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The Third Sector and the University: Reviewing Needs and Opportunities

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Abstract

Irish society is characterised by a vast range of active and highly energetic community and voluntary organisations that provide vital services to communities and citizens at local level. While it is acknowledged that much progress has been made to develop the sector, the current economic climate poses a number of challenges as many organisations find it increasingly difficult to survive with limited resources, funding cuts, and changing needs and practices within organisations. Coinciding with this, organisations are coming under increased pressure to develop social economy initiatives which have the potential to generate local revenue as a means of responding to challenges posed by the current recession. This paper outlines some of the difficulties now facing community organisations in Cork City, and argues that it is not always within the internal capacity of organisations to fulfil core needs in a restrictive and competitive funding environment, despite the commitment of its members. The absence of infrastructural support in the form of training, mentoring, leadership, management, strategic planning, self – organising structures, financial supports, and human resources are all significant factors for many organisations. This paper highlights an opportunity for the university to respond some of these issues through collaborative engagement and interaction between sectors. Firstly the paper highlights the benefits of building closer relationships between the university and

community organisations, secondly, it highlights some of the obstacles currently facing community organisations in a restrictive economic environment, thirdly it outlines the role of the university in supporting community organisations in the development of the social economy and fourthly it outlines how interaction between sectors can contribute to new and innovative practices at both university and community level.

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a research report undertaken at local level in Cork City identifying ways in which third level institutions can best respond to the needs of the Community and Voluntary Sector in the context of their changing social and economic environments. This report later featured as part of the overall findings of the REAP (Roadmap for Employment – Academic Partnerships) Project, *Learning Needs Analysis in Selected Employment Sectors* which was launched in Cork Institute of Technology in December 2009. The overall project presented a learning-needs analysis from a wide range of employment sectors, investigating the possibilities for future engagement with third level institutions and the benefits this may have for future learning outcomes at both local and institutional level. The benefits of engagement between sectors were viewed as significant particularly in the context of a changing economic environment.

This paper looks specifically at the challenges faced by community organisations, with a particular focus on the scope for engagement between sectors in relation to the development of social economy initiatives. It highlights the need to explore the potential for interaction between sectors as a means of creating more robust structures that may allow community organisations more autonomy and financial sustainability. Recent budget restrictions and staffing cuts right across the sector have raised particular challenges for many organisations if they are to continue to serve some of the most marginalised communities. This paper highlights the potential role of the university in responding to such challenges through collaborative interaction while also acknowledging the benefits of such engagement in the acquisition of more enriched learning between sectors.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first part of the paper outlines the background and rationale for the research, the second section examines the evolution of the social economy in Ireland and the rise of social economy initiatives within the Community and Voluntary Sector. The third section of the paper outlines the research undertaken in the study, with a particular focus on the ways the university can play a role in fostering more active working relationships with the Community and Voluntary Sector. Finally, the paper presents the research findings and the key conclusions of the research.

One of the key components of the research was the recognition from local community and voluntary organisations of the benefits of optimising engagement between the university and the community sector. More specifically, the research indicates a high level of interest from local community organisations for greater interaction between both sectors in relation promoting new opportunities and building networks that could enhance the potential for joint initiatives, while also providing vital supports to community organisations. Particular issues highlighted by community organisations related to research initiatives, marketing and management training, strategic planning, and the development of social enterprise initiatives. The opportunity to explore and develop new alternatives through interaction and co-production between sectors was welcomed by all participating organisations. The need to develop the social economy at local level was highlighted as particularly significant given the recent government cuts to the community and Voluntary Sector.

While the Community Sector faces particular challenges, education providers also face further challenges in developing facilities which enable individuals to assimilate knowledge skills and abilities which reflect a wide range of changes taking place in the social, cultural and economic environments of communities. This requires education providers to take a more proactive role in fostering community based research across all disciplines to ensure changing needs and trends at community level are reflected in the teaching and learning experience of students. Through engagement with communities the flow of knowledge becomes multi-directional

where communities inform universities and universities inform communities in a generative and interactive exchange (Doberneck, 2009: 60). Moreover, it is about the university and the community developing interactive and co-operative relationships between sectors that can give meaning to the changing dynamics taking place in the wider society.

Background to the Study

The philosophy driving this study is informed by principles of social justice that view social goals as being determined by social needs that are representative of the interests of communities. Within this framework, communication, relationship-building and the generation and implementation of solutions are viewed as fundamental dimensions of community development and enacting social change (Feldman et Al., 2002: 6). The study acknowledges the state must play a role in supporting communities but that improving the life of communities must be determined by communities themselves. Developing the social economy at local level is one way of doing this. It not only has the potential to build on social and human capital and enhance economic activity but more importantly has the potential to transform communities themselves. However, Bridge, Murtagh, and O' Neill (2009) suggest that when considering the aims of development of the social economy, an integral component must be about openness, sharing, multi-functionality, building social capital, and addressing poverty and exclusion (Bridge, Murtagh, and O'Neill, 2009: 116).

