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Rethinking social enterprise policy making in Ireland – untangling proportionate, disproportionate and unengaged sectoral policy contributions

Research Article

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Abstract: The National Social Enterprise Policy of Ireland was launched in 2019 following a slow and episodic process. The aim of the paper is to examine the development and implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy. In particular the interaction between key sectoral stakeholders in the development of the policy and the primary influences on the process. The results of a substantial qualitative enquiry details the complex set of relationships underpinning the development of social enterprise policy in a multi-level governance framework. It situates the National Social Enterprise Policy in an environment unusually susceptible to sub-sectoral advocacy and highlights the particular characteristics of the Irish case where social enterprise policy is largely removed from broader social economy policy interventions in Ireland and the European Union. The paper highlights the complex and fluid environment in which various stakeholders articulated and advocated for their policy positions. It also details how the relevant policy institutions engaged with and were influenced by stakeholders. It contributes to the understanding of social enterprise policy formulation and how this process can become more inclusive.

Keywords: *Social enterprise, Policy analysis, Policy making, Ireland, Advocacy*

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INTRODUCTION

Although the vocabulary is relatively new, social economy enterprises have been well established in Ireland for more than a century. Their development has been an integral part of Ireland's modern social and economic history. The co-operative movement has a long and established presence (Doyle, 2019) and has contributed to the well-being and economic growth of rural Ireland while the Raiffiessen Banks (Colvin and McLaughlin, 2014), and the more recently established credit unions, have played a vital role in meeting socio-economic needs over the years (Power et al., 2012). In Ireland, these collective enterprises, whatever their legal status or form, are recognized as economic actors alongside the private and public sectors. One of the more interesting distinguishing features of the social economy in Ireland was, until recently at least, the absence of a discrete co-ordinated policy framework. Distinct elements of the social economy operated under a range of statutory and policy frameworks, with a variety of government departments having responsibility. For example, credit unions fell under the remit of the Department of Finance[1], social finance providers under the remit of the Department of Social Protection[2], co-operatives

1 Credit unions in Ireland operate under credit union specific legislation. The principal pieces of legislation covering credit unions are the Credit Union Act 1997, as amended, and the Credit Union and Co-operation with Overseas Regulators Act 2012, known collectively as the Credit Union Acts 1997 – 2012.

2 The Social Finance Foundation (SFF) was established in 2007 by the Government of Ireland and provides loan funding to two social lenders, Clann Credo and Community Finance Ireland. For the purposes of this paper, it is referred to as a quasi-public agency. Ó Broin and Watters (2007, 13) make a distinction between a 'public agency', which is established by legislation or statutory instrument, and a 'quasi-public agency', which expends public money and is constituted as a private limited liability company (2007: 23).

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under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment[3], and the non-legal status and legal form aspects of social enterprises fell under the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development[4]. In addition, the Department of Justice has been a key policy stakeholder, having been the first government department to launch a social enterprise strategy[5].

It is arguable that the interaction of strong interest-based advocacy with a policy system, which was still migrating from a social partnership/corporatist model of policy advocacy to a more pluralist model, was a factor in the emergence of an unusual combination of stakeholders to influence the policy formulation process at critical junctures. Other factors in this regard were: the relatively long delay in devising policy, largely the result of the division of policy responsibilities for the social economy between a number of government departments; the transfer of policy responsibility for the discrete social enterprise area to a number of departments in a short time span (2011-2017); and the relative weakness in policy development capacity of the final policy-owning government department. Furthermore, a significant element of the stakeholder influence originated from groups representative of distinct sub-sectors of the broader social enterprise/social economy enterprise sector, or representative of distinct sectoral support functions, e.g., social finance and enterprise centres, rather than from more broadly representative sectoral groups or mainstream social economy-oriented stakeholders, such as the credit union and co-operative representative bodies. In addition, the larger components of the social enterprise/social economy enterprise sector, e.g., organisations funded by the state's Community Services Programmes, Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE), and other community-based social service providers, such as childcare, remained largely unengaged in the policy formulation process, or had their views filtered through much broader community and voluntary sector policy advocacy mechanisms. This was a complex and fluid environment in which various stakeholders articulated and advocated for their policy positions. It is important to consider it, and to detail how the relevant policy institutions engaged with, and were influenced by, those stakeholders.

The primary aim of this article is to examine the development and implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy in Ireland. In particular, it explores the interaction between key sectoral stakeholders in the development of the policy and the primary influences on the process. It focuses on the engagement of key stakeholders at different stages of the public policy cycle: (a) agenda setting, (b) policy formulation, (c) legitimation, (d) implementation, (e) evaluation, and (f) policy maintenance, succession or termination (Knill and Tosun, 2012). The article sets the context for the development of the National Social Enterprise Policy and highlights the fact that in "recent years several European Union institutions have called for public policies to boost the social economy at European, national and regional level" (Chaves and Monzón, 2019: 7). The European Council's conclusions on *The promotion of the social economy as a key driver of economic and social development in Europe*, published on 7th December 2015, was a major statement in this regard. This, and similar developments, reflect the fact that the social economy is finding its place as a constituent component of the European approach to sustainable socioeconomic development.

The article is presented in a series of sections. Section one (above) has laid out the context. Section two (which follows) details the research methodology adopted and the key constraints. Section three outlines the theoretical framework adopted for the analysis (Van den Heijden and Kuhlmann, 2018) and section four outlines different national approaches to the development of social enterprise policy. Section five details the research findings and highlights the complex set of relationships underpinning the development of social enterprise policy in a multi-level governance framework. It situates the National Social Enterprise Policy in an environment unusually susceptible to sub-sectoral advocacy. It presents the particular characteristics of the Irish social enterprise policy, including the fact that it is largely removed from broader social economy policy interventions, and considers the critical importance of the stage in the policy cycle where influence or advocacy is exerted. Section six discusses the implications of the findings, in particular the interaction of interest-based advocacy (Murphy, 2018) within a changing, under-resourced and weakly developed policy system (as described above). The article concludes with recommendations for future research, with a focus on the policy implementation phase, to complement existing studies on social enterprise policy making.

