

CHAPTER 4

EMBEDDING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL PUBLIC POLICY MAKING: REVIEWING THE IRISH EXPERIENCE 1991-2012

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Introduction

There is a well-established literature on the case for community participation in public policy making but very little discussion of community involvement in Irish public policy making processes, particularly at local level. The experience of local communities engaged in dialogue with state-directed local development agencies provides a useful case study. This article will examine how the Irish state has attempted to structure community involvement in public policy making and to assess the state's efforts to embed local development actions within communities.

This chapter has six distinct components. Section 1 outlines the article's primary research objectives⁶ while Section 2 discusses how the relationship between democratic theory and public policy in the area of local development is rather diffuse and the implications for public policy of developing policy initiatives based on vague and poorly constructed premises. Section 3 outlines findings as they relate to national public policy and Section 4 examines how it relates to public policy formation at local level. Section 5 presents the main findings of the research and Section 6 presents recommendations.

Research objectives

There remain significant gaps in our understanding of the relationship between democratic theory, public policy formulation and institutional design, particularly at local level. These gaps provide the parameters for the following research question: Has the state actively facilitated community involvement in public policy decision-making as it relates to the actions of local development agencies? In particular, what can be learned from the experience of community involvement with local

⁶ The article is based on a research project carried out in the Centre for Co-operative Studies in UCC and the findings have been updated to include changes in policy as of July 2012.

development agencies and the impact of state actions on this experience? These overall aims lead to a number of more specific objectives for this chapter, namely to examine the relevant democratic theory literature; the Irish public policy framework for community involvement; the role of relevant Departmental guidelines and directives on community involvement in local development agencies; possible reforms to strengthen the existing mechanisms community involvement.

Democratic theory and local development public policy

An examination of how public participation is addressed in political theory, while limited, raises a number of issues pertinent to public policy formulation:

- Citizens and communities participate in public policy processes for a variety of reasons;
- If the state wants its invitation for participation to be accepted and embedded in community based processes then the state's rationale for those invitations must be cogent and coherent;
- As Fung and Wright argue, the current institutional architecture of liberal democratic states is ineffective in accomplishing the central ideas of democratic politics, i.e. facilitating active political involvement by citizens, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that embed a productive economy and healthy society (2003: 3).

The Irish state will have to re-examine, in a coherent manner, how it structures its relationship with local communities.

National public policy and community involvement

A number of significant obstacles exist to embedding local development actions within communities, in particular through developing appropriate community participation mechanisms. These include the apparent conflict between state actions and rhetoric, power struggles between the local state and central state, public representatives and communities, and within communities. In addition the discourse in this area is often incoherent. A meaningful debate addressing the relationship between citizens, communities and the state, while central to clarifying what is meant by community participation and the various beliefs and premises that underpin this participation, is largely absent in the Irish setting.

The Green Paper on Local Government Reform (Government of Ireland 2008) contains a chapter entitled “Participative Democracy and Local Government”. This contains a variety of proposals to facilitate community participation, including “petition rights, participatory budgeting, town meetings and plebiscites” (2008: 79). Two significant problems arise from the analysis contained within the report. First, while it largely follows the perspective of the Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) and discusses the impact of civic republicanism on its deliberations, the report remains silent on the developmental versus protective debate. This is a major omission as it is possible to be a civic republican and believe in participation in order to protect my rights because I don’t trust the institutions of the state not to try and dominate me or usurp my rights (Cicero [51BC] 2009 and Pettit 1999), and equally possible to be a civic republican who believes that participation will make me a better citizen (Sandel 1996). If the state can’t cogently articulate why its citizens should participate, what hope is there that the mechanisms it develops to operationalise this participation will be effective?

A second problem with the Green Paper (2008) and the Taskforce Report (2007) is the continuation of similar language and recommendations in the Green Paper (1997) and White Paper (2000) on supporting voluntary activity, the Reports of the Taskforce on the Integration of Local Development and Local Government Systems (1998-2001) and the even older Better Local Government Report (1996). Similar language was evident at the launch of the Poverty III Programme (1987) or the Community Development Programme (1990). Clearly there is a state rhetoric available to be rolled out when necessary however the ability and willingness of agencies of the state to operationalise this rhetoric tends to be absent.

