

Communities, Collaboration, Cohesion, and Centralization: Contemporary Insights from Rural Ireland

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Republic of Ireland’s recent experience of profound economic, social, cultural, and political change and its remarkable journey from relative poverty to boom and then bust have been well documented (see, for example, Chapter 6 in this volume). While much of the commentary on contemporary Ireland’s development trajectory focuses on national actors and institutions — the celebrated and the maligned — insufficient attention has been paid to development efforts and experiences at the local level. This chapter looks at the model and dynamics of rural development that have emerged in contemporary Ireland. It considers the changing institutional, resource, and political contexts in which rural development operates. It looks in particular at the interfaces between local bodies, the state, and the EU, and it assesses the current opportunities and challenges facing rural development actors in Ireland.

Much of the substantial economic, social, and infrastructural change that Ireland has witnessed over recent decades can be attributed to the country’s membership in the European Union. EU interventions and influences have modernized agriculture and opened up new markets for industry and services. The completion of the Single European Market, the dilution

of interstate boundaries, intergovernmentalism, and EU support for inter-regional collaboration all have contributed to the Peace Process and the normalization of relations between Ireland and Britain. EU membership has enabled a cultural transformation, as Irish people travel more and interact to a greater extent with other European peoples and cultures, and the country is no longer perceived as an appendage of Britain but as a distinct entity (Hourigan, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005). EU co-financing of National Development Plans since the 1980s provided guidance to aspects of public policy and introduced an emphasis on multi-annual and multi-sectoral planning. EU influences have impacted the way in which the Irish state and its institutions relate to citizens (Adshead and Tonge, 2009; Rees and Connaughton, 2009).

Rees and Connaughton (2009) use the term “Europeanization” to describe EU-influenced political change at all tiers of government. Europeanization encompasses institutional adaptation to take account of participation in decision-making by non-governmental actors, more sophisticated mechanisms of sub-national governance, and increased networking in political processes. At the local/district level, EU requirements for multi-stakeholder partnerships and an emphasis on bottom-up approaches to development have led to the formalization of interfaces between the state and civil society. Partnership initiatives such as LEADER¹ (the EU initiative for rural development) have empowered community and voluntary groups and conferred decision-making competencies and responsibilities on non-governmental actors (Cawley, 2009; Quinn, 2009). Douglas and O’Keeffe (2009) have documented how the regional tier of government was established in Ireland at the insistence of the EU, although they note that regional authorities have been conferred with few responsibilities, as central government has endeavoured to retain key competencies in spatial planning and territorial development. Marshall (2007) outlines how processes of Europeanization have manifested themselves on the governance landscape of the Dublin metropolitan region, in the form of partnership, holistic regeneration initiatives, participatory planning, and proactive approaches by local inhabitants — all made possible by EU investment in Dublin’s environment, its pump-priming of renewal projects, and its

insistence on collaborative governance. However, Marshall's research questions the extent to which institutions in Dublin and the Irish state have really embraced Europeanization and governance changes, and he is critical of persistent ad hoc approaches in the Irish system and the absence of mechanisms to promote "joined-up urban institutional arrangements" (2007: 178). Similarly, Quinn (2009: 118) claims that "without Brussels' insistence on sub-national partnerships, partnership as a *modus operandi* would not have been implemented at sub-national level."

A series of EU initiatives since the late 1980s have transformed the local development landscape in Ireland. EU-funded anti-poverty programs provided resources directly to civil society groups in mainly urban locations to promote employability and social inclusion. This European support for endogenous bodies, which bypassed the Irish state with respect to the disbursal of funds, laid the foundations for area-based approaches to development that involve a range of stakeholders (Harvey, 1994). Similarly, reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy and the establishment of LEADER as a dedicated funding stream for rural development partnerships were embraced by civil society organizations in rural Ireland. Thus, there is clear evidence of Europeanization in that community development processes and structures have morphed from being highly localized, exclusively bottom-up, and poorly resourced to being more networked, cross-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder (Walsh and Meldon, 2004). Over the past 25 years, agents involved in rural development — LEADER Local Action Groups among them — have generally come to reflect and enact the principles of participative democracy, collaborative governance, and sustainable territorial development. Thus, rural Ireland has gained an attuned and proactive set of institutions with the capacity to devise strategies and implement development programs. Local government has been obliged to adapt and respond to the increased vibrancy and assertiveness of local development organizations; but county and city councils continue to operate in reference to a geography institutionalized in the 1890s and their *raison d'être* has been characterized as "local administration rather than local government" (Lee, 1989; Callanan and Keoghan, 2003; Breathnach, 2013). Clear differences of emphasis and methodological gaps have emerged

between local development and local government actors that add complexity to the governance landscape in Ireland. Central government has on occasions celebrated the successes of what the OECD (Turok, 2000) described as Ireland's "dynamic and innovative" local development partnerships; but it has more generally tended to delimit their functions and autonomy and has attempted — both covertly and overtly — to subject them to local government controls. Significant gaps and some tensions have emerged between local development partnerships, which had come to see themselves as quasi-autonomous development agencies, and the state bureaucracy, as evidenced by an increased raft of regulations emanating from Dublin.

