



Stronger Local Democracy

Co-Ordination, Development, Delivery and Participation

**Position Paper on Local Government Reform,
Enhanced Local & Rural Development, Municipal Governance,
Participative Democracy and Better Local Services**

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Irish Local Development Network Submission to Minister Phil Hogan T.D. on the S.E.C. and the Promotion of Collaboration, Synergies and Efficiencies in the Relationship between Local Government and Local Development.

Foreword

Having consulted extensively with our constituent communities, entrepreneurs, local social partners and representatives of the statutory sector, the executive and membership of ILDN, while welcoming opportunities that are presented by the publication of 'Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government,' are obliged to highlight a number of profound shortcomings and missed opportunities in the document. We wish to put forward a number of observations and recommendations to advance the delivery of the optimum local and rural development service to communities and citizens. We believe our recommendations will also lead to an enhanced role for local authority elected members with oversight and influence over the planning and delivery of state-sector strategies.

The role that Local Development Companies have played in enabling Ireland to emerge from the recession of the 1980s has been widely recognised (OECD, 1996 and 2001), and in the current economic context, clear and tangible positive results are very evident from our work at local level. This submission draws on our twenty-five years' experience and strong track record in efficiently and effectively delivering innovative enterprise and community development and promoting social inclusion - from tackling rural isolation to urban deprivation through a range of enterprise, training and community development supports.

Any advances in strengthening local government must not undermine in any way Local Development Companies (LEADER and Local Development Partnerships), which are now so deeply rooted in local communities. Considerable resistance to alignment and any diminution of the structure and role of local development companies is building at ground level and must be addressed before it grows into a movement with the potential to derail the vision for effective local government. We need to strengthen both local government and local development.

Our proposals and recommendations, while informed by our experience on the ground, are strongly supported by extensive international and academic research.

Our position is based on the preservation and enhancement of Ireland's model of collaborative local governance, whereby community representatives, the social partners, statutory agencies and local authorities come together through independent and accountable autonomous partnerships that successfully deliver a range of programmes and functions to promote economic and social development. Our collective experience, as verified by successive independent evaluations, is that a strong and vibrant local development sector that mobilises citizens and community resources, and works in partnership with local government, represents the optimum model to promote sustainable growth, generate employment and support the democratic process.

1. Our Proposed Model of the SEC – Social and Economic Affairs Commission

We wish to address specifically the proposal in ‘Putting People First’ to establish an SEC in each local authority area, and we reiterate our unanimously held view that such a body not encroach on the delivery of local and rural development or seek to subsume existing LEADER or Local Development Partnerships. We envisage that the setting-up of the SEC will draw on the recent experience of City and County Development Boards. As the evaluation of the CDBs (Indecon, 2010) noted, the local development and LEADER Partnership were the most active contributors to the CDBs, and we remain fully committed to continuing our demonstrated open and collaborative approach to working with local government and with other bodies through the SECs. The Indecon evaluation noted that one of the major shortcomings of the CDBs lay in their inability to relate lessons, good practices and issues upward from the county / city tier of government to either the state or the EU. As the CDBs were perceived as being aligned to local government, senior officials in the statutory sector were not inclined to allow their agencies to be subjected to reporting to CDBs, as they were already reporting to parent government departments. In order to ensure that the SEC operates effectively in promoting fuller inter-agency collaboration and buy-in to a coherent and agreed strategy, it is essential that the SEC be owned by all members – not just local authorities, and that there be equity among all members in terms of their responsibility to contribute to, and subject themselves to accountability. Therefore, we propose that the SEC be given the status and nomenclature of a Commission.

An SEC (Social and Economic Affairs Commission), established with government backing and having co-responsibility among its membership would have real teeth in ensuring better delivery of local development and other public services to the general public. The Commission would also become the key driver and enabler of municipal planning and development, which is a key tenet of ‘Putting People First,’ and one which we strongly support.

1.1 The Role and Functions of the Social and Economic Affairs Commission

In line with the principles advocated in ‘Putting People First,’ drawing on international experiences and motivated by the desire to make our own sector and all service providers and public bodies more responsive to citizens and more effective in promoting economic and social development, we envisage that the Commission will perform planning and oversight functions:

- Collecting, Co-Ordinating and Disseminating Data, thereby promoting information exchanges and joint-initiatives between agencies.
- Monitoring, Appraisal, Proofing and Evaluation of the Territorial Impacts of Agencies and Local Development / LEADER Partnerships against agreed benchmarks.
- Facilitating Joint Service Agreements and Promoting Inter-territorial and Cross-Border Collaboration.
- Overseeing Municipal Plans and Brokering Resources for their Implementation.
- Undertaking Promotion and Advocacy.
- Monitoring Environmental Standards including Quality of Life / Liveability.
- Assessing Territorial Impacts of National and EU Policy e.g. NSS.

At present, the functions listed here are only partly being realised in Ireland (Adshead and Millar, 2003, Ó Riordáin, 2010) and responsibility for them needs to be tidied-up so that it resides within a single entity that operates in an equitable, transparent and accountable manner.

The Commission will also have a key role to play in enabling Ireland to progress towards a municipal tier of planning and government. It will be positioned to provide for the co-ordination of local and community planning, and to ensure that municipal plans feed into a county / city plan, which will in turn feed into and inform county priorities and the regional strategy. Being the independent co-ordinator, and not the deliverer of any plans, programmes or initiatives, the Commission will have the objectivity, credibility and independence that are required to enable it to undertake the required oversight and monitoring of agencies and Local Area Plans at the Municipal Level.

The model presented in Annex A outlines how, as local and rural development partnerships, we will continue to use our community development expertise to facilitate the formulation of community plans, which we will then fuse into municipal level plans. The SEC will be tasked with brokering the required resources and expertise from the local authority in the first instance, and from government and the EU in the second instance so as to enable the implementation of municipal plans. It will also interface directly with the Regional Authority / Assembly. To give effect to its co-ordinating and monitoring roles, it is imperative that the Commission have the required expertise and inter-agency participation. As the model in Annex B presents, the elected members (who are drawn from Municipal Districts) should have an important role.

The model of a Social and Economic Affairs Commission that is outlined here builds-on the proposals contained in 'Putting People First' and offers an effective mechanism for a more co-ordinated and streamlined approach to community-led planning, as required by the Planning and Development Act (2010). Moreover, in line with the recommendations of the Mahon Tribunal (2012), it provides a mechanism through which regional oversight of local / municipal plans can be realised. This model also strengthens local democracy and puts community plans on the agendas of state agencies. Moreover, it offers a cost-effective model by which all service providers, working through the LEADER and Local Development Partnerships relate to local communities and citizens.