3 No explicit co-operative legislation exists in Ireland. It is the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts 1893-2018 that provides a regulatory system for co-operatives.

4 In July 2017, the Government assigned policy responsibility for social enterprise to the newly established Department of Rural and Community Development.

5 The Probation Service and Irish Prison Service (IPS) established a Social Enterprise Steering Committee in March 2016, supported by the Department of Justice and Equality. Its purpose was to oversee and drive the development of 'social enterprise' initiatives as a way of increasing the employment rates of people with criminal convictions. This would represent "an alternative and complementary approach to existing employment models in the sector" (2017, 3).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in the study that forms the basis of this article involved primary and documentary research. In relation to the former, qualitative methods of enquiry were employed to facilitate informants to share their knowledge in a flexible manner, during the data collection phase (Bryman, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 interviewees, as they allowed for flexibility (Creswell, 2014). The authors reviewed the questions to ensure that they were valid and framed correctly, and they were then piloted with two individuals. There were no adjustments to the instrument, or research design, arising from the piloting of the questions. While face-to-face interviews are considered advantageous, since they enable the interviewer to establish a relationship with the interviewee (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015), it is recognised that, when face-to-face is not possible (for example, when the interviewees reside in different parts of a country), telephone or virtual interviews present a practical alternative (Hine, 2012). In the case of the interviews for this research, it was necessary to conduct them online, due to the combination of time constraints and Covid-19 restrictions.

Interviews typically took between 45 minutes and one hour. A list of trigger questions was used to guide the interviews, and some additional questions were then posed, depending on each interviewee's responses. They were held in two distinct rounds. The first round of interviews was conducted with previously identified key stakeholders. Interviewees for the subsequent round were identified through analysis of the first round of interviews. The interviewees included government ministers, senior civil and public servants, social enterprise representatives, social finance representatives, and civil society representatives.

The majority of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous and, therefore, a series of interviewee identifiers was devised, consisting of a category and a number. The categories are: State - civil/public servant; Civil - civil society organisations, including social enterprises and social finance providers; and Elected - elected representative including TDs and minsters. A number was then attributed to each participant in a given category (see table below).

Table 1: Interviewees

Identifier	Interviewee organisation
Elected - 1	TD with a commitment to developing social enterprise policy
Elected - 2	TD with a commitment to developing social enterprise policy
Elected - 3	TD with a commitment to developing social enterprise policy
State - 1	Civil/public servant
State - 2	Civil/public servant
State - 3	Civil/public servant
State - 4	Civil/public servant
State - 5	Civil/public servant
State - 6	Civil/public servant
State - 7	Civil/public servant
State - 8	Civil/public servant
State - 9	Civil/public servant
Civil - 1	Representative of civil society organisation including social finance providers
Civil - 2	Representative of civil society organisation including social finance providers
Civil - 3	Representative of civil society organisation including social finance providers
Civil - 4	Representative of civil society organisation including social finance providers
Civil - 6	Representative of civil society organisation including social finance providers

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers had also intended to conduct focus groups with key individuals from community and voluntary sector organisations and state agencies, alongside the interviews. However, unfortunately, this became impossible to organise due to time constraints. This was potentially a shortcoming as focus groups provide researchers with the opportunity to gain the views of individuals collectively on phenomenon (Bryman, 2004). Moreover, this method provides individuals with a greater level of 'ownership' of the process, than do individual interviews (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data gathered. This process was an inductive one, with the themes developed from the transcripts. It entailed reading each of the transcripts a number of times to become familiar with the data. The text of each of the transcripts was then coded, and sub-themes developed from groups of related codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In turn, these sub-themes were combined into themes. After a number of interviews were completed, the analytical process allowed for the refinement of the number of codes developed. Table 2 below illustrates how codes relate to themes.

Table 2: Codes and Themes

Code	Theme
Perception of reliance on grants	Grant hunters
Community activists engaged in poverty alleviation	Messers
Lack of capacity to engage in enterprise	
Concern of loss of power	Old regime fights back
Empower a cadre of stakeholders	Counter lobbying

The documentary research undertaken involved the identification and compilation of an Irish social enterprise policy corpus, to explore and describe the broad features of the social enterprise policy cycle. This was constructed from publicly accessible documentation. Previous studies, for example Mason and Moran (2018), have tended to include documentation from a "relevant institutional context", i.e., documents produced by, or linked to government that "did not include independent documents produced by interest groups or civil society actors that made it into official communications channels such as government websites" (Mason et al., 2021: 36). This is problematic in the case of Ireland as documentation from the relevant institutional context is very limited. For this reason, it was agreed that the Irish social enterprise policy corpus would include documentation produced and disseminated by interest groups and civil society organisations. Table 3, below, lists all the documents accessed.

The documentary analysis process involved an initial examination of a number of documents. Depending on their relevance, some were discarded, while others were examined more thoroughly. The next stage involved interpretation of the documents, which was done through an iterative process, combining content analysis and thematic analysis. The content analysis involved collating the information into categories, after which thematic analysis was employed to code and generate themes from the data contained within the various categories (Creswell, 2014).

