

Partnership and Local Democracy – assessing the role of LEADER in Ireland

Abstract

The proposed re-organisation of local government and local development structures in Ireland envisages greater alignment of the boundaries and functions of LEADER Local Action Groups and local (county-level) authorities. Local government reforms over the past decade have given elected councillors and local government officials increased representation on the boards of LEADER organisations and interfacing between local government and local development has become more formalised. This is seen by policymakers as increasing the democratic legitimacy of LEADER, while others, mainly in the community and voluntary sector, perceive such moves as an institutionalisation of Partnership, which, if further promoted, could lead to the side-lining of civil society and an undermining of the spirit of volunteerism that has characterised local development in Ireland. Thus, the paper seeks to convey and account for these conflicting perspectives and to make recommendations on how rural development can best capitalise on the energy and commitment of civil society, the dynamism and innovative abilities of the private sector and the expertise and technical know-how of statutory bodies and local government.

Keywords: Local Authorities, County Councils, Local / Rural Development, Partnership, Governance, Alignment, Participative Democracy, LEADER.

Introduction

LEADER (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale*) Rural Development partnerships have been part of the political landscape in Ireland for over two decades. Since their inception, these endogenous bodies have had considerable impacts on local democracy. They have endeavoured to animate community and voluntary organisations to take decisions and deliver development initiatives at the municipal level. LEADER partnerships (known throughout Europe as LAGs – Local Action Groups) provide for civil society representation on their Boards of Directors and sub-committees, and are often the catalyst that enables community and voluntary groups to access supports and expertise from statutory bodies and local government. Local government itself is also represented on the Boards of Directors of LEADER LAGs in the personages of elected councillors and executives. As a result, and through more general collaborations with LEADER, County Councils make significant contributions to rural development. While the relationship between local government and local development has yielded significant outputs, tensions have emerged in recent years that are associated with central government efforts to streamline the geography and administration of LEADER and to give local authorities greater powers in controlling the disbursement of funds and in co-ordinating the work of LEADER and other local development initiatives.

This paper begins by providing an overview of how LEADER operates in Ireland. It presents the delivery mechanisms and structures that pertain and it outlines how LEADER interfaces with local government bodies. The paper then proceeds to assessing key outputs and impacts of LEADER, particularly in respect of stimulating and giving effect to participative democracy. The endogenous and area-based approach promoted by LEADER has impacted on the process of local government reform, and local authorities have of their own volition and through state-led policy reforms established mechanisms to enable community inputs into decision-making. While Irish local authorities have traditionally been marginalised in a centralised state, their recent forays into local and rural development have propelled them into a position, where the

government is now contemplating giving them planning and oversight functions to which LEADER LAGs would be subordinate. Such proposals have met with opposition from the European Union and from LAGs themselves. In order to gauge the perspectives of development agents at the local level, this paper concludes by presenting the results of a survey among civil society leaders and entrepreneurs on the future direction of LEADER, and it seeks to provide pointers for policy makers and practitioners.

LEADER in Ireland

The publication of the EU White Paper on Rural Development (Commission of the European Communities, 1988) marked a watershed in the European approach to the rural economy. Up to then, rural development was almost entirely equated with agriculture policy, and little regard was paid to the rural economy and society 'outside the farm gate.' The White Paper acknowledged the need to promote economic diversification, and to enable rural areas to reduce their dependence on the primary sector and thereby become more competitive, while improving the quality of life for all rural citizens. The new policy also envisaged that the EU and member state governments would no longer see the rural as exclusively a place of food production, but would work to stimulate multi-functional agriculture, whereby farmers would be guardians of the countryside and pursue a more ecological approach to agriculture. This vision implied that rural landscapes would assume new economic functions in generating renewable energy, providing increased woodland cover and enabling growth in the tourism sector. Giving effect to such a vision required reform of the CAP (Common Agriculture Policy), which up to the early 1990s, accounted for over two-thirds of the entire EU budget and was oriented to enabling farmers to be productive. Hence, in 1991 the then Agriculture Commissioner, Ray McSharry (an Irish government nominee to the Commission) announced the single most significant reform in the history of the CAP. The so-called McSharry reforms led to the division of the CAP into two pillars: Pillar I continued to provide supports directly to farmers to encourage food production. Pillar II, which has come to be known as the 'Rural Development Pillar,' represented a separate funding stream to promote rural diversification.

CAP reform and the creation of a dedicated Rural Development Pillar enabled the commencement of LEADER. EU funding was provided for the setting-up of over 200 Local Action Groups at the municipal and county (sub-regional) level throughout the then EU twelve member states. These local area partnerships were given the nomenclature LAGs (Local Action Groups) and were charged with administering a development fund (on average €2m/LAG in Ireland for the years 1991 – 1994) to promote local economic and social development. Unlike previous approaches to development which tended to be sectoral and driven by one agency, LEADER has sought to promote a multi-sectoral approach to development and to include a range of interests as noted in the EU White Paper:

Rural development must be both multi-disciplinary in conception, and multi-sectoral in application... Regional or rural development plans cannot succeed without the direct involvement of the interests concerned. Dialogue and partnership are all the more important because rural decline occurs in such a variety of situations, none of which can be ignored when the programmes are framed and implemented" (1988; 31).

In order to give effect to the vision articulated in the White Paper, Local Action Groups assumed a tri-partite partnership organisational model – bringing together in a single structure, representatives from civil society, the productive sector, and public bodies (government agencies and local and national administration). This collaborative approach to decision-making, which seeks to draw on the strengths of all sectors, is one of the specific features of LEADER. Another core feature is the area-based approach, which implies that LAGs focus on the development needs and potential of a given local territory. The LAGs' responsibilities include animating and inviting applications for LEADER funding, to enable communities, groups and / or individuals to implement development projects in areas such as training, rural tourism, small business development, exploitation and marketing of farm, forestry and fishery products, village enhancement, cultural celebrations and environmental conservation among others. Those who develop projects with LEADER assistance (known as project promoters) are required to provide match-funding in most cases.

