

# Methodological Note on Interviewing Public Actors<sup>1</sup>



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## INTRODUCTION

This “Methodological Note” addresses a number of issues related to the adoption of an intensive and longitudinal research methodology premised on semi-structured interviews with key public actors involved in the Irish social partnership process and/or associated institutions. In particular, this “note” focuses on the factors that underpinned the selection of the aforementioned methodological approach, the design of the questionnaires, the process of selecting individuals for interviews and the data-gathering exercise.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

This author’s study of the Irish social partnership addressed three interrelated research questions. Firstly, it examined the emergence and evolution of the Irish social partnership as a mode of negotiated socio-economic governance within the public policy-making domain. Secondly, it analysed the “*strategic capacity*” of the key actors involved in the process in terms of their *willingness* and *ability* to engage in effective socio-economic concertation. Thirdly, it sought to explain, evaluate and characterise the nature and achievements of the Irish social partnership experiment in the period 1987 to 2000.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an intensive and longitudinal research methodology premised on semi-structured interviews with key informants. In particular, it was considered essential to conduct interviews with the labour market, administrative and political *elites*, that is key public actors with detailed experience and inside knowledge of the social partnership process, social partner organisations and the national public policy-making process. This choice of research methodology was shaped by the following considerations. Firstly, drawing on the relevant literature, the concept of an “Actors’ Strategic Capacity” (see Figure 10.1) was developed as a framework for operationalising an “actor-centred institutionalist” approach to the analysis of the establishment and evolution of social partnership in Ireland since 1987. This concept of

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*strategic capacity* necessitates a strong focus on the interests and strategies of the participating actors and their evolving associational assessment of the requisite *political value* of engaging in peak-level concertation.

Secondly, the focus on the evolution of the social partnership as a mode of negotiated socio-economic governance within the public policy domain ensured that it was necessary to explore the dynamics of the interactions between the participating actors who have been involved in peak-level economic and social concertation. This was reinforced moreover by the fact that literature on social partnership and neo-corporatism highlights the degree to which peak-level consensual policy making is underpinned by the fostering of an appropriate social architecture. Intensive interviews in particular offered the researcher an opportunity to focus on tacit issues such as trust, shared understanding, personalised interrelationships and informal conventions and norms.

Thirdly, within the respective social partner organisations, it has been the national leaders who have been directly involved in the ongoing process of intra-associational debate and deliberation that has shaped and formulated associational strategies and policies in the period under review. These same individuals have also been engaged in a routine process of horizontal deliberation with the other social partner organisations. Similarly, their counterparts in the upper echelons of the political and administrative system have also been key participants in shaping the evolution of the social partnership process. Indeed ultimately, it is these labour market, political and administrative elites who have been responsible for "brokering" successive national agreements, shaping the evolution of the social partnership process and rallying and authorising support for this process within both social partner associations and the broader national political domain.

Consequently, a series of intensive interviews with social partner and administrative elites was viewed as the most appropriate and viable research methodology for garnering key information and critical insights regarding the evolution and development of the Irish social partnership experiment in the period 1987 to 2000.

### **Selection of Interviewees**

The interviewees for this research were drawn from the following organisations and institutions:

- senior officials from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and national trade union leaders/officers;
- senior directors within the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC);
- senior figures from the Social Pillar (community and voluntary sector organisations);
- senior figures within state-sponsored labour market and social partner organisations;

- senior civil and public servants;
- political advisors;
- academics and commentators;
- senior officials within the peak farmers' associations.

A full list of the individuals that were interviewed is provided in Table 10.1. The interviewees were selected in a manner that ensured that not only were all the main participant organisations and institutions researched, but also that they encapsulated the entire period under review, namely 1987–2000. Thus, for example, the trade union interviewees incorporated individuals who were centrally involved in the social partnership process for all or part of this period (1987–2000). For each of the groupings listed above, moreover, it was essential to select individuals who played pivotal roles not only within their own organisation but also within the social partnership process and associated institutional arrangements. In this regard, aside from using secondary literature to identify individuals, expert opinion was also canvassed to ensure that the list of candidates included the key players in the social partnership process.

