

LEADER Partnerships as Agents of Rural Economic Development— lessons from Ireland.

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Introduction and Context

Over half the population of the EU-27 lives in rural areas. In Ireland, 38% of the population resides in the open countryside or in a settlement with fewer than 1,500 persons. Thus, rural development is an important policy domain. At national (Irish) and EU levels there exists a range of policy frameworks and initiatives that seek to arrest the trend towards urbanisation, and which endeavour to promote the development of the rural economy. Since its inception in the 1950s the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) represented the dominant approach to exogenous intervention in rural areas. Up to the 1990s, CAP accounted for up to 75% of total EU expenditure. It has provided supports to productivist agriculture and made the EU states among the most intensive producers of food in the world. However, the number of people engaged in agriculture has continued to decline, and CAP has come to be associated with the costly over-production of certain commodities and environmental degradation (Crowley 2003). Since the 1990s the dominance of CAP has been somewhat diluted by the introduction of a number of complementary and alternative approaches to rural development.

In 1992 the European Commission introduced a second CAP Pillar, dedicated to rural development. Subsequent reforms of the CAP have emphasised the need for greater diversification of the rural economy and conservation of the natural environment. The European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) “envisages polycentric spatial development, and a new relationship between town and country... rural areas must diversify their activities by basing their strategies on their own special features and needs.”

Ireland's approach to rural development has tended to be defined by the EU. The significance of agriculture to the national economy and the influence of the farming sector meant that successive Irish governments were content to equate rural development with agricultural development. Thus, the Irish state and its agents actively promoted the drawing-down of EU agriculture subsidies. However, Ireland has taken on board the more recent EU leanings towards a spatial-led or territorial approach to rural development. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Ireland has not only embraced this approach, but that it has applied it to a greater extent and with greater innovation than has any other member state (OECD, 2001).

The shift towards a territorial approach to rural development represents a change from interventions that are sectoral to ones that are integrated. This implies that rural development policies and frameworks take into account the need to support and/ or regulate all aspects of the rural economy and the complete range of territorial resources.

The progress towards integration and territorial development has been accompanied by changes in the governance structures in rural areas. Indeed, much of the change has come about in response to locally-based governance structures, and in particular

the endogenous elements within them. Rural areas have been described as having undergone a transition from government to governance (Moseley 2003, Scott 2004). The most distinguishing feature of this transition and of the emergent governance structures is that of partnership. Partnership governance is replacing state-led or exogenous approaches to development. It involves the coming together in shared power arrangements of a range of rural stakeholders drawn from the statutory, community and social partner sectors. Autonomous area-based partnerships have become significant players in the rural development milieu; implementing development interventions and contributing to policy frameworks.

The EU and national governments provide resources for, and participate in area-based rural development partnerships. EU-wide initiatives such as LEADER¹ have gained a high profile in rural development. Nationally, the government established ADM (Area Development Management), now *Pobal*² to co-ordinate the establishment and operation of over seventy area-based partnerships; in urban and rural areas, aimed at tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. Area-partnerships have been used to channel public resources into rural areas, and the statutory sector has become a partner in decision-making processes; sharing power with communities and with the social partners. Successive OECD reports (1996, 2000) have lauded Ireland's approach to social partnership at national and local levels. The following maps show the distribution and catchment territories of local development partnerships in Ireland.

¹ **LEADER:** LEADER is the EU Community Initiative for Rural Development that provides approved Local Action Groups with public funding (EU and National) to implement multi-sectoral business plans for the development of their own areas. Further information is available at: www.pobail.ie/en/RuralDevelopment/LEADER/LeaderFAQs/

² **Pobal:** Formerly known as Area Development Management Ltd. (ADM), Pobal is a non-for-profit company with charitable status. Its role is to manage programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU which promote social inclusion, reconciliation and equality through socio-economic development. Primarily, Pobal works with local community development agencies. Further information is available at www.pobal.ie

