

Draft Only

Research on Social Enterprise in the UK: Trends and models, practices and challenges.

Co-ops Research Unit and Public Interest Non-Profit management Research Unit
Open University, Milton Keynes

Exploring the differences – A Comparative analysis of Irish urban and rural social enterprises.

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Introduction

This paper explores the similarities and differences between Irish urban and rural social enterprises. Defined as valued based organisations that operate for social as well as financial profit, Irish social enterprises have traditionally played a central role in tackling problems associated with disadvantage and exclusion. O Hara (2001) in her discussion of Irish social enterprises highlights the dearth of information available on this particular sector of local socio-economic activity. This paper attempts to address this deficit.

The paper argues that the emergence of Irish social enterprises is associated with three main factors. These include a tradition of self-help and mutuality, a national partnership approach to local development and active labour market policy. Preliminary findings derived from a national survey of 805 Irish social enterprises conducted in April 2004 will be discussed. Four hundred and fifty five (455) social enterprises were surveyed electronically and 350 social enterprises were surveyed by post. A total of 256 (32%) social enterprises responded to the survey. Of those social enterprises that returned a completed questionnaire, 50% described themselves as rural, 47% classified themselves as urban and 3% of the respondents did not answer this question.

The paper concludes with a tentative discussion of the key issues arising from these preliminary findings.

Ireland - Social Economy & Social Enterprises.

O’ Hara (2001) notes the pervasion of terms such as the social economy and social enterprises in Irish policy and academic discourse since the 1990s suggesting that it is in part attributable to the European focus on the role of the social economy in tackling long term unemployment and social exclusion. The National and Social Economic Forum (NESF)¹ made the first reference to the sector in Irish policy discourse in 1995 describing it as ‘concerned with meeting real demands which cannot be fully met by the market alone and are not provided by the public sector’ (NESF 1995:19).

Broadly speaking, the social economy and social enterprises generally refer to ‘initiatives involved in the production of goods and services but with social, rather than purely commercial goals’ (O’Hara 2001:150). Irish social enterprises are argued to have emerged in the context of a tradition of self-help and mutuality, the period of social partnership in national economic and social policy in the mid 1980s and national labour market policies (in particular active labour market programmes which have been in place since the 1970s).

Social Enterprises & The Irish Community & Voluntary Sector

The not for profit sector has traditionally played an instrumental role in the provision of personal social and health services in Ireland. The role of religious communities, most notably that of the Roman Catholic church in fields of health, education and welfare has been well documented (Faughnan & Kelleher (1993), Ruddle & Donoghue (1995), Powell & Guerin (1997), Donnelly-Cox & Jaffro (1999). The state’s recognition of the role of the religious in social service provision is also notable in the 1997 Government Green Paper on the Community & Voluntary Sector in Ireland when it acknowledged that “the voluntary sector in Ireland not only complements and supplements State service provision, but is the dominant or sole provider in particular social service provision. In this context Roman Catholic religious organisations and those of other denominations have played a major role in the provision of services. Many services have initiated and run by religious organisations, for example, services for people with a mental and physical disability, youth services, the elderly, residential child care services and services for the homeless” (1997:31). Much of this service provision is delivered through social enterprises.

However, the gradual withdrawal of religious personnel from this service provision and general changes in voluntary activity since the 1980s has led to an increased emphasis, on the part of the state, towards developing solid partnership between the state, the community and voluntary sector as a means of tackling social exclusion at a local community level²³. Strategies to encourage volunteerism, communal activity and to pioneering new approaches to service provision can be linked to the state’s adoption of a social partnership approach to national social and economic policy in the mid 1980s (O’ Hara 2001:155). This approach emphasised the role of local development as both solution to the problem of long-term unemployment and a

¹ The NESF was established in 1993 as a mechanism for achieving a wider national consensus on social and economic matters in Ireland.

² The National Development Plan 2000-2006 has social inclusion as one of its four primary objectives.

³ This shift is notable in the 2000 Government White Paper, A Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community & Voluntary Sector (2000)

support mechanism for community development. It is within this particular context that recent social enterprises have emerged.