Over the past fifteen years Ireland has witnessed a number of changes in the organisation of community and voluntary sector activities. Some of these changes are reflected in the changing nature of the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector, the significance of new models of partnership, a renewed focus on community development, and an emerging interest in the contribution of community and voluntary organisations to the development of the social economy. This growing interest in the community and voluntary sector has coincided with the recognition of community organisations as an increasingly important site for adopting new initiatives for developing and supporting economic activity at local level. Currently, the Community and Voluntary Sector are involved

in a wide variety of initiatives in the form of training and employment initiatives, supports to families and communities, regeneration and development programmes, and the development of social enterprise initiatives which can impact positively on communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and exclusion.

The development of social economic initiatives rests largely on the capacity of community organisations to participate and influence decision making in local social settings and its ability to define its relationship with and participate in local community development. It also requires community organisations to have the required resources to develop long term projects that can generate sustainable income at local level. This paper argues that any discussion on the development of the social economy within the Community and Voluntary sector must address the question of the changing nature of the sector, its ability to deliver on core services, its ability to create social enterprise initiatives in a period of economic constraint, and an assessment of how new kinds of relationships between sectors may provide potential spaces for development. As noted by Donoghue et al., (2006):

Consideration of the roles that non-profit organisations perform and the social and economic changes that Ireland is experiencing challenge us to think proactively about the sector's development. (Donoghue, Prizeman, O'Regan, and Noël, 2006:15)

While much progress has been made by the state in supporting community organisations, many organisations still lack vital resources that can enable them to develop social economic enterprises. This has been coupled with state led responses which demand increasing levels of professionalism and accountability and regulation without providing additional supports to ensure community organisations can rise to these challenges (The Wheel, 2007: 2). A study undertaken by The Wheel¹ in 2005 *Sector Skills: Assessing the Needs of the Community and Voluntary Sector* identifies

¹ The Wheel is a national support umbrella group, which acts as a representative network in the Community and Voluntary sector, connecting organisations and raising awareness on the vital work of community organisations. Their work aims to promote infrastructural support for organisations as well as strengthening the ability of organisations to operate in a community environment.

one of the primary overarching issues facing community and voluntary organisations as being the issue of capacity, along with:

the ability of the sector to continue to fulfil the increasing demands which are placed on it in a changing world of increased regulation and accountability. (The Wheel, 2005: 5)

The report goes further to state:

The effectiveness of the sector is heavily dependent on it having paid and voluntary staff, including Board members with the right skills to fulfil their responsibilities. In order to build the capacity of the sector, measures need to be in place to support the development of the skills of the individuals who work within it (2005:5).

A further study undertaken by The Wheel in 2007, *Supporting and Enabling Voluntary Organisations*, points out that efforts are being taken by community and voluntary organisations to work towards improving their own effectiveness within communities through the development of projects that can build on social capital at local level, but this can only be achieved in the context of a supportive and enabling environment (The Wheel, 2007: 2). The Wheel identifies specific areas where support is required if community organisations are to operate more effectively. These include: new frameworks for funding; new spaces for dialogue; supportive regulatory environment; infrastructural supports; the right to engage in advocacy work; involving communities in decision-making processes; incentivise private giving through tax relief; VAT refund schemes for charities; and the right to identity and independence. In addition there is a need for mentoring and support-services, board development and governance, leadership and strategy development, general management, financial and accounting supports, and information and communications supports. Other areas identified were fundraising and funding, training advice, policy development information and advice on sectoral issues, and engaging in dialogue with other sectors

(2007: 10). The need to map services that are presently available and to identify ways in which gaps can be filled was also noted (Ibid).

The changing relationship between active community involvement and economic development at local level (passim: Lyons, 2004) is also evident in the more recent emergence of local partnerships. This forges new kinds of relationships for community organisations but also raises questions on the role of state regulation and the autonomy of community organisations on issues relating to decision making and economic arrangements. This combined with increased funding constraints affecting many community organisations often places more pressure on organisations in terms of their ability to self organise and operate effectively. This is further compounded by the absence of infrastructural support in the form of training, mentoring, leadership, management, strategic planning, self – organising, financial supports, and human resources. Meeting these needs is not always within the internal capacity of organisations and therefore fulfilling these core needs can often require further supports to ensure organisations operate effectively. Recent recessionary measures have seen a number of organisations face funding cuts which have left them struggling for their very survival.

In such an environment it is difficult to envisage how organisations can remain operational, let alone engage in developing new social economic activities, given the budget cuts currently imposed across the sector. The White Paper (2000) on the relationship between the state and the Community and Voluntary Sector, acknowledged the need to encourage and support marginalised communities to work towards regenerating their local neighbourhoods. While promoting social economic initiatives at local level may be one way of doing this, many community organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver in the absence of key resources and current hard hitting budget cuts (Kelly, 2010). Coinciding with this there is an under-developed framework for supporting community and voluntary organisations on how social economic enterprises might develop and take route. Teague (2007) argues there are a number of reasons why social economy activities have not reached their full potential in the Republic of Ireland. Firstly the institutional factors to promote

the social economy have not been established, secondly many initiatives are overburdened with unrealistic expectations and finally many community-based employment initiatives designed to improve labour market access are not ambitious enough (Teague, 2007: 91).

Much of the literature on the development of the social economy points to the need for fresh and innovative thinking on the problems facing community organisations (Teague, 2007; The Quirk Review, 2007; Andrea Westall and Danny Chalkley, 2007; Kinkead, Douglas, and Ready, 2006). Many social economic initiatives will also require a number of actors and the need for a better understanding of how social enterprise outcomes might happen.