This chapter notes how rural development in Ireland evolved in the context of weak local government and was spurred on by civil society leaders who advocated the need for community self-reliance and independent endogenous action. While Ireland remained a significant beneficiary of EU funding up to 1999, there was a notable Europeanization of the governance landscape, and Irish approaches to rural development were advocated by the European Commission as offering a blueprint for those countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Furthermore, the Commission pushed for a substantial increase in the level of funding for rural development for the period 2007–13, although its efforts were somewhat tempered by members of the European Parliament, who voted in favour of retaining funding for farm subsidies over rural development. Growing Europe-wide recognition and increased levels of funding appeared to put Ireland's rural development partnerships on a strong footing in 2007 and engendered optimism among rural communities. However, as this chapter describes, such optimism was short-lived, as organizational restructuring, bureaucratic regulations, ministerial changes, and government advocacy of an increased role for government at the expense of governance caused a weakening of local partnership, a re-emergence of uniform exogenous planning, and a consolidation of centralization. Indeed, there is considerable evidence of a reassertion of Victorian-era geographies and institutional behaviours on the Irish landscape as the state has become increasingly bureaucratic, inflexible, and authoritative in its supervision of rural development. This chapter

contends that in the context of responses to economic contraction, worrying gaps have emerged between the local and the national, between the volunteer and the bureaucrat, between civil society and state institutions, and between rural development partnerships and national government in respect of policy priorities, mechanisms for delivery, and a vision for rural society. Thus, while central government focuses on reducing the state's debt and budget deficit as quickly as possible, it risks dismantling the sub-national governance infrastructure required to promote territorial competitiveness and sustainable rural development.

DYNAMICS OF THE IRISH MODEL OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Greece, Ireland, and Portugal have the shared distinction of being the first EU member states ever to require an IMF (International Monetary Fund) sponsored intervention. The so-called "bailout programs" to which these three countries are being subjected have caused them to lose political sovereignty, as the IMF, EU, and ECB (European Central Bank) stipulate aspects of their economic policies in return for long-term loans at rates of interest that are lower than those available from financial markets. Of the three member states, Greece is being subjected to the greatest degree of external control as its funders exert demands for extensive political and institutional reform, and that country has experienced considerable social trauma as its political leaders seek to impose unpopular economic policies. Portugal, like Greece, has experienced considerable political agitation and popular protests against austerity. However, its leaders have been more successful than their Greek counterparts in reducing the government deficit and introducing public sector reforms. Similarly, Ireland has been required to make considerable and painful fiscal adjustments and to provide for more consistent revenue-raising mechanisms. In response, the Irish government has moved to introduce household charges and a property tax to provide for the funding of local government, which heretofore has relied heavily on the national exchequer to fund its staffing and operations. The introduction of new taxes has ignited a debate — albeit a muted one — about the role of local authorities and the high degree of centralization that characterizes the Irish state. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that a

2006 ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observatory Network) report identified Ireland, Greece, and Portugal as the most centralized states in the EU. These states' adherence to centralization distinguishes them from other small European states, which have been taking steps to promote regional autonomy and subsidiarity at district and municipal levels.

The centralized nature of the Irish state, the absence of a strong regional authority tier, and shortcomings in local government were among the drivers of local agitation and the emergence of self-assured and independent-minded community development organizations in many parts of rural Ireland (McDonagh, 2001; McDonagh et al., 2009). The inabilities of exclusively top-down distributive strategies such as "growth poles" and industrial relocation incentives to arrest rural decline brought about an interest in complementary bottom-up policies in the 1980s (discussed further in the Canadian context in Chapter 13). Cuddy (1992: 75) argued that the "main focus of bottom-up policies must be to increase the efficiency of the development process" through promoting local participation in discharging those responsibilities it is competent to carry out. This perspective, which recognizes the development potential of the local area and the merits of area-based and territorially differentiated approaches, is articulated in the 1988 European White Paper on the *Future of Rural Society*, the recommendations of which have since been taken up by the European Commission. In 1991, the EU Commissioner for Agriculture (and Irishman) Ray McSharry oversaw the creation of a "second pillar" of the Common Agricultural Policy with a dedicated funding stream for rural development. The pillar, which has provided support for diversification of the rural economy, environmental initiatives, and some social interventions (early retirement for older farmers and training for new entrants into agriculture), as well as LEADER, is significant in that it establishes rural development as a core policy objective of the EU. LEADER has evolved in tandem with "the European Model of Agriculture," which emphasizes the multifunctional nature of the countryside and advocates incentivizing and enabling farmers to protect and promote "the rural landscape, biodiversity, and countryside access" (Feehan and O'Connor, 2009: 126). However, some notable criticisms of the pillar emerged, with many observers (O'Hara and

Commins, 1998) contending that it is overly influenced by agricultural concerns, while others, especially the environmental lobby (Ward and Lowe, 2006; Mantino, 2011), claim that it is under-resourced relative to Pillar One (farm subsidies). Throughout Europe, the dominant farm lobby has continued to object to the transfer of resources to rural development (Papadopoulos and Liarikos, 2007), and as Europe prepares for the program period 2014–2020, this old chestnut is surfacing again.