Fig. 1: Territories of LEADER Local Action Groups (Partnerships) in Ireland

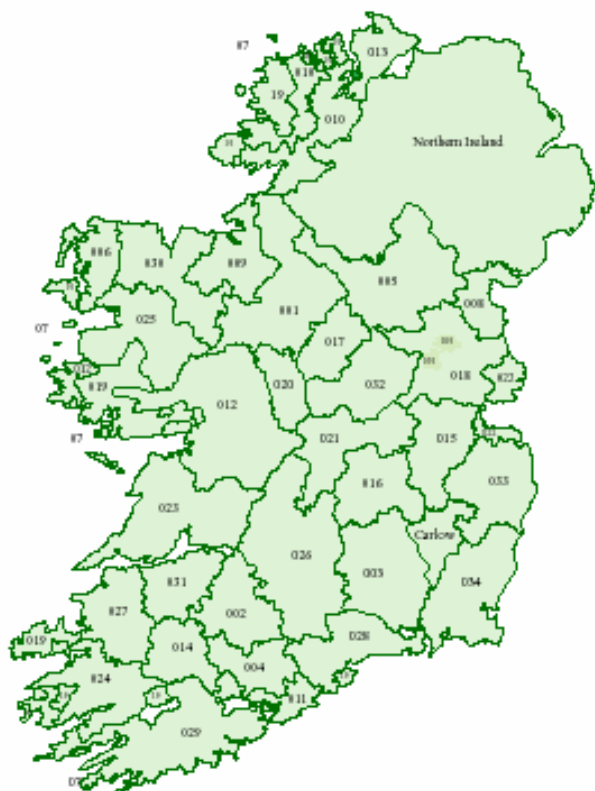
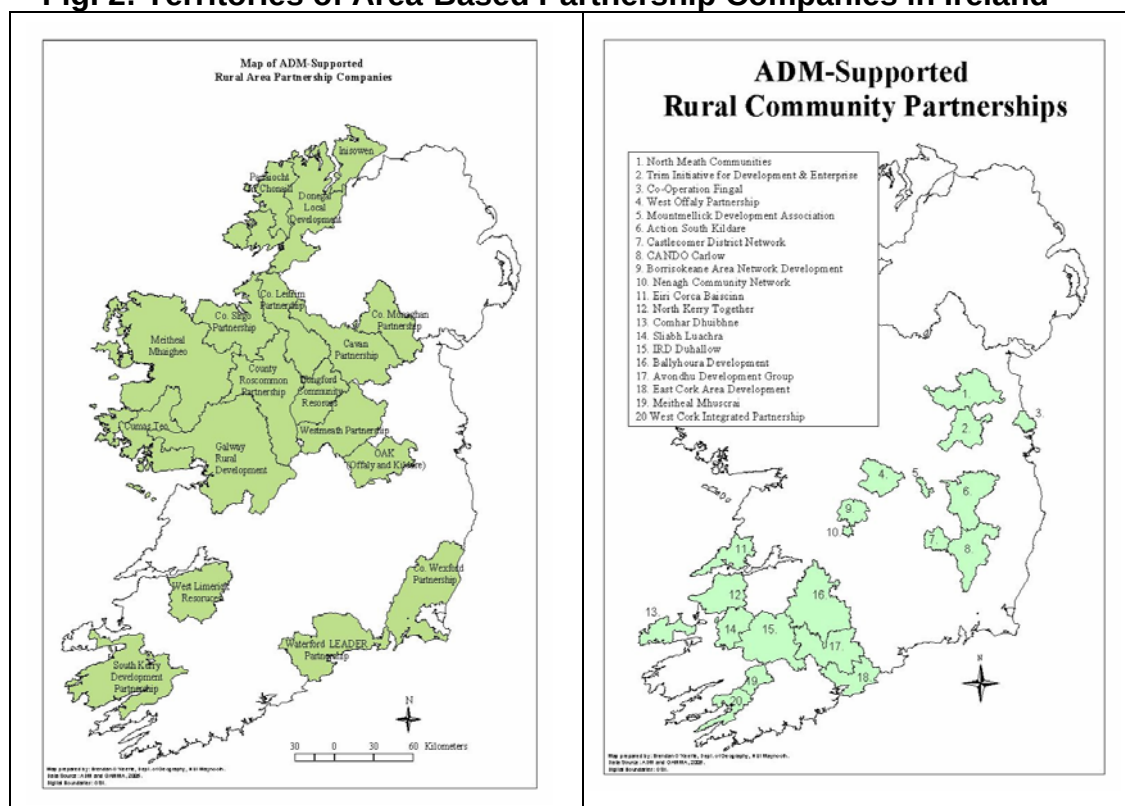


Fig. 2: Territories of Area-Based Partnership Companies in Ireland



Defining the Objectives

There is considerable evidence that rural development is increasingly characterised by partnership processes, integrated approaches to development and spatial differentiation. However, a closer examination of practices in partnerships and the interfaces between partnerships and other agents of governance suggests that partnerships face a number of internal as well as contextual limitations, and that significant governance issues need to be addressed.

Observers of partnership, such as Greer (1999) The European Foundation (2003) and Shucksmith (2004) record shortcomings in partnership processes that tend to be associated with a failure on the part of some partners, particularly the statutory sector to share power with the other partners. Limited resources and restricted autonomy have checked the ability of partnerships to innovate, and to have long-term impacts on the territories in which they operate. O'Donnell (2000), The European Foundation (2003) and the OECD (2005) note the need to identify and promote good governance practices. O'Donnell (2000: 209) specifies shortcomings in the state's ability to be effective in allocating public resources, and in operating systems of governance.

Although partnership structures have existed in rural governance for over a decade, there has been little evaluation of their functioning and impact. Kearney (2004) referred to endogenous partnerships as "the untold story." Valuable evaluations have been carried-out on the programmes implemented and administered by partnerships, such as LEADER and the Local Development Programme. However, Esparcia et al (2000) and Moseley (2003b) concur on the need for a more comprehensive evaluation of partnership, that transcends the programme-oriented evaluations, and which looks at the impact on partnerships and their role in rural governance and territorial development. Esparcia et al (2000: 185) point to the need for case study research to record and document learnings at local level, and to promote transnational transferability.