Social Enterprises & Local Development

During the 1990s the concept of partnership and area-based development became central to the Irish approach to tackling social exclusion (O'Hara 2001:155). This was accompanied by a series of policy initiatives which facilitated the emergence of new social economy initiatives. In 1991 the Irish government set out a second partnership programme, the Programme for Social & Economic progress. This gave rise to the emergence of 12 partnership boards. These boards were an area-based response to the problem of long-term unemployment and social exclusion. Each had a tripartite structure including representation from the statutory, community & voluntary and private sectors. By 1994 the number of these partnership companies had risen to 38 under the 1994-1999 Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (National Development Plan 1994-1999). This emphasis on local development was also evident in EU initiatives such as the EU Leader programme for rural development, NOW and URBAN (O'Hara 2001:156). O'Hara (2001) suggests that the adoption of participatory strategies and their incorporation in national planning led to the formation of coalitions of interest which have been the primary promoters of the social economy from the mid 1990s.

Interest groups such as PLANET (Partnerships for Local Action, a network of individuals and organisations engaged in community based projects and initiatives), the Community Platform and the Community Workers Co-operative have published various documents which suggest ways of developing and supporting the social economy. Similarly, the state established a national Social Economy Working Group as part of the Partnership 2000 agreement. This group published a document in 1998 concluding that the main state support for the social economy had 'come in the form of a labour subsidy through various labour market integration programmes (O' Hara 2001:162). By 2000, the state had launched a national Social Economy Programme, specifically designed to support three types of enterprises. These included:

- Community Businesses: ultimately financed from trading income alone and which would be expected to move into self-sustaining viability in the medium term.
- Deficient Demand Social Economy Enterprises: where the demand for particular goods and services within a community is not matched by resources to pay for these, due to disadvantage or low density of population.
- Enterprises Based on Public Sector Contracts: which deals with the potential for subcontracting public sector expenditure in disadvantaged areas and communities to local Social Economy Enterprises.

Essentially, this national Social Economy Programme has its origins in and strong operational linkages with the policy area of active labour market policy, the policy that perhaps has been the most significant stimulant of Irish social enterprises to date (WRC 2003:132).

Social Enterprises & Irish Labour Market Policy

Direct employment schemes are one of the main form of state support to social enterprises in Ireland. Reference has been made to the role of Irish direct employment measures in 'interfacing with the social economy and local development' (WRC 2003:11). The process by which this has evolved began in the 1970s as part of a

reorientation of public policy that involved recognition that the existing centralised system for economic development and welfare provision was evidently ineffective in tackling persistent long-term unemployment and social exclusion. A new approach involved an emphasis on local and community development as a solution to the problem of long term unemployment and the use of direct employment schemes to support social enterprises (or Work Integration Social Enterprises) engaged in locally-based development projects. Thus, since the 1980s ALMPs have been important in providing labour subsidies to social enterprises.

Community Employment (CE) is by far the most significant direct labour market intervention measure in terms of number of participants. CE provides training, development and work experience to the long-term unemployed (and other key groups at risk of social and economic exclusion) in community and voluntary projects and in public bodies. The measure provides work for up to one year to: unemployed persons aged over 21 years; Travellers (gypsies); lone parents; and persons with a disability. CE also offers a three-year work option to the same categories of persons over 35 years of age. (O’ Hara & O’ Shaughnessy 2004).

The potential of the social economy as a means of tackling long-term unemployment and rejuvenating disadvantaged communities became more prominent in public policy discourse in the mid 1990s. This was reflected in a number of policy and research documents in Ireland (NESF, 1995; National Anti Poverty Strategy, 1997; PLANET, 1997). Reference has already been made to 1998 Social Economy Working Group which set out a series of recommendations for developing the social economy as a means of combating disadvantage and regenerating communities, stating that specific financial and institutional supports should involve a reorientation of existing supports and funding rather than the creation of new ones (see O’Hara 2001). As already mentioned this programme supported three types of enterprises providing they were professionally managed and functioning in the market place. In addition to this, to qualify for support the social enterprise had to provide employment opportunities for long term unemployed and others at risk at social exclusion.

