

**“But you can’t compare Malawi and Ireland!”:
Shifting boundaries in a globalised world**

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Abstract

Although global influences – in the form of international finance coupled with discourses of partnership, participation, good governance and democracy – exact an increasing influence on national and local governance arrangements worldwide, comparative studies across the traditional South/North divide remain extremely rare. Drawing on the findings from a comparative study of Malawi's PRSP and Ireland's national Social Partnership process, this paper demonstrates that a shifting of conceptual boundaries beyond traditionally delineated geographic borders is not just valid, but essential in that it helps uncover new perspectives on the politics underlying and the transformative potential of globalised development processes.

Introduction

The origins of this paper lie in reactions to a comparative study I carried out on the transformative potential of national governance processes in Malawi and Ireland. (1) As a development practitioner and activist re-entering academia somewhat later in life, the topic reflected my own interests and experiences working with groups in or on the margins of participatory processes both overseas (principally on the African continent) and in Ireland. I was struck by both the similarities in the concepts underpinning these 'new' governance processes in Ireland and other countries (participation, partnership, consensus, capacity building) and the experiences, as recounted anecdotally, by participants in both. Motivated by the apparent global convergence in socio-political institutions and structures, and rather naïve to the strict disciplinary and conceptual boundaries of academia, it appeared to me that both processes were ripe for a comparative analysis. Moreover, I could find no similar comparative study in the literature on both. Strict geographic boundaries seemed to apply. Comparative accounts of Ireland's Social Partnership were restricted to governance mechanisms in other European countries, such as the UK's 'third way' approach while PRSP processes were compared only with other PRSP processes in other Southern countries.

My initial euphoria at hitting on a topic that seemed both timely and necessary was short lived however. Even before I had begun, I was confronted with a severe methodological obstacle, most commonly articulated as "But you can't compare Malawi and Ireland!". Even as I began to present data highlighting many similarities between the Malawian and Irish processes, in terms of both their internal dynamics

and the agency of actors within them, these protests continued. The underlying problem appeared to be that, while it was sometimes felt that the Irish model, which has been widely celebrated as one of the key factors promoting consensus and social cohesion thereby laying the foundations for the much celebrated (though also contested) ‘Celtic Tiger’, may offer some lessons to those engaged in the Malawian process (see for example the World Bank, 2003), the Malawian model was seen as offering little to promote a deeper understanding of the Irish process.

In addition to attempting to disseminate the findings of the completed study therefore, I resolved that an additional contribution on the need to shift our thinking beyond our immediate geographic environs was required. This is the subject of this paper. My principal argument is that the global development map is messier than the simple dichotomies of First World/Third World, Developed/Undeveloped (or more optimistically ‘Developing’), North/South suggest and so our conceptual boundaries need to shift. As a stroll through the leafy suburbs of Lilongwe (Areas Three or Ten for instance) or the council estates of Jobstown in West Dublin or Southill in Limerick will quickly attest, the North is to be found in the South and *vice versa*. Growing levels of inequality are a feature both across but also within countries worldwide (see Chinsinga, 2002 on Malawi; Hardiman, 2003; Jacobson and Kirby, 2006 and Allen, 2008 on Ireland). I argue that the contemporary globalised world raises new questions in relation to how people ‘do’ politics, providing practitioners and activists with a broader range of experiences from which to draw. I demonstrate this by drawing on the principal findings of my study where my specific interest was in examining how internal ideologies and traditions combine with external ideologies and influences to produce political action in the context of the two processes I was studying.

I advance my argument in this paper by firstly providing some background information on the two processes, Malawi’s PRSP/MGDS and Ireland’s Social Partnership respectively, and outlining the methodological steps I took to increase the validity of the comparison. I go on to outline the principal findings of my study. The findings demonstrate a significant degree of similarity in both the dynamics of and actors’ motivations and agency within both processes thereby highlighting, I argue, the globalised nature of both processes. Focusing on the one significant difference in

the evolving political outcomes of both, I demonstrate how global discourses and influences have had a significantly greater effect on Malawian society than that in Ireland. I conclude by arguing that, contrary to the commonly articulated view as reflected in the title of this paper, not only can both processes be validly compared, but that, in broadening our conceptual boundaries beyond our immediate geographic environs, such a comparison uncovers new factors and greatly enhances our understanding of the dynamics for transformative change within our own societies.

Malawi's PRSP/MGDS and Ireland's Social Partnership: Comparing the incomparable?

