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## STATE AND COMMUNITY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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*Abstract:* The growing role of the central state in assuming responsibility for rural development in Ireland is outlined, as is the recent emergence of a tendency towards increasing local self-reliance, particularly in the form of the community co-operative movement in the Gaeltacht. Relations between such local groups and state institutions have been far from satisfactory, and some suggestions for improvements in this respect are advanced.

### INTRODUCTION: THE GROWTH OF RELIANCE ON THE STATE

Since the 1930s, most western countries have, at least until very recently, been experiencing a continuous growth of state intervention in the economy. Not only has the state been acting as a general regulator of such areas as inflation, money supply and external transactions, but it has also taken upon itself major responsibility as regards the provision of adequate employment opportunities for the national workforce. Corresponding to the growing *economic* role of central government has been a general tendency for an increasing concentration of political power in the central state organs vis-a-vis regional and local government institutions.

Ireland has been no exception to these general tendencies: indeed, if anything, they have been more pronounced than usual in this country. The Irish government has been more or less forced to adopt a particularly active role in the pursuit of the objective of national industrialisation after independence because of the relative failure of private enterprise in this respect. This failure may, in many ways, be attributed to the legacies of Ireland's colonial association with Britain. One may refer, in this context, to the creation of economic and social structures in colonial Ireland not conducive to risk-taking investment (a situation which appears to be still largely with us), and the effect of emigration - itself a consequence of colonial conditions - in removing many of the potentially more enterprising elements from the population.

In the 1930s and 1940s, there were many instances of the establishment of state-owned industrial enterprises to fill gaps and exploit opportunities where the private sector could not, or would not, take the initiative. However, from the late 1950s on, the Irish government increasingly came to see its role in the industrial sphere as acting as an agent for attracting foreign investment to the country, and after 1960 a heavy reliance on foreign firms as the main source of industrial growth rapidly developed. In addition, since it was government policy to spread these firms as much as possible around the country, virtually every local community developed an expectation that it should acquire its own branch plant. Since foreign firms tend to be very footloose, while indigenous firms tend to expand, if at all, close to the home base - which in Ireland meant the main urban areas - foreign firms have played a key role in the rapid industrial growth which took place in the rural areas - and especially the western areas - in the late 1960s and through the 1970s - although this growth was nonetheless somewhat unevenly distributed.

While the emphasis on foreign investment did produce a considerable expansion in industrial employment up to the late 1970s, there was a corresponding lack of serious attention to the development of a strong indigenous industrial base, and this neglect has recently begun to come home to roost, as the combination of economic recession and rapid population growth has led to a rapid growth in unemployment.

Of course, Irish state investment in rural areas has not been confined to the industrial sector, since considerable resources have also been devoted to the agricultural sector. Most of these resources have, in fact, been directed to the already reasonably prosperous farming regions, as there has been a failure on the part of the state to seriously tackle the structural problems which have left the small-farming areas largely unable to respond to the development schemes and high prices which emerged following EEC entry in 1973. It may be that there was a widespread view in government circles that the agricultural resources of the West in particular did not warrant a major development effort, and that industrialisation was the only effective way to induce significant economic progress in that region. However, there is no doubt that considerable development potential has remained unexploited as far as the West's farming sector is concerned – potential which could have added significantly to regional income levels.

Finally, it may be noted that, whereas employment growth, nationally, has been most rapid in the services sector in the postwar period, there has been, apart from a few token gestures, no serious attempt on the part of any Irish government to formulate a policy as regards the location of service employment. Since some sectors of service employment involve the most prestigious and influential categories of occupation, and since these are heavily concentrated in the Dublin area, it follows that there has been a constant haemorrhage of many of the most able and potentially innovative young people from rural Ireland to the national capital in search of this type of employment.