This paper argues that the benefits of engagement with third level institutions may have some merit in addressing some of the challenges. It argues that there could be a potential role for the university to lend expertise in areas that may benefit the overall development of community organisations. This engagement may also inform new practices and modes of learning for students through more collaborative processes between sectors. Therefore, the benefits are two-fold, not based on a top down approach but rather a two-way process of collaborative interaction for the purpose of creating and enacting a shared learning agenda. This form of community engagement creates new understandings, meaning and knowledge that are dynamic, evolving, and involves a collaborative community inquiry. In this process partners work together in an activist orientation seeking transformative goals for both the community and the university (Rosean, Foster-Fishman, & Fear, 2001:10).

The Social Economy

Today the scale of the social economy incorporates a wide range of initiatives and diverse organisational forms, occupying a space between the state and the private sector. In 1989 the EU Commission first established the Social Economy Unit., giving formal recognition to the development of the social economy as an important site for growth and employment. (The European Economic and Social Committee, 2004) The term social economy first came into use in policy discourse in Ireland

during the 1990s (O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy; 2003). It has been frequently associated with community businesses, social enterprises, and initiatives supported by public sector contracts. Initially, the main impetus for the development of the social economy came from local and community development initiatives as a response to high unemployment and urban and rural disadvantage. Social enterprises emerging at that time were largely based on the development of labour market integration programmes and initiatives to tackle long-term unemployment and disadvantage (Ibid). Since then, the focus on social economy has been characterised by creating new approaches to promote capacity building within communities through economic initiatives that fall outside the boundaries of traditional private enterprise and public economy (Defourny, Favreau, and Laville, 2001: 3).

General characteristics associated with the social economy include the establishment of what are normally democratically run organisations, which endorse collective decision making with a co-operative element. They are community orientated, non-profit making organisations, providing local services, with any commercial element, such as profit directed back into the community, with an emphasis on job creation and local enterprise (Bridge, Murtagh, and O'Neill, 2009: 77). Social economy activities generally embrace a wide and far reaching range of not for profit activities that can be broken down into three core strands:

- Community Groups which often have limited funding and are heavily dependent on voluntary activity but provide support to community members.
- The Voluntary Sector including formal organisations that are sometimes state or partly state funded and consists mainly of large charitable organisations heavily involved in fundraising and have a large number of volunteers.
- The Social Enterprise Sector which includes community organisations with a business dimension whose surplus profits are redistributed into providing business in the community and generating revenue on which to base other community projects that benefit the community as a whole. (see Social Economy Lisburn, 2009)

These three strands represent the important role community organisations play in achieving social goals for communities through sustainable development and responding to the needs of communities. Within this framework community organisations are continually subject to change in the way they aim to meet both their own social and economic needs

In Ireland, general trends pointing to the development of social economy initiatives are witnessed in the more recent rise in the establishment of County and City Development Boards (Boyle and Humphries, 2001) and the development of local partnerships. A significant emphasis was first placed on promoting local enterprise and recognising the importance of the social economy in the governments Partnership 2000 Agreement. Under Partnership 2000 promoting local enterprise and strengthening growth in communities was emphasised, signalling a change in the states approach to the development of communities through optimising community benefits by considering options for greater transfer of decision making powers locally. The Partnership Agreement suggested a number of measures to be undertaken including the establishment of a working group to undertake an in depth examination of the potential of the social economy, particularly in the area of employment and the delivery of services such as childcare, care of the elderly and improving the overall quality of life in disadvantaged areas (ICTU, 2010). A Working Group was established to facilitate the full potential of the social economy through supporting economic activity at local level through enterprise initiatives, job creation, and the delivery of services in disadvantaged communities (CWC, 2003: 1). The overall aim of this initiative was to strive towards combining market, state, and non-profit enterprises that would serve both the social and economic needs of communities. This would also serve to facilitate capacity building at local level through a concentrated policy response to the needs of communities experiencing the greatest concentrations of unemployment and disadvantage (ICTU, 2010).

Since Partnership 2000 developing locally based partnerships has been viewed as a significant step towards creating an environment conducive to the development of the social economy. More focus is now placed on developing locally-based strategies to

tackle unemployment and social exclusion which are generally supported through consultation with local bodies and a renewed focus on a more local governance system. The benefits of such an integrated approach to local government and partnership models has recently been highlighted in a study undertaken in Britain *The Quirk Review of Community Management and Ownership of Public Assets (2007)*. The report outlines how the development of partnership models in community settings has played a significant role in ensuring the ability of community organisations to self-manage, along with addressing the overall economic and social renewal of communities (see *The Quirk Review, 2007*²). However, the report points out that for such a model to be successful it requires local government to be:

more than simply a deliverer of public services and an advocator of the interests of localities and places. Instead local government needs to focus more on the overall welfare of its communities: their cohesion and harmony and the capacity for self-management (2007: 3).