The immediate context for the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which constitute mid to long-term national development plans aligned to national budgets, was the decision, in 1999, by international creditors to grant debt relief to a number of indebted countries. This necessitated a mechanism for the disbursement of released funds. PRSPs were thus devised at an international level by the World Bank and IMF as a condition of qualification for their debt relief package, the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC). PRSPs are now a precondition of aid from the IMF and World Bank for all countries, and are relevant to over seventy low-income countries with around one-third of the world's population (IMF, 2008). They are, in principle, consensus agreements developed in participatory, partnership-type arrangements between the state and a range of other actors, including local NGOs (World Bank, 2004).

Malawi's PRSP formulation process began in late 2000 following IMF and World Bank approval of an interim PRSP strategy in December 2000. The principal civil society group involved in the process was a self-formed network known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN). The MEJN network was made up of a range of non-governmental groups (NGOs), religious associations, trade unions, business associations, academics and community groups and purported to represent 'the civil society' in Malawi (MEJN, 2004). The resultant three year PRSP strategy was formally launched in April of 2002 (Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003). Following its completion work began, in mid-2005, developing a follow-on strategy (what, in some countries is known as a 'second-generation PRSP'). The Malawian five-year strategy,

known as the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) was completed in 2006 and launched in early 2007.

Ireland's Social Partnership process began in 1987 when the state, grappling with a severe economic crisis and, as with many other countries at the time, faced with the prospect of pursuing the structural adjustment route, opted for a different strategy and, through the Social Partnership process, managed to obtain the cooperation of employers and trade unions for a recovery strategy aimed at stabilising the economy, ultimately paving the way for rapid economic growth and job creation attributable, in large part, to the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Mac Sharry, 2000, O'Donnell and Thomas, 2002, Kirby, 2004, Hardiman, 2004). Although Social Partnership initially constituted principally a pay agreement between capital and labour, from the outset the agreement also embodied non-pay aspects, including a wide range of economic and social development policies. The scope and remit of the process has widened over time with the resultant strategies setting out commitments across an ever-increasing range of economic and social policy areas. In 1996, in a move which was heralded as evidence of a firm commitment to social inclusion and equity (Government of Ireland, 1997), a 'community and voluntary pillar' was created bringing in a range of organisations from the national social sector. Although the composition of this pillar has altered somewhat over time, it remains one of the four core pillars within the process. (2)

As this brief review suggests, despite their geographic remoteness, there are clear parallels in the principal features of both processes. Both are underpinned by concepts of participation and partnership; both involve a wide range of actors including NGOs and civic associations as well as state and economic interests; both result in consensus-based national development strategies; and attempts to overcome a development crisis through the attraction of international finance, in the form of debt relief and aid (in Malawi) and initially aid, in the form of Structural Funds from the European Union, and later FDI (in Ireland), were core to the establishment of both. Nevertheless, embedded in countries which clearly differ in economic, social, political and cultural terms, the key question remained - could they validly be compared?

To my mind, this was less a question of context and more one of method. Clearly, such a comparison was required, the question was how. And so, I turned to the literature on social and political research methodology to find some direction. Arend Lijphart, a renowned comparative political scientist has given this matter considerable thought. Writing early on in his career, Lijphart succinctly characterises the principal problem of the comparative method as a problem of “*many variables, small number of cases*” (1971: 685). In a paper focusing in this area, he suggests three ways of minimising this problem. First, he advises that the comparative analysis be focused on “*comparable*” cases, meaning those which are similar in a large number of variables. As we have already seen, Malawi’s PRSP/MGDS and Ireland’s Social Partnership, underpinned by identical concepts and arising out of similar development contexts (economic crisis necessitating external/international intervention) appear to fulfil this criterion. Two further ways in which problems with the comparative method may be reduced, according to Lijphart, focus on the research variables. These are respectively a) to combine, if possible, two or more variables that express an essentially similar underlying characteristic into a single variable, and b) to exercise what Lijphart terms “*theoretical parsimony*” (1971: 690) focusing the comparative analysis on key variables. Drawing on this advice, I designed a theoretical framework comprising five composite variables which I used in examining the two processes. While four of the variables (institutional frameworks, power and discourse, communications and decision making, and linkages to existing political structures) were developed in the early stages of the study following theoretical research, one of these (communications and decision making) was expanded and another (representation) was developed during the interview phase. In this way, while theory initially formed the parameters of data collection, additional data went on to drive the research contours. While this approach may be a little less “parsimonious” than that advocated by Lijphart, and certainly owes much to Michael Burawoy’s (1998) reflexive approach to research, it still bounded the study within a relatively tight comparative framework with the same variables being examined in both cases. So, methodological and conceptual frameworks in hand, what did the findings reveal?