### THE GROWTH OF LOCAL SELF-RELIANCE

Notwithstanding the tendencies outlined in the first section of this paper, in recent years, throughout western Europe, a new tendency towards a higher degree of local self-reliance has emerged. Various influences have lain behind this new development. There has undoubtedly been a growing sense of alienation from centralised power structures, particularly since the focus of centralisation has been shifting to an even higher level with the formation and subsequent evolution of the EEC. Many people have become disillusioned with the quest for constantly-increasing living standards, and have sought greater personal meaning by attempting to assert greater control over their lives. Minority cultures – mainly located in peripheral regions – have begun to react against the cultural submersion which has followed on from increasing integration into centralised socio-economic systems. In any case, the government spending cutbacks and growing unemployment which have accompanied the current recession have virtually forced local communities to become more self-reliant.

In Ireland, the initial focus of this new movement towards self-reliance was the Gaeltacht. Here, the general discontent which emerged throughout the west in the 1960s became fused with local cultural identity to generate a vigorous growth of local development associations and, more especially, community development co-operatives, particularly in the period 1967-1977. However, a vital catalyst in getting this process

underway was the availability of financial aid from state institutions which had been established specifically for the purpose of promoting Gaeltacht development.

While many community co-operatives have provided significant numbers of full-time jobs, their main achievements have included the development of local natural resources, the generation of part-time and seasonal employment, and the provision of vital local services. One may cite, for example, the major programme of land reclamation which has taken place in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, electricity supply in the Aran Islands, and piped water supply in Connemara.

Despite the considerable achievement of the Gaeltacht community co-operatives, the response of the state and its institutions to this type of initiative, despite the considerable financial assistance which has been made available, has been rather ambivalent and halting. This may be due, in part, to a fear of these local initiatives as a potential threat to existing power structures, although a more likely explanation is a sceptical and disparaging attitude on the part of professional technocrats regarding what are seen as the enthusiastic but inevitably incompetent efforts of local amateurs. As a result, state aid to the co-operatives has tended to be of an *ad hoc* nature, frequently in response to the pressures created by crisis situations. This is in contrast to the situation pertaining in Scotland, where the Highlands and Islands Development Board provides a comprehensive programme of financial and technical assistance to fledgling community co-operatives, with the aim of ensuring a sound financial base, that medium-term development plans are drawn up, that projects undertaken are viable, and that management and accounting procedures are adequate. By contrast, most of the Gaeltacht co-operatives in Ireland have found themselves submerged in debt and overstretched in the current recession, and, indeed, some have already ceased operations.

Local self-reliance, it should be emphasised, has not been confined to the Gaeltacht areas. Simultaneous developments of a similar nature occurred in other rural areas, of which Killala Community Council and Connemara West Ltd. (the latter based in Letterfrack in northwest Galway) are outstanding examples. More recently, there has been a noticeable growth of community-based enterprises, linked mainly to new employment-creating and training programmes operated by state agencies such as AnCO, the Youth Employment Agency, and the Shannon Free Airport Development Company. However, these schemes are not based on any coherent philosophy of community development as such, but are geared essentially to the reduction of unemployment as an end in itself. This is indicated by the scheme for community enterprises operated by the VEA, which provides an enterprise worker for an initial period of one year only, although effective community organisation requires a considerably longer timespan than this. In addition, these schemes are of the "responsive" variety: in other words, they are available to existing community groups which apply to avail of them. Frequently, however, it is the most disadvantaged communities which are the least organised, and hence least likely to be in a position to make use of these schemes, although they are the communities which need the schemes most.

### THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

It is a central argument of this paper that community-based initiatives can make a very significant contribution to rural development in Ireland. Effective community organisation can lead to the mobilisation of considerable resources – physical, human

and financial. For example, it can be suggested that the structural problems of small-farm agriculture could be better handled through the medium of community organisations rather than through centralised programmes mediated by government officials. There is also plenty of evidence to indicate that the powerful identification with local communities in rural Ireland can, if properly channelled, release considerable energies in the form of voluntary effort and commitment. Such voluntary participation can offer both ~~better and cheaper alternatives~~ than professionally-run schemes operated by the state.