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING POLICY MAKING

There are a variety of distinct theoretical perspectives to explain why governments "institute, modify and terminate" public policies (Knill and Tosun, 2012: 69). Structure-based models, institutional-based models, and interest-based models have tended to dominate the literature. Although sharing a common assumption, namely that institutions do matter, there are within institutional-based models a variety of conceptions of how, why, and to what extent institutions make a difference (Knill, 2001). For the purposes of this article particular attention is paid to the historical institutionalist approach.

Historical institutionalism is grounded in comparative politics and is often applied to analyse public policy choices. The approach is broadly agreed to contain a number of key features (Royles and Lewis, 2019), though there are differences in emphases among authors. One central feature is the theoretical importance of institutions, to the extent that they can be considered as the key independent variable that affects outcomes and behaviour. In

Table 3: Summary of the documentation used for analysis

Organisation	Type	Year	Document
Forfás	State Agency	2007	Ireland's Co-operative Sector
PLANET	Civil Society Organisation	2009	Exploring Social Enterprise in Nine Areas in Ireland
Social Enterprise Task Force	Civil Society Organisation	2010	Adding Value – Delivering Change The Role of Social Enterprise in National Recovery
Government of Ireland	Government	2011	Programme for Government
Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Task Force	Civil Society Organisation	2012	Unlocking the Potential of Social Enterprise & Entrepreneurship – a submission to Forfás
Forfás	State Agency	2013	Social Enterprise in Ireland: sectoral opportunities and policy issues
Department of Rural and Community Development	Government Department	2017	Realising our Rural Potential: action plan for rural development.
Department of Justice	Government Department	2017	A New Way Forward, Social Enterprise Strategy 2017-2019
Department of Justice	Government Department	2018	A New Way Forward, Social Enterprise Strategy 2017-201, mid-term review
Social Finance Foundation/ Department of Rural and Community Development	Quasi-Public Agency/Government Department	2018	Social Enterprise in Ireland - research report to support the development of a National Social Enterprise Policy
Department of Rural and Community Development	Government Department	2019	National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022
Department of Rural and Community Development	Government Department	2019	Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities - a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024
Department of Rural and Community Development	Government Department	2020	National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022; annual report 2020
Department of Justice	Government Department	2021	Working To Change, Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021 – 2023

defining institutions, this article emphasises their formal aspects, in contrast to perspectives stressing their informal features (Hall and Taylor, 1996). It adopts a view of institutions as "formal organizations, rules and procedures" (Lecours, 2000: 513), such as relations among different branches of government, state-interest group relations, and policy networks that structure the political process (Immergut, 1998: 17). Institutions can be understood as both the formal and informal rules, the norms, and the precedents that organise the social, political, and economic relations, which structure political behaviour and which, as a consequence, can favour some outcomes over others (North, 1990) and have a "significant influence on the emergence and implementation of social initiatives" (Petrella et al., 2021: 273).

The second key feature of historical institutionalism relates to its approach to the relationship between structure and agency. Within this perspective, institutions can condition both the likelihood of agency activity, and the nature, forms and intensity of their activity. Lecours recognises the importance of agency and stresses the agency-structure dynamic of historical institutionalism as "the interactions between actors and institutions, focusing not only on actors, but also on how institutions are shaped and re-shaped by these actors" (2000: 516). As Farrell argues "actors use the opportunities that institutions provide them, but potentially change those institutions as a result of those actions" (2018: 24).

For the purposes of this article, the last pertinent feature of historical institutionalism is the importance of historical context when analysing institutional behaviour and institutional change, in particular, the concept of 'path dependence'. Path dependence holds that institutionalised commitments, in the formative period of an institution or policy cycle, can strongly influence subsequent decisions (Peters, 2012). Path dependence dynamics "establish a trajectory that remains an enduring influence and constrains the scope for diversion from a set policy direction" (Royles and Lewis 2019: 710). This path can be disrupted by the intervention of significant forces and these episodes of 'critical junctures' can best be understood as crucial moments of institutional change, that can spur alternative developmental paths (Thelen, 1999). In addition to such critical junctures, historical institutionalism also provides for greater recognition of the potential for more gradual policy and institutional adaptation, as a result of internal and external forces (Peters, 2012).

Applying this historical institutionalist model, the article focuses on the role of a small number of government departments including, a newly established government department, the Department of Rural and Community Development. These will be considered as the key policy-formulating institutions and processes, and their engagement with a relatively limited number of civil society organisations, some more well-established and experienced than others, will be examined.

Navigating the policy process

The policy process can be approached from 'varying analytical angles', which involve the application of different assumptions to the sequencing of policy making. This article does not discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the variety of approaches but, rather, is based on an understanding of policy making as a process model, i.e., the policy cycle. This models the policy process as a series of political activities which consist of the following phases: (a) agenda setting, (b) policy formulation, (c) legitimation, (d) implementation, (e) evaluation, and (f) policy maintenance, succession or termination. Knill and Tosun (2012) and Hill and Hupe (2015) argue that the "normatively attractive top-down view of policy and its implementation is based on three questionable assumptions:

- A chronological order in which expressed intentions precede action;
- A linear causal logic whereby goals determine instruments and instruments determine results;
- A hierarchy within policy formulation is more important than policy implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2015)" (Hudson et al., 2019: 1).

Cognisant of this argument, the article does not assume a purely sequential model of the policy process. A reformulation of policy might occur during the implementation stage, some stages may overlap, or some phases might be skipped.

NATIONAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL ENTERPRISE POLICY

Governments around the world have been encountering "numerous unstructured, crosscutting, and complex policy challenges" (Choi et al., 2020: 494). Over the past three decades, social enterprise has been utilised by a number of governments as a solution to these challenges. Perceived to be situated at the nexus of government, market, and civil society, social enterprises are claimed to have the potential to solve intractable problems by pursuing both social purpose and economic profit, based on cross-sectional collaboration (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017; Nyssens, 2007). In this context, social enterprises have promoted the employment of the hard-to-employ (O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy, 2021); addressed sustainable economic development in rural areas (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019); developed local communities by supporting local entrepreneurs (O'Hara, 2001), and distributing surplus funds back to the community (Guinan and O'Neill, 2020). While relatively recent arrivals on the policy agenda, social enterprises as policy initiatives, have been quite widely studied, and governments have developed and implemented social enterprise policies in a number of distinct ways.

A variety of studies have shown that social enterprise manifests differently in different policy ecosystems and exhibits "characteristics that reflect the institutional, political, economic, social and, sometimes, geographic context in which they emerge" (Mason et al., 2021: 28). These studies postulate that ideas are a key factor in shaping social enterprise development. In countries that have strong social democratic traditions, social enterprise draws on ideological cooperative traditions (Defourney and Nyssens 2010; Petrella et al., 2021), while countries with more 'liberal' traditions are more likely to be influenced by market ideologies (Mason and Moran, 2018). This makes Ireland an interesting case. While its strong cooperative tradition is less widespread now than previously, it has

retained a very vibrant credit union, i.e., financial cooperative, sector. At the same time, domestic policy discourse has been strongly influenced, if not shaped, by international neo-liberal ideas, though possibly not to the extent that many commentators suggest (Smith, 2005; Kirby, 2010).

The changes in the Irish context are also reflected elsewhere. There is considerable evidence (Karré, 2021) that a number of distinct dynamics have been taking place in countries that heretofore had, what were considered, strongly social democratic traditions, e.g., Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Such dynamics include:

(a) A process of "hybridization, whereby organisations that were initially independent from the state, e.g., co-operatives, are increasingly linked to the state" as they are now partially, or completely, funded by the state, or one its arms to deliver services or "deal with public issues that traditionally fall under its purview" (Karré, 2021: 292).

(b) The emergence of 'new-style social enterprises', linked to discussions about social innovation. These organisations "strive to solve social problems through economic activity" but are distinct from longer established, more social economy-oriented organisations, in that they are "explicitly established for the purpose of solving social problems through commercial activity, and were also explicitly framed as social enterprises from the outset" (Karré, 2021: 294). Another important difference between such new-style social enterprises, and their predecessors, is that the former, typically, do not originate from the third sector, but from the market sector, as they are established by socially-minded entrepreneurs.

Both dynamics, particularly the emergence of new-style social enterprises, are clearly visible in Ireland. What is different is that the co-operative and credit union sectors in Ireland, which might be perceived as more social economy-oriented organisations, don't appear to have engaged with the social enterprise policy ecosystem as they have done in the case of France, Portugal and Spain. This was despite requests from other stakeholders (Civil - 1).

Looking at the picture more broadly, recent research by the European Commission (see table below) analyses four main types of welfare systems and their role in terms of "boosting social enterprise development" (2020: 46).

Table 4. Drivers and trends of social enterprise

Type of welfare system	Main drivers boosting social enterprise development	Examples of countries
Poor supply of welfare services by public providers and, traditionally, gaps in welfare delivery and strong civic engagement	Bottom-up experimentation of new services by groups of citizens Consolidation of social enterprises, thanks to public policies that have regularised social-service delivery	Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain
Extensive public supply of social services, increasingly contracted out to private providers	Privatisation of social services Bottom-up dynamics	Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom
Extensive public and non- profit welfare structures, covering the majority of the needs of the population	Public support system designed to support work integration Bottom-up emergence of social enterprises to address new needs	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands
Welfare systems that have undergone drastic reforms, weak associative and cooperative tradition	Public policies (start-up grants) specifically tailored to support WISE initiatives with philanthropic background and donors' programmes	CEE and SEE countries

Source: European Commission (2020: 46).

While that research places Ireland in a distinct 'box' with a number of other countries, this article will demonstrate that this is not the complete picture, and that the drivers of social enterprise development, including the formulation and implementation of a national social enterprise policy, are more complex than heretofore understood.

FINDINGS

In the section to follow, we present findings that relate to the development and implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy in Ireland, the interaction between key sectoral stakeholders in the development of the policy and the primary influences on the process. The findings are presented in a number of distinct sub-sections, linked to the themes identified in Table 2. They address issues relating to the nature of the policy cycle in Ireland, i.e., its duration, and phases in the formulation process. The sub-sections are presented in chronological order and each sub-section addresses a discrete period (where useful) in the lead up to the development of the National Social Enterprise Policy and its subsequent implementation. They reveal a complex and sophisticated engagement by a number of key stakeholders with policy-makers over a prolonged period, and the critical role played by institutions, their ability to shape and direct policy development processes, and also the extent to which they are, in turn, influenced by their engagement with other stakeholders (Duina, 2011).

