capacity to innovate is curtailed by traditional attitudes and structures.

In addition, some of the LPCs noted that it is often difficult to secure effective access to members of the targeted disadvantaged groups, and also that often the nature of the local geography and economy (a dispersed population, poor infrastructure, a lack of local industrial development) makes it hard to deliver the support services that those groups need.

Finally the respondents were asked “what changes or assistance do you think are needed to improve the operation of your partnership in the future?” Among the LEADER groups, the most frequent response was ‘continuity of funding’, certainly beyond the end of the LEADER II period. This observation seems to be coupled with a desire for a “long term vision tied to long term goals” and a sense that the groups have “too short a period to bring about real change”. Another set of wishes relates to the partnership approach itself; there is a desire for greater devolution of decision-making, for the better training of board and sub-committee members in the process and meaning of ‘development’, and better vertical integration to the county and national levels. Or as one person put it, “the partnership approach can work if all involved leave their baggage outside”. Among the LPCs there was again a wish for guaranteed continued funding so that “our early achievements can be built upon” and also a wish for better co-ordination and a greater sense of strategic direction at the national level of

the agencies that are being expected to work in harness locally. In addition the wish was expressed that the State agencies would be more ready to 'mainstream' initiatives that had been successfully piloted by the local partnerships and that they would in future focus "more on support and less on evaluation".

### *Comparative features*

Although a relatively small sample of partnerships was surveyed, a number of clear patterns emerge relating to their roles which complement existing reviews. The reasons for the adoption of a partnership approach are shared and relate to the desire to address problems in a co-ordinated way, to involve the local community, and to access funding. Co-operation emerges as an outcome rather than a reason for partnership. Differences are apparent: key individuals played a more important role in the creation of LEADER groups than of CEBs and LPCs, for which national and EU funding provided more of a stimulus. Whilst some overlapping of functions existed, particularly in relation to the creation of employment, CEBs, LEADER groups and LPCs each had clearly defined remits: (i) the formation of enterprise, (ii) social and economic development more broadly defined and (iii) the promotion of social inclusion, respectively. The outcomes of their actions reflect these emphases in remits. In addition, LEADER partnerships were distinguished by a greater interest in promoting tourist enterprises and cultural heritage based activities. Elected politicians typically played an active role only in the CEBs. Perceived strengths were viewed as arising from the spirit of co-operation, good local leadership and the commitment of staff. Difficulties were seen to derive in part from external factors, including the bureaucracy of State agencies and uncertainty relating to the continuity of finance. Internal weaknesses were also acknowledged and related in particular to the need for staff training in developmental activity. Continuity of funding was identified as necessary for future activity and there was also a strong expression of interest in better integration with local government and national agencies.

## **Comparative international contexts**

### *Northern Ireland*

Local partnerships are also a strong and growing aspect of 'rural governance' in Northern Ireland, and several were included within the same PRIDE 'extensive survey' as part of the UK sample. As the questionnaire was common to all the PRIDE national surveys it provides an opportunity for comparison with Ireland.

The responses from Northern Ireland (seven in total) were all LEADER-based projects and so a broad range of partnership types is not available. As in Ireland, the LEADER programme tended to produce a 'common model' of partnership style and management in Northern Ireland. This common model might be characterised by a 'top-down' structure attempting to yield results through 'bottom-up' involvement. Typically, this involves the creation of a Board with formal status (company limited by guarantee) employing one or two full-time and /or part-time staff (occasionally more but generally less than their southern counterparts) charged with working up project programmes for approval and funding. Project budgets were typically around £200,000 (but sometimes as high as £600,000 in the case of much larger partnerships). Geographical areas ranged widely in population (from 16,000 to 150,000). Partnership membership was typically around ten to twelve in number, but ranged outside this from five to twenty. Normally there was a smaller sub-group or committee of around six to seven (but sometimes as many as fourteen) responsible for executing a strategy approved by the Board. The emphasis was on funding, action planning, and implementation – 'delivering the goods'.

At the same time, each partnership had taken care to include a wide range of members from all sectors. Local Authorities (District Councils) took a lead role, in contrast to Ireland. Non-departmental public bodies, the voluntary and community sector, and private business also featured strongly (the latter less so but more strongly than in Ireland). This breadth of involvement and commitment appears to have been very successfully achieved. With regard to issues surrounding democratic accountability, strongly aired in Ireland, initial case study results suggested that the greater prominence of local elected Districts Authorities reduced the 'democratic deficit' apparent in the former.

Furthermore, involving the community was a primary aim, reflecting the wider UK mainstream concerns for 'capacity building' and a genuine 'bottom-up' approach. Again in line with the rest of the UK, the methods of involving the local community tended to focus on the implementation process itself, together with access via community and elected representatives (the latter in contrast to Ireland) rather than such specially designed initiatives, as 'Planning for Real' or focused consultation exercises. These approaches may raise questions concerning their accessibility and effectiveness, especially with regard to tackling social exclusion.