The establishment of LEADER Local Action Groups coincided with, and was strongly influenced by the EU strengthening its focus on regional and territorial development, as championed by then Commission President Jacques Delors, who visited Ireland on several occasions, and was also instrumental in ensuring EU support for the Peace Process¹. Being one of the four Cohesion Countries², Ireland was an enthusiastic supporter of the EU-led shift towards territorially-differentiated approaches to policy implementation, and EU Regional Policy has had notable impacts on Ireland in economic and political terms. Partly as a result of EU transfers, via the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), ESF (European Social Fund) and Cohesion Funds, Ireland's GDP grew rapidly during the 1990s; in 1990, Ireland's GDP per capita stood at 71% of the EU average, and by 2000, it had reached 118%. In respect of the political impacts, Marshall (2007) and Rees & Connaughton (2009) claim that Ireland's membership of the EU, and in particular EU norms and expectations regarding the administration and disbursement of regional and local development funds (including LEADER) have led to a process of *Europeanisation*, whereby decision-making has become more inclusive, multi-level (involving state, regional and local actors) and multi-stakeholder (involving formal & informal political institutions and non-governmental actors). Kitchin and Bartley (2007) refer to the emergence in Ireland of multi-level governance, whereby government made the social partners (productive sector – farmers, trade unions and employers) part of the political process. This collaborative approach came to be known as national social partnership, and while its main focus initially was on stimulating economic growth and development, it gradually became a vehicle through which government involved a range of stakeholders in policy formulation.

¹ The 'Peace Process' refers to the multiple political processes that led to paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland (1994 and 1997), the subsequent Belfast / Good Friday Agreement (1998) and St. Andrew's Agreement (2003) between most political parties in Northern Ireland and the British & Irish governments, the setting-up of power sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, all-island institutions and frameworks between Ireland and Northern Ireland and improved relations between Britain and Ireland. The EU INTERREG Community Initiative has supported collaborative projects involving actors from both sides of the border on the island of Ireland, while a dedicated EU-funded Peace and Reconciliation Programme has targeted cross-border community development projects and local economic development. Further information on the Peace Process can be obtained from Coulter and Murray (2012). Further information on INTERREG and the Peace and Reconciliation Programme is available on www.seubp.eu and www.cooperationireland.org. The ICLRD (International Centre for Local and Regional Development) works with government departments, regional authorities, local government and community organisations to promote cross-border collaboration. See www.iclrd.org.

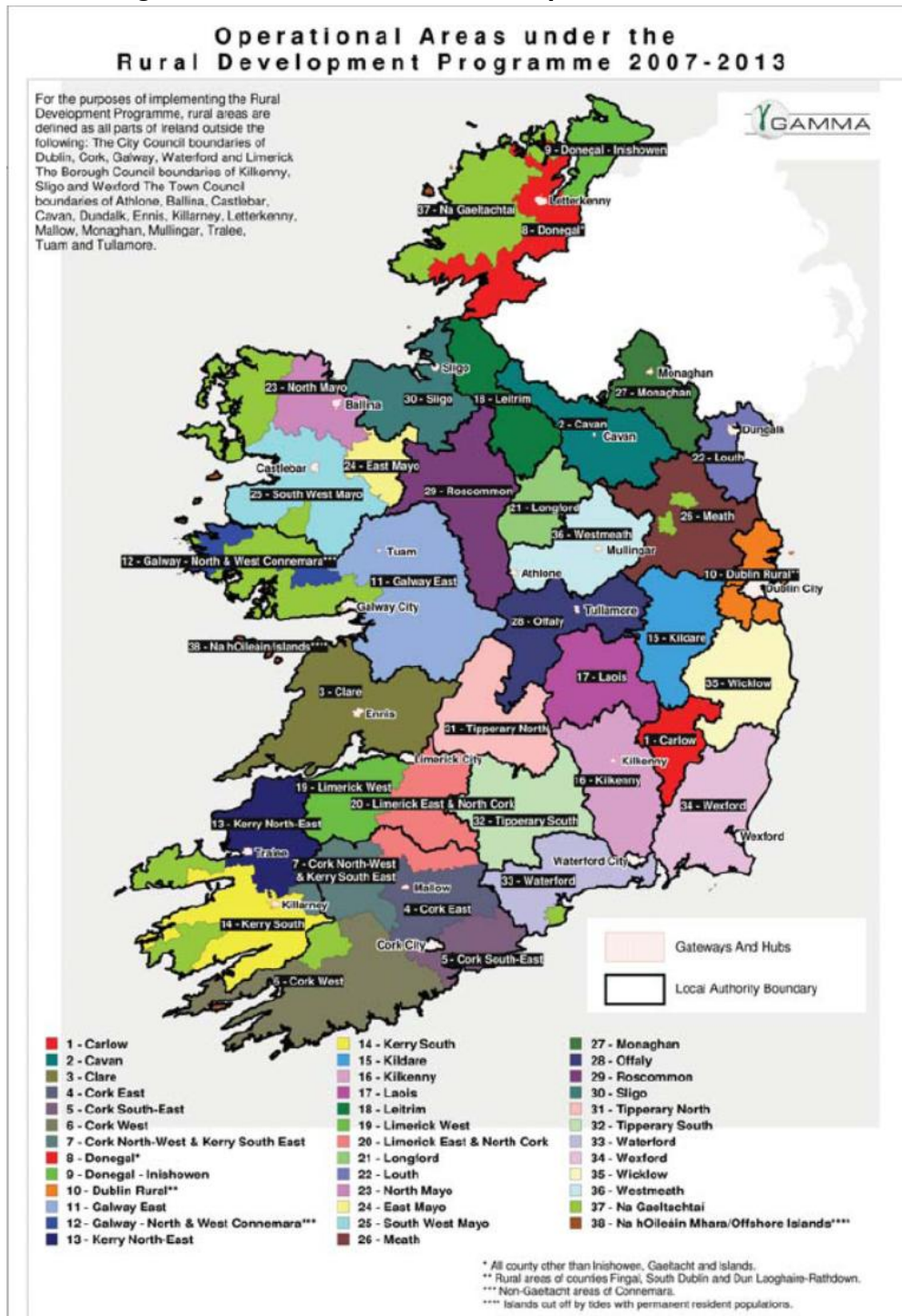
² The four Cohesion Countries of Ireland, Greece, Spain and Portugal were the primary beneficiaries of EU supports to prepare peripheral regions in the run up to the completion of the EU Single Market in 1993.

