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Ireland:

Agenda-Building through LA21: Creating a Constituency for Change?

Introduction

By any standard, notwithstanding the exception of notable ‘pioneer’ authorities, the response to Chapter 28 in Ireland is still in the very early stages. The story of LA21 in Ireland, thus far, runs both parallel to, and is bound up with the reform of local government in Ireland. It needs to be stressed from the outset that this reform is a necessary, though not sufficient condition, for the spread of LA21.

Constitutional Structure: Central-Local Authority Patterns

One of the most significant features of central-local relations in Ireland is that local government has no constitutional basis. Local Authorities derive their power and function from central government and are regarded as ‘executive agencies’ of government departments charged with implementing central policy .. The poorly embedded nature of local government in Irish life was highlighted by a decision by central government to postpone the 1998 local elections until 1999 .. However, steps have been taken to redress this situation.

Restructuring

At the local level there is an attempt to restructure the relationship between elected representatives and the administrative dimension of local government. The distinctive feature of this approach is the formalisation of policy inputs from social partners through the establishment of a Strategic Policy Committee. The Strategic Policy Committees (SPC) include both elected officials and representatives of local interest groups and voluntary associations charged with assisting policy formulation within the areas of competence of the local authority e.g. planning, environment etc. The internal restructuring of local authorities is to be complimented by horizontal networking between authorities and vertical networking with regional and central government.

Financing Local Government

The Local Government Bill 1998 largely replaces the existing funding arrangements for local authorities. Among the main provisions is the establishment of an IR£590 million fund to be financed directly from motor taxation and exchequer contributions in 1999. The new fund is under the direct control of the Minister for the Environment and Local Government and will inject much needed resources into the system.¹⁰ However, as a non-statutory concern LA21 is likely to be secondary to the functional remit of local authorities.

Redressing the Democratic Deficit

As already indicated the current government is in the process of taking measures to redress the lack of constitutional protection for local government. The structural, financial and democratic reforms emerging from 'Better Local Government' appear to signal a substantial step towards the modernisation of local government in Ireland .. The reforms outlined.. arguably create more favourable conditions for the implementation of LA21.

Baseline Conditions

Despite these evolving reforms, the baseline conditions that contextualise the Irish response to LA21 identified in Lafferty & Eckerberg (1998) remain the same. These include: the recent evolution of an institutional framework for environmental protection; an enfeebled structure and culture of local democracy counterpoised to almost a decade of social and economic innovation/experimentation; a highly centralised state that clings to its role as gatekeeper in an evolving system of multi-level governance in Europe; and, a politicised though fragmentary social movement sector in civil society concerned with environmental issues. Added to these factors has to be recognition of a recent period of extended economic growth that is carried in both official and popular discourse by reference to the 'Celtic Tiger'. The conditioning effect of these variables was to create: a framework for the initial understanding of LA21 as a function of environmental policy; an understanding of participation in legalistic terms or at best in terms of a context specific experience of 'partnership'; and a tendency to reduce sustainable development to a conception of sustained economic growth.

Antecedent Role in UNCED

Ireland appears to have had very little input in terms of actively developing the Local Agenda 21 initiative .. There has, however, been some movement in this area recently which can be interpreted as a positive response to UNCED. Ireland officially joined the Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD) on January 1 1997. In addition, the Irish Government has recently indicated that the National Environmental Partnership forum will, when established, play an important role in reporting on the follow-up to Ireland's obligations to the UNCSD (DoELG 1998c).

Government Reaction

LA21, were becoming somewhat visible in early 1997 when the initial report was made. These included: the publication and distribution of guidelines on LA21, the staging of a National Local Agenda 21 conference and early indications of the structural provisions for LA21 that were outlined in the reform programme 'Better Local Government'. Since then it has become possible to discern a more patterned, though still incremental, response .. The publication of the 'Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland', in April 1997, places what was previously considered environmental policy steadfastly into a new rhetorical frame of reference. More importantly, it provides a larger framework for the implementation of Chapter 28 .. The details regarding the

restructuring of current governance arrangements are outlined in Chapter 19 of the strategy. This includes: the establishment of an independently chaired National Sustainable Development Council (now being described as a National Environmental Partnership Forum); a regionalisation of the strategy in co-operation with the regional authorities; a pivotal role for local authorities in the context of Local Agenda 21, and the creation of a new Environmental Partnership Fund.