Local public policy and community involvement

The first finding in the local sphere relates to a lack of coherence in policy formulation and implementation. In the early stages of the local development agencies’ programme, 1991-1993, the approach adopted to facilitate community participation was top-down. It paid little attention to local sensitivities. This was followed by what might be called a period of ‘benign neglect’ as local development agencies were allowed to develop the mechanisms that they saw fit, 1994-1999. From approximately 2000 there appears to have been a change in perspective

and the introduction of target group representatives was now perceived to be of key importance. It is understood that this has its roots in what Pestoff refers to as 'participationalism' (2009: 203), i.e. citizens should "engage personally in shaping the welfare services they demand". However as Murray and Rogers point out this approach has had a number of negative consequences (2009: 129).

The expansion of the areas in which local development companies operate in the 2007-2009 period meant that the mechanisms championed by Pobal in the 2000-2006 period now had to be revisited. The new extended areas, however, by the nature of their socio-economic composition often lacked groups targeted for representation. This in turn led to the adoption by many local development agencies of the community forum model. In addition to the lack of a coherent policy on community participation, there were distinct changes to the composition of the boards of local development agencies in 2009, and changes in models of community participation supported by Pobal. The experience of many local development agencies is that the state has consistently underestimated the support necessary to involve communities in any meaningful manner: In the words of one research interviewee:

... Volunteers' expenses are eligible for development boards to pay and that removes some barriers such as childcare restrictions or travel costs.... there are issues with participation that makes involvement in the decision-making process challenging for community members. There is a huge reliance upon technology in order to participate in decision making, access to e-mail in order to keep up to date is essential and many people don't have this knowledge or resources to access e-mail regularly. So many funding streams are complicated and time intensive and if involved in the process, an expectation of a knowledge of "expert language" is assumed during discussions in order to facilitate saving time but new members are restricted from participating due to a lack of knowledge....Community members are not always fully aware of what they are signing up for due to a lack of clear role descriptions around their involvement....there are difficulties with the representative feeding the information back to the community adequately as it is very time consuming process to do so.

Furthermore, the research has identified the apparent lack of consultation between the Department of Community, Rural and

Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRAGA), Pobal and the local development agencies as a major problem. For example, in April 2007 DCRAGA insisted that it would reserve the right to appoint the Chairpersons of the various boards, despite the fact that each of the local development companies already had sitting chairpersons. Furthermore the right to appoint the independent chairpersons had been a prerogative of the boards since 1991. DCRAGA reversed its decision in October 2007. In addition DCRAGA unilaterally decided to reduce the size of the social partner component of the boards from 6-8 to 2 representatives. This was done without consultation with the social partners. Neither ICTU nor IBEC were contacted by DCRAGA prior to the decision. The decision was reversed in October 2007. An analysis of the various memoranda and discussion between DCRAGA and the integrated local development companies' representatives shows the initial lack of concern at the local development company's views about these changes. It was only when the legal and political ramifications of a number of these were outlined that DCRAGA reversed its decisions.

From the outset the state's efforts to involve local communities in its' local development programmes has been beset with problems. Ireland had and retains a culture and mindset of public service centralisation. As one research participant observed "It is not used to consulting'. Furthermore its policy design process has not addressed a number of key questions, e.g. why do citizens participate? Why should they participate and how should the state facilitate participation? By choosing not to address these issues, policies have been devised and mechanisms implemented that are, in reality, designed to fail. They could not become embedded in the social relations of local communities because they took no account of the social relations of local communities. What limited successes that have been achieved have been based on effectively sidestepping departmental requirements.

Key findings

The key findings are presented using the following framework; democratic theory and public policy; public policy at national level; public policy at local level.

The relationship between abstract democratic theory and public policy may, at first sight, appear tenuous however the clarity and coherence inherent in democratic theory constitutes useful perspectives

from which to examine public policy formulation. The case of community/citizen participation policy in Ireland is particularly interesting. This article contends that there is a lack of clarity underpinning Irish public policy in this area, for example, the lack of examination of fundamental questions such as why citizens or communities should participate, why they actually participate, and why the state asks them to participate. Despite a review of modern literature in this area, e.g. Taskforce on Active Citizenship, the analysis avoids addressing these, and related, questions.

With regard to public policy at national level, two key findings emerge. Despite the presence of a number of common themes running through the last decade and a half there remains a lack of clarity as to why citizens and communities are expected to participate. Despite a significant number of policy documents being drafted and published, it is very difficult to identify concrete and coherent actions the state has undertaken to make manifest its stated commitment to citizen/community participation, or to develop new “avenues of participation and communication between local authorities and the communities they represent” that “could allow citizens to exercise a greater degree of control over local services and facilities” (Government of Ireland 2008: 80).

In terms of public policy at local level there is a lack of consultation between the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRAGA), Pobal and the local development agencies.