In relation to the ICTU, it was particularly important to try to capture the nature of the intra-associational deliberation that occurred within the organisation over the period 1987 to 2000. As such, the list of candidates from the labour movement included senior ICTU officials, national trade union leaders (public and private sector trade unions) and, critically, individuals who have emerged as either strong advocates or strident critics of the social partnership process. Finally, it was also important to ensure that the trade union listing included some individuals who have been involved in social partner policy bodies and various public policy committees and/or working groups that have evolved within the social partnership framework.

Although within the IBEC there is less public articulation of divergent positions in relation to the social partnership process compared with the ICTU, it was considered necessary to canvass again the views of a range of senior officials within the peak employers' association. Aside from seeking to gather multiple perspectives, this also reflected the fact that senior officials have performed different functions and roles within both the IBEC and the social partnership process. As with the ICTU, it was also important to ensure that there were individuals in the interview list who had experience of the various public policy institutions and working groups that have been established under the ambit of social partnership. As is evident from Table 10.1, the interview list also includes senior representatives from the social pillar and the peak farming organisations. The same criteria that shaped the selection of individuals within both the ICTU and the IBEC were equally applicable to these social partner organisations.

Given that a key focus of this research is on the Irish social partnership as a mode of negotiated socio-economic governance it was also essential to ensure that the interview list incorporated individuals who have been involved in either social partner advisory bodies and/or public policy groupings that have emerged



under the framework of the national level social partnership. This was particularly important in relation to both the evaluation of the effectiveness of the social partnership as mode of negotiated governance and to the assessment of the social partners as policy actors. The emphasis on how the social partnership has evolved as a mode of negotiated governance also ensured that it was important to interview senior civil servants who not only had experience of the policy process in general but also had been directly involved in the social partnership process. In relation to the main political parties, several individuals were interviewed who had served as policy advisors and offered an insight into the perspective of the political parties. As is evident from Table 10.1, no actual politicians were interviewed for this research study. This absence of politicians was primarily due to problems in gaining access. However, the combination of the aforementioned interviews with policy advisors in conjunction with secondary research material – Dáil Reports (Parliamentary Records), published speeches and policy documents – attenuated this deficiency somewhat. In finalising the initial interview list, it was also necessary to ensure that it incorporated a range of individuals who were centrally involved in the negotiation of the fourth national agreement, Partnership 2000, as this was to be used as a case study of how a social partner agreement was brokered. Finally, as the interviews were conducted, several additional names were added to the original interview list to reflect emerging issues and themes arose. Additionally, in several instances, the original interviewees made suggestions regarding people who they considered it would be worthwhile talking to as part of this research. Consequently, the final list of interviews was compiled in part using a “snowball sample” technique.

### **Questionnaire Design**

As indicated above the interviews were premised on semi-structured questionnaires with key headings informed by the literature. Although a number of key themes were explored in each of the interviews, the semi-structured questionnaire was customised in each case to reflect the role and position of the individual in question. Thus, for some senior trade union leaders, the negotiation of a national deal or the formulation of associational policy may have been a major focus of the interview, while for other trade unionists, the research interview may have placed more emphasis on their experience of participating in the public policy domain through their participation in meso-policy networks and/or committees. In this regard therefore, it was important to have an awareness of the position, roles and functions that an individual may have undertaken within both their own organisation and the social partnership process in general. Critically, the interviews themselves also generated research questions and themes that were addressed in subsequent interviews and, as such, the research journey served to shape and influence the design of the questionnaires.

### **Data Gathering**

Approximately two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in the months