By May 2003, 355 enterprises, employing 2,257 persons, were operational under the national Social Economy Programme. A profile of the enterprises indicated that many were ‘addressing equity issues in the context of market failure and were delivering services to people at risk of or actually experiencing’ social exclusion’ (WRC 2003:124). In addition to this WRC concluded that the majority of those enterprises ‘providing social services in disadvantaged areas’ ‘are insecure and unlikely to be viable in the absence of some form of continued support’ (WRC 2003:124). This finding merely reinforces the view that Irish social enterprises are characterised by a strong reliance on public support in the form of active labour market measures. Any change in this type of support has significant implications for the emergence and long-term sustainability of social enterprises.

Restructuring of ALMPs

The numbers participating in ALMPs rose consistently throughout the 1990s but began to decline in 2001, reflecting the growth in employment in Ireland. Direct employment measures, the primary source of labour to social enterprises experienced the greatest decline.

The rapid economic growth of the Irish economy stimulated a rethink of direct employment measures. Research on the effectiveness of Community Employment has suggested that the scheme ‘contributes less to the employment prospects of its participants than other available programmes’ (O’Connell & McGinnity, 1997; Denny, Harmon and O’Connell 2001; O’Connell, 2001). A review of Community Employment concluded that, despite the fact that the scheme played an important role in the social and economic development of communities, most CE participants have a better chance of getting a job if they do a training course (Deloitte and Touche, 1998, O’ Hara & O’ Shaughnessy 2004).

The most recent National Development Plan 2000-2006 contained a reorientation of Community Employment (CE) in favour of education and training supports to mainstream employment. This reorientation sought to place an emphasis on ‘progression to, and meeting the needs of, the open labour market’. In late 2002, the government proposed significant cuts in the CE provision. This proposal was met with significant protest and condemnation from the voluntary and community sector. By early 2003, CE had been reduced by 4%, to 918 places. In late May 2003, budgetary constraints led to a freeze in funding under the national Social Economy Programme (O’ Hara & O’ Shaughnessy 2004). Financial commitments made to existing social enterprises were honoured but no new initiatives could be supported.

This paper has concentrated so far on explaining the emergence of Irish Social Enterprises and describing the various policy measures which have supported their activities. The remainder of this paper will focus on some preliminary findings derived from a national survey of Irish social enterprises.

Some preliminary findings from a national survey of Irish Social Enterprises

Four hundred and fifty five (455) social enterprises were surveyed electronically and 350 social enterprises were surveyed by post in April 2004. A total of 256 (32%) social enterprises responded to the survey. Of those social enterprises that returned a completed questionnaire, 50% described themselves as rural, 47% classified themselves as urban and 3% of the respondents did not answer this question.

- Either a manager or a director in almost 65% of all social enterprises completed the survey. It is therefore important to stress that it is the respondent’s perspective on the social enterprise that informs us about these socio-economic initiatives.
- Fifty two percent (52%) of all social enterprises that responded to the survey were founded during the decade 1990-2000. Of a total of 128 rural social enterprises almost 61% were founded in this decade compared with almost 43% of the 119 urban social enterprises that replied to the survey.
- When asked to suggest the primary reasons for establishing the social enterprise, an overwhelming 64% of all social enterprises indicated that it was ‘to respond to local needs’. Sixty eight percent (68%) of the 119 urban social enterprises that responded to this question cited this reason compared with 60% of the 128 rural social enterprises. Almost 20% of both rural and social enterprises suggested that ‘the provision of training and employment opportunities to groups experiencing disadvantage’ was a primary reason for the establishment of the social enterprise. Just over 10% of the 128 rural social enterprises indicated that ‘the promotion of

cultural tourism and heritage' was a primary reason for establishing, compared with less than 3% of the urban respondents. Less than 1% of all social enterprises suggested that they had established to 'avail of statutory funding/ grant assistance'.