Ireland's current economic climate and insecure funding environment presents many challenges and marks the need to explore new possibilities as many community organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to serve their target groups. Coupled with these increasing pressures of economic constraints is under-resourcing (Garvey and Sheehan, 2006) and the lack of access to professional supports required to ensure a sustainable environment for good governance and creating social economic activities. *The Wheel (2005)* suggests some of the solutions are found in addressing the need for the implementation of essential training needs for Community and Voluntary organisations (*The Wheel, 2005: 3*). *The Wheel* specifically point to the need for programmes to be developed to strengthen the ability of community and voluntary organisations to develop in a more effective way through the provision of training initiatives and increased representation in decision making at county and

² The Quirk Review is a report that was published in 2007 as a result of a nationwide study in Britain which examined the ways in which communities can optimise their benefits through the transfer of ownership of public assets and management to community groups. It sought the advice of local authorities, community organisations, and current social enterprises, with a view to establishing what can work at local level.

national level. The Wheel emphasises the need for capacity building if organisations are to succeed in developing social economic activities and argues that if such supports are not available to organisations they will be unable to deliver on core activities and services (Ibid). Teague (2007) argues that the successful management of community organisations and the capacity to build social economy initiatives will require the engagement of a number of key stakeholders informing successful economic initiatives and co-production between sectors, activating new labour market networks locally that places the empowerment of communities at its core (2007: 91-108). This next two sections of the paper highlights the views of community organisations in relation to current challenges faced in the development of the social economy, the gaps in provision and resources available to community organisations, and examines the role of the university engagement in addressing these issues.

The Study

Study Description and Methodology:

Within the current economic climate a number of challenges face community organisations and many are finding themselves increasingly directed towards becoming more financially sustainable without the supports previously provided by the state. Without this investment in public infrastructure and long term community engagement strategies community organisations will struggle to fulfil their core commitments to the communities they serve. Of the participating organisations in this study, many acknowledged that funding cuts are inevitable in the current climate but argue that if organisations are to strive towards building on social economy initiatives, a number of resources need to be in place to allow organisations to become more financially independent of the state. Some of the issues specifically addressed were the provision of skills, knowledge and expertise, management skills, research needs, collaboration and networking, and the need to identify gaps in development practice. Many of these issues were common among all organisations and identified as real problems in terms of how the organisation might progress and continue providing vital supports to communities. Other issues identified were organisation- specific highlighting the variety and distinctiveness of the landscape of community activity and the differing levels of internal resources available to organisations.

Methodologically, the study incorporated a cross-sectoral comparison inclusive of a number of community organisations at local level. A range of organisations were considered in the initial scoping stage but only six organisations were selected for the study due to the limited timeframe of the research. The interviews for the study were undertaken during March and April of 2009. All of the participating organisations were located locally to allow for accessibility and the scope of the research. Material was selected from these six organisations for the final report.

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on both formal and informal semi-structured interviews that were carried out over approximately six weeks. These interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Some of the interviews were followed up by a further telephone interview if required to clarify data and content of interview. Consent was given by all participants to use interview information in the study.

The six respondent organisations are currently engaged in a wide range of activities including community development, fundraising, education, recreation, integration, employability initiatives, cultural awareness, providing services, and a number of other initiatives reflecting the multiple roles of community and third sector organisations. All of the participating organisations acknowledged the importance of the development of the social economy but stressed this must take place in the context of community development.

As well as contacting organisations, a number of existing studies were reviewed that were deemed relevant to the study. These studies were consulted as a resource to help identify more general infrastructural problems and to build a clearer picture of the nature of problems distinctive to community organisations. Studies undertaken primarily by The Wheel were viewed as significant, as were others conducted by Boardmatch, in conjunction with The Wheel. The recent NESC (2009) report *Ireland's Five-Part Crisis: An Integrated National Response* was also considered relevant.

Participating Organisations:

The participating organisations were as follows:

1. The Community and Voluntary Forum: Interviewee - Board Member.
2. Cork VEC: Interviewee - Basic Adult Education Co-ordinator.
3. South Mid West Community Development Support Agency: Interviewee - Family resource centre co-ordinator working with a number of organisations in the Cork/Kerry region.
4. Cork Simon Community: Interviewee - Assistant Director of the Cork Simon Community.
5. NASC: The Irish Immigrant Support Centre: Interviewee – The Director of NASC. (at time of research). This position has now been replaced by CEO position, with a new staff member.
6. Niche: Community Health Project: Interviewee - Project Manager.

Thematic Focus of the Study:

In total, 5 recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with representative organisations whose members are employed at both management and organisational level. All respondents were asked to discuss the nature of their work, the dilemmas currently facing organisations, and the kind of initiatives that are required to bring about change. To yield important information, the interviews were structured around five main themes:

- (1) the funding of organisations,
- (2) the sustainability of community organisations,
- (3) the changing needs and practices within organisations,
- (4) the benefits of enhancing relationships and engagement with the University,
- (5) the role of the University in meeting the needs of the community organisations.

Research Findings

Overall the research was viewed positively and was welcomed by community organisations as an important route to enable enhanced collaboration and future networking with the university. The research yielded important information on the needs of community organisations in view of the changing environments, the context

of community development, and the growing demands made of social economy actors. Interviewees pointed to the multiple and overlapping complexities facing community development, compounded by an unstable sustainable environment and the need to focus on alternatives that promote less reliance on government funding. In particular the need to develop expertise on the business orientation of organisations which in turn could have the potential to generate income at local level in the form of employment initiatives was deemed relevant. For example, some organisations had developed business plans aimed at increasing revenue within local communities but lacked the expertise to take these plans forward to the next stage. Social economic initiatives were viewed as significant in the case of all of the community organisations but lack of expertise in this area was viewed as a particular disadvantage.