LEADER and Local Development Partnerships, operating as autonomous, yet publicly accountable organisations shall complement and contribute to the operations of the Commission by having responsibility for the design and delivery of:

- LEADER, the LCDP, Rural Transport, TÚS, the LES, RSS, JI and all other EU and national programmes for which contracts are currently held, and other actions that arise in local development
- Community Development (current and additional functions)
- Social Economy / Third Sector Development
- Local Employment and Enterprise Functions
- Local Agenda 21
- Mainstreaming via Localisation and Out-Sourcing from the statutory sector

In so-doing, the Partnerships need to operate on a global grant system, based on multi-annual plans, the cycles of which should run in tandem with municipal¹ plans². We assert this position based on the rationale that the local partnerships

- are in-place, thereby avoiding any set-up costs,
- have valuable institutional and social capital from nearly three decades experience,
- are flexible and have clear capacity for innovation,
- have proven low administrative costs,
- are strongly supported by community and voluntary associations / civil society,
- have the capacity to take on additional responsibilities and functions where government and communities need swift actions and targeted responses.

Our presence on the ground offers government – both local and national– and the EU the conduit through which to provide streamlined and targeted services to citizens, and through which municipal governance can evolve and progress. As OECD and other evaluations and studies of Partnerships have noted (e.g. Pike, 2011), the most effective delivery structures are those that are active in community development and delivery. This ensures that strategic deliberations at Board level and our contributions to policy-making are firmly rooted in local practice (Moseley, 2003, 2003b). Horizontal structures ensure that our organisations are promotive (as recognised in the independent evaluation of LEADER I i.e. Kearney et al., 1995) adaptive, effective and deliver value for money and thereby distinguish LEADER and Local Development Partnerships from more detached or intermediary bodies (Cherrett and Moseley, 2001).

In parallel to direct local delivery on the parts of LEADER and Local Development Partnerships, the establishment of the Social and Economic Affairs Commission provides a mechanism to ensure a community-led planning process, which shall be complementary to national policy on sustainability. A key aspect would be to ensure that the community led process is seen to actively contribute to national policy development so that national policy outcomes are clearly embedded within the local community planning process and vice versa. This means that for the first time there would be an organised process of moving issues from local to county to national level and back down.

As the following pages demonstrate, our contentions are supported by a weight of irrefutable, independent academic and international research. They draw on best practice from several sources and represent an evidence-based approach to policy formulation and development.

¹ A municipality is the most localised tier of government in most European democracies. Under the Victorian planning regime, the term ‘municipal’ came to be associated with a city / town and its hinterland. However, effective municipalities exist across Rural Europe and within urban areas. Indeed, ESPON experiences show a strong movement away from 19th century town and countryside approaches to planning to more holistic and vision-oriented planning based on territories that are dynamic local entities with networked (polycentric) settlements.

² A review of current models of community planning in Counties Limerick (Ballyhoura) and Mayo undertaken by Seán Ó Riordáin and Associates recommends that structured processes are central to participative, community-based planning, which are in turn central to planning by local authorities and statutory bodies. The review suggests that communities engage in planning 1 – 2 years prior to the commencement of the statutory planning process.

1.2 Stronger Local Government

Since the publication of the Barrington Report (Advisory Expert Committee, 1991) and the subsequent roll-out of a series of reforms through 'Better Local Government' (1997), local authorities in Ireland have become more prominent as deliverers of certain local services (Ó Riordáin, 2010). 'Putting People First' acknowledges the role of local government in socio-economic development. While much has been achieved, it is widely recognised that there remains considerable scope to further strengthen local government in Ireland. ESPON (2006) classifies Ireland, Greece and Portugal as having the most centralised states in Europe, while Ó Riordáin highlights the need for increased co-governance with central government providing clearer guidance for local authorities, and local representatives having greater inputs into policy-making. He laments the fact that elected councillors have tended to shy away from making decisions on issues such as development control and waste management, and he argues that "for local governance and regional institutional settings to work, a more integrated strategic framework, which recognises the multiplicity of demands, expectations and need for targeted organisational restructuring is required (2010; 360).

In the light of Ó Riordáin's recommendations, and drawing on international best practice, the SEC Model (Social and Economic Affairs Commission) offers a definitive mechanism to build on the reforms that have been achieved since Barrington in a very significant, far-reaching and meaningful manner. The SEC strengthens representative democracy at the local level by:

- Conferring on democratically-elected councillors and the local government system important powers of planning and oversight with respect to all agencies,
- Enabling local government to monitor the territorial i.e. municipal impacts of agencies (statutory, local government and local development) and of policies,
- Drawing on and valorising the professional expertise of local government personnel, particularly in planning, data management and mapping,
- Providing a formal institutional link between the county and regional tiers of government,
- Enhancing co-decision and policy co-ordination by formalising linkages between the centre and lower tiers of government and governance.

In order to give effect to these steps towards stronger local government in Ireland, it is essential that the SEC retain its role in 'oversight and planning' and not be involved in operational or delivery matters. Were the SEC to become involved in delivery, it would come to be associated with one set of functions or programmes, and would consequently lose its teeth, thereby returning to a CDB-type model, which was delimited by its lack of power over agencies and its inability to influence government policy. It is important that the SEC function as an overseer and be seen to do so. It must act with impartiality and apply an evidence-based approach; this implies that **the SEC be co-owned by all members, dominated by none, and have the ability to extract the optimum performance from all.** Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that while it may broker resources on behalf of its county or local municipal districts, it should not hold contracts, but instead, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, ensure that the necessary programmes and actions are delivered by the best positioned and appropriate agents, and in the case of LEADER and LCDP – by the Local Development Companies.

In order to achieve its roles in 'planning and oversight,' as listed on page two of this submission, the SEC shall:

- Meet in full session at least 4 times per annum,
- Convene in different locations, with members hosting meetings on a rotational basis,
- Seek to arrive at decisions by consensus and always promote equality between members, with its minutes to be published on-line,
- Elect its own chair and vice-chair,
- Require each agency to submit in December its targets for the coming year in respect of delivery of services and functions (direct and indirect indicators) to each municipal territory and ensure that all strategies have been subject to proofing (poverty, equality, rural and environmental); targets should be circulated among members and put the January meeting of the SEC for consideration, review / approval.
- Publish an annual report presenting the territorial outputs and impacts of all agencies / members (for the previous year and on a compound basis),
- Identify and publish good practices, achievements, issues and challenges that arise at municipal level that require responses from regional and/ or state authorities in the form of changes to policy or practice, greater mainstreaming, out-sourcing, devolution, central guidance, increased funding, inter-agency collaboration or legislative change,
- Have the power to compel agencies to provide data on Key Performance Indicators and territorial impacts,
- Broker shared services agreements between agencies,
- Ensure staffing is independent; each member of the SEC (with the exception of voluntary members and with a tiered contribution for the social partners) should make a financial contribution to the office of Prefect, whose role shall include administrative support and the management of the functions presented here. The prefects for each region should also convene quarterly under the aegis of the regional assembly, so as to strengthen policy co-ordination, facilitate cross-border collaboration and channel policy and good practice recommendations upwards, and
- Make recommendations to government via the regional assemblies, on the funding that should be allocated to agencies based on their outputs and impacts to date and their contributions to the promotion of balanced territorial development and sustainable communities,
- Not play any role in the distribution of funding or interfere in the operational or delivery functions of any of the agencies that sit around its table, but use the OMC (Open Method of Co-Ordination) approach to foster the goodwill of all members.