- All social enterprises were asked to identify the main actor responsible for establishing the social enterprises. Nearly 68% of all social enterprises indicated a 'local voluntary organisation'. Approximately 10% of the urban sample cited a church/religious organisation compared with only 7% of the rural social enterprises. Less than 5% of all social enterprises identified other social enterprises as the main actors responsible for their establishment.
- The most common legal structure adopted by all social enterprises is the company limited by guarantee (82%). Of the sample of 128 rural social enterprises approximately 76% have adopted this structure and close to 6% are registered as co-operatives. This contrasts with the urban social enterprises; of the 119 surveyed, less than 1% (0.8%) is registered as co-operatives and almost 90% are a company limited by guarantee.
- Fifty five percent (55%) of all social enterprises have charitable status.
- When asked to suggest the primary goal of the social enterprise 43% of all social enterprises suggested the 'production and delivery of locally based community services'. Of the 128 rural social enterprises almost 47% gave this reply compared to 40% of the 119 urban social enterprise respondents. However, 6% of this urban social enterprise sample indicated that lobbying and advocacy was a primary goal of the social enterprise compared with less than 1% of the rural social enterprise respondents. The second most popular response recorded amongst 24% of all social enterprises was the 'provision of training and employment opportunities to those experiencing disadvantage'. Approximately 27% of the rural social enterprises indicated this as a primary goal of the social enterprise compared with 22.7% of the urban social enterprises.
- Approximately 36% of all social enterprises cite 'Health and Social Service Provision' as the main activity of the social enterprise. However, urban social enterprises reflect a greater likelihood to be engaged in this activity with 46.2% of the 119 social enterprises involved in this activity compared with almost 27% of the sample of 128 rural social enterprises. Similarly, rural social enterprises are more likely to be engaged in environmental management (17.2% rural compared with 2.5% urban social enterprises) and enterprise promotion & development (26.6% rural compared with 14.3% urban social enterprises).
- Respondents to the survey were asked to identify the sources of income to the social enterprise in 2002.⁴ Statutory grant assistance was a significant source of income for all social enterprises; 82% of all social enterprises suggested that they

⁴ The year 2002 was chosen as the researchers were of the opinion that most social enterprises were in existence since at least 2001 were likely to have audited accounts for 2002. Further analysis of the data will be required to determine if there is a link between year of foundation and the social enterprise dependencies of different sources of income.

were in receipt of this statutory assistance. Only 18 or 7% of all social enterprises had an income in 2002 from the sale of goods and services to statutory authorities. Approximately 26% of all social enterprises recorded an income in 2002 from the 'sale of goods and services to individuals and the community'. Of the 128 rural social enterprises that responded, almost 33% recorded an income in 2002 from this source compared with approximately 20% of the urban social enterprises. Income in 2002 from patronage, donations and fundraising was noted in 37% of all social enterprises; with rural social enterprise indicating a higher incidence (39%) compared with 36% of the urban respondents.