Indeed, from 1997 onwards, civil society organisations were formally represented in national social partnership. The perceived successes of this model of collaborative governance at national level in maintaining industrial peace (preventing strikes) and increasing worker productivity while the government sought to balance Ireland's budget, prompted politicians and the civil service to encourage a partnership approach to decision-making at local level, and in this respect, EU funding and support for LEADER and for area-based initiatives to promote social inclusion brought about the establishment of partnership structures in several locales throughout urban and rural Ireland. During the first LEADER Programme (1991 – 1994), there were 16 Local Action Groups in Ireland, covering about 40% of the rural territory. Since LEADER II (1995 – 1999), there have been over thirty LAGs, and these cover all rural areas (i.e. all of Ireland with the exception of the main urban centres). LEADER+ and the parallel state sponsored RDP (Rural Development Programme, 2000 – 2006), as well as the current (2007 – 2013) LEADER Mainstream cover most rural areas in Ireland. In parallel to enabling the expansion of LEADER, the state and EU promoted the establishment of APCs (Area-Partnership Companies) and CPs (Community Partnerships) to promote social inclusion and economic development in deprived areas. APCs had a tri-partite structure – similar to LAGs, and were reflective of the tri-partite model of national social partnership. Since 2009, LAGs and APCs / CPs have been obliged by government to amalgamate – a process known as 'Cohesion' (Humphreys, 2011; O'Keeffe, 2012), and in many instances smaller APCs and CPs were subsumed into LAGs³. The map on the following page presents the current geography of Ireland's LAGs.

In addition to influencing decision-making processes and structures in Ireland, EU policy has impacted on the state's territorial organisation (Adshead and Tongue, 2009). *Europeanisation* is evidenced by the establishment of eight regional authorities (NUTS II tier) in 1994, while the state's desire to maximise EU structural and cohesion funding motivated the establishment of two Regional Assemblies in 1999. Indeed, were it not for pressure from the EU, it is highly unlikely that an Irish government would ever have put in place a regional tier of government. While such a tier now exists, successive governments have failed to confer on it any degree of political authority that would put Irish regions on a par with equivalents in other EU member states (Quinn, 2009; VanEgeraat and Foley, 2012), and now that Ireland does not benefit to the same extent from EU regional development transfers as was the case in the past, the government's commitment to regional government has come into question. At the same time however, multi-level governance has enjoyed a period of vibrancy at the local level (Marshall, 2007; Douglas and O'Keeffe, 2009; Quinn, 2009). OECD reviews (Sabel, 1996; Turok, 2000) and independent evaluations commissioned by the EU and the Irish government (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2003; 2004; ÖIR, 2008) record that local partnerships (including LEADER Local Action Groups) have generally been responsive to territorial needs and potential, promoted innovation and generated economic development and social progress.

³ Since the Cohesion Process, the newly-constituted partnerships in Ireland are known as Local Development Companies. As this paper focuses on LEADER, and in order to maintain consistency with the nomenclature used throughout Europe, the term LAG (Local Action Group) is used.

Fig. 1: LEADER Local Action Group Territories in Ireland



The Irish state's commitment to local social partnership in general, and LEADER in particular is evidenced by its provision of co-funding, its enabling of an expansion of the areas covered, and its making available the officers of statutory bodies to serve on the boards and sub-committees of partnerships. In addition, the state has conferred on LAGs responsibility for delivering range of rural services⁴ and labour market activation schemes. Consequently, the budgets, staffing levels and authority of LAGs have expanded considerably, and this growth was most evident during the period 2003 – 2008⁵. The Carnegie UK Trust has observed that “countries such as Ireland, Finland, Spain, Portugal and Greece have Local Action Groups that cover nearly all their rural areas and these are becoming a much-needed ‘one-stop shop’ for delivering many policies to rural citizens” (2010; 29). Some commentators have however questioned the long-term commitment of the state to devolving power to local partnership bodies such as LEADER Local Action Groups. Connaughton contends that *Europeanisation* of the sub-national level has been “strongly mediated through the pre-existing balance of institutional structures and values” (2009; 77), whereby central government retains a disproportionate amount of power relative to the other tiers of government. Her analysis concurs with research undertaken Cawley and Keane (1999) and Scott (2004) among others, which suggests that exogenous agents have been reluctant to cede competencies to partnership arrangements. The current debate on LEADER in Ireland focuses precisely on these issues, and specifically the decision-making competencies of LAGs. Central government has recently declared that local authorities ought to have a more direct involvement in delivering LEADER and other local development initiatives, and if such proposals were fully implemented, they would represent *a de-Europeanisation*, as traditional agents of government would take power from multi-stakeholder partnerships. Therefore, the research presented in this paper focuses on the role of LEADER in local governance, and it articulates the views of project promoters with regard to the experience and future direction of rural development in Ireland.

The LEADER Model and Participative Democracy

In Ireland of the early 1990s, LEADER emerged into the governance landscape of a very centralized state. While successive governments had spoken about the need for local government reform, there had been little by way of action. A government-sponsored report (Advisory Expert Committee, 1991) criticised several elements of Ireland's local government system including the absence of regional and sub-county tiers, the poor levels of citizen engagement associated with a disproportionately low number of local authorities and councillors relative to population size and the absence of direct funding mechanisms. Lee (1989; 360) was trenchant in his criticisms, describing the system as “patently incapable of providing adequate local government,” and accusing ‘centralisers’ of patently undermining the “even the rudimentary inherited system.” McDonagh (2001) highlighted the democratic deficit inherent in the Irish Local Government system, claiming that

“local authorities are dominated by non-elected officials and, as such, lack a popular mandate... As a matter of course, Irish local councillors have very little power. The fact that local authorities cannot change a local speed limit without approval from the

⁴ These include rural transport and community businesses.

⁵ This timeframe largely coincides with the period in which Eamonn Ó Cuiv T.D. was the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs – the government ministry that was the Managing Authority for LEADER (2002 – 2011).

Minister for the Environment, indicates their lack of responsibility and reinforces their role as mere agents of central government” (2001: 166).

In the intervening two decades, local authorities in Ireland have been the subject of reforms (Ó Riordáin, 2010), but their weak political position relative to equivalent authorities in other EU member states created a power vacuum at local level, which was in many cases duly filled by LEADER LAGs (O’Keeffe, 2009).