'Putting People First' acknowledges many of the shortcomings in the current system and rightly points out the need for a body with sufficient teeth to be able to give effect to planning and oversight functions. The modus operandi presented here is integral to ensuring that SECs optimise the expertise of all partner agencies and operate in an open, collaborative and equitable manner. Delivering these functions requires that SECs be broadly based and enjoy the support and buy-in of a broad range of stakeholders (Annex B), and include at least one councillor from each municipal district.

1.3 Stronger Local Development

Local Government and Local / Rural Development are inter-related but very distinct sets of functions. Local Authorities and Local Development Companies (LEADER and Local Development Partnerships) have successfully collaborated on several initiatives such as urban and village enhancement, the provision of community amenities, estate management, environmental conservation, heritage management, adult and continuing education, youthwork, preventive education and events' promotion. The coming on stream of SECs will provide increased scope for Local Development Companies to deepen collaborations with all agencies, including with local authorities. In this respect, the local development sector brings a wealth of experience and a strong track record to the table, and has demonstrable capacity to ensure that resources and interventions are targeted at the people and places that are most in need. The sector is in a unique position to ensure that agencies – including local authorities – have on the SEC a willing partner with:

- Unrivalled local knowledge,
- Acceptance by citizens / communities who identify with it as 'being local and of ourselves,' (local ownership by communities)
- Multi-sectoral experience and a capacity to integrate economic, social and environmental goals,
- Flexibility, innovation and clear value-for-money,

Strengthening the autonomy and capacity of LDCs will optimise their contributions to the SEC.

Around the SEC table, the statutory sector will bring guidance in respect of national policy, local and regional government will bring the voice of representative democracy, while the local development sector will confer on the SEC the strengths and energy of participative democracy.

'Putting People First' needs to be seen in the context of the significant institutional reforms of democratic institutions to which the government is committed. With the impending absorption of Town Councils into Municipal Districts, the reduction in the number of councillors and talks about the abolition of Seanad Éireann, concerns will arise regarding a perceived reduction in the number of channels through which citizens can influence the democratic process. However, by preserving and strengthening the local development companies, the government will be putting down a clear marker that it is strengthening direct democracy at the local level. Minister Hogan's commitment to gender quotas and the composition of the Constitutional Convention are examples of ways in which traditional representative democracy can be supplemented by citizen participation. Local Development Companies have proven themselves to be the generators of citizen participation at local level and as recognised by the UN (United Nations Year of the Volunteer, 2010) and the Task Force on Active Citizenship, where participative democracy is strong and where people are willing to volunteer and get involved in their own communities, democratic institutions prosper. Such processes can be accelerated in Ireland through autonomous Local Development Companies delivering services and development programmes directly to local communities, and, through the mechanisms of the SEC, collaborating with all agencies and with government.

2. The LEADER and Local Development Method and the Merits of Partnership Governance

“Competitiveness is a bottom-up process in which individuals, firms, and institutions take and share responsibility to address the specific barriers faced by their region and companies in a given market and not just the general challenges. In delivering the Europe 2020 strategy, local and regional governments and development agencies across rural Europe will need to look at their own specific situations and see how they might work with other partners to develop rural business clusters” (ESPON, 2009; 45).

ESPON (The European Spatial Planning Observatory Network), of which Ireland is a member (through NUI Maynooth) provides a rich repository of good practice experiences in planning and development from twenty-nine countries, and it offers roadmaps for governments, regions and territories in enabling sustainable economic development. Its observations in respect of how best to realise economic competitiveness focus on the bottom-up approach, and on collaborative governance mechanisms that bring together the tiers of governance, including local development agencies. LEADER and Local Development Partnerships provide the forum through which the ESPON vision can be better realised in Ireland. Our tri-partite structure optimises the collective strengths, expertise, knowledge, skills and capacities of range of actors:

Fig. 1: Promoting Bottom-Up Development and Shared Responsibility – the model on which Area Partnerships and LEADER Local Action Groups operate.

Bringing Together		Awareness	Viewpoints	Interests	Abilities to Mobilise	Know-how
Tri-Partite Structure	Community and Voluntary	<i>of the social and cultural aspects</i>	<i>on listening and dialogue</i>	<i>in people and quality of life</i>	<i>human resources</i>	<i>co-ordination of discussion</i>
	Social Partners (farmers, unions and business)	<i>of the economic aspects</i>	<i>on the time and efficiency factors</i>	<i>in the markets and economic profitability</i>	<i>financial resources and private heritage</i>	<i>management and development</i>
	Public Sector & Local Authorities	<i>of the political and institutional aspects</i>	<i>on the general interest</i>	<i>in planning and providing facilities for the area</i>	<i>financial resources and public heritage</i>	<i>institutional support</i>
Allows the following to be realised		improved readings of the area highlighting unforeseen opportunities	new combinations of ideas seeds of innovation	more mature projects integrating the interests of different social groups	a more effective implementation guaranteeing better risk management	a better durability of actions based on the ability to be constantly renewed

Adapted from AEIDL (1999)

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) of which Ireland is also a member has consistently supported the view that local development partnerships represent the best value-for-money and most targeted mechanisms through which to promote social inclusion and community development. A 1996 study by the OECD, which was authored by Prof. Charles Sabel concluded that Ireland's local development partnerships had a tremendous capacity for innovation, while a more recent OECD study (2001) highlighted the Irish Local Development Partnership model as one that ought to be replicated to other countries.

The OECD studies, which have been conducted across its thirty-five member states and in developing countries are emphatic in their support for autonomous local partnerships in both urban and rural contexts. They caution against such partnerships becoming dominated by any one sector such as local government. This point emerges very strongly in the 2006 OECD publication 'The New Rural Paradigm.' The OECD emphasises that in the context of globalisation, and in order to attain sustainable rural vibrancy, policies and programmes need to be formulated and delivered by partnerships that involve local stakeholders and put a value on local resources (2006; 15).

Several studies have demonstrated the merits of local area partnership approaches to development and the effectiveness of partnership structures (Martin, 2008; Walsh and Meldon, 2004; Westholm, 1999). These studies are based on experiences in Ireland and throughout Europe, and in most countries a convergence is emerging between policy makers, academics and citizens that favours decentralised partnership approaches over traditional centralised or silo-type arrangements (Douglas, 2005 and 2010; Marshall, 2007; Ó Broin and Kirby, 2009; Osborne, 2010; Pike, 2011).