Questions have been raised about the potential of partnerships to mainstream rural and local development initiatives (PLANET, 2000). The mid-term evaluation of the Southern and Eastern Regional Operation Programme for example, asks whether or not partnerships have "internal absorption capacity" in respect of mainstream resources (2003: 186). The Irish government has expressed the need for more tangible evidence that partnerships provide an effective mechanism for delivering a range of local development actions. Discussions on the ability of partnership processes to provide an alternative to elements of the CAP in terms of developing the rural economy are at the very centre of current debates on EU budget reforms, and financial allocations to and by national governments.

Methodology

This paper draws on case study research in a number of selected partnership areas in Ireland, mainly Arigna (County Leitrim and North Roscommon), Duhallow (NW Co. Cork and part of East Kerry) and County Offaly. The research also reflects the findings from current work on collaborative governance in the urban context, and it utilises material garnered in Dún Laoghaire – Rathdown (immediately south of Dublin City) as part of the SPAN³ (INTERREG) Project.

³ Full details are available on www.span-eu.org

Drawing-on material from the case studies, this paper seeks to identify elements of good practice that ought to be further developed and transferred within partnerships, and to other types of institutional arrangements. In addition, it identifies aspects of partnership processes that need reform and adjustment. The paper concludes by putting forward recommendations for the reform of partnership processes, and the formulation of frameworks and policies for sustainable rural development.

Looking more specifically at the local development context, and the differences between urban and rural development, Härkönen and Kahila (1999) emphasise the significance of the 'causal relationships' between economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of development. They contend that institutional arrangements play a key role in directing and enabling development and that in this regard "partnerships and other institutional considerations assume more importance. Indeed, the problems of rural disparities could not be measured solely by economic indicators - the administrative and structural multiplicity of rural areas should be considered" (1999: 203).

By providing a territorial analysis of partnership contributions and limitations, based on cause and effects on territorial resources it is envisaged that the findings from these case studies, and in particular the methodology applied will allow other rural development partnerships to undertake territorial diagnosis, thereby strengthening their capacity to engage in strategic planning and the realisation of brokerage and mainstreaming. These objectives are significant in the light of the findings of Greer (1999), PRIDE (Cavazzani et al 2001) and the OECD (2001), all of which concur on the importance for partnership optimisation of

- shared understandings,
- common strategic vision,
- an appreciation of local conditions,
- knowledge of the local situation and
- a commitment to the valorisation of local resources among partners,

so as to enable the realisation of successful partnership. The realisation of each of these conditions is contingent on a comprehensive territorial diagnosis.

Table 1: Evaluation Indicators

Element of Territory	Lead/ Primary Indicators		Secondary Indicators	Weightings for Dimensions of Sustainable Development		
	Name (strength of-)	Code		Econ.	Soc. C.	Env
Human Resources	Population Dynamics	HR1	population levels and spatial distribution demographic composition by age and gender	.36	.525	.115
	Social Structures and Services	HR2	social inclusion projects – effect of childcare places, rural transport	.36	.525	.115
Know-How and Skills	Educational Attainment Levels	S1	strategies aimed at overcoming educational disadvantage literacy and numeracy initiatives	.45	.4	.15
	Skills and Training Levels	S2	training places provided / taken-up access to third level education	.45	.4	.15
Culture and Identity	Heritage Artefacts and Amenities	C1	stock of amenities evidence of combining heritage and culture in territorial development	.2	.2	.6
	Cultural and Arts Organisations	C2	range and diversity of organisations and expressions awareness and accessibility of the arts and local culture	.2	.2	.6
Governance and Financial Resources	Civil Sector Dynamics	G1	organisational capacity of the community/ voluntary sector third sector as an agent of economic development	.3	.6	.1
	Citizen Participation in Decision-Making	G2	participation by disadvantaged groups/ sectors voluntary / community sector engagement with the statutory sector	.3	.6	.1
Employment and Economic Activities	Employment (unemployment) Levels	E1	employment development strategies experiences / extent of economic diversification	.6	.3	.1
	Business Activities	E2	spatial distribution and size of businesses extent of networking, co-operation and collaboration	.6	.3	.1
Image and Perception	Presentation of the territory to outsiders	I1	extent of visitor attractions integration of returnees/ newcomers	.3	.25	.45
	Territorial Marketing	I2	distinctive territorial products and branding promotion of territorial resources and amenities	.3	.25	.45
Physical Resources	Biodiversity	PR1	size, distribution and health of protected areas/ natural habitats application of biodiversity guidelines	.1	.1	.8
	Environmental Initiatives	PR2	ecological practices among landowners/ farmers participation / performance in national tidy towns	.1	.1	.8
Access and external relations	State/ Public Sector resourcing of local initiatives	ER1	territorial ability to attract public funding infrastructural connections	.35	.3	.35
	Inter-agency Co-Operation	ER2	joint-initiatives / joint-projects transnational co-operation	.35	.3	.35

Outputs and Impacts of Partnerships

Evaluating the operational effectiveness of partnerships, their contributions to rural governance and their capacity to influence and direct change in the statutory sector and enhance territorial competitiveness requires a quantitative and qualitative assessment that transcends programme-based evaluations. The case studies referred to in this paper assess the extent to which partnerships have impacted on actual changes to territorial resources. These reveal that partnerships have contributed to a positive valorisation of territorial resources, particularly in terms of economic diversification and enhanced citizen participation in local development. However, they tend to have shortcomings in terms of addressing environmental issues and concerns, and have had varying degrees of success in influencing

mainstream policies and practices in favour of rural development. The following maps instance some of the quantitative outputs of the case study partnerships⁴.