The advent of Pillar Two and the emergence of LEADER were welcomed by the Irish government, which moved to facilitate the formation of 16 Local Action Groups (LAGs) — area-based partnership organizations responsible for the implementation of LEADER I (1991–94) (NESC, 1994). The LAGs were generally driven from the bottom, with civil society organizations being the main protagonists. Statutory bodies, the social partners, and in some cases local government representatives also sat on the LAG boards to provide specialist knowledge, technical support, and match-funding. The independent evaluation of the program in Ireland (Kearney et al., 1995) noted the significance of LEADER in consolidating the establishment of LAGs, and in providing rural areas with a tool for promoting long-term and integrated local development. O’Hara and Commins (1998: 271) noted that LEADER marked “a significant reversal of the situation when local projects operated with virtually no state support (indeed almost in spite of the state), to one where there is now a widespread acceptance and appreciation of the value of voluntarism in local development.” The successes of LEADER I led to the roll-out of LEADER II (1995–99), LEADER+ (2000–06), and the mainstreaming of LEADER across the EU in 2007. Since 1995, LEADER has covered almost all of the territory of the Irish state, with the exception of the five main cities.² In 2006, the regional gateways and hub towns³ were excluded from the catchment territories of LEADER LAGs.

Successive iterations of LEADER in Ireland have been implemented exclusively by LAGs. Since 2008, LAGs have been legally obliged to include local government representatives on their boards of directors in the personages of the county manager (or his/her nominee) and a number of elected county councillors. The multi-stakeholder composition of LAGs,

their strong association with civil society, and their relative autonomy in decision-making up to 2006 distinguished LEADER in Ireland, Finland, and Spain from the arrangements in some other EU member states, where LEADER tended to be more aligned with local government, although in more recent years the dominant trend across Europe is towards LAGs that are driven by civil society. In their study of rural development organizations in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Ireland, Douglas and O’Keeffe (2009: 89) note that “both jurisdictions have gravitated towards a more local, endogenous, or bottom-up approach over time, with one (Ireland) subscribing more explicitly to the principles of subsidiarity. Successive evaluations of LEADER (Esparcia et al., 2000; ÖIR, 2004, 2010; RuDI, 2010) have lauded the “specific features”⁴ of LEADER as offering the optimum governance model for rural areas. The OECD records that “LEADER has demonstrated the benefits that a bottom-up, integrated approach to rural development can bring with relatively little resources, and its success stands in contradiction to and highlights the limits of the sectoral approach to rural areas” (2006: 91). In a similar vein, the Carnegie UK Trust observes that “LEADER is judged to be one of the most successful initiatives ever to come to Europe” (2010: 3).

The transition from LEADER I to LEADER II in the mid-1990s was marked by an expansion of the number of LAGs from 16 to 34 and a corresponding increase in size of the LEADER national envelope (from €43.6 million to €119.2 million). By 1996, the majority of LAGs had also assumed responsibility for the delivery of complementary development initiatives, the most notable among them being the Local Development Program (LDP). Established by the EU and partly co-financed by the Irish exchequer, the LDP sought to promote social inclusion and local economic development. While LEADER was open to any individual or collective body with an eligible idea or project, LDP resources had to be targeted towards the most disadvantaged in society, with the priority being those affected by long-term unemployment. The LDP had a similar overall budget to LEADER II (€112.5), but was more targeted at urban than rural areas; and where it was not delivered by a LAG, the LDP was the responsibility of a designated Area Partnership Company or Community Partnership. Its

implementation was co-ordinated at national level by an independent intermediary organization — ADM (Area Development Management) — rather than by the Irish civil service. ADM included on its Board of Directors representatives of the partnerships involved in the delivery of the LDP, nominees of government, the social partners, and social advocacy groups. Its incarnation and the establishment of a LDP Monitoring Committee represented a very significant Europeanization of Ireland's governance landscape, as a multi-stakeholder partnership assumed a role that would have traditionally been the exclusive preserve of a government department (ministry). Most LEADER LAGs partnerships, particularly those in the west of Ireland, embraced Europeanization: they assumed responsibility for the LDP and tendered for the delivery of a range of other EU and national programs (such as LIFE, Rural Transport Initiative, and Social Economy Program) on the basis that their mandate was multi-sectoral and that an integrated approach to rural development was essential (O'Keeffe, 2009). A minority of LAGs, however, were less comfortable with the notion of taking on responsibilities other than LEADER, and at times there were tensions at national LEADER Network meetings between the more holistic, multi-sectoral partnerships and those who described themselves as "pure" LEADER groups. The decision by some LAGs not to engage in broader local and rural development contributed to the establishment of parallel partnership organizations — many with structures and territories that came within, coincided with, or overlapped LEADER territories — thus increasing institutional complexity and creating a perception of agency duplication.