Alongside community involvement, economic regeneration was, as in Ireland, at the heart of the policy areas being addressed, together with a strong commitment to integrated sustainable development in many (but not all) of the partnerships responding. The case study suggests that there appeared to be a stronger focus on economic projects, with community initiatives taken up more than other programmes. However, agricultural change and rural tourism tended to feature more strongly than elsewhere in the UK, reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. As in Ireland, there was a plethora of other funding programmes and partnerships which need to be considered in terms of achieving 'integrated' sustainable development.

Looking at the achievements of the partnerships in Northern Ireland, the emphasis has been on 'delivering the goods' and most partnerships appear to have been considerably successful in stimulating and funding a wide range of activities and initiatives. The question of how effective these have been in achieving fundamental aims through a coherent strategy (rather than a series of discrete projects, for example) remains to be addressed through more detailed research. But there is no question that much rural development in the widest sense has been achieved.

Furthermore, these achievements must be seen in the wider political context of Northern Ireland. There is significant evidence from the survey that 'cross-border' issues are being actively tackled, and that partnerships have succeeded in generating more 'outward-looking' attitudes on the part of members, and a reduction in narrow parochialism. The importance of these changes within the political context of Northern Ireland can hardly be over-estimated.

The perceptions of the strengths of individual partnerships reflect more generally the wider Irish experience and responses from elsewhere. The importance of local community support and involvement is paramount, both for validation and the use of local skills and knowledge. Wide representation on the management of partnerships is an important strength, together with good integration with other bodies and reduced 'central control'.

Similarly, many of the key challenges facing partnerships in Northern Ireland are familiar elsewhere. The need for more resources to meet heavy workloads, continued long-term funding, and more delegated powers featured strongly. More particularly, perhaps, there was a call for

better guidance and training to help develop partnerships (members and staff) and establish their role and presence as relative newcomers to the scene of 'rural governance'. More specific to the Northern Ireland situation, however, was the call for better strategic working at the sub-regional and local level to provide a coherent policy context within which to work, especially within the complex political and administrative circumstances of 'cross-border' issues.

To conclude, the experience of LEADER partnerships in Northern Ireland reflects many of the characteristics of this European-funded model of delivering integrated rural development (i.e. organised from the top-down but orientated to bottom-up involvement) to be found in Ireland and elsewhere. Clearly they are successfully funding and delivering projects on the ground, although the longer term impacts and effects, including those on democratic accountability, await further evaluation. Differences in practice and impact in Northern Ireland are likely to arise as a result of differences in political and governmental contexts, for example the stronger involvement of local government, government departments, and business interests. Cross-border issues also loomed large in the work of many Northern Irish partnerships.

#### *Wider European experience*

As indicated earlier, the PRIDE survey covered eight countries in Europe and so it is possible briefly to compare the experience of Ireland with a wider European perspective. Although the absence of strong local government in Ireland contrasts with the UK context of emerging partnerships, it more readily reflects the experience of Southern Europe where top-down European and national rural development programmes characterise the emergence of partnerships. However, the latter does not appear to have provoked the questions of legitimacy concerning local representation.

Irish partnerships are generally longer established than in the rest of Europe (outside the UK) but the reasons underlying their formation reflect a common combination of wanting to address common problems, involve local communities and gain access to available funding. Similarly the 'top three' policy issues being addressed by Irish partnerships reflect the wider European experience - i.e. the pursuit of economic regeneration, community involvement, and integrated sustainable development. And the activities carried out are similar too, with the emphasis on practical implementation through funding, action plans, information and community support. And as elsewhere, implementation is itself the main vehicle for community involvement, which raises questions about whether there is wider involvement in the ownership or running of the partnership itself, as opposed to the delivery of its products. This question may be especially significant if, as in the Irish case until recently, local government representation is weak.

The reported outputs of partnerships in Ireland shared two of the 'top three' Europe-wide outputs, namely the 're-enforcement of co-operation links' and 'community involvement', although other high scoring Irish outputs were not shared widely, namely 'the provision of infrastructure and facilities' and 'an improvement in the quality of life'. It would be interesting to pursue the reasons for these latter differences.

Broader changes brought about by Irish partnerships generally reflect the wider European experience of helping to promote co-operation between different agencies, facilitate networking, and raise levels of community involvement. Although not always tangible outputs, these are often viewed as crucial elements in the successful working of partnerships in complex administrative and political contexts.