Fig. 3: Increased Spatial Distribution of Projects in the Arigna LEADER Area

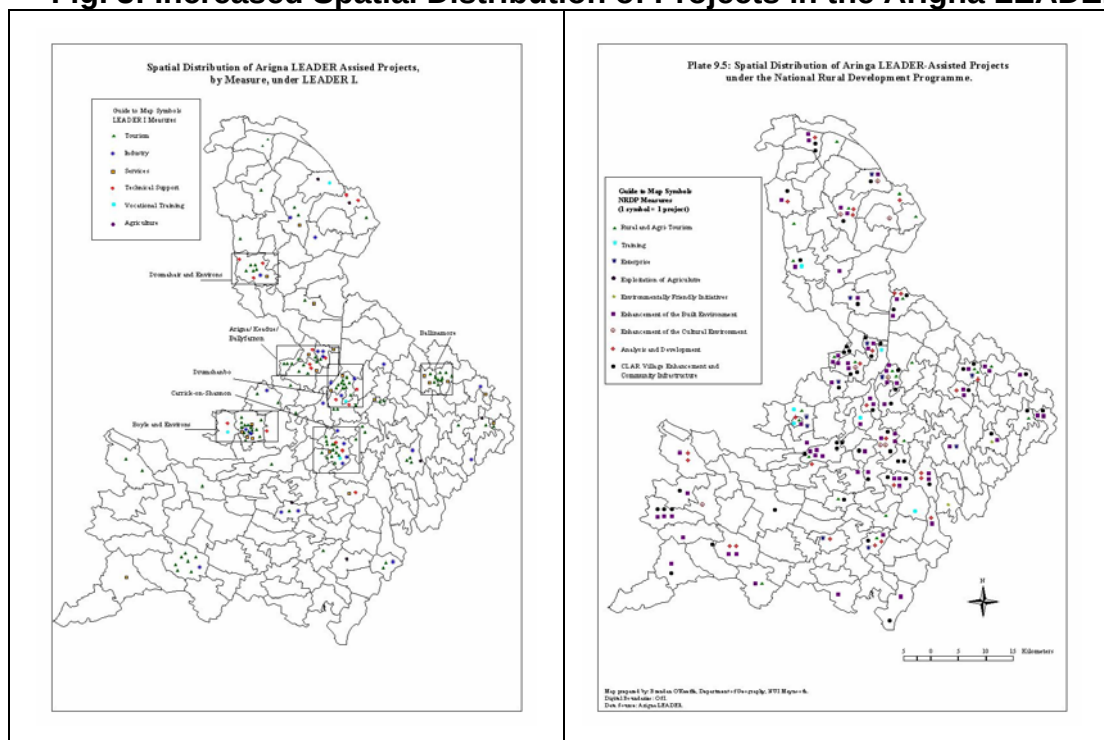
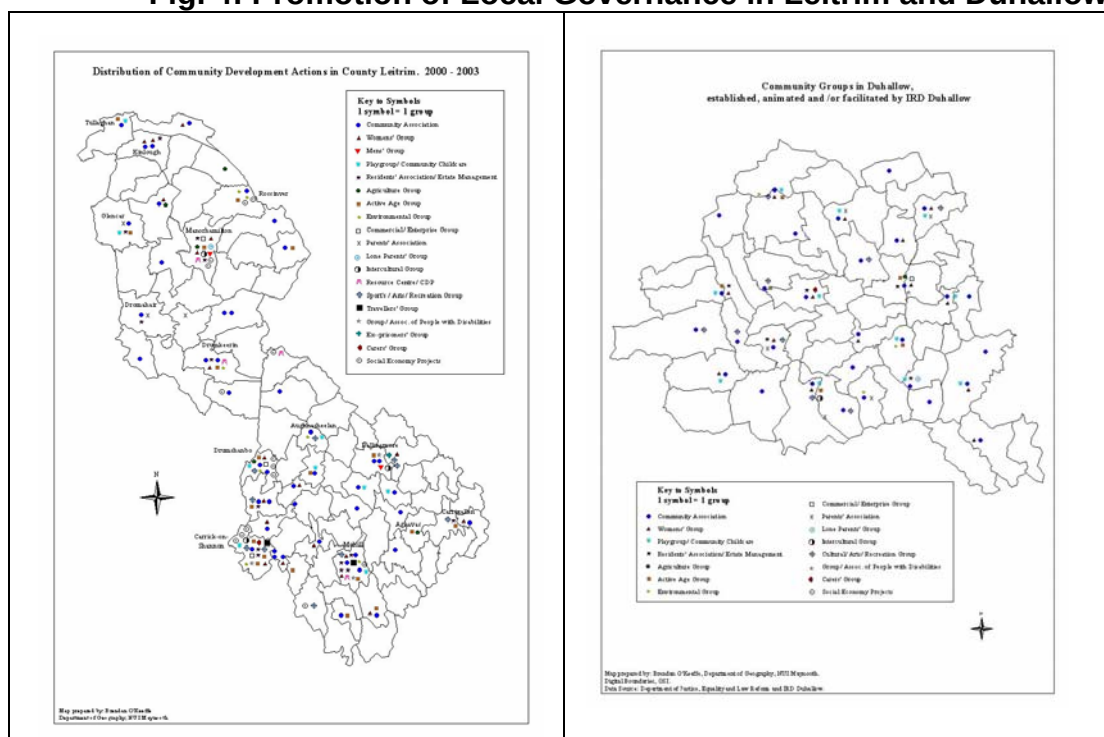