Specific issues that arose that were common across organisations fell under four main themes:

- 1) Funding, Sustainability, and Social Enterprise Initiatives
- 2) Marketing and Management / Business, Finance and Strategic Planning,
- 3) Training Needs
- 4) Research Needs, Collaboration, and Making links with the University

Funding, Sustainability, and Social Enterprise Initiatives:

The issue of sustainability in relation to the funding of organisations was considered a pressing issue for most participants, although some organisations experienced this more profoundly than others. All participants identified the lack of funding as a problem that seriously contributes to how effectively an organisation operates. While this view was shared by all organisations, some had been heavily affected by funding constraints, some relied more on philanthropic funding, while others more established organisations had benefited from its strong corporate links. Nevertheless, funding for all participants featured as a significant obstacle to the overall development of organisations.

A number of organisations pointed to an inconsistency in funding which creates difficulties for forward planning. This echoes the findings of the Wheel (2007) study

which argued that the difficulty with statutory funding is that it is provided on an annual basis which impacts on the time and energy of organisations to carry out their work and also means that organisations cannot plan for multi-annual programmes. This has recently been compounded by large scale cuts right across the Community and Voluntary Sector. In the aftermath of the McCarthy report, the Community Sector has seen a number of budget reductions. The McCarthy report proposed 15% cuts to CDPs a 32% cut to the sector as a whole. Following this, Bord Snip proposed cuts of €44 million to Community Development Programmes and Partnerships, along with a 10 million cut to community service programmes, while RADID and welfare entitlements for community service programmes are to be axed (Irish Left Review, 2009). Adding to this on the 25th November 2009 the government announced the commencement of the winding down of 180 community projects (Seanad Debates, 2010). These funding cuts pose real issues for community organisations and question the commitment of the state to community development per se. Many participants in the study were of the view that while community organisations in the most disadvantaged areas may have benefited least from the Celtic Tiger, they are now the ones now expected to pay the highest price.

Some of the organisations consulted in the study were fearful of the impact of funding cuts on their ability to provide adequate services to the communities they seek to serve. Some organisations spoke of the need for new alternatives to compensate for cuts in funding but pointed to a deficit in the provision of resources in order to accomplish this. Proposed funding cuts impacted on some of the participating organisations differently, for example, organisations like The Community and Voluntary Forum, who fall under the Department of the Environment, only faced minimal cuts at local and national level which was not viewed as having any real impact in terms of the work undertaken. In contrast, the co-ordinator of the family resource centres pointed out that without funding to support family resource centres, some organisations will effectively fold. Organisations like Nasc, did not face immediate funding cuts as they rely on minimal state funding (currently philanthropically funded) but identified funding as a real priority for the long term survival of the agency. Nasc pointed to how the development of more robust

structures with the university institutions, particular departments with an interest in the area of community development, could have a significant impact in helping organisations overcome some of the current issues. The participant pointed out that when funding is withdrawn it can threaten the lifeline of an organisation and if socially economical alternatives are not in place, an organisation will effectively cease to operate. The director of NASC stated:

Fundraising is critical.....Our crucial task over the next few years will be fundraising and the sustainability of the organisation.

However, she argued the whole area of fundraising and developing new initiatives requires skills and expertise not always available to organisations. She again pointed to resources available at university level that have the potential to overcome some of the current difficulties:

For students who are studying business the whole area of fundraising could prove beneficial in making links, it can put business in the community.....putting together plans and strategies and carrying out very practical pieces of work. This is one area where there is a huge need for expertise in community organisations. (Director of Nasc)

On the issue of funding, the coordinator from Niche argued, that there was a real need to look beyond reliance on statutory funding and look to alternative structures of support if the organisation is to truly serve communities. While funding is initially required to set up programmes, the project coordinator in Niche argues that a community development organisation must encourage people to develop their own skills and capacity that will benefit the community as a whole.

Organisations such as the Cork Simon Community echoed this view and argued that while there is a need for funding of organisations, organisations need to move beyond internal structures to build on initiatives and become more self organising. The Simon Community are one organisation that have benefitted from external links with

other organisations and as a result are now more established and skilled in terms of their fundraising capacity. Their ability to organise and develop corporate links has proved to be beneficial, along with their ability to be proactive in engaging with the local city council and other external bodies. Successful elements of the organisation pointed to planning and infrastructure, a well organised fundraising forum, an ability to provide staff training, and the capacity to network in the wider community. However, like many other organisations, Cork Simon Community is not exempt from funding cuts and sees this as a real challenge for the organisation over the coming years. Engagement with the university was viewed as an area where expertise could be shared collaboratively informing both rhetoric and practice.

All organisations recognised that in light of significant funding reductions there is more pressure on organisations to become more self-financing. On this issue, the need to develop projects that are more innovative and enterprise orientated was considered significant. Many participating organisations saw the need for social enterprise initiatives to take root as a way of generating income to sustain the work of organisations but emphasised the importance of getting the balance right between projects that are socially motivating and the emphasis on economics. All organisations highlighted that the focus of any social economy initiatives must have a primary focus on alleviating disadvantage and must have community development as a core aim where profit-orientation is directed back into communities. All organisations acknowledged the need for increased awareness on the long term challenges of sustainability and the benefits of social enterprise locally but emphasised that new ideas generated on business orientated goals in the community must serve the long term needs of communities and must not be viewed as 'quick fix' measures for deeply embedded structural inequalities .