The PRIDE survey revealed fascinating cross-national comparisons between different partnerships' perceptions of strengths, weaknesses, and changes needed. Ireland shared with the UK the importance of a "co-operative atmosphere" (also shared by several others) and the "presence of key people", but was aligned only with Spain in stressing the importance of "valuable local resources" (indicating economic potential) as a key strength of the partnership. As for difficulties, Ireland shared a common concern about "funding problems", "insufficient co-ordination", and (with Spain and Italy) "lack of motivation among local people". As for future changes, again there was common cause around the need for "the availability and continuity of funds", "less bureaucracy" and "more autonomy and responsibilities at the local level". This is a complex picture, but it points to a common need to match sufficient and efficient top-down resource mechanisms to local community and cultural networks of activity and organisation.

### Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the experience of rural development partnerships in Ireland based on existing published studies, a recent survey, and comparative material from Northern Ireland and various continental countries and the UK. Whilst limited in scope, the survey results have produced some provisional findings which complement the broader overviews and evaluative exercises. The comparisons with Northern Ireland and elsewhere in Europe provide additional comparative insights which assume particular interest currently as new co-ordination of local development activity is being addressed in Ireland.

The first point to note is that the Irish State is endowed - *pro rata* to its population size more than any other European State - with a plethora of local partnerships devoted to the cause of local socio-economic development. The existence, development and, one may add, success of these partnerships clearly derives in large measure from the happy convergence of 'top-down' support (i.e. central Government encouragement and European funding) and *ad hoc* 'bottom-up' dynamism (from local individuals and community groups). What it did not stem from initially - in marked contrast to the UK situation which was simultaneously surveyed - was a local government anxious to embrace a new model of governance. Moreover in Ireland, as in the UK, 'the private sector' - as distinct from individual people with private sector credentials - played only a minor part in these partnerships, though it can and does, of course, figure predominantly in many of the projects that the partnerships foster.

The Irish jig-saw of local partnerships emerges to a large degree as filling a vacuum left by a weak Irish local government system. The surveyed partnerships were largely composed of local representatives of State agencies, representatives of local community groups and of the 'social partners' and a limited involvement of local government officers or members. Key individuals were, however, attributed greater importance in partnership formation and growth in the case of LEADER companies than of other forms of partnership. There is a sense that partnership formation has been largely a matter of 'rounding up the usual suspects' to a formula largely pre-determined from above. Clearly this has proved a successful formula, but it contrasts to some extent with the UK where 'standard' partnerships of the LEADER or 'Rural Development Programme' type are at least matched numerically by a range of more ad hoc partnerships emerging to grapple with particular locally recognised issues such as market town regeneration or the management of a precious environmental resource.

An impressive catalogue of achievement is suggested, including both the tangible— jobs created, businesses supported, projects launched— and the less tangible such as community

development, a greater readiness to get involved and to work together, a recognition of new ways of attacking old problems. Detailed research would be needed to assess the precise outcomes achieved.

The possible duplication of efforts by the Irish partnerships inevitably arises. Their missions, partner organisations, and areas of operation overlap significantly— a reality that may at once both reinforce their effectiveness and lead to some duplication and even, as suggested by some commentators, to confusion among applicants for assistance. However, the partnerships differed in their original *raison d'être*, they were conscious of their differing remits and they worked under the aegis of separate State and semi-State agencies. Also, the degree of coincidence of actions varied: for example, LEADER and LPC partnerships shared economic and social objectives, whereas CEBs were more closely focused on enterprise support. Given a certain commonality of and complementarity of interests, it is not surprising that some LPCs also received funding from LEADER sources.

The Irish Government addressed the solution of the possible duplication of activities among partnerships and the potential conflict between local government and community/voluntary efforts, in the *Report of the Task Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development Systems* (Government of Ireland, 1998). The report recommended that a single agency should operate the LEADER and LPC approaches in rural areas. In each county, a CDB will co-ordinate the activities of Local Area Committees (LACs) which include local elected representatives and (potentially) representation of the community and voluntary sectors. Thus, the Government remains committed to both the LPCs and to the continuation of the LEADER programme within the context of its National Development Plan 2000-2006 (Government of Ireland, 1999a; 1999b) but is seeking to achieve greater integration and co-ordination at a county level. The CEBs will continue to focus on enterprise support. As part of this move towards greater co-ordination and integration at county level between the local authorities and the community and voluntary sectors, LEADER and LPCs now have local elected representatives on their boards.

The recent initiatives address several of the fears and hopes for the future expressed by the respondents, notably relating to the continuity of funding needed to build on early achievements, a desire for greater devolved authority and in some cases a wish for a more wholehearted involvement of the national agencies and local authorities. It remains to be seen, however, whether a greater devolution of decision-making will take place relating to the disbursement of funds, as advocated by the Irish partnerships and by their counterparts elsewhere. Adaptation to the new co-ordinating structures will be necessary. It is clear also that different agencies have different strengths (as distinct from missions) which complement rather than compete with each other. These complementary strengths need to be harnessed effectively in the newly established structures. The real challenge for Ireland's local partnerships remains surely to carry forward the lessons and achievements derived from working together to design and foster local solutions to local problems, into a new era in which generous EU funding will become a thing of the past.

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