While Ireland may have been characterised as having had weak local democracy, the country was fortunate to have many vibrant community organisations and strong local leaders (McDonagh, Varley and Shortall, 2009). Consequently, civil society organisations assumed a lead role in the formation of most LAGs, and this association between LEADER and the community and voluntary sector remains significant. LEADER in Ireland has been largely driven from the bottom-up, and it builds on development structures and efforts that were deeply rooted within several communities. Between 1991 and 2009 (from whence government regulations on the composition of LAG were imposed universally), civil society organisations accounted for at least one third of Board members, while the local representatives of the social partners / productive sector accounted for a further 25% to 30% of directors, with the remaining representatives coming from the state sector and local government. Commenting on stakeholders’ participation in LEADER LAGs, Commins and O’Hara noted, “development from below, largely marginalized in the past, has found a new and long awaited legitimacy, which has allowed local people to participate in the development process, and has elicited considerable commitment and enthusiasm from rural communities” (1999: 278). Successive evaluations of LEADER in Ireland (Kearney et.al, 1995; Fitzpatrick Associates, 2004, RuDi, 2010) have shown that women and other sectors of society, who have been under-represented in traditional local and central government assemblies, are better represented on the Boards of Directors and Sub-Boards of LEADER LAGs. These observations suggest that LAGs give effect to participative democracy at the local level, and are indicative of multi-level governance associated with *Europeanisation*.

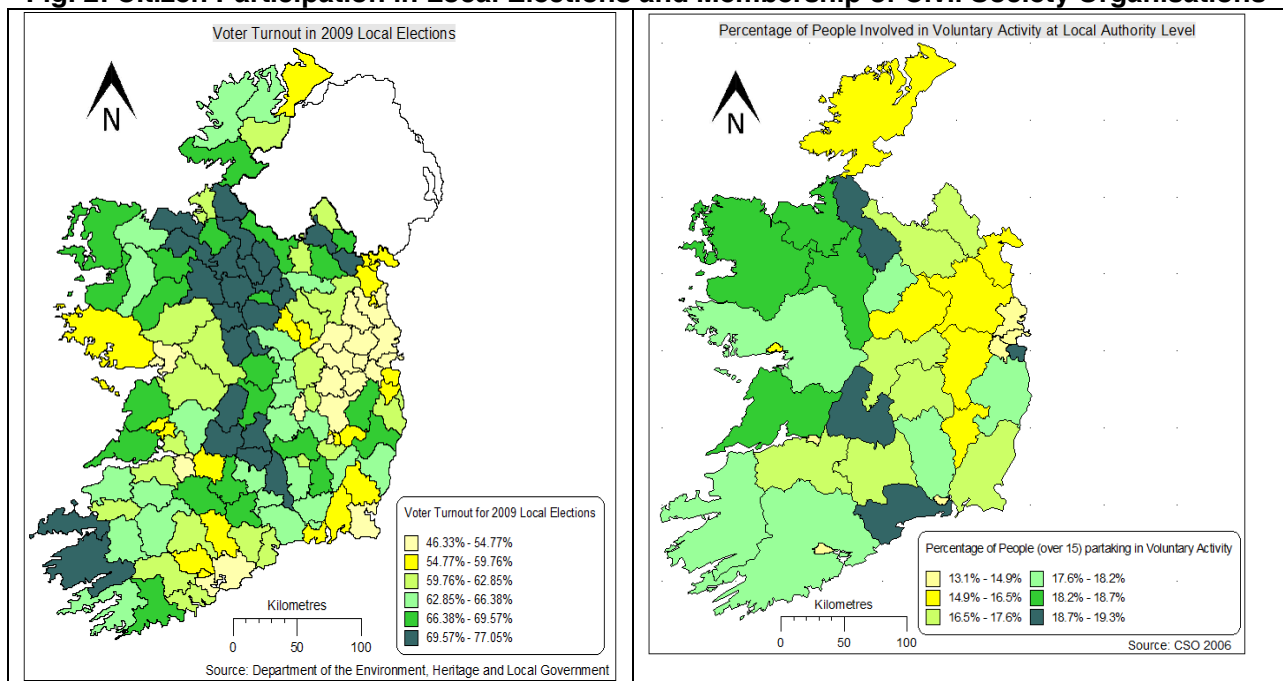
The view that participative democracy (also referred to as direct or deliberative democracy⁶) is complementary to representative democracy has been strongly articulated by several IGOs. The EU has produced a White Paper on Governance (2001). The UN declared 2011 as the International Year of the Volunteer (Plus 10), and The Council of Europe has issued a Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, which defines ‘partnership’ as the highest level of citizens engagement (2009; 7) and it states that

“At this level NGOs and the public authorities come together for a close cooperation while ensuring that the NGOs continue to be independent and have the right to campaign and act irrespective of a partnership situation. Partnership can include activities such as delegation of a specific task to an NGO, for example delivery of services, as well as participatory forums and the establishment of co-decision-making bodies, including for resource allocation. Partnership may take place at all steps of the political decision-making process and is particularly relevant at the agenda setting or implementation steps” (op. cit.; 8).

⁶ See for example Ryfe (2005).

In Ireland, The Task Force on Active Citizenship (which was established by government in 2006) stated that “a successful society depends on partnership – with citizens, civil society, elected public representatives, the public service, businesses and trade unions all contributing in different ways” (2007; i). These sentiments indicate that LAGs, operating as discrete entities, which promote community development and enable local inputs into decision-making, have a significant role to play in underpinning citizenship and the workings of democratic institutions. The correlation between both forms of democracy – participative and representative – is highlighted by the following maps. These show that areas with the highest levels of voter turnout in the most recent local elections (2009) are those with highest levels of citizen participation in civil society organisations (as recorded in the Census of Population).