Fig. 4: Promotion of Local Governance in Leitrim and Duhallow



⁴ Further details on the case studies are available from O’Keeffe, B. (2005)

Fig. 5: Targeting Deprived Neighbourhoods – Actions supported by Southside Partnership

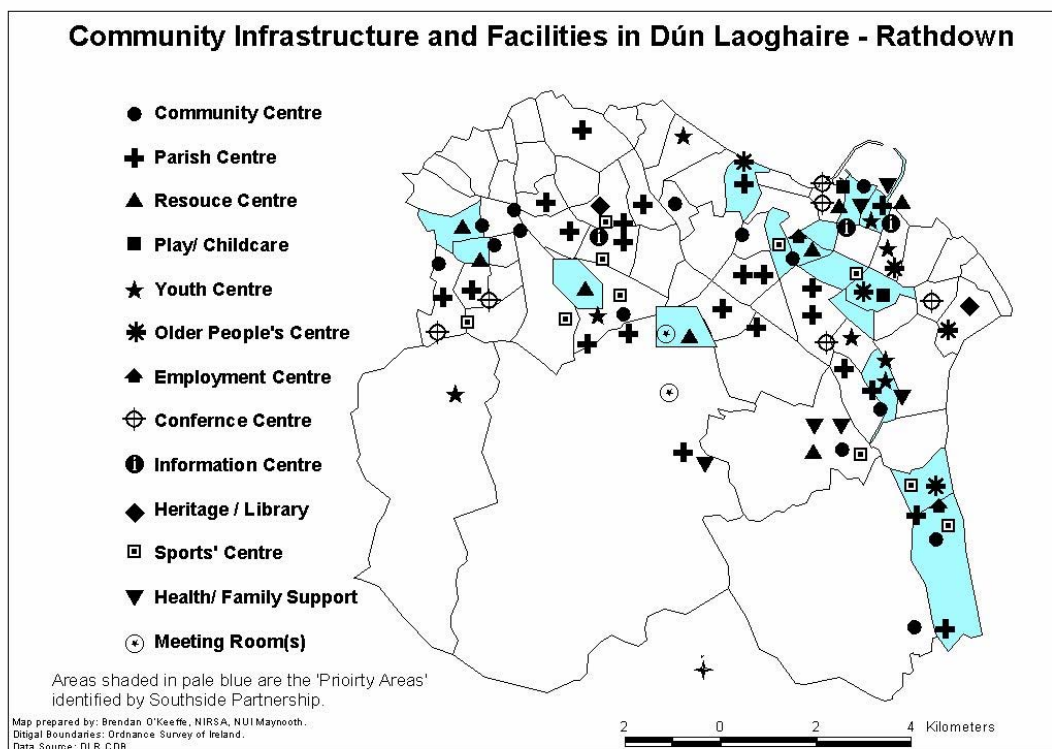
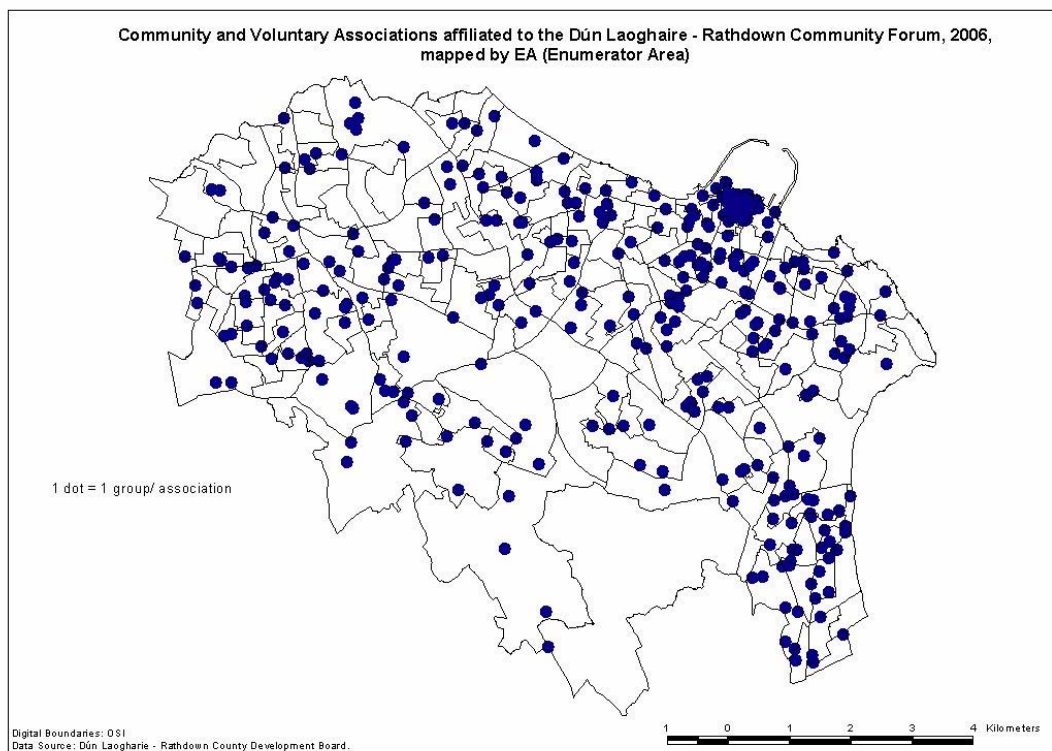