The first sub-section, 'Setting the agenda', describes the catalysts for the development of a national social enterprise policy, the ambit of the policy and its primary influences. It primarily deals with the period from the mid-1990s to 2012. The second sub-section, 'Policy-making in distinct phases', provides a high-level overview of the period 2012-2019 and highlights the prolonged duration of policy advocacy by a number of stakeholders. It also addresses the questionable assumption that there is a "chronological order in which intentions precede action, a linear causal logic whereby goals determine instruments and instruments determine results, and there is a hierarchy within which policy formation is more important that policy implementation" (Hill and Hupe, 2015: 1). The third sub-section, 'Grant hunters and messers', presents the negative views of many within the policy-owning departments on social enterprise. They perceived it as, in essence, a code for continuing and developing a culture of grant dependency, they queried the capacity of social enterprises to deliver any meaningful output and they expressed concern that social enterprises would, in some way, displace 'real' businesses. The sub-section primarily deals with the period 2011-2016. 'Public policy, Brexit and the European social economy agenda' finds that the choice of a successful model, as a basis for Ireland's inaugural national social enterprise strategy, in the aftermath of Brexit, was more contested than heretofore appreciated (2018-2019). The final sub-section, 'The old regime fights back', focuses primarily on the early stages of the implementation phase of the National Social Enterprise Policy (2019). It finds a key conflict between the stakeholders, who were strongly vested in social partnership-type policy advocacy, and a policy making system, that was creating more pluralist policy advocacy mechanisms.

Setting the agenda

A finding at an early stage relates to identifying a number of the catalysts for the development of a social enterprise policy, the ambit of such a policy, and the primary influences at the agenda setting stage. The first mention of a government agreeing to develop a policy was in the *Programme for Government 2011-2016*, agreed between Fine Gael and the Labour Party (Government of Ireland, 2011). However, it became clear that the impetus for this came from a much earlier period. In 1995 the then recently established, National Economic and Social Forum, recommended that government action be taken to develop the social economy by creating support structures for social economy enterprises, and providing subsidies to those enterprises that would recruit from the unemployed (NESF, 1995). A number of organisations, including PLANET[6] and the Dublin Employment Pact[7] began advocating for a national policy following the NESF's recommendation (O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy, 2021).

The establishment of a Social Economy Programme in 2000 appears to have led to a *decline* in advocacy (Civil - 2 and Civil - 4)[8]. However, advocacy re-emerged in 2009 with the establishment of the Social Enterprise Task Force (later renamed the Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Task Force). This was not a representative body *per se,*

6 PLANET, now known as the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN), is the national representative body for local development companies. These are multi-sectoral partnerships that deliver community and rural development, labour market activation, social inclusion, climate action and social enterprise services.

7 The Dublin Employment Pact (DEP) was established in 1998 as an EU initiative via the Department of the Taoiseach, with the active support of the social partners, to tackle employment and development issues in the Dublin region. It was one of four Territorial Employment Pacts operating in Ireland

8 The National Economic and Social Forum was a component of the Irish social partnership process, and the Irish government's establishment of the Partnership 2000 Working Group on the Social Economy in response to it, was done within the social partnership framework. The brief of the working group was to undertake a detailed examination of the potential of the social economy to provide employment and services in disadvantaged communities. In its report, published in 2000, the Working Group reiterated the NESF's earlier call for government support and reinforced the association between the social economy, labour market integration, and service delivery to disadvantaged communities. The Working Group recommended the establishment of a national social economy programme that would use existing resources, wherever possible, to support the sector. This resulted in the establishment of the Social Economy Programme in 2000, later revamped as the Community Services Programme in 2006.

but brought together a number of key stakeholders, including members of PLANET/the Irish Local Development Network and the Dublin Employment Pact, to advocate for "a national strategy for social enterprise in consultation with the sector" (SEETF, 2012: 9-10). In parallel, the Forfás report, *Ireland's Co-operative Sector,* implicitly recognised the need for a policy response to develop Ireland's co-operatives and the broader social economy (2007: 11). It appears that this advocacy and, in particular, the investment in the recruitment of a professional lobbying consultant, was a critical success factor in the inclusion of a commitment to develop a national social enterprise policy in 2011.

There are two further important findings relating to the agenda setting stage. First, the primary advocates for change were not social enterprises or social enterprise representative bodies. Arguably this reflected the relatively weak state of the social enterprise sector at that time. Second, the scope and ambit of the proposed national policy evolved and, in time, narrowed from an EU-style social economy focus (Civil - 3 and State - 2) to one that was specifically focused on social enterprises, and some particular types of social enterprise at that, i.e., work integration social enterprises (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara, 2021; O'Shaughnessy, 2020), social entrepreneur-established organisations (Ó Broin, 2017), and local development companies (Civil – 1). This was rather than focusing on the social economy as a whole, including co-operatives, credit unions, and other mutuality-oriented organisations. This distinct change in the agenda setting stage, and the early parts of the policy formulation stage, was clearly identified by a number of interviewees. One interviewee claimed that a representative of a civil society organisation recommended to officials, in the Department of Rural and Community Development, that lessons could be learned from how the Scottish social enterprise policy was developed (State - 4).

A key finding of this phase is that the ability of a stakeholder to financially invest in the advocacy process at the right time can pay dividends. In this case, the willingness of the social finance members of the Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Task Force to fund such advocacy allowed the Task Force to shape the agenda setting stage in a variety of ways. This is not unusual, and a number of other studies have pointed to the advocacy power of social finance organisations, and the willingness of policy makers to take on board their views (Mason and Moran, 2018; Stokes Berry et al., 2019; Huckfield, 2020; Mason et al., 2021). Huckfield notes the UK's experience of policy makers attempting to harness "entrepreneurship, innovation and capital to tackle social issues more effectively" and to connect social enterprises to the "capital markets" (Huckfield, 2020: 136).