The project co-ordinator in Niche identified a number of specific areas where the University might play a role in terms of extending its expertise to community organisations in the area of commercial and financial planning. Speaking specifically about their project targeting unemployed men, she pointed to the need for commercial expertise in marketing and management skills that can help projects to progress to

commercial entities. At the time of the study there a number of men participating on a programme designed to help restore self confidence, particularly for men coping with addictions, long-term unemployment, and other difficult social circumstances. The participating men had successfully participated in a glass cutting project, which had produced high standard and marketable pieces of work. Niche are currently looking at ways to market the work and develop this into a self sustaining project with a commercial element that will allow the men themselves to take ownership of their work and create employment at local level directing revenue back into the community. The coordinator argued that while the project had generated a lot of interest and resources were available, the problem lay in the lack of business expertise in taking the project forward to the next phase that would allow it to become a viable social enterprise initiative at local level. The co-ordinator commented:

we have generated the interest, we have brought in the resources but it needs expertise to move this on. (Project Co-ordinator, Niche)

In this case the potential to generate revenue at local level and fulfil community needs through inclusive ownership directed by the organisation back into the community has been hampered by the lack of professional support in business planning available within the organisation that could potentially drive the project forward to a viable employment initiative. This was viewed as an example of an area where the university might lend its support through joint ventures that would benefit the university through shared learning experiences while also serving the community itself.

The need for such expertise was shared among a number of organisations. The assistant director of Cork Simon Community highlighted the need for co-operative structures to become embedded in community organisations which are currently absent. The participant from the Community and Voluntary Forum highlighted the need for pre-business courses to be delivered to all community organisations engaging in social enterprise initiatives. The director of NASC acknowledged that many community organisations will need social enterprise income if they are to survive.

Nasc are currently looking at initiatives that will help the long term sustainable funding to the organisation but again identified the need for expertise in making some projects marketable. For Example, Nasc are currently looking at creating anti-racist workshops and packages that can be delivered to schools, workplaces, and the wider community. But again lack the expertise in taking this initiative forward.

There was a sense that if social enterprise is to play a real role in terms of bringing change to communities then this must be done in a way that is inclusive of those who are most vulnerable. On this point the many organisations highlighted that there is scope for better engagement with the University in this area in terms of sharing knowledge and expertise as a means to identify the way organisations may develop. They argued that funding such joint projects could yield important information to help motivate communities and have a long term positive impact in terms of developing more sustainable mechanisms for community organisations

Overall, there appeared to be a growing need for expertise in the business and commercial orientation of organisations, particularly on how social economy initiatives could be developed. Placements for business students in community settings were suggested as one way of doing this. Also some support in moving some existing initiatives forward, which have the potential to create employment and generate revenue at local level. Currently there is a substantial gap in how community organisations access supports and this was highlighted as a significant area in which university supports could prove beneficial. All of the organisations consulted pointed to a shortfall in the provision of business and enterprise supports, saw a strong role for the university in meeting these needs, and acknowledged how such expertise could contribute to new initiatives that would have positive impacts on communities.

Business, Finance, and Strategic Planning / Marketing and Management:

To ensure competitive positioning, business needs relevant to social economic activities were recognised as a pressing concern across all organisations. Developing enterprise initiatives was viewed as significant and an area where engagement with the university would prove beneficial particularly in lending its support in the

development of effective business plans. The need for skilful leadership and management of the financial aspects of organisations was also viewed as relevant, particularly given the current economic climate and the challenges this presents for organisations. Business needs analysis and cost effective planning were two of the areas noted where expertise currently appeared to be lacking for most community organisations.

A number of organisations pointed out that strategic planning and organisational development would prove essential for organisations striving towards investing in community economic development. To engage in new business approaches, forming strategic alliances with external bodies such as community employer organisations and third level institutions was seen as significant. These are areas where all participants acknowledged gaps. As one respondent stated:

There is a gap in the provision of planning and marketing resources for the business needs of organisations. At the moment we have someone working with our administration staff on something quite specific like accounting. If there were people available at college level who could facilitate this then it would save the organisation us a lot of money that could be better placed elsewhere. If students could do this as part of their placement or were just interested in getting involved at community level then that would be beneficial all round (Director of Nasc)

However, when building relationships to develop innovative strategies for meeting the business challenges of community organisations, it was clear that all participants were of the view that this must be done in the context of community development and the need to recognise the different approach this might take was noted. At the same time there was a clear recognition of the need to combine community development, capacity building, and business orientation. As noted by one respondent:

There is a need for strategic management within community development specific training which can combine community development with

business orientation..... If someone was to come in and provide marketing skills, it would be beneficial but the approach needs to be different than from a purely commercial project. There are differences and we need to be aware of these differences (Family Resource Centre co-ordinator)

Respondents also argued that consideration must be given to purpose and the range of activities conducted within the community and voluntary sector and that skills development should not be uniform but rather designed to meet the specific needs of each agency. Planning, management, and business orientation, thus, cannot be based on one standardised solution - smaller organisations tend to experience budgets and resource constraints more profoundly with the cost of training and development posing specific problems. More established organisations tend to benefit strongly from developing corporate links and where formal links had been made, this had in turn benefited new training on commercial initiatives. In smaller organisations the development of corporate links was minimal and many organisations saw the role of intermediary bodies as significant in building much needed links. This would help communities to build on resources. It would also help reduce some of the up front costs that community organisations incur while also changing the dynamics for reaching new understandings and valuable knowledge on new market initiatives.