Fig. 2: Citizen Participation in Local Elections and Membership of Civil Society Organisations



Maps prepared by Ciara Younge, Department of Geography, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

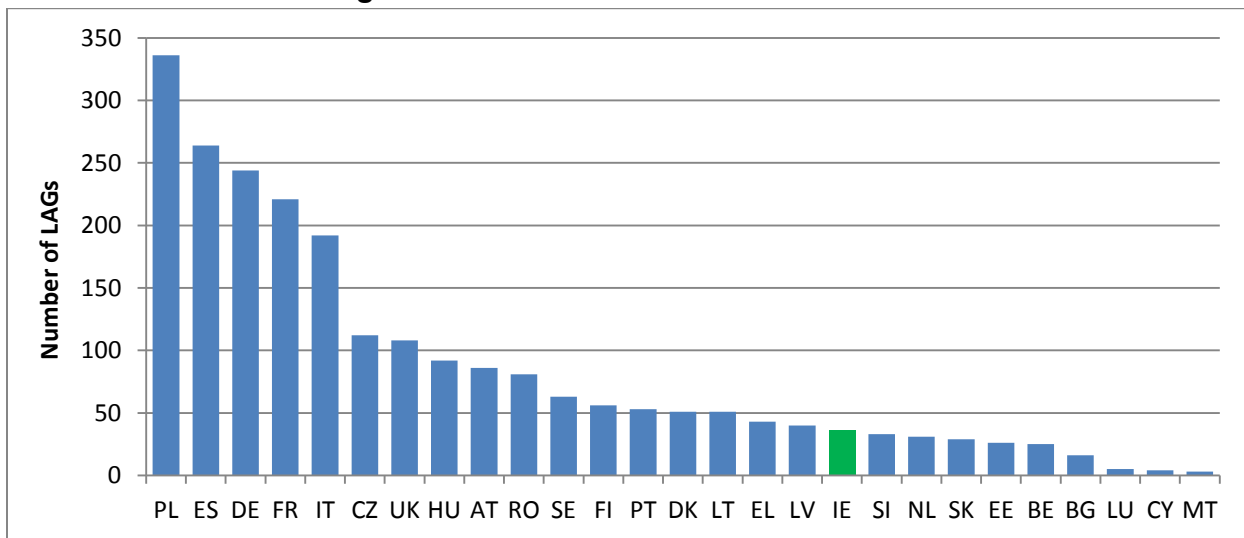
While no independent study has been published that measures in a quantifiable manner the specific impacts of the LEADER in respect of promoting voter participation in plebiscites, several works testify to its role in supporting community development and volunteerism (RuDi, 2010; Carnegie UK Commission, 2010). The expansion of LEADER in Ireland suggests, outwardly at least, that the relationship between agents of participative democracy (LAGs) and agents of representative democracy (the state) is progressive. While considerable advances have been made in the resourcing of LEADER, and in enabling civil society organisations to become more vibrant and proactive in all aspects of development, there is evidence to suggest that the state has been tempted to prop-up Ireland’s local authorities by enabling them to subsume some of the roles currently executed by LAGs, while simultaneously weakening local government through centralisation and taking from local authorities functions that they have held for several

years⁷. Thus, the *Europeanisation* trajectory, which had characterised the evolution of decision-making at the local level up to the mid-2000s now appears to have become mired in a series of power struggles involving local development and local government interests, and the relationships between local actors have come into sharp focus with the launch by the Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government of a policy document, ‘Putting People First – Action Programme for Effective Local Government, which proposes to confer on local authorities planning and oversight functions to which LAGs would be subject.

Interfaces and Relationships between Local Development and Local Government

There are currently over 2,300 LEADER Local Action Groups operating in rural territories across the EU. As the following graph shows, the member states with the largest rural territories tend to have the highest numbers of LAGs. These include Poland and Spain. The three smallest member states – Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus have twelve LAGs between them, while Bulgaria has only 16 (the lowest per capita in the EU), and more densely populated and urbanised states such as The Netherlands and Belgium also have fewer LAGs.

Fig. 3: LEADER LAGs in EU Member States



Considering the relative size of its territory and its significant rural population (38% of the state’s total), Ireland’s number of LAGs per capita is considerably below the EU average. The large scale of Irish LAGs is due in part to the aforementioned Cohesion Process (2005 – 2008) during which time some LAGs expanded to take-on territories covered by APCs and CPs (Area Partnership Companies and Community Partnerships), and during which the boundaries of a number of LAGs were re-configured to become more aligned with county (i.e. local authority) boundaries.

⁷ Among the functions that have been transferred from regional and local government to central agencies over the past ten years, are the delivery of the health service (from regional health boards to the Health Services Executive), water supplies (from local authorities to a semi-state company – Irish Water), administration of grants for third level students and the issuing of driving licences. The property tax, currently being introduced is meant to support local government services, although it is being collected centrally by the Revenue Commissioners.

To date, a strong commitment to participative democracy has enabled Ireland's LAGs to compensate for their relatively large size, and thereby avoid becoming too distant from the citizen. Indeed, the leadership role assumed by civil society in driving LEADER in Ireland has been widely acknowledged. The Carnegie UK Commission (2010) cited the endogenous (bottom-up) nature of LEADER Ireland as offering a template for its implementation elsewhere, while the EU-wide RuDi Consortium Evaluation (2010) also credited LAGs in Ireland with being particularly effective. Similarly, a report produced by the European Court of Auditors (2010) complemented LAGs (including the Irish case) that pursued approaches to decision-making that sought to promote consensus and involve a broad range of stakeholders and local interests. However, the auditors' report criticised a number of LAGs in some member states in which decision-making was overly-dominated by local authorities. This, they claimed inhibited the realisation of added-value associated with partnership.

While the European Commission has allowed variations in the ways in which LAGs are constituted, all are obliged to conform to a partnership structure and to ensure that public sector organisations (including local / municipal authorities) do not constitute more than 50% of the membership. The accession of ten new member states in 2004, some of which were former communist countries, and in which as a consequence, civil society was weaker than in Western Europe, prompted the Commission to introduce greater flexibility in respect of LAG composition (Regulation 1698/2005 Article 62 (2)). This has allowed states the option of allowing existing municipal authorities to lead a LAG structure and to assume responsibility for the administration of funds, although decisions must still be taken through local consultative processes. While Ireland has consistently maintained adherence to the original European Commission vision of LAGs that are led from the bottom-up, proposals that have been articulated recently by the Irish government (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012) would, if implemented, see LEADER take on a format that is more akin to that currently pursued in Eastern Europe, in which local authorities are the lead bodies in local partnerships. A key difference however is that Ireland's local authorities are considerably larger (in population and surface area terms) than are those that exist elsewhere in Europe (Callanan et al, 2012).