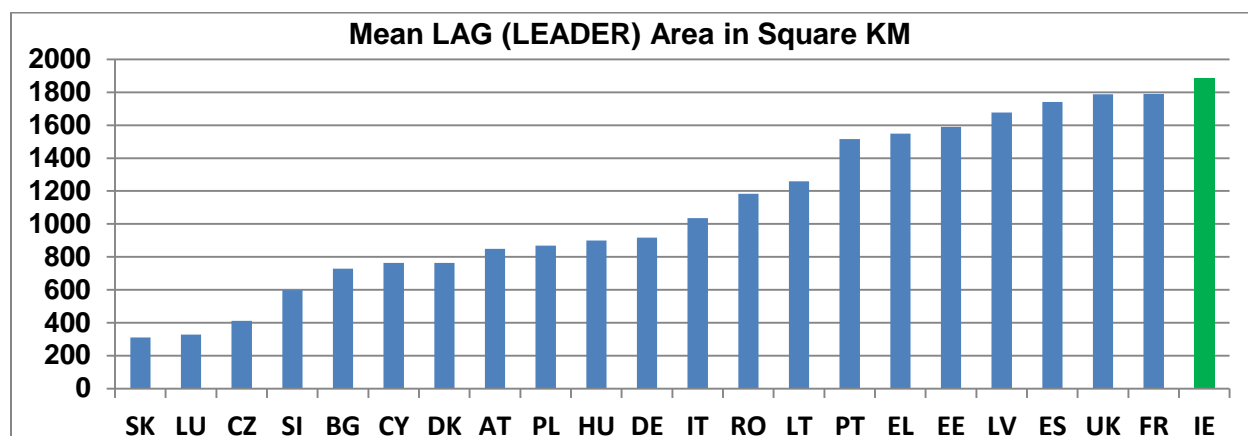
This progressive thinking has influenced the European Commission (2011; 1), which contents that "Over the past 20 years, the LEADER approach to community-led local development (CLLD) – designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their local region, has proven an effective and efficient tool in the delivery of development policies. CLLD can mobilise and involve local communities and organisations to contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, fostering territorial cohesion and reaching specific policy objectives." Although the Commission's arguments here refer specifically to LEADER, the same document, and several other EU Commission reports refer to in similar terms to the achievements of urban partnerships, particularly, in delivering community initiatives such as EQUAL as well as employment and enterprise functions.

3. The Geography of Development

3.1 Size and Scale of Local Territories

Place and space are key ingredients in any development process. 'Putting People First' with the modifications proposed in this document represents an institutional framework for improving the delivery of local services in Ireland. Local, national and international experience emphasise the importance of ensuring that institutions operate at the most appropriate and effective scale. The geography must be right i.e. The Social and Economic Affairs Commission, Partnerships and other agencies need to operate at the correct scale. The overwhelming evidence is that in Ireland, there is a need for organisations / institutions to operate at a smaller scale, so that they become closer to citizens and are more responsive, innovative and flexible.

Local partnerships in Ireland were born out of bottom-up action, and while most urban partnerships have successfully maintained their local geographical scale, many rural partnerships / LEADER Local Action Groups have, as a result of the Cohesion Process (2005 – 2008), which was promoted by the previous government, been forced to blindly up-scale. As a result, LEADER groups in Ireland are now the largest in Europe outside Finland and Sweden. This is despite the fact that many rural areas in Central Spain, the interior of France and several regions in Eastern Europe have lower population densities than in Ireland. The following graph shows the current geographical scale of LEADER Local Action Groups in EU member states.



Excludes Finland and Sweden (very low population densities) and The Netherlands and Belgium (very small LAG areas due to high population densities).

The Cohesion Process was imposed on LEADER and Area Partnerships, and while it rightly sought to achieve greater integration between the various programmes operated at local level, its approach to scale / geography was not supported by evidence, and it put Ireland on a course that deviates from the European norm. If Ireland were to now continue with this up-scaling approach, and to align local development boundaries with those of counties, this would have serious negative consequences for those counties which currently have more than one LEADER partnership i.e. Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry, Dublin, Cork and Limerick. Imposing such a geography of the development on western counties would fly in the face of every piece of evidence and every policy initiative that has sought to promote balanced regional and territorial development. Indeed, the original NESC report (1994) recommended a population of 25,000 to 30,000 per LAG – a scale that is similar to municipal districts in several countries.

As well as having partnerships that are relatively few in number and large in scale, Ireland has a parallel experience in respect of local government. As the following table shows, the distance between local government and the citizen is greater in Ireland than elsewhere, with the exception of Britain.

Comparative Local Authority Size and Scale³

Country	Number of Local Authorities	Average Population of Local Authorities
France	36,783	1,500
Switzerland	2,758	2,500
Austria	2,357	3,500
United States	71,343	4,000
Germany	12,340	6,500
Ireland (existing town councils)	80	7,500
Canada	3,752	9,000
Finland	416	12,500
Poland	2,793	13,500
Belgium	589	18,000
Sweden	290	31,500
Portugal	308	34,500
Netherlands	441	37,000
Australia	550	38,000
New Zealand	85	49,500
Denmark	98	55,500
Northern Ireland (existing 26 councils)	26	65,500
Ireland (existing city / county councils)	34	127,500
Ireland (proposed post-2014 councils)	31	140,000
Britain	415	143,000

In this context, Ireland's non-aligned, sub-county, local development partnerships are best positioned to provide vehicles for citizen engagement and the delivery of development programmes.

³ Paper Presented to the Observatory of Local Autonomy (OLA) Conference 'Local Governance in the United Kingdom and in Ireland: so far, so near...' Université de Valenciennes et du Hainaut-Cambrésis, France 24th November 2012. Mark Callanan, Ronan Murphy and Aodh Quinlivan

Over the past few years, public representatives in Ireland have been subjected to significant pressures from vested interests or populist figures within the media to amalgamate and / or abolish agencies including local authorities. While all taxpayers are keen to ensure absolute value for money among public bodies and agencies, responding to populism does not equate to generating savings. We are fortunate that specific studies have been done in this respect on the local government sector. Research by Breathnach (2012) demonstrates that short-term cuts to local government can have long-term negative impacts on the democratic process. Callanan et al. (2012) point out that costs associated with mergers, such as transferring staff and assets, making severance payments and the time extended in aligning policies and bye-laws may negate any potential savings. Drawing on merger experiences in Denmark, Canada, Australia and the UK, they conclude that

“Beyond populations of 15,000-20,000, there is limited potential for economies of scale in most areas... Some studies show larger local authorities are associated with higher levels of overall spending per capita... However, many studies suggest that for most services there is no statistical link between population size and costs.”

Across Europe, the average population concerned by funded by the ERDF in the 2000-2006 period was approximately 30,000 inhabitants⁴.