- When asked to indicate the most important source of income to the social enterprise in 2002 the social enterprises responded as follows: Approximately 75% of all social enterprises suggested that grants from statutory agencies was the most important income stream. This dependency was relatively consistent across rural and social enterprises. The only notable difference between rural and urban social enterprises was in the level of importance attached to 'patronage. Donations and fundraising'. 13.3% of the rural respondents cited this as the most important income compared with 4.2% of the urban respondents. Sale of goods and services to individuals was selected as the most important source of income by almost 11% of all social enterprises compared with less than 1% that suggested the 'sale of goods and service to statutory agencies' as the most important source of income.
- Each social enterprise was asked to identify the most significant challenge to the voluntary base of the social enterprise. Reluctance on the behalf of young people to volunteers, an ageing volunteer base and reluctance to become involved in the board due to legal responsibilities were the most significant challenges (22%, 20% and 16.4% respectively of all social enterprises). These challenges were more significant to rural rather than urban social enterprises. Lack of strategic skills among the Board of Directors of the enterprise, failure to develop and implement policies regarding volunteers and tensions between paid staff and volunteers were the more common challenges suggested to currently face urban social enterprises.
- Networking at local, national and regional levels is perceived as being important to the social enterprise. Approximately 56% of all social enterprises view regional networking as beneficial in providing 'access to information and resources' and support in accessing statutory funding. Only 13% of all social enterprises view this benefit in terms of 'advocacy and lobbying'. Urban social enterprises place a greater emphasis on 'access to information and resources' as an important benefit of networking regionally compared with their rural counterparts.
- Approximately, 20% of all social enterprises suggest that national networks 'facilitate participation in national decision-making structures'. Approximately 46% of all social enterprise cites 'access to information and resources' and 'support in accessing funds' as a benefit of national networking.
- Rural social enterprises (10.2% of 128 respondents) place a greater level of importance on national networks to 'support access to statutory funds', compared with 2.5% of the urban respondents. Less than 1% suggests 'the referral of customers/contracts' as a benefit of regional and or national networking.

- Local networking is deemed to be important for the ‘promotion of a more integrated approach to local development’ by almost 24% of all social enterprises surveyed. ‘Access to information and sharing of resources’ is suggested as the most important benefit of networking locally by almost 34% of the social enterprises. The promotion of a more integrated approach to local development is perceived as an important benefit by 27.7% of the urban respondents compared with 22% of the rural social enterprises. ‘Raising the profile of the enterprise in the community for the purpose of fundraising’ was cited as the most important benefit of networking locally by 10.2% of rural social enterprise respondents compared with less than 6% of the urban respondents.
- The most significant challenge facing social enterprise is a cut in active labour market programmes, cited by almost 36% of all social enterprise. The second most significant challenges, identified by 14% of all social enterprises, are ‘pressure from external agencies to become financially viable in a short space of time’. Approximately 10% of all social enterprises suggested that declining numbers of volunteers was the most significant challenge facing the social enterprise. Rural social enterprises were more likely to suggest that cuts in ALMPs, the possible erosion of the original social objectives of the organisation due to the influence of external funding agencies and pressures to respond to the ‘new needs’ of the end user than their rural counterparts. Urban social enterprise were more likely to cite ‘restrictions on the type of personnel that can be recruited with the assistance of statutory subsidies’ than their rural counterparts.
- All social respondents were asked to suggest the most significant strategy that has been adopted to deal with these challenges. 19% of all social enterprises have chosen to ‘lobbying’ the government, approximately 16% suggested the development of ‘strategic alliances with similar organisation for the purpose of drawing down funds’ and approximately 24% cited the diversification of activities to generate extra income and a re-orientation of original goals and activities in response to service user demands’.
- Rural social enterprises were more likely to suggest ‘a reorientation of original goals and objectives in response to internal issues’ (such as increased professionalisation and/or declining volunteer base) compared with their urban counterparts (8.6% compared with 2.5%).

Some Tentative Conclusions

Survey results indicate that the period 1990-2000 was characterised by a significant growth in the number of Irish social enterprises. This coincides with a period of national policy reorientation and greater levels of state support for local development and community development. It also coincides with the implementation of a national area based approach to tackling social exclusion, the EU Leader initiative and a national Social Economy programme. It is also probable that the sample might be biased, in that the database was gathered from a variety of sources including FAS, the national Training & Employment Authority, the body with responsibility for the administration of Community Employment and the national Social Economy programme (already identified as a significant labour subsidy to Irish social enterprises).

It is clear that Irish social enterprises (urban and rural) have originated in response to local needs; this reinforces the strong ‘social nature’ of social enterprises. The provision of training and employment opportunities for the long term unemployed and socially excluded is less of a reason for becoming established, only 20% of the sample had cited this. Given that almost 36% of all social enterprises have identified ‘a cut in active labour market programmes’ as the most significant challenge facing the social enterprise it is evident that Irish social enterprises reflect a dependency on this active labour market programmes yet perceive the provision of ‘training and employment’ as secondary to serving local needs. This suggests a potential conflict between the ‘goals of the social enterprises’ and the obligations it has to fulfil with respect to external funding requirements.