Policy making in distinct phases

Following a commitment in the Programme for Government to develop a national social enterprise policy, it was agreed, after lengthy, difficult and detailed discussions, that the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation would have responsibility for the development of the policy. In turn, Forfás was authorised in *The Action Plan for Jobs 2012* to develop a substantial research study on the social enterprise sector "with a view to determining its potential for job creation" (Government of Ireland, 2012: 2). The report, published in 2013, formed the basis for much of the subsequent policy formulation in, what might be most appropriately called, the first phase of the policy formulation stage. Several interesting issues emerged from our research, including:

(a) The disinterest and suspicion of those within the main economic and enterprise departments in the policy responsibility for social enterprise, "we were just seen as a shower of messers" (Elected – 1) and "the fear was that it would be a money pit" (State – 1). The civil service institutions viewed social enterprise as either a form of labour market activation, i.e., dealing with unemployment, and therefore a Department of Social Protection matter, or a poverty alleviation initiative, and therefore a Department of Social Protection or Department of Community and Rural Development matter.

(b) The narrowing of the scope of the policy, from social economy to social enterprise, appeared to be entrenched at this stage, and efforts to engage with the government departments with policy responsibility for co-operatives and credit unions ceased. However, it appears that, on a number of occasions, the then Minister of State sought updates on the development of the Forfás research and this helped ensure its completion and dissemination (State - 2).

(c) In 2014 the policy formulation process stalled and responsibility for the development of the national social enterprise policy moved from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to the Department of Agriculture, in particular under the remit of the Minister of State for Rural Economic Development and Rural

Transport (Elected -1). This is likely to have been as a result of the Minister of State with responsibility for social enterprise in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation being appointed as Minister of State with responsibility for Overseas Development Assistance, Trade Promotion and North–South Cooperation in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Civil Society – 2). This stalling can be seen as the culmination of a distinct and discrete phase of the policy formulation stage. It was only re-instigated, i.e., a second distinct phase begun, with the election of a new government in May 2016.

(d) At that point, the Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, with responsibility for Regional Economic Development, decided to re-commence the policy formulation stage and instructed civil servants to engage in developing the policy. In January 2017 (Elected – 3), the Government made a commitment in the *Action Plan for Rural Development* to "develop and publish a National Policy on Social Enterprise which will encompass the full range of activity in this sector" (2017b: 32).

(e) In June 2017 a Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) was established, led by a minister of Cabinet rank. This meant that the department was now able to resource the policy's formulation in a manner that had not been possible heretofore.

(f) A research partnership was established between the DRCD and the Social Finance Foundation (SFF) to progress the objective of developing the national social enterprise policy. It was charged with carrying out research that would "bring clarity to what constitutes the Social Enterprise sector in Ireland" (DRCD-SFF, 2018: 7). At this point it is important to note that this arrangement was rather unusual in policy development terms, and a significant number of interviewees commented on, what they saw, as the disproportionate influence of the relatively small social finance sector. As pointed up earlier, such sub-sectoral influence is also noted in other common law jurisdictions. The DRCD-SFF report, *Social Enterprise in Ireland – Research Report to support the development of a National Social Enterprise Policy,* was published in 2018.

"Grant hunters" and "messers"

One interviewee highlighted the reluctance of the civil service within the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to retain ownership of the policy area:

> *I never got the sense that any of the officials bought in to it. We had a meeting with John Perry TD, the Minister of State with special responsibility for Small Business. The Secretary General also turned up, which we thought surprising. The Minister was getting interested in social enterprise, but the Secretary General stepped in, and the Minister was reminded of his other priorities* (Civil - 2).

Key interviewees highlighted the department's "obsession" with the concept of displacement, i.e., the extent to which social enterprises might push mainstream entrepreneurs and enterprises out of certain market sectors (State - 1, State -2 and Elected - 1). As a result, there was a very clear departmental view on the appropriate 'policy home' for a national social enterprise policy, and that was not the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, even though they retained policy responsibility for co-operatives.

The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) "saw the sector as having two parts, one that was self-sustaining, that Enterprise Ireland[9] and the Local Enterprise Offices[10] could work with. Then there was the softer part, the 'grant hunters'. DJEI wanted nothing to do with that group. The Assistant Secretaries General felt they should go to 'Community'. DJEI were only willing to take the self-sustaining element" (State - 1). In essence, social enterprise was seen primarily as a poverty alleviation, or labour market, initiative, rather than as a mainstream economic activity.

One interviewee noted that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was much more open to the idea of social enterprise but the civil servants in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation "had a pervasive

9 The national enterprise development agency, Enterprise Ireland, is responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets

10 The Local Enterprise Offices are 31 local, government-based, support units for anyone seeking information and support on starting, or growing, a business in Ireland.

idea that such communities were 'messers'. If you had a business idea why would you not go to Enterprise Ireland or set up a business" (Elected - 1).

This splitting of policy responsibility for the social economy, i.e., separating social enterprises from other social economy enterprises, at a time when the European Commission was highlighting the potential of the social economy,[11] had a number of implications, which are discussed in further detail later.

Public policy, Brexit and the European social economy agenda

A number of interviewees highlighted the significance of the choice of a best practice model for the development of an inaugural national policy for social enterprise. Three distinct dynamics are identified. The first relates to the selection of a model, "who had got it right and what could we learn from their experience?" (Civil - 2). The second relates to the considerable influence of Anglophone sources in that selection, and the third addresses the relatively limited influence of the EU policy analyses, e.g., the analysis underpinning the European Social Business Initiative (2011).