Since the publication of Schuhmachers' landmark thesis 'Small is Beautiful' in 1974, much international research has emerged which conclusively demonstrates that 'small' – not big – is beautiful i.e. more efficient, cost-effective and innovative. Research by Douglas on the restructuring of the municipal system in Ontario, Canada (which had sought a realignment of municipalities) concluded that the process was antithetical to rural development. Douglas recorded that:

“Experiential knowledge, notably at the local community level was devalued, not in terms of operationalizing the constrained alternatives, but in problem construction and solutions framing, i.e. the generative phase of the process. The integration of territorial systems of social relationships, the cornerstone of Friedmann's principles in action, becomes a distant possibility with the enlargement of the municipal units, the spatial and functional distancing of constituent (now “customer”) and representative, and the radical constriction of the municipality's fiscal base. Control, self-reliance and other tenets of community development do not call for self-sufficiency or closed socio-political systems. They seek out an equitable and efficient top-down/bottom-up balance of mutual interdependencies. In this case, rural municipalities have been the recipients of an essentially top-down restructuring process, and are increasingly severed from legitimate life-lines of fiscal transfers from the senior level of government, whose “creatures” they supposedly are (2005; 240).

Given the parallels between the situation in Ontario and Ireland, it is essential that in the roll-out of 'Putting People First' we ensure full and proper consultation with, and participation by citizens, communities, civil society, businesses and all tiers of governance.

⁴ Source: COHESION POLICY 2014-2020. The European Commission adopted legislative proposals for cohesion policy for 2014-2020 in October 2011.

3.2 Citizen Perceptions of Local Government and Local Development

The merits of down-scaling Irish local authorities, avoiding any alignment between local government and local development and emphasising the municipal over the county / city are not only financial; they also impact on citizens' perceptions of local government and local democracy. A Eurobarometer survey (2012) on citizens' attitudes to local government in all EU and candidate states found that peoples' levels of trust in local government were among the lowest in Ireland and Greece – both of which are centralised states (ESPON, 2006). Levels of trust were much higher in more decentralised states, with three tiers of government and strong, small municipal / district authorities. In Austria for example, levels of trust in local government were more than double those recorded for Ireland. Austrian local authorities are much smaller than Irish City / County Councils, and local and rural development in Austria is delivered by independent and autonomous Partnerships / LAGs (Local Action Groups).

Since the Publication of 'Putting People First' several hundred community and voluntary groups have been in contact with their local partnerships, and many have also commenced media and lobbying campaigns. These voluntary organisations have expressed profound and heart-felt concerns over alignment. Many fear that it could inhibit local development in the way that some policies pursued by the previous government did, as they see it as a further step along a 'cohesion' road that could transfer local development functions to local authorities. They are also concerned that the loss of current partnership personnel and the rupture of existing relationships would cause severe setbacks to community development. To date, Partnerships have sought to allay such fears and to encourage groups to row in behind ILDN in pushing for clarifications and a more democratic approach to local government reform. In order to quantify views locally on 'Putting People First' as part of its evaluation of its own performance, one LAG in the BMW Region contracted the Department of Geography, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick to undertake an independent survey of all LEADER Mainstream project promoters (community leaders, individuals and entrepreneurs). The survey, which realised a 93% response rate found overwhelming levels of support for the current model of LEADER and Local Development delivery i.e. through local partnerships. One of the survey questions asked promoters to indicate on a scale from one to ten (where one indicated 'strongly disagree' and ten indicated 'strongly agree') their views on a hypothetical proposal that "The County Council should implement LEADER." The average score awarded by respondents was 1.8 (out of ten). As the following comments indicate, promoters sector are strongly opposed to alignment:

- "Don't fix what's not broken."
- "Where would the volunteers be if the council took over, only burned out?... not to mention the travelling across the county... they should keep LEADER in small areas."
- "Local knowledge is key. The council don't have that."
- "Grant-giving should not be politicised like the Lotto is."
- "I usually don't bother with surveys, but the idea of the County Council getting stuck in enterprise development is such a joke."

Project promoters are also in favour of sub-county partnership structures, in larger counties. They also emphasised the need for LEADER to become less bureaucratic and they recommended a number of changes to the Operating Rules that would make LEADER more effective in enabling job creation.

4. Territorial Dynamics

The publication in 2010 of the first ever set of maps showing deprivation and affluence at the level of Small Area (c. 90 households) has crystallised the existence in Ireland of a neighbourhood effect, whereby many communities – particularly in the urban centres are afflicted by inter-generational and multi-dimensional disadvantage. Disadvantaged urban areas frequently exist side-by-side with more affluent neighbourhoods. This spatial pattern implies that in order to tackle social exclusion and to promote vibrant and prosperous communities, it is necessary to apply very targeted and localised approaches. As most urban partnerships are smaller in scale than local authorities, or if they cover a larger area, they have strong linkages with designated disadvantaged communities, and are therefore the optimum mechanisms for the direct delivery of social inclusion measures (ESPON, 2006; Barca, 2009).

In a similar vein, the international literature on rural development also concurs on the need for localised and targeted multi-sectoral interventions. The OECD and ICLRD (International Centre for Local and Regional Development) have produced a series of action-research projects, that identify the micro-region as the optimum space in which local and rural development ought to be delivered (Creamer et al., 2009). Micro-regions are defined by common socio-economic features, rather than delineated by administrative boundaries. In contrast, their colonial delineation, internal disparities and their disregard for topography and contemporary patterns of economic, social and cultural life render many counties inappropriate units for spatial planning, let alone the delivery of development functions. Parker (2009) associates Irish county boundaries with ‘über-nostalgia.’ Breathnach (2012) describes the current geography of Irish local government as one that is based on a “medieval county system unrelated to the spatial configuration of modern Irish society.” Furthermore, the work of AIRO (The All-Island Research Observatory⁵) in mapping the catchment areas of towns and functional territories across the island of Ireland exposes the increasing inappropriateness of county boundaries in respect of delineating service catchments, administrative areas and development territories.

‘Putting People First’ marks the first official recognition by an Irish government of the need to create a more effective planning and development geography than that currently provided by county structures. By introducing the concepts of municipal governance and municipal planning, ‘Putting People First’ represents good practice. This is supported by our experience and research. Moreover, it is in Ireland’s strategic financial interest in terms of leveraging the maximum level of EU funding to adhere to area-based development, as the European Commission has recently proposed that the disbursement mechanism of CSF funds (to 2020) will

- focus on specific **sub-regional territories**;
- be community-led, by **local action groups**
- be carried out through integrated and multi-sectoral **area-based local development strategies**,
- be designed taking into consideration **local needs and potential**; and
- include **innovative features** in the local context, **networking** and, where appropriate, **co-operation**.

⁵ Mapping outputs from the All-Island Research Observatory can be studied on www.airo.ie. The observatory is based in NIRSA (The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis) at NUI Maynooth www.nuim.ie/nirsa.