Global-national transformations: A brief review of the findings

It is beyond the remit of this article to present a full analysis of the findings of the study. Nor indeed is that the article's principal aim. Its aim is to highlight the utility, and indeed necessity of the comparative approach employed in deepening our understanding of the dynamics, outcomes and potential of the two respective processes, and the prospects for social change in both contexts more broadly. In other words, did the chosen comparative approach reveal anything which might not otherwise have been revealed? And if so, what? To answer these questions, I draw on the principal similarities and differences between both processes, both in terms of their dynamics (structure) and the motivations and actions of their participants (agency).

The similarities: The invisibility of power - within and without both processes

While the literature on PRSPs and Social Partnership, together with wider literature on new forms of governance (see for example Bogason and Musso, 2006, Sorenson, 2006, Bang, 2003, Kooiman, 2003) tends to focus on their formal processes and procedures, in reality both the Malawian and Irish processes involve a high level of informal networking and relationship building. This is underscored repeatedly by both state and non-state actors within both processes and represents a significant similarity between both. For example, a civil society representative in Malawi explains... *“How decisions are made in Malawi, [it is] largely informal. A lot of manoeuvring is never done in public, kind of done deals behind closed doors... A lot in the corridors yeah, a lot in the corridors, very, very much so in the corridors.”*, while in Ireland a state actor within Social Partnership outlines how *“There's a lot of informal chatting and everything that goes on as people try to establish bottom line positions.”*

This has important methodological implications as an exclusive focus on the formal arenas and institutions together with their rules and procedures fails to capture the spatial scope and provides an incomplete picture of how power circulates, how alliances are formed, or how decisions are reached within both processes. A methodological approach focusing on invisible forms of power was thus required. Employing this, with a particular focus on discourses and communications (including

behavioural norms), some startling similarities across both processes became apparent.

First, discourses within both processes are highly technocratic and both are dominated by a ‘problem-solving’ discourse. While such an approach will be very familiar to many *Development in Practice* readers and development practitioners, having formed the basis of development interventions for a number of decades, this represents quite a new concept within Ireland’s Social Partnership, having been introduced by the Director of one of its core institutions in the early 2000s. (3) Interestingly, he is unfamiliar with the history or application of the concept in development studies. Within this framework, in both cases, policy discourses are privileged and the opportunities for what we might call ‘problem-framing’ or an examination of the underlying causes of these problems are foreclosed. Significantly, these norms have been internalised and are now reproduced by civic actors within both processes. In Malawi, MEJN’s Director notes the importance of technical expertise for problem solving, while in Ireland both trade union and community and voluntary pillar members underscore it as a principal feature.

I think the calibre of people we featured in the TWGs [thematic working groups] but also in the drafting, the technical drafting team of the PRSP, was calibre that wouldn’t be doubted, by the government, the donors, and everybody else.

(MEJN Director, Malawi)

I think the nugget of partnership is problem-solving.

(Trade union pillar member, Ireland)

Social Partnership is, as they put it, a problem-solving process. If it stops being that, or if we get the problem solved, we don’t have to be bothered about Social Partnership in a sense.

(Community and voluntary pillar member, Ireland)

Second, the dominant communication norms within both processes closely resemble each other with argumentation the favoured form in both cases. This consists of presenting a position backed up by statistics and facts, a ‘reasonable’ argument. In Malawi this is known as ‘evidence-based’ lobbying and this language has recently

(2006 onwards) entered the Social Partnership arena also. Thus there is no space for more animated or emotive communication norms of the type often favoured by less 'articulate' or educated, middle-class, male participants. Moreover, communication within Ireland's Social Partnership also appears highly gendered. Phrases like "*hard nosed*", "*hard ball*" and "*being business-like*" are used to describe attitudes and behaviour within the process. A number of community and voluntary pillar members point to the "*machismo*" that pervades the process. This is clearly a very male environment. In the words of one participant "...it's the big boys, and it's the big, and the boys."

Third, and allied to the restrictive communication mechanisms, very narrow behavioural norms characterise both processes. Again, these have been adopted and internalised by civic actors in both cases who have, in turn, attempted to 'discipline' (in a Foucauldian sense) their own members and colleagues into similar behaviour. Thus a walk-out at a plenary session by some members of Social Partnership's community and voluntary pillar protesting at new legislation which they perceived to be discriminatory met with anger from other pillar members, whilst MEJN leaders express frustration with what they characterise as "*unprofessional*" behaviour on the part of some of their members associations.