The choice of a model assumed an importance with key stakeholders, when they were informed that the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the Social Finance Foundation, recommended that Scotland be considered as the model of best practice, "Scotland is regarded by many as a leading country in terms of a vibrant Social Enterprise sector" (DRCD-SFF, 2018: 25). This appears to follow the claim by the then First Minister, Alex Salmond, that Scotland had developed "the most supportive environment in the world for social enterprise" (Roy et al. 2015: 2-3). However, given that the Brexit referendum had been recently voted through, it seems like a very questionable choice of model. While Scotland had launched a 10-year strategy in 2016, it seems unlikely that the existence of a recently launched strategy, by a sub-national administration of a non-EU member state, constituted sufficient justification for its selection. Even within its own terms of looking to the UK for a model, Wales would seem a more appropriate choice. The report of the Welsh Co-operative and Mutuals Commission (2014) and its subsequent implementation, was arguably of considerably more value, and was more widely known to key Irish social stakeholders, many of whom had been partners in successive Ireland-Wales European Regional Development Fund projects. These included projects funded through the Ireland Wales Programme (INTERREG 4A), such as the Wales Ireland Network for Social Entrepreneurship (WINSENT 2009-2012)[12] and Menter Iontach Nua (2012-2015)[13].

Further to the above, the choice of Scotland as a model of best practice underpinned a broader Anglophone approach on the part of the DRCD and the SFF. This included visits to Northern Ireland (Social Enterprise Northern Ireland) and England (Social Enterprise UK) and attendance at the UK-based Social Enterprise World Forum, held in New Zealand in September 2017. While the logic of examining the experience of nearby common law jurisdictions has historically exerted a powerful force, Ireland's membership of the British-Irish Council appears to have been an important,[14] if under-appreciated institutional factor, in this instance.

The third remarkable factor with regard to the process of selection of model, is that it ignored the, heretofore, strong EU and "more vigorous and less confused" trend in Irish policy discourse on the social economy, that of "having been strongly influenced, since the early 1990s, by a European policy perspective that promoted the social economy and social enterprise as a community-based strategy to tackle unemployment and social and economic exclusion" (O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy, 2021: 117-118). In addition, it appears to contradict the changes taking place in other Irish policy making processes, where there was evidence that "Ireland's commitment to European integration intensified" and was marked by a "process of domestic adaptation and reorientation of institutions, political parties and citizens" (Murphy, 2019: 547).

11 The EU's Social Business Initiative was launched in 2011, and aimed to introduce a short-term action plan to support the development of social enterprises, key stakeholders in the social economy and social innovation. It also aimed to prompt a debate on the avenues to be explored in the medium/long term.

12 WINSENT initially comprised six partners – two Irish social enterprises, Partas (the lead partner) and BASE; and four local authorities. These are the County Councils of South Dublin and Fingal in Ireland, and Denbighshire and Isle of Anglesey in North Wales. However, in October 2010, BASE formally withdrew, due to funding issues and was replaced by Kildare County Council in January 2011. The overall aim of WINSENT was to reduce inequalities and poverty, by building a thriving social entrepreneurial culture in the local economies of North Wales, Dublin, Meath and Kildare

13 The key components of Menter Iontach Nua were the delivery of an MSc in Management of Innovation in Social Enterprise, and a comprehensive suite of networking, training, and mentoring supports for social entrepreneurs, community development organisations, and companies with a Corporate Social Responsibility remit in North Wales and Leinster.

14 For example, in January 2020 the British Irish Council's Social Inclusion work sector hosted a symposium on supporting social enterprises across the BIC administrations. It saw 60 stakeholders and policy makers, from all Member Administrations, come together to better shape the future development of the social enterprise sector.

The old regime fights back

The draft National Social Enterprise Policy was distributed for stakeholder consultation in April 2019, and formally launched at Speedpak, a well-known Dublin-based Work-Integration Social Enterprise (WISE), in July 2019.

At this point, three distinct issues arose for the key sectoral stakeholders. The first related to a belief among some stakeholders that the policy launch would also see DRCD funding provided to establish a 'Social Enterprise Development Unit', to work on behalf of / in support of (and with) all relevant social enterprise stakeholders, in partnership with the Implementation Group/Government to ensure and enable implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy (State – 3). This did not happen, and, in fact, it generated a very considerable counter lobbying campaign to ensure it did not occur, as many in the sector felt it would empower a small number of stakeholders, at the expense of the broader sector (Civil – 1, Civil – 2 and Civil – 4).

The second issue related to the proposed recruitment mechanism to the National Social Enterprise Policy Implementation Group (NSEPIG). It is here that the transition from a social partnership framework for policy advocacy, to a more pluralist framework is most apparent. It was proposed that those interested in joining the Implementation Group would apply and an adjudication process would take place. This "beauty contest" (Civil - 3) proposal generated significant lobbying activity, and it was subsequently agreed that the majority of places on the Implementation Group would not be openly advertised and recruited, but rather would be offered to:

(a) the state-owned and bank-funded Social Finance Foundation;

(b) the state- and philanthropy- funded Social Innovation Fund of Ireland;

(c) the largest representative body for charities and the community and voluntary sector, The Wheel;

(d) the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed;

(e) the Irish Local Development Network.

Three further places were advertised, and it is understood that several social enterprises applied for them. Following a selection process, a community-based social enterprise, Dunhill Ecopark, and two 'social entrepreneur-initiated' organisations, SEDCo and Shona, were successful. The final place was reserved for a higher education institution, the selection of which was by application to, and assessment by, the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The third issue related to the lack of accord between the existing sectoral stakeholders regarding the representation of the sector's interests. As noted earlier, a task force of social enterprise stakeholders had been established in 2009, and its influence and activity had waxed and waned over the course of 2009-2019. The discord had its roots in a number of extant factors: the role of the large existing community and voluntary sector representative body and its efforts to represent social enterprises as well; the efforts of a small social enterprise representative network to establish itself; and the financial muscle of the primary social finance provider and its advocacy efforts. The lack of accord was managed while the social enterprise policy was being developed but, once it was published, it became clear that moves were afoot to establish a new social enterprise representative body. Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland was launched in July 2020. Two interviewees emphasised how, having a number of organisations purporting to represent the social enterprise sector, lengthened the time it took to complete the consultation process in relation to the social enterprise policy (Civil - 2 and Civil- 3).