5. Territorial Governance

“Place-based integrated development policies have a strong economic rationale – this is clear... Decentralisation of public decision-making is the primary means of dealing with these (public) failures by allowing closer control by citizens and pressure on policy-makers and public officials and by encouraging the performance of different places in the provision of public goods and services to be compared”
(Barca, 2009; 40).

Barca further recommends a policy-making architecture of ‘multi-level governance’ by which “policy design is distributed between different levels of government and special-purpose local institutions” (op. cit.; 41). In the context of Barca, Ireland’s LEADER and Local Development Partnerships represent the structures through which a decentralised approach to policy-making happens and ‘Putting People First’ represents a mechanism for further decentralised decision-making, while the County-level Commission for Economic and Social Affairs provides a forum to fulfil vertical and horizontal monitoring, oversight and evaluation roles.

The Barca Report is but one in a series of significant documents and studies to underscore the importance of place-based / territorial approaches to promoting summative growth i.e. achieving growth in all areas contributes to overall national level growth, competitiveness and balance.

The (ICLRD) International Centre for Local and Regional Development has undertaken several studies on place-based approaches in Ireland, Switzerland, France, Canada, the USA, Spain and Germany (see for example Creamer et al, 2012). These also demonstrate the benefits that accrue from involving local stakeholders in decision-making fora to drive development and unlock latent institutional and local potential. The ICLRD action research is supported by the latest thinking on sustainable planning (Parker and Doak, 2012). Summative growth and place-based development require inter-agency collaboration (as envisaged in our proposed Commission) and cross-border collaboration. The ICLRD work with local and regional government, businesses and civil society organisations in Northern Ireland and the RoI Border region reveals how integrated and multi-sectoral planning that transcends administrative and inter-jurisdictional boundaries can generate efficiencies, promote economic competitiveness and improve quality of life. This learning points to the need for Partnerships and all other agents involved in the delivery of ‘Putting People First’ to work collaboratively across administrative boundaries. It also obliges policy-makers and those delivering development to recognise that while counties / cities may offer an interim space within which Commissions for Economic and Social Affairs can operate, the economic, social and environmental reality is that boundaries are fuzzy and flexible and must be treated as such (Haughton et al., 2010).

To date, Ireland and the UK have been outliers in a European sense with respect to the way in which ‘local’ is defined. In our context, ‘local government’ has become equated with the city and / or county tier of government, while in most democracies the ‘local’ equates with the community or municipality. Working with and through LEADER / Local Development Partnerships, ‘Putting People First’ offers a realistic roadmap to enable Ireland to move towards a more mainstream system of local government underpinned by parallel participative democracy.

6. Drawing on Best Practice

'Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government' is a radial document. Its advocacy of a more integrated, holistic, multi-pronged and strategic approach to spatial planning is long overdue, and Local Development Partnerships are keen to play our part in facilitating, formulating and delivering on multi-sectoral plans at the levels of the community and municipal districts. We are also committed to working with and through the proposed Commission, and with partners in other agencies and organisations to contribute to a bottom-up approach to policy formulation, so that government and policy makers are provided with evidence and data on which to base their decisions. We strongly compliment the authors of 'Putting People First' for recognising the potential of the municipal tier, and its contribution to balanced territorial development and sustainable communities. As we work constantly at this level, we wish to put on the record our on-going commitment to community-led local development and to the required investment in local governance. We recognise that in many societies such investment can take time to bear fruit, but we take heart from experiences in pluralist democracies, such as Canada and in particular the province of Québec, where within the space of two decades, the governance landscape was transformed, and the province is now renowned for having both strong local government in the form of its municipalities and a strong local development and civil society sector. Citizens in Québec enjoy a high standard of living associated with high levels of devolution / decentralisation. They take responsibility for looking after own communities and have a positive perception of politicians and the role of government. Ireland's 25+ years' experience in local development and LEADER Partnerships stands us in good stead in implementing 'Putting People First,' to make Québec-like progress, and within a shorter timeframe.

6.1 Implications for Local Government

The transition to municipal structures and geographies will pose short-term challenges, but significant medium and long-term opportunities for Irish local authorities. In this respect, we are fortunate in that we can learn from other countries. International experience underscores the need for municipal government to be rooted in the local and not driven by party political agendas. Even in Spain, which is relatively new to democracy, elected councillors demonstrate an ability to put party divisions aside and to work for the common good of their local territory. Referring to the Canadian experience, Douglas observes that:

"If the municipality is an extension of the community, its identity and its purpose derive from that community, not from the particular services it provides. The municipality has a legitimate right to take actions that are needed by that community. The right derives from the nature of the municipality as an extension of the community, and does not depend on the specific powers assigned to it. The municipality's primary role is concern for the problems and issues faced by the community. The interests and values of the community are expressed and resolved through the municipality. It is "a political institution for the authoritative determination of community values" (Tindal, 1999;. 15, cited in Douglas, 2005).

Capitalising on these experiences implies that Partnerships / LAGs take a lead role in the development of municipal governance in Ireland. We are doing much of this work in any event,

and 'Putting People First' affords us the opportunity to set this on a formal and statutory-empowered setting. As Douglas (2005; 241) observes "This perspective, valuing as it does the autonomy of self-reliant communities and respecting their democratic systems, is much closer to commonly accepted constructs of community and community development."

6.2 Implications for Local Development

"A territorial dimension and a place-based approach is integral to the implementation of the strategy. The aims of Europe 2020 require that territorial diversity is acknowledged and that full advantage is taken of the distinctiveness of Europe's regions and municipalities."

A territorial dimension is also needed to fully grasp the different types of challenges for regional development of the Europe 2020 strategy. Last but not least, acknowledging the territorial dimension and its richness also allows for better inclusion of the key public and private stakeholders at local and regional level" (ESPON, 2009; 30).

These clear policy statements by ESPON (the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network), which are based on experiences in twenty-nine countries are consistent with the proposals in 'Putting People First' to advance towards municipal planning and systems in Ireland. Local Development Partnerships are suitably placed to play the lead role in promoting municipal governance (O'Keeffe, 2009) – we are doing so, de-facto anyway, and welcome the opportunity now afforded to enable us to do so in a more formal manner. Moreover, the role partnerships play in enabling volunteerism and participative democracy to flourish is essential for the functioning of the wider democratic system (Decoster, 2002; O'Keeffe and Douglas, 2009). Through our participatory structures, which work inter alia in collaboration with directly elected and state bodies, we represent an important pillar of democracy, and one which needs to be strengthened in its own right, rather than subsumed into or aligned with other structures or an inappropriate and outmoded geography

The ESPON recommendations also underscore the importance for regional and local economic competitiveness of partnership structures and processes that are driven from the bottom-up. These structures create synergies with, and add value to the development efforts of statutory and local government bodies. Therefore, there is an economic imperative to maintain the current local development partnership bodies and to legally guarantee their position as non-statutory delivery mechanisms for rural and local development. As the Barca Report (2009; 41) recommends with respect to multi-level governance, "it is up to the top levels of government to set general goals and performance standards... (and) it is up to the lower levels to have the freedom to advance the ends they see fit."