between March and July 1997, which was the period immediately after the negotiation and ratification of the fourth national programme Partnership 2000 (1997–2000). The final set of interviews was conducted in the six-month period April to August 2000. Conducting interviews in the aftermath of the negotiation process for Partnership 2000 proved beneficial to the research for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to explore with key actors the dynamics of the negotiation process in which they had recently been involved. Secondly, as the deal was completed and ratified, the key figures were more willing to engage in reflection and debate about both the negotiations process and the social partnership process itself. Indeed, there was a general sense in which these elite players actually welcomed the opportunity to engage in a degree of “reflection” about a process in which they had been so centrally involved. Certainly, gaining both access to and critical insights from social partner elites would have been more problematic if the author had attempted to conduct the interviews in the final months of a national programme when the focus is very much on whether there will be a successor agreement. These months tend to be characterised by a degree of public posturing and some heightening of tensions, as the various parties prepare for the forthcoming negotiations. Indeed, despite the fact that the social partnership has been in place since 1987, these negotiations can be invariably intensive and protracted in nature. As such, there would be a degree of hesitancy in publicly engaging in debate about the social partnership process at this time. Further rounds of interviews were subsequently conducted in the months between March and July 2000 and, in this instance, they succeeded the negotiation and ratification of the fifth national agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness.

The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the individuals. An assurance of complete confidentiality was essential for the integrity of the interviews and the research. Each individual was also offered the opportunity to receive a full written transcript of the interview if they so wished. While no individual refused to be recorded, at certain junctures in some interviews, the interviewee requested that the tape recorder be switched off, as they were addressing a particularly sensitive issue. In such circumstances, the issues of confidentiality and integrity were again paramount. As these taped interviews collectively represent “oral” testaments of the experiences of actors involved in national policy issues, it is the author’s intention, with the permission of the interviewees, to archive this material and make it publicly available for research purposes.

#### CONCLUSION

The intensive research methodology outlined above ensured that this research study of the Irish social partnership was informed by the critical insights and knowledge of the elite cadre of individuals who were responsible for initiating, shaping and progressing the evolution of the Irish social partnership experiment since 1987. Equally, it afforded important insights into how the strategies and interests of the individual social partner organisations, in

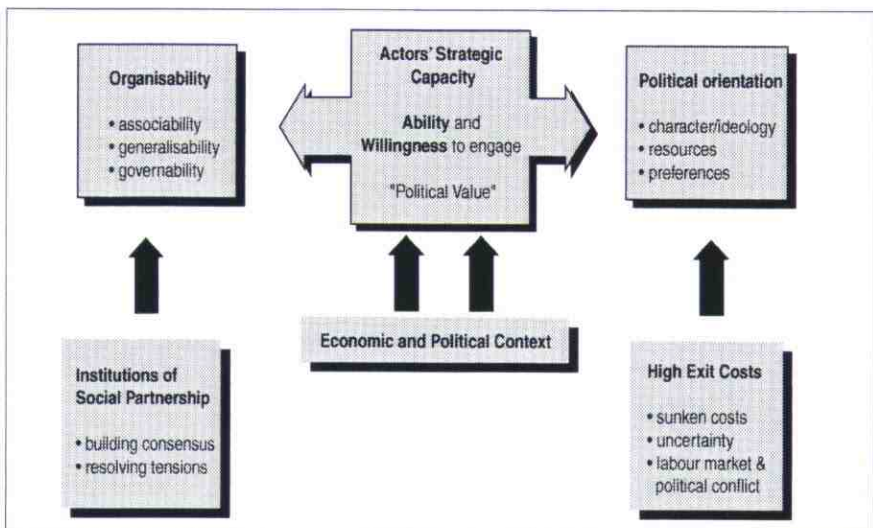


particular the ICTU and the IBEC, have evolved within the context of over a decade of peak-level concertation. Canvassing a range of perspectives within these aforementioned associations reinforced this focus on intra-associational deliberation and policy formulation.

There are a number of problems inherent in a reliance on interviews with key actors who were/are so involved in the social partnership process. Firstly, there is the question of subjectivity, as these are actors with an individual and associational interest in the process. Secondly, one is reliant on the participants' knowledge and memory. Thirdly, it is suggested that the actors often display an underestimation of the basic structural power relations in society and, in particular, may over-emphasise the role played by "social dialogue" in achieving particular social and economic objectives.