The spawning of local partnership structures between 1995 and 1999 and the ensuing allegation propagated by some politicians and media commentators that a plethora of agencies was operating at cross-purposes exacerbated what had already been an uneasy relationship between local development and local government in Ireland. The achievements of the local development sector — the targets for LEADER II and the LDP were exceeded nationally — and partnerships' abilities to fund community projects prompted many politicians to call publicly for local development functions and budgets to come under the control of local authorities. This

view was supported by the County Managers' Association, which lobbied for change. The external evaluation of LEADER and the ESF (European Social Fund) review of the LDP noted the need to tidy the institutional landscape at the local level, although the ESF report observed that:

charges of proliferation and overcrowding on the local development scene are not new, nor are they, in our experience unwarranted. However, what is unwarranted is any charge leveled against any of the organizations themselves. Partnership companies, LEADER Companies, ADM-Funded Community Groups, Enterprise Boards and others did not invent themselves. They are all creations of central planners, both at national and EU level and in that respect where there is over-crowding, that over-crowding is the fault of those central planners and of a fund driven rather than objective driven mentality. (European Social Fund Evaluation Unit, 1999: 201)

The failure of the local development sector itself and of national government to grasp this nettle in 1999–2000 meant that, although basking in the successes of significant development outputs, LAGs and other partnerships faced then, as they still do, uncertainty regarding their institutional futures and their interfacing with local government.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE STATE

Although Ireland is the most rural country in Western Europe,⁵ it was not until 1999 that the government adopted a White Paper on Rural Development. Until then, a number of commentators had equated Irish policy to “shopping for EU subsidies” (McDonagh, 2001; Dillon, 2010). Douglas and O’Keeffe (2009) observe how the White Paper was influenced by the European agenda to promote multi-functional agriculture and vibrant and sustainable communities. They also note that the government’s commitment to rural development has been evident in subsequent National Development Plans and in spatial planning policy. The roll-out of measures contained in the White Paper has seen LEADER Partnerships — now known

as Integrated Local Development Companies (ILDCs) — assume an extensive range of development roles, as the state has outsourced to them the delivery of a range of schemes and services. Consequently, ILDCs now operate between six and 10 programs in addition to LEADER; are involved in rural transport provision, conservation initiatives, and community business; and are exclusively responsible for the delivery of two state-sponsored labour market schemes⁶ (Maye et al., 2010: 18). Thus, the state has enabled an expansion and consolidation of ILDCs, as they become more involved in the mainstream delivery of public goods. Therefore, the trend identified by O’Keeffe and Douglas (2009: 107) whereby rural development had become “more integrated and multi-faceted or holistic” has been manifest, although its continuation is by no means guaranteed.

The expansion in their role that LAGs experienced up to the mid-2000s and the change in the nomenclature from either LEADER LAGs or Area/Community Partnerships to ILDCs are associated with what came to be called the “Cohesion Process.” Maye et al. (2010: 10) eloquently distinguish this uniquely Irish cohesion process from the better-known “cohesion” that underpins EU regional development policy and territorial solidarity. The drive towards cohesion in Ireland was spearheaded by the Ministry of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The ministry was established in 2002, and included in its mandate the agencies responsible for the development of Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas, the promotion of Irish, community development projects and schemes, as well as rural development, including LEADER. ADM and its programs also came under the ministry, which, at the time of its establishment, was one of only two rural development ministries in the EU. The creation of this ministry meant that all the partnership organizations involved in delivering both LEADER and ADM-sponsored programs were reporting, for the first time, to a single ministry.⁷ Having achieved the integration of programs at the level of the national government, the minister and his officials then set about realizing a mirrored integration at the local level, whereby LEADER partnerships and organizations delivering local development (and/or other social inclusion measures) were expected to fuse into integrated structures (Humphreys, 2011). This process of local-level integration known as “Cohesion”

had as its ultimate objective the creation of one partnership structure per county: an ILDC; although, as the process evolved, some flexibility was permitted such that larger counties such as Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Donegal, and the then minister's home county of Galway were permitted to have more than one ILDC.

The process of Cohesion can be seen as giving effect to the LEADER principles of multi-sectorality and integration. Evidence already existed of the synergies that could accrue from joint-delivery of LEADER and the Local Development Program (O'Keeffe, 2009). However, the top-down formula and timetable for Cohesion alienated a number of bodies, particularly the smaller Community Partnerships, who feared their ethos and their specific focus on social inclusion would be lost if they were to be subsumed into a larger organization. There were also fears of job losses and personality clashes in some counties. Consequently, progress on the Cohesion agenda was slow, and it was most problematic in counties Cavan and Monaghan, where directors of the LEADER group there, which had been in existence for almost 20 years, objected to the breakup of their organization so as to come within two new county structures. Indeed, the Cavan–Monaghan LAG explored legal avenues to try to stall Cohesion. The process chugged along between 2006 and 2008, but was brought to a head when the ministry inserted a “compliance with governance measure” in the selection criteria issued to potential LEADER applicants. Thus, only fused entities — ILDCs — could tender to administer LEADER and the Local and Community Development Program for the period to 2014.⁸ When it eventually concluded, Cohesion had resulted in a reduction in the number of local development partnerships from 94 to 52.