Across Europe, autonomous LAGs / Partnerships that work in collaboration with local / municipal authorities, but which are institutionally and financially independent of them are becoming the norm. In the most recent programming period, states that had local authorities as 'lead partners' such as Greece and Slovakia are moving to a more partnership model. As a

European leader (along with Finland) in having autonomous and dynamic, partnership-based and locally-rooted LAGs, it is important that Ireland stay ahead of the curve. The most recent Europe-wide independent evaluations of LEADER (RuDi, 2009 and Metis, 2010) provide evidence-based pointers that should serve as signposts for LEADER and other area-based programmes, services and initiatives now and post 2014. The RuDi evaluation involved seven universities. The research project was co-ordinated by The Johann Wolfgang Goethe Institute University, Frankfurt and covered fourteen countries including Ireland. The Metis Evaluation was undertaken across all EU member states on behalf of the European Commission. Both concurred on the importance of local partnerships being proactive, innovative, flexible and largely autonomous. Metis recommended that in EU members states (e.g. Bulgaria) in which partnerships were characterised as having 'low' autonomy, Managing Authorities should ensure that they progress to assuming 'medium' autonomy. The evaluators recommended that in states such as Ireland, partnerships move from having 'medium autonomy to high autonomy.'

They stated that,

"More autonomous LAGs show better results in awakening dormant skills and potentials, in strategic thinking and in monitoring the development of their area in a structured way. Autonomy or the decision making power of Local Action Groups should be further developed. Decision making power makes sense if the LAG is willing to exert it, if it is capable to master it and if it is allowed to do so by the managing authority and the programme administration (Metis, 2010; 20).

If the model of rural and local development in Ireland is to be the best in Europe, and if it is to be consistent with the evidence and advice from independent evaluators, partnerships need to be institutionally independent, and citizens need to be assured that partnerships are independent of the state and of local government. 'Putting People First' provides opportunities to strengthen partnership autonomy and dynamism, while enabling greater inter-agency collaboration, particularly between local government and local development.

Rural and Local Development are important public functions and services, as recognised by 'Putting People First.' The recommendations advanced in this submission centre on ensuring delivery by personnel whose mandates are underpinned by participative democracy and who have capacity for effective leadership and cost-effective, efficient and results-oriented delivery. In addition, by including municipally-elected councillors on their Boards of Directors, Partnerships are supported by representative democracy and are rooted in the local and the municipal. While councillor participation on the Boards of Partnerships has generally been a positive experience, the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programme in Ireland (Indecon, 2010) recognises some capacity deficiencies. Therefore, ILDN concurs with the view of the European Commission (2011) that "The establishment of effective public-private partnerships with a clear allocation and understanding of the respective roles needs to be actively promoted and supported. It is not in the interests of the LAG to exclude potential beneficiaries who are often the more motivated and innovative actors." This implies that LAGs / Partnerships need to have the autonomy to co-opt experts on to Boards and Sub-Committees, and to ensure that Directors take a more hands-on approach to project evaluation.

6.3 Conclusion : Implications for Local Development – Local Government Interfaces and the Role and Potential of the Social and Economic Affairs Commission.

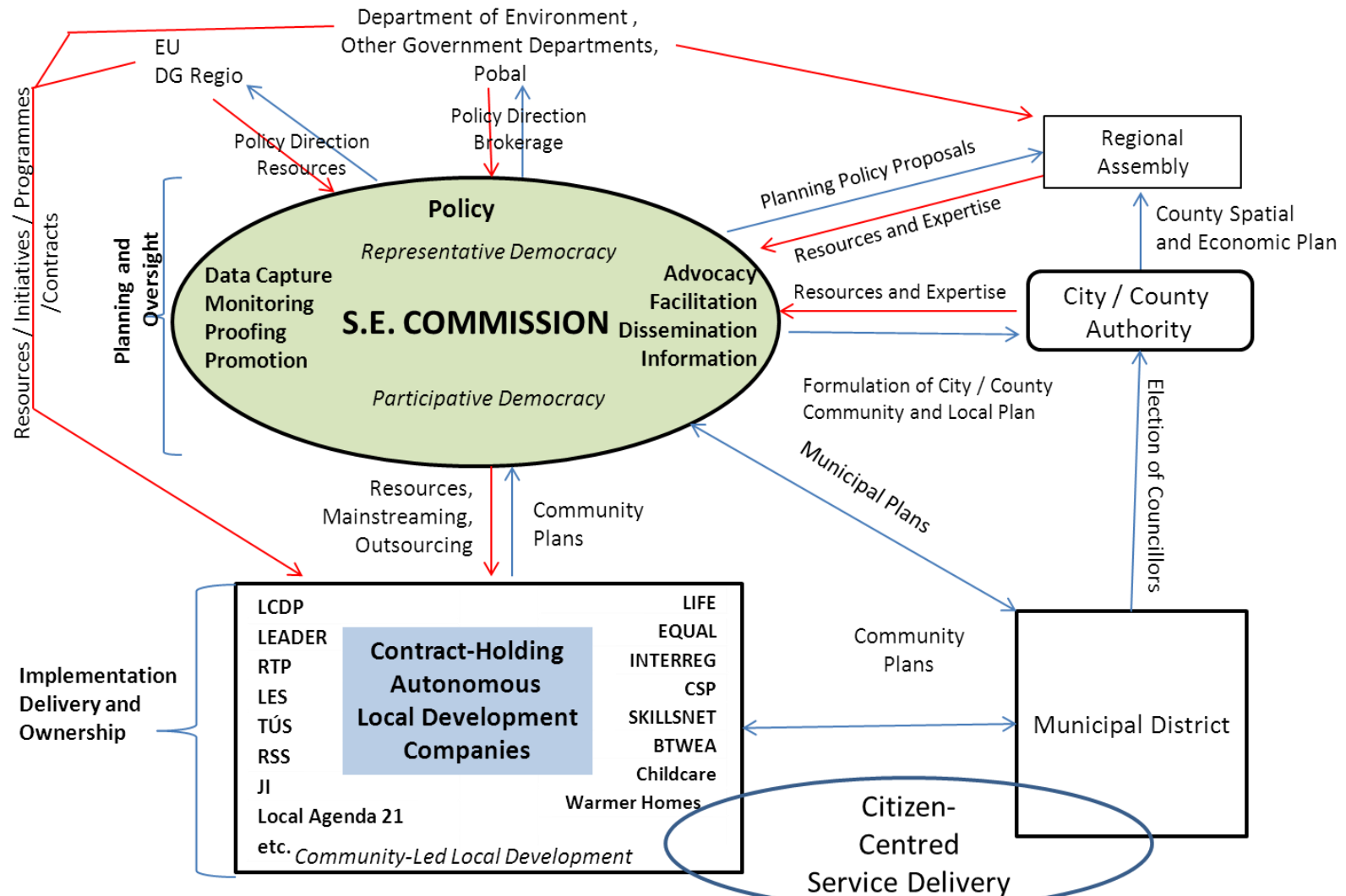
Ireland's Local Development Companies (LEADER and Local Development Partnerships) make very significant contributions to economic development, social progress and environmental conservation. Their achievements have been objectively verified and internationally recognised. They represent an important and autonomous, yet accountable element of this country's governance infrastructure, and they have a proven capacity to be innovative and to contribute to the successful implementation of a modified 'Putting People First.'