The similarity in these findings in relation to the discursive, communicative and behavioural norms within both processes are quite striking, yet they appear a little puzzling in the light of the avowed aim of both processes to increase participation and widen the range of voices and inputs on development policy options and alternatives. If the aim is to engage diverse voices, analyses and experiences, why are the norms for doing so so restrictive? This raises the question as to the real interests and motivations of both state and civil society actors in both processes, which brings us to another similarity across both and highlights their highly globalised (in an economic sense) nature.

For states in both processes, interviews revealed that their motivations are twofold - to promote order, consensus and social stability wherein international investment, be it in the form of FDI or aid or a combination of both, may be attracted, and to build legitimacy and support domestically for this project. As commentators in both

countries note, support, both internationally, but also vis-à-vis local citizens is important.

I think it's [consultation for PRSP] pretty much an obligation to be honest. That's what donors expect them to do.

(Official from Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, Malawi)

Sometimes governments think that civil society are a pain but I have always said that if only a government can listen to one or two things that civil society says they are likely to gain a lot of political capital for themselves.

(World Bank representative, Malawi)

The government's answer to all these questionnaires [from the EU] 'what are you doing about good governance?'. 'We have a very broad all-encompassing Social Partnership which includes NGOs as well as other Social Partners.' So they're using this as their way of handling the whole idea of creating more open government.

(Ex-state official, Ireland)

...there is an aspect of legitimacy which derives from their [community and voluntary pillar's] involvement. In a sense, the concern with fairness in the broader sense in the agreement is a good element to have in terms of the wider public understanding and acceptance of the outcomes of these negotiations.

(Chair of Social Partnership, Ireland)

Possibly more surprising is the acquiescence and internalisation of the restrictive norms by civil society actors. Representing their varied constituents one would expect greater resistance to the narrow norms characterising both processes (although, in the early 2000s, this was apparent to some degree among some members of Ireland's community and voluntary pillar). Interviews conducted in 2005-2007 revealed that the principal motivations of civil society actors (in both cases) lie in the perceived status and prestige, together with possible financial rewards accruable from their participation in both processes. In Malawi, participants in the PRSP acknowledge that their participation brought them to the attention of donors. Certainly, MEJN's meteoric rise over the period 2000 to 2006 from a secretariat of one to eight, and from a small grant from Oxfam to hold some workshops to a series of long term programmes funded by ten different donors is hard evidence of this. In

Ireland, community and voluntary pillar members also acknowledge the advantages of their ‘Social Partner’ status, as it is known.

The fact that you’ve got that mark, that you’ve been recognised as a Social Partner does add credence and credibility to your case, it does. There is a certain ‘oh, they’re a Social Partner, right, they’ve obviously had to achieve a certain standard’...

(Community and voluntary pillar member, Ireland)

The financial dimension is particularly important in the Irish case where the majority of funding to community and voluntary pillar members (and to the associations within the community and voluntary sector more broadly) comes directly from the state. Some members have learned this the hard way. Following its decision not to endorse the strategy in 2003, the Community Worker’s Cooperative, lost its core state funding resulting in the loss of two out of four of its staff. The remaining two staff were retained through separate project funding (CWC, 2005). Conversely, funding to community and voluntary pillar members who endorsed the strategy remained unaffected. In fact, three pillar members received once-off state grants in both 2003 and 2004 which did not fall under any of the usual official funding streams. In 2006, the Irish state announced a special funding stream to the tune of 10 million Euro per annum for community and voluntary pillar members for “*costs arising from contributing to evidence-based policy making, over and above normal activities and programmes*” (Government of Ireland, 2006: 71).

The similarities between both processes are quite remarkable given the alleged strongly nationally driven, country-owned nature of both. It might validly be argued that the less structured manner of working, emphasising relationship building and informal networking, together with the ‘disciplining’ tendencies apparent among state and civil society actors alike may be reflective of traditional, political cultural trends. However, the inherently globalised nature of both processes is also readily apparent in the influences of international capital (itself an invisible power) on both processes – both in the ‘spin’ vis-à-vis international donors and investors and in the discursive limitations of both processes where the focus is on solving the downsides of the dominant development model (problem-solving) rather than examining or deliberating upon the model itself (problem-framing). Clearly, Malawi’s PRSP/MGDS and Ireland’s Social Partnership are not so different as their geographic locations might

suggest. But are there any differences, and, if so, what accounts for these? It is to the one key difference between both processes, together with its implications for the potential transformation of both processes and social relations more broadly that we now turn.