This expansionary phase in respect of increased responsibilities (up to 2008), albeit camouflaged and somewhat stifled by the protracted cohesion experience, contrasts with what many in the ILDCs currently perceive as the state's stifling of local development through excessive and restrictive bureaucracy, much of which is associated with the fact that, since 2008, LEADER is no longer a stand-alone program, but has become mainstreamed as part of Axes 3 and 4 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. A survey of ILDCs in 2010 noted that “the current

operating rules are proving very ‘challenging’ and ‘restrictive’” (Maye et al., 2010: 20). The survey findings also state that there is clear concern that the LEADER ethos of bottom-up rural development is, in the new mainstreamed program, being replaced by a much more top-down approach and that “the principles of innovative, area-based local development strategies that guide the LEADER program . . . (as articulated in the Cork Declaration in 1996), which make a clear statement in support of the philosophy of bottom-up rural regeneration, are, for some, in danger of being lost” (Maye et al., 2010: 24). The RuDI (2010) scoping study of rural development across several EU states reported that agricultural ministries remain the strongest single institutional influence on rural development policy. This perspective is shared among LEADER stakeholders in Ireland, who also point to the growing influence of the Ministry of Environment⁹ (the ministry responsible for local government). LEADER staff report that, up to 2008, they had positive working relationships with government inspectors, who gave advice in addition to monitoring projects. Since mainstreaming, however, relations between development officers and the inspectorate have become less collaborative, and interfaces between LAGs and government officials sometimes have been testy. One development officer observed: “The Department Inspectorate is becoming increasingly involved in individual projects,” while a LEADER CEO remarked, “We have gone from bottom-up to top-down, due to having to comply with agriculture-type regulations. We need to be removed from being one of the four axes, so that our ethos is not further diluted” (discussion forum).

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERFACES

The unease among partnership organizations and their questioning of successive governments’ attitudes to them has been heightened by temporal gaps between LEADER programs (one year between LEADER II and LEADER+ and almost two years between LEADER+ and its successor in 2007–08). The establishment of county and city development boards (CBDs) in 2000 and the exogenous approach to the “Cohesion Process” in 2007 and 2008 — both of which were steered by national government — also raised the ire of many LEADER stakeholders. CBDs were established

as part of an ongoing, although protracted, process of local government reform. The CDBs were seen by government as a mechanism to promote interfacing and create synergies between representative and participative democracy (Ó Riordáin, 2010), and their multi-stakeholder composition — involving representatives of civil society, the social partners and statutory sector — somewhat mirrored that of LEADER LAGs/ILDCs. Key distinguishing features of the CDBs, however, include that elected councillors outnumber each of the other sectors, the chair must be a local authority member, and staff are employed by the city/county council. Thus, they are very firmly an arm of local government, and have been charged with responsibility for co-coordinating a city/county development strategy. The boards have been subjected to external evaluation, and have been credited with enabling inter-agency synergies, but they lack a formal mechanism to ensure that national and government bodies give due weighting to local priorities (Indecon, 2008: viii). Many in rural development contend that they provide local government with the necessary partnership-like structure¹⁰ that would qualify county and city councils to assume LEADER and local development functions, and could “with the stroke of a minister’s pen be dressed-up in LEADER’s clothes for 2014” (interview, LAG chair).

ILDCs’ fears of local authorities (CDBs) assuming a supervisory or delivery role in rural development from 2014 have been primed by the fact that they are required by government (since 2003) to have their annual work programs endorsed (i.e., sanctioned) by the CDBs — an obligation not placed on any other publicly funded organizations. Statements in the government Green Paper on Local Government (2008), which described local authorities as “leaders in the local community” (2008: 89) and commitments in the Program for Government to “move many of the functions currently being performed by agencies — such as community employment and enterprise supports — back to local government” (Fine Gael and Labour, 2011: 27) added to concerns among those involved in rural and local development. Indeed, a number of LEADER representatives reported being taken aback by comments made by a senior government official who, in response to a query about the diminution of local government functions over recent decades,¹¹ replied, “we have to find something for them to do” (interviews).

The road map for local authorities also is being influenced by a steering group, which was established by the Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government to consider, among other things, how to enhance the role of local authorities in the delivery of local and community development programs and functions. It recommended (March 2012) more joined-up planning under the governance of the local authority and stated that local/rural development territories should be aligned with those of county (and city) councils. If pursued, the latter would have significant consequences in the more rural and peripheral west of Ireland, as along the western seaboard more than one ILDC operates within each county.¹² The west's adherence to flexible and locally delineated sub-county structures may indeed be geographically appropriate given western counties' larger scale, dispersed settlement patterns, and poorer socio-economic profiles. Indeed, the emergence of locally defined geographies of development is hardly surprising: county boundaries, which were delineated by the British colonial regime, have not changed since the seventeenth century (Parker, 2009: 290). Empirical research by Creamer et al. (2009) suggests that social, economic, and cultural connections have distinct geographies that frequently transcend current county boundaries, including in many cases the boundary between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the work of Breathnach (2012) and of AIRO (the All-Island Research Observatory¹³) in mapping the catchment areas of towns and functional territories across the island of Ireland exposes the increasing inappropriateness of county boundaries in respect of delineating service catchments, administrative areas, and development territories.