The National Environmental Partnership Forum

The background to this initiative: its role and purpose, terms of reference, structure and composition, were all outlined in a consultation paper from the Minister and the subject of a consultative conference in Dublin, in March 1998 .. The actual shape that the Forum will take is still uncertain, as is the contribution that it will make towards facilitating the further diffusion of LA21 initiatives. Therefore, it is difficult to take a predictive stance at this point beyond simply echoing the optimistic observation made by Dr. Barry Dalal Clayton, i.e. that it is unusual for a consultative process to be used regarding the establishment of a national council for sustainable development.

Regionalising the Agenda

that regional authorities will have general responsibility with regard to regional implementation of the strategy, and with supporting a comprehensive and long term process of conversion to a sustainable development path (Kirby 1998: 97). In relation to LA21 they are to review local authority initiatives to ensure consistency across the region and monitor implementation. They are required to identify and define sustainable priorities for their regions; recommend appropriate implementation mechanisms; and, assist in the development of regional sustainability indicators.

Local Authorities and LA21

All of the other factors outlined contribute to building the institutional framework for the implementation of LA21 but the process itself is still a long way behind .. In the Irish case both progressive Local Authorities and community and NGO activists see the potential reduction of LA21 to the formalised relationship in the SPC system alone as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the concept. One of the main mechanisms being used to overcome this is the provision of funding for dialogue between all stakeholders through the Environmental Partnership Fund.

Environmental Partnership Fund

This fund was established by central government in 1997 to co-finance joint local authority-community projects. The Environmental Partnership fund allocates IR£100,000 per annum to these projects, 65 were funded in 1997 and 44 in 1998.

Local Community Response

The Response of Community Groups

Littlewood and While (1997: 117) identify traditionally weak mechanisms of community involvement as a significant obstacle to LA21 in Britain .. The promise of participation in a more inclusive LA21 process has provided a new focus for community activity. The response of communities is taking place on two main levels and is linked to the response of NGOs. The first level concerns communities that are participating in Local Agenda 21 processes. The most notable example here is 'Dublin Citizens Agenda 21' which began after the 1995 National Conference. The steering committee is made up of community representatives and members of environmental NGOs .. The second level of activity, while not strictly LA21, is an important development that may help to facilitate the further spread of the process i.e. networking between NGOs and community associations .. This is important because it both creates a public sphere in which progress can be monitored and debated and it can contribute to mobilising a constituency for LA21.

Proactive Local Authorities

At this stage it is unlikely that we will get a clear picture of the actual extent of LA21 in Ireland until the end of 1998 when local authorities are required to have initiated the process .. However, a number of local authorities have gained a reputation for being forerunners in the implementation of LA21. These local authorities have a number of common features. These include an interested county manager, an active (and organised) citizenry and a connection to broader diffusion mechanisms e.g. Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign. The forerunner in this regard is Dunlaoghaire- Rathdown Co. Council.

The Cork Environmental Forum was the first operational LA21 forum in Ireland. Although it does not officially wear the label of LA21 the concept was integral to its original terms of reference.

NGOs and Social Partners

The established environmental NGO sector has availed of the opportunities provided by LA21 to transform its fortunes and access the emergent concertation mechanisms. An Taisce, the longest standing conservation organisation in the country, while retaining their foundational conservationist identity have moved firmly since 1992 (and perhaps before that) towards the consensual embrace of sustainable development. Using EU instruments like the LIFE programme they have been at the centre of many of the efforts to stimulate the start up of the LA21 process. Global Action Programme (GAP) has provided local authorities with a mechanism to address climate change problems and biodiversity projects at the level of individual households and communities .. In the case of Dublin Citizens Agenda 21 environmental groups are becoming actively involved with community groups in the context of LA21.

Political and Policy Impacts

By either measure Ireland is still at the starting line .. However,

there are certain observations that can be made. Although environmental conflict is definitely not a thing of the past, the move towards LA21 has created a space where the potential to harness the energies of a broader spectrum of society in a journey towards sustainable development may exist .. Perhaps the most significant place where LA21 is having an impact is on the regional level .. Increased responsibilities in relation to LA21 are forcing a process of 'imagining' regional government in a context where it has not existed before .. On a national level, LA21 has the potential to expand the institutional architecture for the implementation of sustainable development policies. The creation of forums on the national, local and potentially regional levels may bring us beyond the type of technical responses favoured by environmental policy in the past.

The specific question of 'really existing' LA21 initiatives, evaluated rigorously according CA (SUSCOM) normative criteria and measured against the ideal LA21 planning process of the Aalborg Charter, is for the moment beyond the scope of available knowledge on the Irish case. We are faced with a context in which most of the progress is still at the level of 'conditioning the spread of LA21'.