The second finding in the area relates to the lack of consideration given to the implications of expanding the local development companies’ areas of operation and the communities they would now be working with. In addition to the lack of foresight in this matter it was found that DCRAGA did not engage in any meaningful consultation exercise with the local development companies or their representatives. Despite this lack of consultation and the problems and delays that arose from this during the implementation of these new mechanisms, the relevant Minister castigated the integrated local development companies for delays in electing community directors (MacConnell 2008b, 2008c and 2008d).

Recommendations for public policy

Recommendations can best be categorised in two areas, (a) a national or inter-departmental sphere, and (b) a DCRAGA/Pobal/integrated local

development company sphere. With regard to the former a number of fundamental issues need to be addressed. These include mapping out previous state commitments to facilitating community participation and reviewing how these have been implemented or if not implemented the various obstacles identified to their implementation. Once this exercise is completed it is recommended that the state should examine how it can oversee the implementation of current initiatives, e.g. those contained in the Green Paper on Local Government Reform *Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change* (2008), in the context of its previous failures. These will be a major exercise as it will involve a substantial element of inter-departmental co-operation.

With regard to the DCRAGA/Pobal/integrated local development company sphere, the analysis of documentation and interview data portrays an image of a very dysfunctional area of public policy formulation. The appropriate relationships between DCRAGA, Pobal and the local development agencies require more clarity.

In addition, the amalgamation of the LEADER Companies and the Area and Community Partnerships has given rise to an interesting anomaly. In terms of LEADER funding the integrated local development company deals directly with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries and, indirectly, the EU, but the funding provided under the new Local and Community Development Programme (LDCP) involves dealing with Pobal, as the funding intermediary, and DCRAGA as the parent department dealing with such issues as governance. When one includes funding from the Health Service Executive, FÁS, Rural Social Scheme, Whole Time Job Initiative, County/City Enterprise Boards and private funding from organisations like Atlantic Philanthropies, reporting relationships can become complex very quickly. As a result integrated local development companies have to deal with a variety of funding agencies in a variety of ways and this complexity tends to be disregarded by DCRAGA (Ó Broin 2009).

Finally the resources required to facilitate community participation from marginalised communities and non-marginalised communities are often underestimated (Ó Broin 2009; Murray and Rogers 2009: 127). In addition when cutbacks are advertised the first budget that tends to be cut is that allocated to community capacity building. Again it is recommended that, despite the current financial situation, the relationships between DCRAGA, Pobal and the integrated local

development companies need to be placed on a coherent and sustainable footing. It is not conducive to effective planning and service delivery if the level of autonomy granted to integrated local development companies, all of which are legally independent, is subject to official whim.

One of the most interesting aspects of this research is the relative paucity of existing material in the area of the relationship between elected public representatives, in particular city/county/town councillors and the locally elected directors of integrated local development companies. The author is aware that among the boards of directors of the Dublin integrated local development companies in the late-1990s this was an issue, primarily because the local councillors were prevented from sitting on boards of local development agencies. This situation changed in 1999 and since then each local development company has had councillors on its board. There are obvious issues of contestation and conflict between two classes of elected representative, e.g. legitimacy and representativeness. Since January 2009 this has become even more interesting as locally elected directors are currently on the boards of local development agencies that operate on a countywide basis. As a result elected directors can now have countywide representative duties. The authors are not aware of any research in this area at this time.

The relationship between integrated local development companies and the state is problematic, in particular between Pobal and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRAGA). Are the integrated local development companies agents of the state or independent limited liability companies contracted to deliver certain services? The *Guidelines* issued by DCRAGA in April and October 2007 raise a significant number of questions about the power of the relevant minister to influence the decisions of locally-constituted and legally independent boards. This area is, to the researcher's knowledge, largely unexplored.

Conclusion

In summary the area of public policy as it relates to community participation in local development actions is still evolving. At the time of writing significant changes to the Irish local development sector are proposed. It is unclear what implications arise for the sector, unlike

many of our EU counterparts Ireland has yet to develop robust and coherent models of community participation (Ó Broin and Waters 2007: 32-34). In addition to the absence of such mechanisms attempts by integrated local development companies have been *ad-hoc*. A key aspect of this relates to the lack of coherent national policy in this area. Despite approximately 20 years of policy documents and the local development agencies being in existence since 1991 the implementation of policy has been weak. This largely relates to a seeming unwillingness on the part of the state to implement appropriate mechanisms. Despite the success of some integrated local development companies and their efforts to establish models of good practice, changing departmental guidelines have meant that these successes rarely become embedded. As a result the state's efforts to embed community participation in local development actions has not been a success and is unlikely to be until the state can devise, implement and maintain a coherent policy initiative in this area.