The ongoing debate about the spatial boundaries of rural development partnerships and their relationship with local government has revealed a considerable chasm between the local and the national and between the local and the county. Divergent perspectives have pitched community-based volunteers and practitioners against the county and state officials, while political representatives at all levels have transmitted mixed messages on the prospect of an expanded rural development role for county councils. Many councillors, including those who lead community groups and those who sit on the boards of ILDCs, are supportive of subsidiarity, while others

are reluctant to depart from stated party positions. The European Union has taken a jaundiced view of Ireland's attempts to direct its local authorities towards assuming local development functions, while the state is simultaneously pursuing centralization by transferring functions from local government to central government and statutory agencies. A European Court of Auditors Report (2010) reaffirms the EU's commitment to the bottom-up and multi-agency partnership approach, and it cautions against the institutionalization of local partnerships. With reference to the Irish context, the Court of Auditors states: "one of the key features of the LEADER approach is that decisions should be made not by public authorities but by a wider local partnership, where the local government is included but does not have a majority vote" (2010: 18).

As a result of such affirmations from Europe, many rural development actors currently perceive they have more friends in Brussels than in Dublin. As some ILDC managers have commented, "We have been knocked three steps backwards. Fear is all over the place from the board down." "The Department has lost the plot . . . In Europe, other DGs [Directorates General]¹⁴ are taking on board the LEADER approach, but our own government is killing it" (discussion forum). However, Ireland's economic growth during the 1990s and early 2000s and the accession to the EU of 12 states in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007 mean that the country is no longer a first-tier priority for European Regional and Cohesion Funds. Therefore, the EU's ability to influence the operations of sub-national governance in Ireland is limited, as is the degree of leverage available to ILDCs in responding to state-led centralization.

LEGACY OF THE CELTIC TIGER

During the heydays of the so-called "Celtic Tiger," rural development in Ireland appeared to enjoy something of a renaissance. A White Paper provided policy direction, while a dedicated ministry (Department of Community, Rural, and Gaeltacht Affairs), in particular the personality and drive of Minister Eamonn Ó Cuiv, ensured leadership and a strong rural voice in government circles. At the local level, LAGs matured into ILDCs and moved from delivering a single program (LEADER) to assuming

responsibility for a range of government-sponsored schemes, as the state recognized that ILDCs represented a service delivery model characterized by flexibility, innovation, and accessibility to local communities. As their responsibilities expanded, so did the budgets and human resources available to ILDCs; and there was considerable optimism among rural development actors that the Rural Development Programme (2007–13) would be “our most straightforward and innovative” (ILDC manager). The Celtic Tiger economy provided government departments, and by extension the ILDCs — as deliverers of local development and services — with reliable funding streams, while local communities benefited from increased access to supports. Thus, while the ILDCs were increasingly recognized as enablers of development at the local level, their dependence on central government increased, and more energy was devoted to delivering schemes than to policy development or the promotion of better governance; a restructuring of ADM (the name of which was changed to Pobal) resulted in its Board of Directors ceasing to include ILDC and other endogenous representatives, as all directors came to be appointed directly by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Consequently, ILDCs lost direct access to a national policy-making body, while Pobal itself has become more oriented towards the administration of local development funding than to the promotion of best development practice, an original core function of ADM. Furthermore, relations between ILDCs and central government were ruptured by a government decentralization¹⁵ program, which saw personnel in the civil service who had rural development experience move to other sections and ministries. In addition, the difficulties with the Cohesion Process, and the subsequent two-year delay to the commencement of the RDP (begun in 2009 instead of 2007) deflated the spirits of many of those involved in ILDCs and caused a loss of some experienced personnel, as a still artificially buoyant national economy offered alternative sources of employment.

In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland ILDCs are challenged to manage public expectations and maintain the level of activities to which they had become accustomed. Their influence on national policy has been reduced and government guidelines prohibit ILDCs using public monies to fund research, evaluation, the production of annual reports, or the training of board

members. The increased bureaucratization associated with new personnel in the ministry and mainstreaming at the EU level have led to significant administrative backlogs in program delivery. The Mid-Term Independent Review of the Rural Development Programme¹⁶ noted that in the first three years (2007–10), expenditure on Axes 3 and 4 (LEADER) lagged considerably behind Axes 1 and 2. While the evaluation (Indecon, 2010) acknowledged the need for a lead-in time to animate projects — a view shared by the OECD (2010) — officials in the ministry saw a need to intervene to prevent any possible under-expenditure in Axes 3 and 4. Since 2011 government officials have been much more active in the management of LEADER funds; all projects involving a grant in excess of €100,000 require prior approval from the ministry, while the budgeting of LEADER is now done on an annual rather than a multi-annual basis, as had been the case since LEADER I. The annualization of the funding has allowed the Irish government to reduce its contribution to rural development since 2011, such that the total value of LEADER and the core budget of most ILDCs have been reduced by 25 per cent. Thus, the rural development experience of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland has come to be characterized by cutbacks, centralization, and governance disconnects as the centre and the local become increasingly estranged.