However, much of the community-based development effort which has emerged in recent years has been running foul of the state machinery, rather than being encouraged by it. The classic example of this is the debilitating frustration experienced by virtually all community groups in dealing with a bewildering array of state agencies and schemes, almost all of them centralised and functionally-defined, and poorly structured to deal with area-based groups. It has now become fashionable to establish "one-stop" shops to facilitate communication between local groups and individuals, on the one hand, and the various state agencies, on the other. However, these should be regarded as temporary measures. What is needed is a rationalisation and more effective co-ordination of state agencies and schemes, preferably involving a reorganisation which would create structures which would be more area, rather than functionally, based.

One possible approach to this problem would be to establish powerful regional development organisations which would be in an effective position to co-ordinate, within their respective regions, the operations of functionally-defined central state agencies, such as the IDA, Bord Failte, the Department of Agriculture, the Forest and Wildlife Service, and the Board of Works. To maximise their effectiveness, these regional organisations ~~should develop close liaison~~ with local representative groups, so that development planning could take place in a ~~manner sensitive to local needs~~, and making maximum use of local resources. Indeed, at a time when profound changes in local government structures are being considered, it may be suggested that such regional development organisations should be democratically controlled by popularly-elected regional councils, perhaps made up of representatives of local community councils or groups.

What is at the back of these suggestions is the contention that centralised state organisations tend to be very wasteful of resources, not only because they tend to become top-heavy with administrative personnel, but mainly because they are conducive to the formulation of standardised policies and schemes which are unable to adapt to the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) geographical variations from locality to locality in needs and resources, thereby leading to situations where needs which don't exist are being attended to and vice-versa, or where valuable local resources remain unexploited. An outstanding example of this is the EEC Farm Modernisation Scheme, whose central tenet that a single basic approach to agricultural reform should be pursued runs directly counter to the massive regional and local variations in agricultural conditions in the Community.

What is needed, essentially, is, first of all, a recognition on the part of the state and its agencies that ~~considerable untapped potential exists at the level of the local community~~, in fact, the reversal in the 1970s of the long-established pattern of emigration from Ireland has meant that there has been a considerable ~~strengthening~~ of the demographic and social fabric in most parts of rural Ireland, with the result that there are many more ~~young, able, and~~ potentially energetic people around than had been the case previously. However, as argued already in this paper, present structures are

not properly geared to make good use of the potential represented by these people, which as a result either remains still-born, or becomes channelled in other, perhaps less desirable, directions.

There is, therefore, ~~a need for a national programme for promoting community development~~. Such a programme would involve, at minimum, putting into the field a corps of trained and adequately-supported community organisers whose task it would be to help local communities get over the initial steps of organising themselves. However, once organised, local communities must then be allowed operate in an environment which will permit them to function effectively. Essentially, this means that they must be accorded formal status in their dealings with state agencies. This does not simply mean that community organisations would constitute talking shops or pressure groups agitating on behalf of those whom they represent. Effective community development means that community organisations should function as active development agencies in their own right, and that ~~state agencies should see themselves as facilitating and serving these community-based bodies~~, rather than, as is commonly the case at the moment, the state agencies regarding community groups as annoying thorns in their side.

## CONCLUSION

The measures envisaged in this paper clearly require a fairly radical reordering of the present power structures in Ireland, both political and administrative. As such, it can be expected that they will be resisted, as it is not in the nature of established power structures to voluntarily yield up some of their power. However, the evidence indicates that there has been a considerable build-up in recent years of pressures, emanating from various sources, which are placing great stress on the established institutions of Irish society. The demand for the decentralisation of power is just one of these which seems likely to continue to grow in future years. Whether the system can successfully resist these pressures, or what the consequence will be if it does not, remains to be seen.