Fig. 6: Associations Affiliated to the Community Forum (facilitated by Local Government) in Dun Laoghaire – Rathdown.



The findings from the case studies point to the need for additional public investment in partnership approaches to rural development. Partnerships have provided good value for money, and have the capacity to deliver a greater range of development interventions than is currently the case, although some partnerships need to address the representativeness and capacity of their boards and sub-committees. Initiatives promoted and supported by partnerships are making tangible contributions to diversification of the rural economy, and the expansion of participative forms of local governance. While partnerships have generally enhanced citizen participation in local development, persistent problems associated with social exclusion and under-representation by women, and other sectors of society suggest that, in order to further their democratic legitimacy, partnerships need to pay increased attention to animation, capacity-building and the development of more inclusive decision-making fora.

The Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown case study reveals that Southside Partnership has been the instigator and main driver of collaborative governance in the County. The Partnership is a dynamic organisation, and its strengths are clearly manifest in its capacity to identify, articulate and respond to needs in a variety of communities and across all sectors. In addition to delivering social inclusion and local development initiatives, the Partnership is in itself a core arena of collaborative governance. Its board, sub-structures and its interventions at neighbourhood level are all characterised by approaches and processes that promote collective and inclusive decision-making and active participation. The Partnership is enabling bottom-up participation, and its capacity to disseminate information, target communities and promote animation and capacity-building need to be more adequately and extensively resourced. In addition, Southside Partnership encourages top-down engagement in local development, and it facilitates interfacing between the bottom-up and top-down. Due to its collaborative structure, and multi-sectoral capacity and membership, the Partnership offers the optimum vehicle through which pilot initiatives can be mainstreamed, and its role in articulating policy ought to further developed.

Partnerships began as a largely experimental element in local economic development. This case study has provided some insights into how Southside Partnership has excelled in that respect, while having also emerged as a vital component of the governance infrastructure in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The Partnership has vigorously advocated and enabled the roll-out of collaborative governance within local government, and it has been to the fore in contributing to the development of strategic approaches and new initiatives involving local government. Its contributions to local government and local democracy are significant, and it is important that Southside Partnership continue to promote participative democracy, and foster citizen participation in all aspects of local development and decision-making.

Participation in partnership governance has influenced, and in some cases altered and enhanced the role of the state sector in local and rural development. Several state agencies have demonstrated a high degree of buy-in to the partnership processes. They have funded and co-funded projects in collaboration with the partnership itself and/ or with social partners and community groups. While most agencies have progressively engaged in collaborative ventures, and have come to share power in partnership arrangements, a number of agencies do not. The case

studies suggest that the role played by lead government departments shapes and influences the responses of agencies at local level. The current variations among agencies in responding to partnership dynamics suggest the need for agencies to be given greater exogenous direction, competencies and resources, in the interest of promoting their participation in partnerships. Pro-partnership initiatives currently promoted by some government Ministries ought to be extended to a greater range of statutory bodies.

While there is evidence of partnerships influencing changes in practices among public bodies and among the social partners, the number of policy changes that can be attributed to partnership processes is limited. Partnerships have tended to adopt a minimalist approach to mainstreaming. Some examples emerge from the case studies that demonstrate how partnership can realise out-sourcing arrangements with the public sector. Such experiences need to be transferred to other territories, partnerships and agencies.

One of the shortcomings that faces partnerships in the transfer of best-practice is their tendency to under-record and under-report their achievements. An over-reliance on quantitative performance indicators and a cumbersome administrative system are contributing to an under-representation of the outputs and impacts of LEADER. This problem is less acute in respect of the Social Inclusion Programmes, as Pobal facilitates partnerships to undertake qualitative case studies of their work. However, monitoring systems applied to date fail to capture any impacts that partnerships may be having on territorial competitiveness and on institutional structures and processes.