The current proposals, which seek to give local authorities more direct involvement in the operation of LEADER, represent the latest in a series of efforts by central government since 2000 to encourage city and county councils to assume greater responsibility for community and local development. The establishment of CDBs (County and City Development Boards) provided each local authority with a structure that was similar to a LAG; CDBs brought together representatives from statutory agencies, the productive sector and civil society. LAGs and other local partnerships were also represented on the CDBs. Although they are due to be abolished in 2014, CDBs have enabled local authorities to consult more extensively with citizens and to involve agencies in policy formulation. They have also been a focal point in the relationship and interfaces between local government and LEADER. Operating under the aegis of local authorities, CDBs have had responsibility for approving the annual work programmes of the local development sector – including the community development and social inclusion activities delivered by LAGs. This caused a degree of resentment on the parts of some LAGs, whose

representatives noted that other agencies were not subject to any degree of monitoring by CDBs. Thus, CDBs were open to the accusation that their attempts to co-ordinate policy at the local level were focused in one direction only i.e. on local / rural development. The CDBs were also criticised for the diminutive role they assigned to the community and voluntary sector (Acheson and Williamson, 2006).

County and City Development Boards represent one element in a series of local government reforms that were introduced in Ireland since 1996 (Ó Riordáin, 2010), the effect of which has been to widen the democratic base of local authorities. Aside from the CDBs, local government has been and continues to be a significant actor in local and rural development and an important partner for LAGs in delivering projects and services. LAGs and Councils have successfully collaborated on several environmental and infrastructural projects, such as village enhancement and the installation of community, sporting and recreational amenities and facilities. Both organisations have worked together to support community groups to participate in the National Tidy Towns Competition⁸, and there is considerable evidence at local level of positive synergies between LAGs and County Councils. Local Authorities are directly involved in the governance of LAGs, as most have had councillors on their boards since their inception in the 1990s, while some LAGs have also had on their boards, executives from local authorities⁹.

Perceptions of Local Government's Role in Local Development

LEADER has been in operational in Ireland for over twenty years, and a rural development framework is currently being put in place for the upcoming programme period (2014 – 2020). As negotiations take place on the future strategic direction of LEADER, a number of contrasting perspectives and sets of recommendations have emerged:

- European Institutions, notably the European Commission remains strong advocates of multi-level governance that is driven from the bottom-up.
- The Irish government has indicated a desire to row back on *Europeanisation*, and to confer on local authorities specific roles in the planning and oversight of LEADER.
- LAGs themselves, their representative bodies and civil society organisations are arguing for LEADER to become less bureaucratic and more responsive to local needs and potential¹⁰.

The perspective of the European Institutions is summed up in a Commission communique, which contends that

“over the past 20 years, the LEADER approach to community-led local development (CLLD) – designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their local region, has proven an effective and efficient tool in the delivery of development policies. CLLD can mobilise and involve local communities and organisations to contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy goals of smart, sustainable and

⁸ The National Tidy Towns Competition is organised annually by the Department of the Environment and it involves participating communities (towns and villages) being rated on aspects of their local environment. For further information, see www.tidytowns.ie

⁹ This feature of LAGs represents a point of contrast with APCs and CPs, most of which did not have local authority representatives on their boards until 2001, when they became obliged by government to do so.

¹⁰ The views of LAGs have been articulated by their representative network – the Irish Local Development Network (www.ildn.org).

inclusive growth, fostering territorial cohesion and reaching specific policy objectives" (2011; 1).

This position is consistent with the earlier findings and recommendations of the European Court of Auditors, which stated that "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" (2010; 18). Thus, the EU remains steadfast in its commitment to a model of rural development that is driven from the bottom-up, it territorially-oriented and involves inputs from several stakeholders, collaborating as equitable partners.

The policy document 'Putting People First' published by the Irish government in October 2012 provides an insight into current thinking on LEADER at the member state level. This document states that "local government will have a more central role in the oversight and placing of local and community development programming, while maintaining a key role for local development entities in frontline delivery" (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012; 30). This would represent a strengthening of the role currently played by City and County Development Boards. However, the same document also envisages a more hands-on role for local authorities, and specifically for a SEC (Socio-Economic Committee), which each local authority is expected to establish. It states that "oversight and responsibility for the management and disbursement of local and community development programme funds will be vested in the SEC" (op. cit.; 32). Giving local authorities responsibility for the disbursement of funds such as LEADER would clearly represent a diminution in the current role and status of LAGs. In addition, the thinking conveyed in 'Putting People First' conflicts with European Commission proposals that LEADER be administered for 2014 – 2020 by Local Action Groups in which "civil society and private sector partners should have at least 50% of the decision-making power and no single interest group should have more than 49% of the votes (2010; 3).

Since the publication of the government's proposals to reduce the decision-making autonomy of LAGs, civil society organisations have organised several public meetings to express their opposition to such a move, and the proposals have been debated at length through local media. This paper seeks to bring an informed perspective to this debate and to provide a steer in gauging the workability of the contrasting proposals presented by the European Commission and the Irish government. To this end, the paper presents the results of a survey that was undertaken among one hundred project promoters in a LAG area in the Western Region of Ireland.

Data Collection

This survey was conducted among all project promoters who had received financial support from South West Mayo Development Company¹¹ (the LAG) since the commencement of the current LEADER Programme in 2007. In addition to dealing with their perspectives on the future direction and governance of LEADER, the survey sought to elicit project promoters' experiences on their dealings with LEADER to date, and it sought to establish the impacts of

¹¹ This LAG has been operational since 1991 and covers about 50% of the territory of County Mayo on Ireland's west coast.

LEADER in respect of economic development and the generation of social capital. The survey was undertaken independently by the Department of Geography, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick between July and November 2012. The main data collection instrument was a questionnaire. All promoters were offered the option of completing it face-to-face, and as the following figures show, the vast majority opted for this:

70 questionnaires were completed face-to-face.

12 were completed and returned by post.

11 were completed and returned by e-mail.

5 were completed by telephone.

2 were completed by 'drop and collect.'