In operationalising a research methodology that is reliant on interviews with elite public actors, it is important to be aware of these limitations and problems. The issue of "subjectivity" is partially attenuated by ensuring that one garners multiple perspectives within and between organisations. Additionally, the accumulation of practical knowledge over the course of the research journey serves to temper overt subjectivity. The reliance on memory was not overly problematic in this particular research, as it was focused on a comparatively short time span. Also, as indicated above, the interview list was designed in such a manner that it incorporated individuals who collectively offered the researcher direct experience of all of the national agreements to date. Finally, the gains afforded by this intensive research methodology in terms of collating the experience, insights and knowledge of the elite actors who have been involved in a process of macro-political bargaining since 1987 outweighs, though does not remove, some of the concerns listed above.

**Figure 10.1: Actors' Strategic Capacity**



**Table 10.1: List of Interviewees 1997–2000<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position/Function</b>
Peter Cassells	General Secretary, ICTU
Patricia O'Donovan	Deputy General Secretary, ICTU
Joe O'Toole	General Secretary, INTO
Sean O'Riordain	General Secretary, AHCPS
Dan Murphy	General Secretary, PSEU
Maurice Sheehan	Assistant General Secretary, MANDATE
Bernard Harbour	Head of Research, IMPACT
Mick O'Reilly	General Secretary, ATGWU
Noel O'Neill	General Secretary, UCATT
Dan Miller	Deputy General Secretary, TEEU
Phil Flynn	IR Consultant (Ex-General Secretary, IMPACT)
Kevin Duffy	Deputy General Secretary, ICTU
Bill Attley	President, SIPTU
Manus O'Riordain	Head of Research, SIPTU
Jimmy Somers	General Secretary, SIPTU
John Dunne	Director General, IBEC
Brian Geogehan	Director of Economic Affairs, IBEC
Brendan Butler (1997)	Chief Executive of Small Firms Association
Brendan Butler (2000)	Director of Social Policy, IBEC
Gerry Dempsey	Director of Human Resources, IBEC
Turlough O'Sullivan	Director of Industrial Relations Division, IBEC
Kieran Mulvey	Chief Executive, Labour Relations Commission
Declan Morrin	Head of Advisory Service, Labour Relations Commission
Paddy Teahon	Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach
Dermot McCarthy	Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach
Sara Cantillon	Principal Officer, Department of the Taoiseach
Kevin Bonner	Secretary General, Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
Julie O'Neill	Principal Officer, Department of the Tanaiste
Michael Tutty	Deputy Secretary, Department of Finance
Sylda Langford	Assistant Secretary, Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform
Padraig O'hUighinn	Ex-Secretary General, Department of Taoiseach
Senior Civil Servants	Department of Social Community and Family Affairs; Department of the Taoiseach, Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform; Department of Environment and Local Government
Sean Dooney	Ex-Senior Civil Servant, Department of Agriculture
Sean O'Hegarty	Director, NESF
Sean Healy	CORI
Mike Allen (1997)	General Secretary, INOU
Mary Murphy	Assistant General Secretary, INOU

Mike Allen (2000)	General Secretary, Labour Party (2000)
Tony Monks	General Secretary, INOU (2000)
Susan McNaughton	Research Officer, National Womens Council of Ireland
Orla O'Connor	Head of Policy, National Womens Council of Ireland & Community Platform
Noreen Byrne	Chief Executive, National Womens Council of Ireland
Niall Crowley	Director, Pavee Point
Simon Nugent	Director, Youth Council of Ireland
Greg Tierney	ICOS
Con Lucey	Chief Economist, IFA
Professor Patrick Honohan	ESRI
Dr. Martin Mansergh	Head of Research, Fianna Fáil
Brendan Kennedy	Programme Manager and policy advisor to Ruari Quinn (Minister of Finance 1995–1997)
Professor Michael Laver	Politics Department, Trinity College Dublin
Professor Eunan O'Hallpin	Business School, Dublin City University

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- 1 I would like to thank Professor John Tomaney for his advice, support and friendship during this research.
  - 2 Approximately two-thirds of the interviews took place in the first six months of 1997 with a further round of interviews being conducted in 2000. Several of the individuals in the list were interviewed twice in part due to changes in their position. The title attributed to each of the individuals reflects their position when interviewed.

#### REFERENCES

- Thomas, D. (2003) "The Irish Social Partnership 1987–2000: An Evolving Economic and Social Governance". Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.



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