The case studies identify the factors that contribute to, and detract from the realisation of integrated local development. Spatial variables emerge as a significant determinant of the effectiveness of partnership processes. Initiatives that operate in more homogeneous economic and social territories, and which respond to the specific characteristics and resource potential of rural locales are more effective in enhancing territorial competitiveness than are initiatives that operate on larger geographical scales, and which prioritise administrative divisions over economic, cultural, social and environmental realities. Administrative autonomy, a high degree of integration and the flexibility to respond to local conditions, and to target specific sub-areas and cohorts of the rural population add to the effectiveness of partnerships. The case studies presented here, which consider partnership contributions and limitations in a range of spatial contexts, point to the current and potential contribution of operating within, through and on behalf of functional areas that are defined and delineated by the relative homogeneity of their resource bases. The demarcation and promotion of functional planning and development areas in Ireland has been very much neglected heretofore.

Drawing on the lessons from the case studies here, regional authorities ought to initiate such a process. Adherence to functional areas should be a requirement of future area-based partnership programmes, including the programmes that are expected to follow LEADER and the LDSIP⁵ in 2009. This area-based approach may

⁵ **Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (2000-2006):** The Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) was a series of measures, funded under the National Development Plan 2000-2006, that were designed to tackle social exclusion, deliver a more sustainable economy, improve employment prospects and contribute towards balanced regional development. The programme, which was managed by Area Development Management (Ltd.) – now Pobal – on behalf of the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, was particularly targeted at the areas of greatest need throughout the country.

then be rolled-out to local authority areas. Implementing development interventions based on functional areas also raises the issue of introducing a municipal level of government in Ireland.

The case studies reveal a high level of output on the parts of all the partnerships in the case study territories. There is considerable evidence that the outputs and impacts of the partnerships exceed those envisaged for the various programmes they operate. Each of the partnership organisations has developed over time, and has increased its competency in delivering rural development interventions. The experiences of all the partnerships concur with evidence put forward by Greer (1999: 307-309) that regular contact between partners and capacity-building over time, are among the factors that lead to more inclusive decision-making processes. Each of the partnerships has become more inclusive, with women, community and voluntary groups and those affected by social exclusion now playing much more active roles in partnership that was the case at the inception of partnership processes. Participation by the social partners has increased over the past five years, and collaborative area-based ventures involving the public sector are more frequent and less transient that was previously the case. With one exception, each of the partnerships discussed here is now operating at least four development programmes, and all have increased the degree of integration and multi-sectorality in their approaches.

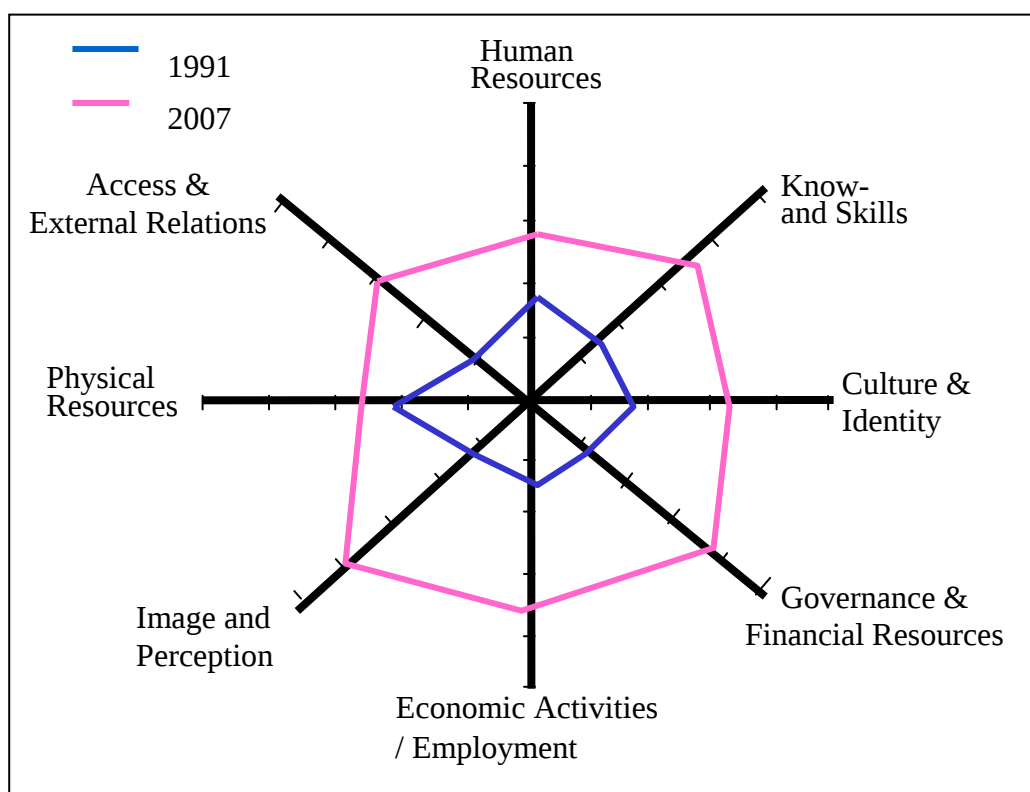
Extracting the Key Lessons from the Partnership Experience; refining partnership characteristics and processes.