Training and Development:

There was wide consensus among participants on the need for better training right across the sector. Harnessing practical supports in terms of organisation developmental strategies and community development action plans were viewed as highly significant, if organisations are to strive towards developing the social economy within communities. Specific training needs highlighted were strategic planning, organisation development, and training in public relations to offer organisations better credibility when engaging with other sectors. The study findings highlighted a shortfall in the provision of training and development programmes across five of the six participating organisations. All organisations pointed to the need to fulfil the training needs of organisations to allow organisations to grow and

fulfil the current demands placed upon them in the current economic climate. Without such training the ability of organisations to engage in the development of social economic activities was viewed as seriously diminished.

While more established agencies, like Cork Simon Community were able to meet the training needs of its members internally through provisions made for staff within the organisation, other organisations found this more difficult. Where training was provided it was delivered on an ad hoc basis and not tailored to meet the individual needs of organisations. The project coordinator of Niche pointed out that access to some training was provided to them by bodies such as the HSE and Springboard around common training needs but that leadership skills and more organisation-specific training needs to be improved. She argued that:

there is an issue around training needs and leadership skills, and these are things that are available but are not accessible particularly in Cork.....if you are in Dublin these things are much more readily available through national organisations based in Dublin....Perhaps there needs to be some kind of growth in that area, practical support structures in the Cork region. We are missing out from that level of engagement, it is a regional issue.....maybe this is an area where there is scope for the University in terms of its knowledge and expertise (Project Co-ordinator, Niche)

The Cork Simon Community, which is able to provide training for both paid and unpaid staff, viewed training as fundamental to the success of the organisation in terms of advancement and their ability to adapt to change but also viewed it as a vital investment in human capital.

Structures are evolving all the time and if we are to remain relevant to what we do, we need to look at changing profiles... The organisation has to be fit for purpose, very adaptable and flexible to changing needs
(Assistant Director, Cork Simon Community)

Another issue raised by a number of organisations was that funding provided to organisations is not always enough to provide for their training needs. Of that which is provided, the training is not always suited to the needs of community organisations. A number of organisations highlighted that the quality of training and not always relevant to the needs of the community sector. Some participants had the view that this was a top-down one size fits all approach which does not reflect the practice issues that may arise, particularly for small organisations. Several organisations highlighted that such a uniform approach to training programmes lacks a meaningful reflection of the diverse services provided at community level. As noted:

You can teach skills but if it is not done in the context of community development then you lose sight of your target groups” (Family Recourse Centre Coordinator)

Also noted was the lack of consultation with community organisations in the development of training programmes that gives attention to organisation specific problems that arise. This was identified as an area where the university may play a specific role through collaborative community engagement. Developing a tailored programme specific to organisations could aid the overall professional development of the organisation while also informing the teaching practices at university level. Some of the training needs identified were skills support, professional training for staff and volunteers, programme planning, developing new and alternative models of practice, advocacy training, leadership skills, and solution focus and professional supervision.

Research Needs, Collaboration, and Making Links with the University:

Generating income at local level through new enterprise initiatives, innovation, and cross-sectoral engagement is viewed as increasingly important. University College Cork is ideally positioned to respond to the needs and aspirations articulated by the social economy and community and voluntary sector participants in this research. Such a response represents a real opportunity for the university. There is an even

greater imperative derived from national expectations of innovation and new thinking to address current challenges. As stated in the recent NESC report:

Only integration and innovation in how Ireland's educational system, training and labour market policies, and welfare state respond will ensure that a new problem of long-term unemployment is not created.....The Council urges....that all bodies with a capacity to deliver high quality, market relevant training and education programmes, would identify and implement a set of measures feasible and effective in meeting these goals (NESC, 2009: xiii).

All participating organisations acknowledged the importance of collaborative research initiatives through enhanced collaboration with the university. The project coordinator of Niche pointed out that more collaboration with the University could have multiple benefits. She pointed to the scope for engagement around critical evaluation of the work of the agency as a means of improving the work and taking organisations forward. She suggested this might take the form of an external assessment by the University. This could in turn inform better practice within the organisation while also providing more innovative ways of taking the agency forward.

Some organisations had already benefitted from links with the university. This engagement has been generally conducted mainly through research initiatives. As a result of such interactions Niche had benefitted from gaining university representation on their board which has helped greatly in terms of advocating on behalf of the agency. It has also helped develop research initiatives around health in the wider community. It was noted how engagement with the university could act as a meaningful site on which to assess the overall work of the organisation through external inputs.

It is really useful if you can have external people assess the work of the agency. There could be a role for a University report that asks questions.....professional supervision of the work would be good for

managers, to have networks with people from outside the agency, with someone who has an interest in what you do but is not caught up with the everyday running of the agency. (Project Co-ordinator, Niche)

On the subject of research, the assistant director of the Cork Simon Community pointed agency-specific research that would inform the future development of the agency. He pointed particularly to the need for a longitudinal study to track the progress of those who avail of their services, particularly in relation to tracking mechanisms over a three to 5 year period. This is absent at present and would give a good insight into what services work and what services do not. It could also inform changing practices and direct resources to where they are most needed. Overlap in services could be identified and excess resources directed back into the organisation that may help in the social economic activities of the organisation.