DISCUSSION

Over the past century social enterprises, particularly co-operatives, have made a significant contribution to alleviating many economic and social crises, which Irish society has encountered. For example, producer co-operatives have enabled farmers to gain a superior price for their produce, by eliminating the middlemen from the process (Tucker, 1983), while the credit union movement enabled thousands of families' to gain access to affordable credit (Quinn, 1999). Furthermore, since the 1890s social enterprises, particularly co-operatives, have transformed

rural economies (Doyle, 2019). In Italy, Spain and the Canadian province of Quebec, co-operatives have made an enormous contribution to the development of vibrant endogenous economies, both rural and urban. These cases serve to highlight the potential that co-operatives can make (Mendell, 2010; Restakis, 2010).

This review of Ireland's experience of developing a social enterprise policy has identified a number of significant challenges to the success of the process. These include: (a) the reluctance of the designated policy-owning department to retain ownership of the policy; (b) the limited understanding among civil servants of the importance and potential of the social economy; (c) the episodic character of the policy process itself; (d) the relatively narrow role of stakeholders in general and, relatedly, the outsized influence of a very small sub-section of stakeholders; and (e) the absence of the largest stakeholders in the social economy, i.e., co-operatives and credit unions, from the process. In combination, these factors have provided the social enterprise policy that emerged with a distinctive personality.

Recognising the negative impact of these challenges, it is suggested that, in the future, Ireland's social enterprise policy formulation processes should focus more on policy in jurisdictions, such as those mentioned above, and fellow EU member states. In addition, the definition of social enterprise, contained in Ireland's social enterprise policy, should be broadened to include co-operatives[15]. Failure to do this will be a missed opportunity for supporting the social enterprise contribution to the development of vibrant sustainable economies (Doyle, 2019). Furthermore, national and international, academic, peer-reviewed research presents strong evidence of the effectiveness of social enterprises at addressing societal issues, such as fossil fuel dependence.

Happily, there has been some movement in this regard, and in 2021 the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications announced significant support for community-based energy production (Government of Ireland, 2021). However, the key elements of this initiative, including considerable support for community-based energy co-operatives, appear to remain outside of the remit of the National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022. Arguably, this is a critical omission in the development of a national social enterprise policy in Ireland. Indeed, it is not a national social economy policy. This may appear, at first glance, to be a harsh criticism. But, at a time when the EU is strongly advocating the efficacy of a whole of social economy approach, Ireland has adopted a much narrower social enterprise policy approach.

The governance structure responsible for monitoring the implementation of Ireland's next social enterprise, or social economy, strategy, might be comprised of representatives of social enterprise networks and different categories of social enterprises, including co-operatives, credit unions, WISEs, circular economy-focused social enterprises, support agencies and academics from higher education institutions. The terms of reference for membership of that governance structure could require evidence of accountability to their respective network or nominating body.

Experience from Canada, and from Italy, Spain and other EU member states demonstrates the critical role that civil society organisations perform in the development of the social economy. Accordingly, the next iteration of the national social enterprise, or social economy, policy should encourage civil society organisations, particularly those with an anti-poverty focus and the trade union movement, to advocate and support the development of the social economy in Ireland.

A wide variety of views were expressed by those interviewed for this research as to which Department should lead the implementation of the next social enterprise policy. Some believed that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should perform this role while others asserted that that the status quo should remain. Irrespective of which option is chosen, the Department should widen its enterprise brief, to include supporting the development of social economy enterprise development. Future Programmes for Government should prioritise this.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that a number of distinct issues allowed an unusual combination of stakeholders to influence the social enterprise policy formulation process at critical junctures, and to shape the final policy. These include:

(a) The interaction of strong interest-based advocacy with a policy system, still migrating from a social

15 This would include the very significant credit union sector, producer co-operatives, the growing housing co-operative sector, and energy and utility co-operatives.

partnership/corporatist model of policy advocacy, to a more pluralist model.

(b) The division of policy responsibilities for the social economy between a number of government departments.

(c) The transfer of policy responsibility for the discrete social enterprise area to a number of departments within a short time span (2011-2017).

(d) The relative weakness in policy development capacity of the final, policy-owning government department, arising from its recent establishment and size.

The article's findings contribute to the emerging literature on social enterprise policy and to a better understanding of the role of institutions. It is widely acknowledged that the development of a national social enterprise policy is a significant milestone, and provides a strong foundation for the next iteration of the policy. The article highlights the distinctive nature of the policy process and the role key stakeholders played in its development. It also outlines the context-specific challenges, for example the near complete collapse of the corporatist 'social partnership' process, and the partial emergence of a more pluralist advocacy process. It details the factors that gave the policy process, and the subsequent policy, its particular quality, they being: the concurrent creation of a new government department, the divided nature and subsequent changes in policy ownership by a number of departments, Brexit, and the ongoing fiscal challenges facing the state.

To summarise, the article highlights the complex and fluid environment in which various stakeholders articulated and advocated for their policy positions. It demonstrates how the relevant policy institutions engaged with, and were influenced by, stakeholders. It contributes to the literature on social enterprise policy and to the thinking on how the policy formulation process can become more inclusive. However further research is required to contribute to understanding of other key factors, including the institutional influences of the British-Irish Council and the competing policy imperatives of the EU, the perspectives of the co-operative and credit union movements in Ireland, and implications for policy makers of the EU's Circular Economy and European Green Deal initiatives.

BIO-NOTES

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