The key difference: Promoting public debate and democratising political spaces

It is when we step outside the doors of both processes to examine the actions of civil society participants vis-à-vis their constituents that the key difference between both becomes apparent.

An issue in relation to Social Partnership which has become increasingly apparent in recent years – ironically, by its absence rather than presence – is the reduced level of public debate surrounding its broader developmental policy aspects, together with the virtual invisibility of community and voluntary pillar participants in the process. Although these received some attention in the earlier years of Social Partnership, with the community and voluntary pillar employing the national media to raise public debate in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the dearth of coverage of the pillar’s contributions during and beyond the 2006 talks stands in marked contrast to these earlier years. An issue of confidentiality surrounds more recent developments. As the (state) Chair of Social Partnership notes, *“I suppose we would also expect... a degree of observance of the no surprises principle”*. This has clearly been communicated in subtle ways to community and voluntary pillar members.

...there’s definitely a confidentiality anyway and I suppose you have to monitor that reasonably as well. There’s probably a level of discretion. But there’s also a spirit of the agreement or a spirit of Social Partnership which says - well you know, the officials would say that wouldn’t they? ‘We’d rather you talk to us than go public’. Or they may not say it but you’ll know it from body language, people not returning your calls, people being snotty.

(Community and voluntary pillar member, Ireland)

The work of the Social Partnership’s formal institutions, together with its various working committees remains virtually unknown publicly, while negotiations and deliberations on the final strategy are also shrouded in secrecy. The community and voluntary pillar in the 2006 negotiations did not adopt a media strategy and, although members stressed that all were free to issue statements or carry out interviews as they saw fit, almost all chose not to. It is interesting that, when questioned in 2007 about

their lack of media work, a number of members of the pillar had come to see the media in terms of a lobbying tool, almost as a last resort, rather than as an instrument to mobilise popular debate. Some noted that they needed to be very careful in employing it in that their interests could suffer as a result.

...you need to be careful not to use it [the media] too often. One, you upset the other organisations in the negotiations if you don't manage it right. Two you upset the civil servants.... You need to be careful.

(Community and voluntary pillar member, Ireland)

Yet commentators note that this lack of public debate on key issues has silenced dissent with one ex-community and voluntary pillar member noting that “*you don't get the crises because they're negotiated away*”. Moreover, with the public largely unaware of the actions of Social Partners, or the substance of their policy deliberations, there remains little public debate on either the country's development options (which remains within the exclusive domain of Social Partnership) or the legitimacy and/or effectiveness of its members.

This situation stands in marked contrast to the activities of MEJN. Malawi's PRSP, in particular during its early years, was widely publicised through both the national media, and also through MEJN's publication of popular materials such as a simplified version of the 2002-2005 strategy which was produced in several local languages and distributed to groups and associations throughout the country. Consequently the process has stimulated a high level of public debate on both the content of the strategy itself – i.e. the country's developmental options – and the actions of participants within it. As we will see, combined with the power of global discourses of ‘good governance’, ‘partnership’, ‘participation’ and ‘democracy’, this has succeeded in prising open a public political space bringing political authority (including that of MEJN) under increased scrutiny and critique, thereby forcing MEJN to mediate more directly the voices, analyses and aspirations of its constituency.

While MEJN began with the intention of bringing more actors into the PRSP, as we have seen, very quickly network leaders adopted the dominant discursive and communicative norms within the process. Sourcing technical experts and acquiring a more professional edge, MEJN leaders began sidelining less capacitated (as they saw

it) associations and members. Conflict inevitably erupted within the network where members, feeling excluded and sidelined, accused the secretariat of becoming an NGO in its own right. In the words of one network member...

MEJN is a network. They should not be implementers. Let them use their members... So let them identify what is their role. Are they facilitators or implementers? MEJN is not an NGO. The way I understand it, it is a network.