A change of government following national parliamentary elections in February 2011 has done little if anything to arrest the decline in the status of rural development. Indeed, rural communities and actors feel further marginalized by severe austerity, as Ireland seeks to meet the terms of its international bailout and return to the financial markets in 2014. This policy approach has resulted in the closure of police stations, reductions in postal services, and threats to the future of rural hospitals and elementary schools. Austerity is also the primary driver behind rationalization of local government and the amalgamations of several authorities. In October 2012 Phil Hogan, the Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government, announced a reform package for local government that includes proposals directly affecting rural development. The minister's proposals (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012a: 28, 30) state that “the current enterprise development remit of the local

development companies (including LEADER) should be aligned with the functions of the local authority to avoid confusion and duplication” and that “local government will have a more central role in the oversight and planning of local and community development programming.” The reform package also provides for the creation of an SEC (Socio-Economic Committee) in each local authority area, with responsibility for decision-making on EU and nationally funded programs and interventions, and with oversight and responsibility for the management and disbursement of local and community development program funds. The reform proposals have been met with strong opposition from ILDCs, who claim that the establishment of an SEC would duplicate and usurp roles currently performed by their boards of directors (ILDN, 2013). Civil society organizations, predominantly in the west of Ireland, have mobilized to oppose the minister’s blueprint; local action committees have been formed and several public meetings have been held to enable citizens to voice their concerns and to rally support for LEADER and endogenous approaches to rural development.

The Irish government’s current attempts to rationalize local governance are not without international precedent. Douglas (2005) describes how municipality amalgamations in rural Ontario were characterized by a devaluing of local and experiential knowledge. Caldwell (2010: 113) makes similar observations in a wider Canadian context and also claims that efforts to strengthen upper-tier governments can compromise the fabric of rural communities. Such sentiments have also been expressed by civil society representatives in Ireland (Moore, 2013). DeVries (2013) has described attempts by the Dutch government to reduce the number of municipalities in the Netherlands as “blind up-scaling,” and he has cautioned that the proposals currently being advocated by the Irish government may prove to be costly. The financial implications of up-scaling have also been subject to analysis by Callanan et al. (2013: 13), who contend that “policy-makers need to tread carefully in this area . . . the savings involved can be secured by alternatives to costly amalgamation exercises, such as through inter-local authority cooperation, shared services and outsourcing.”

While up-scaling of local authorities is not unique to Ireland, and the international evidence cautions against such a trajectory, the dismantling

of local governance mechanisms, and specifically ILDCs, would set Ireland apart. The European Commission (2011: 1) has held to its view that “Over the past 20 years, the LEADER approach to community-led local development (CLLD) — has proven an effective and efficient tool in the delivery of development policies.” The Commission’s insistence that non-public sector representatives comprise at least 50 per cent of the membership of a LEADER board of directors is strongly supported by the Metis GmbH evaluation (2010: 20) of LEADER in Europe. The evaluation also claims that:

more autonomous LAGs show better results in awakening dormant skills and potentials, in strategic thinking and in monitoring the development of their area in a structured way. Autonomy or the decision making power of Local Action Groups should be further developed. Decision making power makes sense if the LAG is willing to exert it, if it is capable to master it and if it is allowed to do so by the managing authority and the programme administration.

The merits of multi-stakeholder partnerships and territorial approaches continue to be advanced by the OECD (2012), which advocates formal and informal institutions facilitating negotiation among actors in order to mobilize and integrate them into the development process. These sentiments echo the views of Greenwood (2010), who notes that the current challenges of rural planning, environmental conservation, and amelioration of climate change require integration across policy silos, a valorization of rural resources, and purposive decision-making that involves local communities and citizens.

CONCLUSIONS

The Irish model of rural development, which was for many years lauded as being among the best in Europe now finds itself in a critical position. From the late 1980s to the mid-2000s locally based partnership bodies (initially LAGs and more laterally ILDCs) expanded in terms of personnel, budgets, policy influence, development functions, and decision-making responsibilities. They also mobilized growing numbers of citizens and communities

and gave effect to participative governance and direct democracy in a state that has been characterized by centralization and the absence of formal municipal institutions. ILDCs represent one of the most tangible elements of Europeanization in the governance landscape of Ireland. However, as EU influences and concerns for citizen inputs into decision-making processes have become sidelined in the drive to consolidate traditional exogenous state institutions, Ireland is unravelling key elements of sub-national governance, and risks dismantling an infrastructure with learned experiences, established networks, and a demonstrable track record. Such a trajectory may serve to ensure greater uniformity in the administration of development initiatives and the delivery of services, but it comes at the cost of reducing innovation, disempowering citizens, excluding local voices, and further marginalizing peripheral and disadvantaged communities.

The rural development expansion over two decades paralleled the growth of the national economy and was accompanied by a recognition by Irish and EU authorities of the capacity of area-based partnerships to deliver local development and implement national policies and programs. This expansionary phase also saw increased formalization of development structures and governance arrangements as ILDCs incorporated local government representatives and were subjected to more frequent interfaces with local authorities (county and city councils) and controls from central government. Increased state involvement in the regulation of rural development is associated with standardization and bureaucratization and has resulted in a slow-down in rural development delivery and heightened tensions between the local and the centre. The current proposals by central government to align ILDCs with county and city/county boundaries and to subject them to oversight by a Socio-Economic Committee are representative of clear attempts to clawback to the centre powers that had been acquired by civil society. While government has referred to economic arguments in favour of centralization, it has not published the budgets associated with the establishment of SECs. Indeed, the overwhelming international evidence suggests that any benefits will be overtaken by the costs in the medium to long term.