Ireland’s rich history of self-help and mutuality can be traced to the agricultural co-operatives and national Credit Union Movement. However, less than 6% of all social enterprises surveyed were registered as co-operatives compared with an overwhelming 82% registered as a company limited by guarantee. Of the rural social enterprises surveyed almost 5% were co-operatives compared with less than 1% of the urban sample; this could be related to the historical relationship between Irish rural communities and the co-operative movement (agricultural, community co-operatives and credit unions).

Laville & Nyssens (2001) contrast social enterprises with other third sector organisations (such as agricultural and/or consumer co-operatives) arguing that social enterprises incorporate a goal of service to the community (Laville & Nyssens 2001:314). Preliminary finding from this study reinforce this assertion. Forty-three percent (43%) of all social enterprises cite the ‘production and delivery of locally based services’ as the primary goal of the organisation.

O’Donoghue (2002)⁵ highlights the role of volunteers in third sector organisations as constituting a substantial resource in four main areas. Volunteers provide essential human resources to an organisation (ii) they occupy a pivotal role in sector renewal (iii) they are key actors in the evaluating and directing the governance of the organisation and (iv) they are central elements to the legitimisation of an organisation. Volunteers are a significant resource to non-profit sector and are critical for its future survival (O’ Donoghue 2002). Irish social enterprises are no different than any other

⁵ Speech given at the launch of the National Committee on Volunteering Report to the Irish Government

social economy organisation in that regards. A significant challenge facing Irish social enterprises is the retention of their voluntary component and the increasing levels of bureaucracy they face in acquiring statutory financial support. The legal incorporation of social enterprises places an additional responsibility on the volunteer who has to assume the responsibility of a company director. This can be a source of anxiety and concern for an individual who may wish to demonstrate altruism in addressing a local need, but be reluctant to take on the responsibilities of a company director (O' Hara & O' Shaughnessy 2004)⁶.

Tension between paid staff and volunteers appear to be a greater problem for urban social enterprises than their rural counterparts. This suggests that urban social enterprises reflect what the NESF have termed the “*professionalisation of voluntary services*”, which in their estimation has had an effect on the “changing the nature of volunteering” (NESF, 2003).

Close to 86% of all social enterprises surveyed is part of a local network. This is a relatively consistent pattern across both urban and rural social enterprises. The most significant perceived benefits of this networking are the promotion of a more integrated approach to local development and the sharing of resources or professional services.

Seventy-four percent (74%) of all social enterprises are involved in regional and national networks; rural social enterprises would appear to marginally be more likely involved in regional networks than their urban counterparts. However, urban social enterprises are more likely to suggest that advocacy and lobbying are the most important benefit of this networking.

Irish social enterprises reflect a high dependency on active labour market initiatives as a means of subsidising labour within these socio-economic initiatives. This dependency is reflected in the fact that almost 36% of all social enterprises cite a cut in these programmes as the most significant challenge facing them. Pressures from external funding agencies appear to be another significant challenge facing social enterprises. The pressure to become financially viable is a challenge facing both urban and rural social enterprises. It would appear that the incorporation of a commercial focus within the organisation s the most common strategy adopted by social enterprises in response to challenges; diversification of activities, the pursuit of new markets and an improved response to current service users are amongst the most popular strategies suggested by respondents. The other most significant strategy likely to be adopted by social enterprises is to lobby the state, cited by almost 20% of the sample with rural social enterprises more likely to pursue this avenue compared with their urban counterparts.

It can be tentatively concluded that the differences between urban and rural social enterprises are subtle, none the less there are slight differences and the next stage of this research is to explore these further with a view to determining if the policy context through which these socio-economic initiatives arise and survive should reflect these differences.

⁶ These findings are consistent with some of the findings presented by Ruddle & Mulvihill in their successive reports, 1992, 1994 & 1998, on volunteering behaviours in Ireland.

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