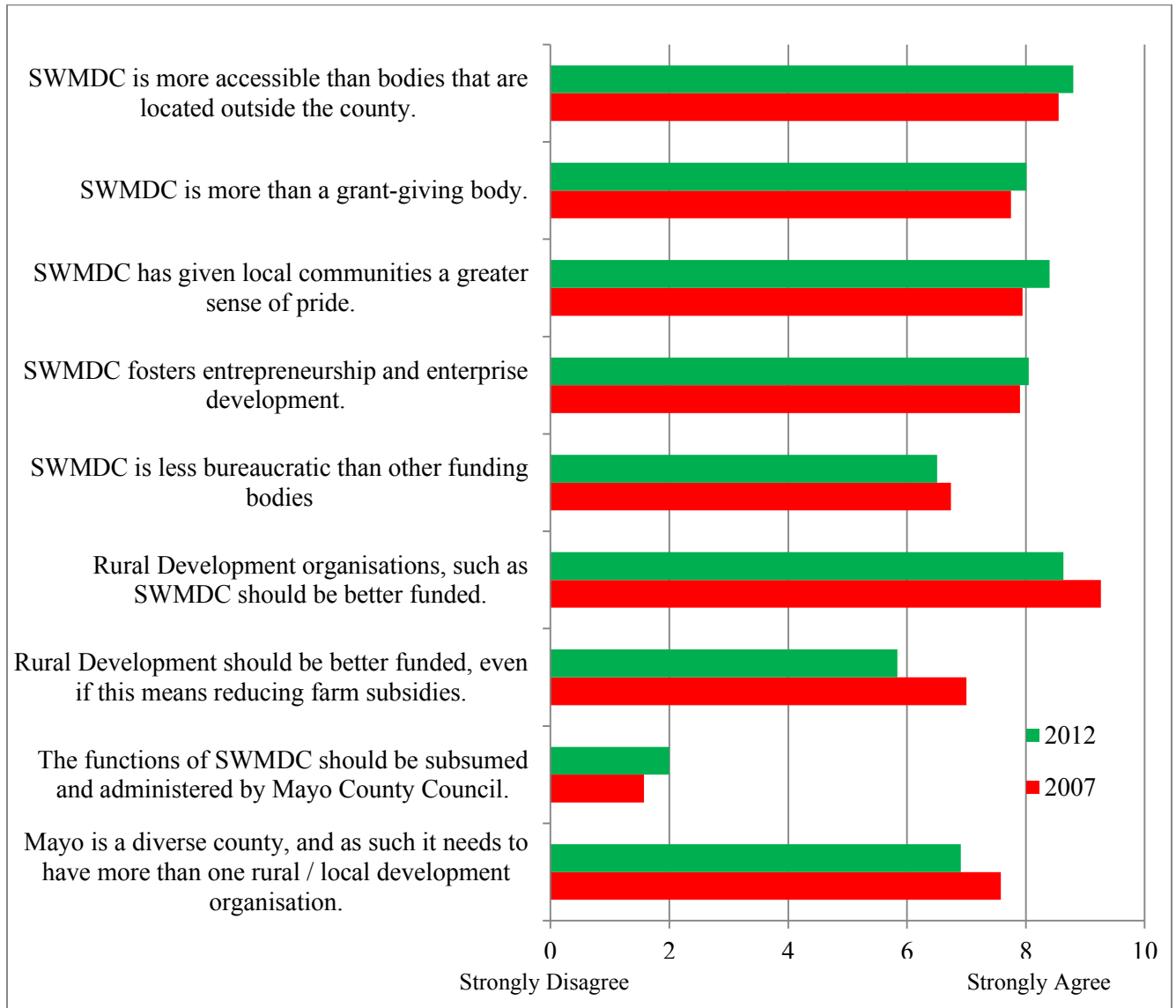
Therefore, a total of 100 questionnaires were completed, returned and processed. This represents a response rate of 92.6%. In addition, eighteen promoters also participated in in-depth interviews.

Presentation of Results

The survey found high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of South West Mayo Development Company. Project promoters were complimentary towards the members of staff, and they stated that it was important that LEADER continue to operate in a bottom-up manner, offering advice, guidance and support – and not just funding. They were however very critical of what they perceive to be excessive and increasing bureaucracy and paperwork, and several survey participants indicated that current administrative procedures are a barrier to development. Most survey respondents acknowledged however, that the current system of regulations does not emanate from South West Mayo Development Company itself, but they recommended that the LAG work to redress this situation. When asked for their opinions about the issues that have been articulated in this paper, promoters were strongly of the view that LEADER should continue to be operated exclusively by independent LAGs, and they rejected any notion of institutional or geographical alignment with local authorities.

On a scale of one to ten, where one indicates 'strongly disagree' and ten indicates 'strongly agree' promoters were asked to indicate their levels of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about South West Mayo Development Company, rural development and local governance. Over 95% of respondents dealt with all of the issues presented here. The following graph (Fig. 4) synthesises their responses:

Fig. 4: Promoters' Levels of Agreement / Disagreement with Given Statements about Rural Development and Local Governance.



The survey findings show strong support among project promoters for maintaining the current delivery mechanism for LEADER. In 2012, as in 2007, the highest level of agreement is with increasing the funding for LEADER. Promoters are also almost universally in agreement with the view that by virtue of its local base, SWMDC is an accessible organisation. As the graph shows, promoters' levels of agreement with affirmative statements about the LAG increased slightly between 2007 and 2012. Promoters express high and increased levels of agreement with the view that SWMDC is accessible, enables development (i.e. more than a grant-giving body), promotes community pride and fosters entrepreneurship. There is however a slight decline in the level of agreement with the view that the LAG is less bureaucratic than other funding bodies. Promoters responded to this issue on the basis of personal experiences and reports they had heard from those who have dealt with other organisations. While the recorded

fall in promoters' level of agreement with the statement about bureaucracy is slight, this research revealed promoters' strongly-held concerns regarding what they perceive to be excessive and meaningless red-tape.