Following its ascendance and expansion, albeit to some extent in the

shadow of the state, rural development in Ireland is now facing the prospect of severe contraction. While central government has been willing to out-source service delivery functions to endogenous bodies, the state's attitude and its actions in the form of financial cutbacks — despite growing local needs, increased bureaucratization, centralization, and attempts to sideline collaborative governance — suggest that it is less comfortable with sharing power and devolving decision-making competencies to partnerships. Indeed, the current scenario brings into question the state's attitude to participative democracy. Ireland's rural development experience has come to mirror that portrayed by Marshall (2007) in respect of the Dublin metropolitan region, where the intransigence of exogenous institutions stifled a durable transition to collaborative local governance and regional planning. The rural development narrative at the local level also reflects the patterns identified by Quinn (2009) at the regional level, which were characterized by a lack of commitment by central government to any meaningful form of devolution and, in fact, showed concerted efforts to preserve the hierarchical. The Irish experience currently manifests characteristics that Douglas and Annis (2010: 301) associate with responses to exogenous forces — reactive adaption, periodic inertia, and degrees of residual dependency. However, the current challenges are also injecting a new radicalism, vocalism, and vibrancy into rural communities, as civil society mobilizes itself in ways it has not done since the 1980s to stand up to the centre and to assert itself as having the ability to drive development initiatives. Now, unlike in the 1980s, communities can point to their 25 years of LEADER experience and consequent knowledge capital as evidence of their capability and commitment.

NOTES

1. *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale* (Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy).
2. Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Waterford.
3. The National Spatial Strategy (2002–20) identified nine regional gateways (Dublin, Cork, Limerick-Shannon, Waterford, Galway, Sligo, Dundalk, Tullamore-Mullingar-Athlone, and Derry-Letterkenny) as drivers of regional accessibility

- and growth. A further 11 “hub-towns” were identified as regional service centres.
4. The specific features of LEADER are: an area-based approach, collaboration and networking, innovation, multi-sectorality, partnership, decentralized financing, and a bottom-up approach (AEIDL, 2000; Carnegie UK Trust, 2010).
 5. Results of the 2011 census show that 36 per cent of the population reside in what the CSO (Central Statistics Office) defines as rural areas, i.e., the open countryside and settlements with a population of under 1,500.
 6. The two schemes are the Rural Social Scheme, which provides part-time employment for smallholder farmers (or their spouses) in delivering community services and improving local infrastructure, and TÚS, which commenced in 2010 and provides training and work experience placements for the long-term unemployed.
 7. Heretofore LEADER LAGs reported to the Department of Agriculture, while ADM was under the aegis of the Department of An Taoiseach (prime minister).
 8. The Local and Community Development Program builds on previous local development and social inclusion programs that had been supported by ADM. It provides ILDCs with resources to promote community development, training, education initiatives, and youth and family supports.
 9. After the 2011 general election, the Ministry of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs was broken up and its functions reallocated to other ministries, with responsibility for LEADER transferring to the Ministry for the Environment, Community and Local Government.
 10. EU guidelines specify that a LAG has to draw at least 50 per cent of its membership from outside the statutory sector.
 11. Local authorities have ceded competencies to central government in a number of policy areas such as health, agriculture, traffic, education grants, and the marine (Barrington, 2012; Breathnach, 2013).
 12. The number of local development partnerships in counties along the west coast is as follows: Donegal 3, Mayo 3, Galway 4, Kerry 4, and Cork 5. In addition, offshore islands have their own federation partnership.
 13. Mapping outputs from the All-Island Research Observatory can be studied on www.airo.ie. The observatory is based in the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at NUI Maynooth, www.nuim.ie/nirsa.
 14. Directorates General are the cabinet-like policy areas of the European Commission.
 15. The term “decentralization” is frequently misused in Irish discourse. While “decentralization,” which is synonymous with “devolution,” means transferring

decision-making power from central to regional and local authorities, the word has come to be used in Ireland to refer to relocating government offices and personnel from Dublin to locations elsewhere in the country. This misnomer has been uttered repeatedly in Ireland, such that a program to relocate 10,000 civil and public servants announced by the Minister for Finance in 2003 is more often than not referred to as “decentralization.” Indeed, the minister himself, Charlie McCreevy, used the term. In practice, the program announced by McCreevy failed to gather much momentum, did not adhere to the geography set out in the National Spatial Strategy, and was formally abandoned by government in 2011. The partial implementation of the program had led to the establishment of an office of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo, and the transfer to that office of personnel from Dublin.

16. The Rural Development Programme is structured according to the following national and community priority areas, which are implemented under Axes 1, 2, and 3:

Axis 1: Improvement of the competitiveness of agriculture by supporting restructuring, innovation, and development.

Axis 2: Improving the environment and countryside by supporting land management.

Axis 3: Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of economic activity. Axis 3 measures are implemented using the LEADER approach to rural development (Axis 4).

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