The continued success of LDCs (LEADER and Local Development Partnerships) lies in preserving and enhancing their roles as autonomous and empowered deliverers of local and rural development actions, initiatives and services on the basis of their proximity to the citizen (subsidiarity) and their multi-stakeholder participation. 'Putting People First' provides Partnerships with an opportunity to strengthen their relationships and interfaces with other stakeholders, most notably at the local and regional tiers of government. Experiences to date demonstrate the positive deliverables that arise from collaboration between autonomous LAGs / Partnerships and Local Authorities, and the establishment of a Social and Economic Affairs Commission in each county – with formal links to regional government – offers real potential to promote greater collaboration, increased efficiencies, better service delivery to communities and citizens and a more informed approach to policy-making.

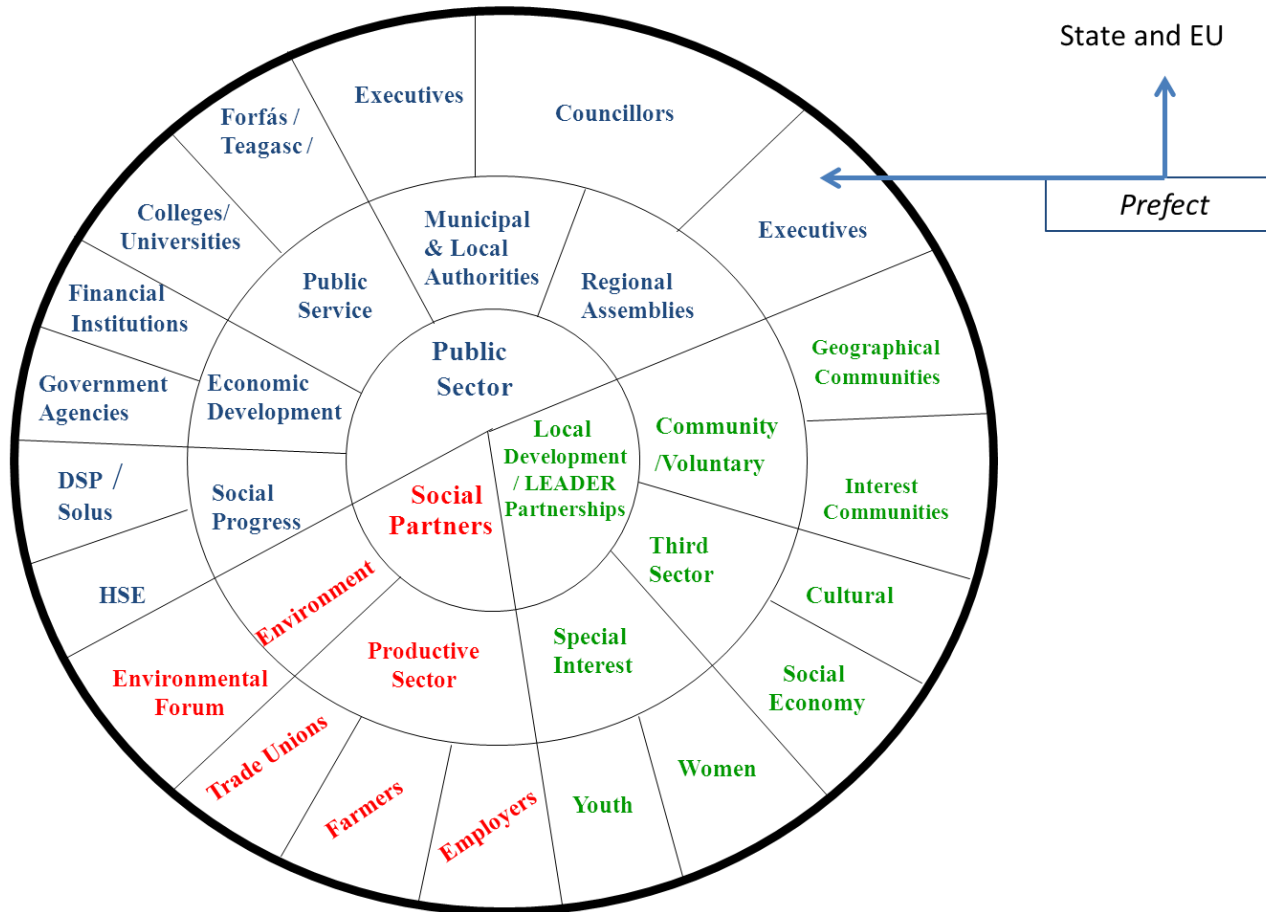
The vertical linkages between the Social and Economic Affairs Commission and the regional and national tiers of government are essential in overcoming the shortcomings of the previous CDB (County / City Development Board), and are necessary to give effect to the recommendations of the independent evaluation of the CDBs "that formalised mechanisms are put in place to ensure some weighting is given by national Department / statutory agencies to views of CDBs in relation to local measures. We believe this is particularly important in deciding on resource priorities" (INDECON, 2008; viii). Moreover the model of a 'Commission,' as presented in this submission provides a mechanism for vertical co-ordination between agencies and stakeholders and closer and more effective monitoring of territorial impacts of all agencies.

'Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government' is indeed a radical and far-reaching blueprint for action, which has several progressive elements. Foremost among these is the commitment to municipal governance and planning. Local Development Companies are already working and delivering at this level, and we envisage deepening and expanding our roles here in facilitating community planning and compiling municipal plans, which will underpin the wider economic and spatial planning process at county and regional levels. We have demonstrated that our organisations have the capacity to promote municipal-based and community-led planning in tandem with continuing to deliver, own and manage development programmes. By assuming new roles in this respect, and through our active participation on the Social and Economic Affairs Commissions we will provide the fundamental link between agencies, elected representatives and the communities we all serve. The SEC will be co-owned by all members, dominated by none, and have the ability to extract the optimum performance from all.

Annex A. SEC Roles and Functions in Respect of Community and Municipal Planning and Interfaces between Local Development and Local Government



Annex B: SEC Membership



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