The evidence provided by this study is that partnership processes are adding significant value to the attainment of sustainable rural and local development goals. The case studies demonstrate that partnership processes enhance the territorial competitiveness of rural territories and that, with some modifications, area-based, integrated and endogenous approaches to development have the potential to deliver a greater range of programmes and benefits to rural territories.

The following diagram, which presents the median quantitative level of territorial change in each of the three case study areas, based on combining the scores from the three case studies demonstrates how the contextual conditions in which partnerships operate, and the territorial competitiveness of three rural areas have been enhanced. As the diagram shows, the partnerships' most significant contribution to rural development is their animation and fostering of collective endogenous action that strengthens rural identity, promotes positive perceptions of rural territories and increases citizen participation in local governance. When the contributions and limitations of partnerships in the three case study areas were quantified, based on the economic, socio cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, the socio-cultural dimension emerged as the strongest of the three. Citizen participation is incentivised by the promotive role of partnership staff and by the structure and focus on development deliverables made possible by autonomous and inclusive partnership boards and sub-committees. Funding provided by partnerships to enable community and voluntary groups to undertake development projects furthers citizen participation and local governance.

Partnerships are effective in the area of economic development. They are promoting diversification of the rural economy, and are supporting and fostering creativity and entrepreneurship. The training and employment programmes delivered by partnerships are enhancing employability in rural areas, and partnerships are having considerable successes in addressing social exclusion through their employment support actions. Global grant arrangements, multi-sectoral approaches and a harnessing of local knowledge and expertise favour local economic development.

Fig. 8: Mean Quantitative Assessment of Territorial Resources in the Three Case Study Territories, 1991 and 2007.



Partnerships' contributions to the attainment of all dimensions of sustainable rural development also associate positively with on-going monitoring and evaluation; quantitative and qualitative, multi-annual, multi-sectoral and integrated strategic planning and programme delivery, inter-partnership networking and collaboration, promotive approaches to animation and idea-generation, strong leadership among partnership directors, management capacity and a coherent territorial approach.

Of the three dimensions of sustainable development, the one that currently requires greatest attention is the natural environment. Partnerships have limited resources and expertise in this area. Despite their implementation of some innovative conservation and ecological projects, there is considerable room for furthering the contribution of local development to the attainment of sustainable development goals. Inter-agency collaboration on ecological initiatives needs to be encouraged.

The conclusions from the case study analysis provide evidence that vindicates the proposals put forward in 2004, by the then EU Commissioner for Agriculture Franz Fischler, when he recommended that at least 7% of EU Rural Development Funds be allocated to LEADER-type approaches, and that all rural development actions should incorporate a LEADER element. The recent decision by the European Council (July 2005) that LEADER should account for at least 5% of the rural development budget post-2007 represents a significant acknowledgement at EU-level of the achievements of partnership and the potential benefits that can accrue to rural territories from the mainstreaming of partnership processes. The case study findings also support the recommendations made by ESPON (2003) and the Rural Economy Foresight Group (2005) that greater levels of resources be transferred from the first to the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Drawing on the experience of LEADER+, ÖIR (2004: 58-60) observes how the realisation of synergies between partnership and mainstream rural development measures can be realised when institutions adopt similar methodological approaches, administrative interlinking, inter-agency negotiation, joint strategic perspectives and customising approaches to suit local territorial conditions. The case study evidence strongly supports this contention, and underscores the need for improved programme implementation mechanisms, including evaluation mechanisms, and inter-agency knowledge transfers.

The case studies reveal a number of limitations in the current degree of synergy between partnership and mainstream approaches. That EU-level commitments to mainstreaming have been put in place, does not automatically mean that similar principles will apply at national level. The Community and Voluntary Sector has responded enthusiastically to evolving governance arrangements and volunteers have assumed considerable responsibilities in the co-ordination of multi-sectoral initiatives. As a result, a number of agencies have engaged more fully in local development and have entered into more extensive partnership processes with community groups. However, agency responses have not been uniform and the role of local government in enforcing poverty- and equality-proofing needs to be strengthened. The volunteer base on which much of collaborative governance rests needs on-going mentoring, facilitation, support and technical assistance. Such supports ought to be provided on a multi-annual basis, with community groups having the flexibility to innovate and to respond to new and emerging opportunities; while also retaining their autonomy and achieving greater parity of esteem with other governance actors.

Multi-annual strategic planning needs to be more explicit in community development and inter-community networking. Bottom-up and top-down actions to promote volunteerism, neighbourliness and civic spirit are essential in fostering good governance; with local development / LEADER Partnerships well positioned to promote these.

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