There is a very high level of opposition among project promoters to Mayo County Council having an increased role in local / rural development. This notion evoked very strong reactions among several project promoters. Some responded in an angry manner, while others rejected the idea outright. It is worth noting that a number of local authority staff who are members of the various organisations who took part in this survey stated that the County Council had no desire to take over any of the functions of LEADER, and they rightly pointed out the issue had never even come before the elected members of Mayo County Council. The following represent a representative sample of the comments people made in response to the statement that "the functions of South West Mayo Development Company should be subsumed by Mayo County Council":

- "It is so important for LEADER to be independent of the state. You need to keep them on the ground – close to the people. If the council took it over, the mentality would be totally different."
- "If the Council took over, the running costs would multiply."
- "I don't there is anybody who is so naïve as to trust the County Council. You would be buried in paperwork and bureaucracy."
- "Councils have a totally different emphasis, and that's not a bad thing, but you can have them giving-out grants, because that would be much more political."
- "They (Council) can't even do what they are supposed to be doing. Planning is a joke and infrastructure in this county is terrible. All the evidence is that they just can't deliver. The communities do the job better themselves."
- "The Council have their own agenda. Some of the councillors run scared of the top brass. They would cannibalise it."
- "The County Council would use it as an income source or for their own projects, and communities would drop to the bottom of the pile"

As these quotes show, promoters are most perturbed by what they perceive would represent a politicisation of the funding. It is also important however, to acknowledge that perceptions of local authorities may be coloured by the fact that most promoters have previously been required to deal with Mayo County Council in connection with rates¹² or planning issues¹³. Moreover, local authorities are associated with the recently-introduced household tax and septic tank charges, which have been very unpopular among citizens, and especially in rural areas. Turning specifically to LEADER, promoters also stated that it was important to maintain the localness with which it is associated, and in this respect, they expressed strong support for maintaining the current geographical boundaries of SWMDC rather than obliging it to expand to cover all of County Mayo. Promoters pointed out that social capital could be diluted in the event

¹² Commercial rates are a taxation that local authorities levy on businesses.

¹³ A public enquiry (Mahon Tribunal) into planning and land use in Ireland found considerable shortcomings within the local government system.

of SWMDC amalgamating with the other LEADER organisation in the county. As one businesswoman observed, “The big danger with any amalgamation would be that good people could be lost, and that would be a blow to the business people who have a relationship with them.” Several promoters spoke about the long distances from one end of County Mayo to the other. A tourist accommodation provider who is based on the periphery of the SWMDC catchment area remarked, “If you make it too big, it becomes one area versus another.” While another promoter contended that “the current set-up ensures a better spread of activities.” Similarly, one respondent in the south of county remarked, “It’s a long way from here to Belmullet (located at the northern end of the county) and you need to take into account local knowledge to understand what is really going on.”

Although promoters are critical of the notion of local government being conferred with any decision-making or administrative powers in respect of LEADER, they value many aspects of the work of local authorities. In several towns and villages in South West Mayo, inter-agency collaboration has been essential in enabling communities to improve local facilities and amenities. The local authorities have provided sites and insurance for projects such as community playgrounds and they have looked after the on-going maintenance of parks and playgrounds. Several community leaders reported that the inputs of Mayo County Council in the form of professional advice and technical support have been valuable for community groups, and the expertise provided by council staff has improved the quality and deliverability of a number of projects. Thus, their experiences suggest that local development benefits from collaborative approaches, with LEADER playing a key role in enabling local citizens to lever resources from mainstream agencies.

Conclusions

Those who participated in this survey are all either running businesses or leading civil society organisations in County Mayo. While it is legitimate to question the extent to which their views are reflective of public opinion in Ireland, the survey respondents are certainly well positioned to comment on the future direction of rural development. The survey findings are significant in that they represent the first independently-collected dataset on attitudes to current government policy proposals since the emergence in 2012 of reports on the alignment of local government and local development structures. The divergence between promoters’ views and the thinking set out in section four of ‘Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government’ is indicative of what can happen when policy is not formulated in a consultative manner. There are also lessons from the findings for LAGs and Managing Authorities in respect of working to lessen the bureaucratic burden, which promoters perceive to be a barrier to development. Furthermore promoters believe there is an onus on all agencies to continue to work in a collaborative manner and with local citizens and civil society.

LEADER originated from a reform of the Common Agriculture Policy, and while its primary purpose was to promote the diversification of the rural economy, one of its main impacts has been the testing and expounding of a model of collaborative governance that has proven to be adaptive and innovative in several contexts. As a result of their engagement with LEADER

LAGs, many rural citizens have come to expect to be consulted about and involved in formulating policy and taking decisions that affect their communities. LEADER remains one of the most visible manifestations of *Europeanisation* on the political landscape of Ireland, and independent LAGs are a valuable partner for local authorities and state agencies in motivating collaborative approaches to development that play to the strengths of the community, productive and statutory sectors.

Since the inception of LEADER in the early 1990s, much progress has been made on refining mechanisms for promoting economic development and territorial competitiveness, some of which draw on the LEADER experience. The Barca Report, which was independently researched and presented to EU Commissioner Hübner (DG Regio) noted that “place-based integrated development policies have a strong economic rationale” (2009; 40). Similarly, ESPON (The European Spatial Planning Observation Network) contends that “competitiveness is a bottom-up process” (ESPON, 2009; 45), and it envisages clear roles for development partnerships and multi-level governance in promoting territorial competitiveness. Across Europe, autonomous LAGs that work in collaboration with local / municipal authorities, but which are institutionally and financially independent of them are becoming more prevalent. In the most recent programming period, states that had local authorities as ‘lead partners’ such as Greece and Slovakia are moving to a more multi-stakeholder model. The most recent Europe-wide independent evaluations of LEADER (RuDi, 2010 and Metis, 2010) recommend that in EU members states in which LAGs were characterised as having ‘low’ autonomy, Managing Authorities should ensure that they progress to assuming ‘medium’ autonomy. The evaluators recommend that in states such as Ireland, LAGs move from having ‘medium autonomy to high autonomy.’ They assert 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” (Metis, 2010; 20).

The publication of ‘Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government’ has opened-up in Ireland, an overdue debate on local governance and territorial development. While it poses clear and immediate threats to LEADER LAGs, volunteerism and participative democracy, and its content diverges from the views of project promoters, the EU and independent experts, the document signals an intention to undertake radical reform, which if channelled in line with evidence and international best practice, could yield significant dividends in terms of decentralisation and balanced territorial development.

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