NASC also acknowledged how links and collaboration with departments like ‘The School of Applied Social Studies’, ‘Migration Studies’, and Law have helped enormously in terms of the networking and research capacity of the organisation. University representation on boards was also cited as significant and building links had contributed to more expertise in the planning of funding proposals.

The project co-ordinator of Niche pointed out how collaboration in terms of conferences that link in with the University and other organisations as a way of enhancing shared learning and developing links would be beneficial. This was echoed among other respondents in the study. NASC pointed to the need for joint initiatives on research publications, public awareness, conferences, business initiatives, and policy initiatives.

The coordinator of the family resource centres highlighted a real opportunity for the university to engage on issues relating to ‘area analysis skills’. This, she argued, is something that needs to be addresses if community development is to respond to the needs of those it claims to serve.

Overall most organisations acknowledged that research needs were highly significant. There was a consensus that greater collaboration and interaction needs to take place. However, while research was identified as significant across organisations, research needs varied according to the needs of the agency. For example, the research needs of Cork Simon Community were very different to the research needs identified by NASC. These differences need to be taken into account at university level and research needs to be conducted on organisation specific issues. Some organisations had benefited from research conducted at university level while other organisations felt that the research needs of community organisations were not always met. For example, Niche pointed out that their agency had been over consulted on research initiatives involving the participation of their clients but under consulted on evaluative research that could benefit the overall running of their projects. This is an area where partnerships were regarded as key to creating new learning opportunities both at community and university level.

Overall Findings:

Much of the findings of the report point to the area of strategic planning, research skills, policy, and business planning as key developmental areas, along with training of all kinds to meet the growing concerns and complexities indicated. Management expertise and a substantial lacking of expertise in commercial and financial management were also significant. The study revealed this as a potential site for the University to reach out and expand the parameters of community development through sharing of knowledge and expertise. Smaller and less established community based organisations face particular problems in terms of developing social economy initiatives and could benefit from some evaluative research and the generation of new ideas to help mobilise specific needs. The study outlined important information relating to the scope for developing more diverse ways in which teaching and learning can be facilitated. This will potentially provide more enriched learning experiences through new and integrative practices that will ultimately have the potential to transform communities both socially and economically. The scope for students to carry out their business placements within the community was identified as one

important way in which the University can facilitate and provide vital supports to community organisations and enhance their ability to compete for resources.

The overall findings of the research point to significant advantages for community organisations to engage in collaborative processes with the university. These advantages include a greater dissemination of information, improved collaboration, improved knowledge, easier access to support, greater representation in the public sphere, and greater opportunities for acquiring additional business and market skills. All participants acknowledged that the community sector is currently operating under difficult economic conditions and the importance of developing social economy activities was seen as significant. Many of the participants pointed out that while there are difficulties within the sector, there are also new opportunities for innovation and cost focused given the changing trends within the sector. The importance of networking with the university was identified as a critical factor for organisation learning and continuing professional development activities.

Concluding Remarks

With the demand for incentivising local enterprise comes an orientation towards new social economy initiatives where community organisations are increasingly encouraged to explore social enterprise options at local level (see Kinkead, Douglas, and Ready, 2006). Developing social economy initiatives requires investing time in organisations and providing vital supports to ensure they are able to continue to provide core services and deliver on social economic activities. Now more than ever it is crucial that community organisations are able to deliver as a base for community services, supporting community activities through the creation of social enterprise initiatives that will directly impact on job creation and sustaining communities at local level.

In Ireland today it is estimated that the community and voluntary sector contributes 2.5 billion each year to the economy while also employing approximately 40,000 full-time staff and 23,000 part time staff with a further 31,000 comprising full time volunteer staff (Centre for Non-Profit Management, 2006). While the state has

recognised the contribution of the community and voluntary sector and the vital role it plays in combating social exclusion, major gaps exist in supports provided to communities and community organisations. This is reflected at a national level in the form of funding deficits but also at local level where much greater focus needs to be placed on the overall welfare of communities. Making this happen will require not only greater fiscal and political action but also bringing together key actors at local level.

While major reforms indicate the need for stimulating innovation among local providers and incentivising local enterprise (see Cork County Development Board, 2004), community organisations remain increasingly under pressure to deliver to communities. A move towards greater innovation is welcomed among community organisations but this can only take place if organisations have the resources to move in this direction. Therefore inter-sectoral engagement and collaboration are essential. This will provide mutually beneficial relationships at both community and university level. The study has yielded important information on the benefits of collaboration both in the teaching and learning potential but also in the delivery of new and integrated practices between sectors. This will require developing more consultative processes between the university and the wider community.

Building links with the community sector will prove challenging but the study contends that if we are to recognise the inclusive element of community work, then we must extend our obligations not just to those who lie within the boundaries of the university but also extend it to those who lie beyond it. If a more inclusive and sustainable environment is to be created, working together will prove imperative. This way we can begin to explore all the potential new and diverse learning possibilities for both the university and the community.

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