(Representative of MEJN member organisation, Malawi)

This conflict, following MEJN's publicity work, found its way into public debate more broadly whereupon, dovetailing with more global critical debates on NGO legitimacy and action which are well known and rehearsed in Malawi, MEJN's secretariat began to find itself confronted with charges of legitimacy. From its early days of relying on the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* as a basis for its inputs to the PRSP, MEJN's management and secretariat were faced with a growing public consciousness that the network had not consolidated a grassroots base which might feed into policy and advocacy activities, thereby putting into practice the theory of "*participatory economic governance*" (MEJN, 2004) that the network espoused and informing its representation. Indeed, with an office and entire staff in Lilongwe, MEJN appeared the very embodiment of the "elite" NGO divorced from its roots, as depicted in the critical development literature of the late 1990s (for example, Hulme and Edwards, 1997, Pearce, 2000). In 2002, cognisant of these issues, responding to public critiques, and seeking to consolidate a grassroots base, the MEJN secretariat began to build a local network of representation in the form of what became known as the District Chapter Programme.

MEJN's District Chapter Programme consists of locally elected voluntary committees of eight to ten people claiming to represent the interests of their communities at district level. Committees have been established in twenty-seven of Malawi's twenty-nine districts and consist principally of representatives of both local NGOs and local community-based associations including youth groups, women's groups, faith-based groups, and trade and business associations. (4) With MEJN leaders keen to use these committees to gather information in specified areas for its 'evidence-based' communication at national level, yet committee leaders keen to see MEJN represent

the real views and issues of local people, a clear divergence of views on the role and function of local committee structures has emerged. While MEJN struggles to maintain its status within the PRSP process, in itself a crucial portal to national policy for more broadly, its locally based membership, emboldened by global debates on the meaning of ‘participation’, partnership’ and ‘good governance’, lies waiting in the wings, with members of some District Chapter committees becoming increasingly vocal about secretariat support in their efforts towards more genuine representation at national level. It remains to be seen how MEJN’s secretariat will negotiate the conflicting normative demands of the state and donors, on the one hand, and Chapter members and their ‘communities’ on the other. One thing is clear however, bridging these relations and poised with one foot in, and one foot out of the hegemonic order, MEJN’s future decisions and actions could prove both insightful and inspirational to community and voluntary pillar members in Ireland caught in a similar nexus but, for the moment, seemingly shielded from global debates on their legitimacy, the contested meanings of partnership and participation, and the implications for development policy and social change more broadly.

Conclusion

The findings of the comparative study of Malawi and Ireland’s national development processes, in revealing high degrees of similarity across a range of variables – the invisibility of power, the dominant discursive, communicative and behavioural norms, the importance of international financial influences, and the motivations of both state and civil society actors – provides compelling evidence for the argument that both ostensibly “national” processes in fact constitute national versions of more generic globalised forms of governance. This further strengthens the argument that such processes, though geographically dispersed, can and should be compared.

It is interesting that while Malawi, together with many of its Sub-Saharan neighbours, is often highlighted as a loser in economic globalisation, with Ireland’s “Celtic Tiger” consistently cited as a winner, from the perspective of political and social transformation the findings of this study demonstrate the opposite. While many commentators bemoan the imposition of Western structures, concepts and values on African societies, Malawi’s political and social actors show that the reality is far more

complex and interesting. In Malawi, where international influences have long been strong, conceptual boundaries appear fluid, and social and political actors agile and responsive. In the case discussed here, Malawians have shown their adeptness in seizing global concepts, tapping into global informational networks and debates, and exploiting the opportunities offered therein to transform their own structures and society. There is an important lesson here for Irish social actors reluctant to move outside their traditional, geographically delineated points of reference. As long as they remain confined in this way, they will continue to ignore the valuable lessons provided by others and will remain locked into a status quo which, through the last twenty years of Social Partnership, carries a considerable degree of responsibility for the consistent rise in inequality during Ireland's so-called "boom years".

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Notes

- 1) The processes were Malawi's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, later renamed Malawi's Growth and Development Strategy (PRSP/MGDS) and Ireland's national Social Partnership process respectively. The study was carried out between 2004 and 2008 and formed the basis for my PhD thesis.
- 2) Social Partnership comprises an employer, trade union, farming and community and voluntary pillar, together with the state. Many of the largest national level representative bodies from each respective sector sit on these pillars.
- 3) The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) is one of the key formal institutions of Social Partnership.
- 4) It is worth noting in passing that, while it has become popular to describe civil society as a 'new' concept in much development literature, Malawi provides ample evidence of what Comaroff and Comaroff have described as a "*social revisioning*" (1999: 3) of the concept. Civic associationalism is extremely diverse and has a long history in Malawi (see Lwanda, 2005) and many of the local associations represented within MEJN's District Chapters have existed for decades.