The Politics of Empowerment: Power, Populism and Partnership in Rural Ireland*

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I INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s local area partnerships, sponsored either by the state or by the EC/EU together with the state, have proliferated in Ireland as elsewhere (Geddes, 2000). What inspired these area partnerships initially was an official analysis that the conditions resulting in urban and rural decline had reached crisis dimensions that cried out for a fresh policy response. The basic idea was to tackle intractable economic and social problems by creating institutional arrangements capable of producing a consensus among key actors and of harnessing the energies of the public, private and voluntary sectors in new dynamic area partnerships.

Three early streams of rural area partnerships can be identified in Ireland. Behind the LEADER area partnerships we find the European view that the scale of population decline in the remoter disadvantaged areas and the ecologically unsustainable character of intensive farming would have to be addressed (European Commission, 1988; Kearney *et al.,* 1994). A second

stream had its origins in the aim of the 1990 Programme for Economic and Social Progress to use a series of pilot partnerships – to be sited in rural and urban unemployment black spots – to counter the alarming growth in long-term unemployment. Similarly, in our third stream, rising unemployment levels were critical to the decision in the late 1980s to initiate a third European anti-poverty programme (Poverty 3) that would distinguish itself from its predecessors by its partnership approach.

Although the origins, structures and operating practices of the various rural area partnerships show some differences, these initiatives did share something important in common. The participation of local communities as 'partners' came to feature prominently in all of them. Indeed, a distinctive general image in the official rhetoric infusing the Irish area partnerships is that they constitute a means of returning power to 'local communities'. For this to happen the suggestion is that the local community must become a 'partner' in its own right and so be 'empowered' by virtue of its participation in the partnership process (Geddes, 2000, p. 793; Walsh, 2001, p. 116; Varley and Curtin, 2002a, pp. 127-8). Of course community 'empowerment' *via* partnership can mean different things to different people. It is certainly an issue about which activists representing community interests can be expected to have their own views.

If we take it in any case that the promise of 'community empowerment' is an important dimension of the local partnerships, the question becomes how are we to study this phenomenon sociologically? Our suggestion here will be that 'populism' offers the basis of an interpretive framework. While accepting that 'populism' is nothing if not complex and diffuse (Canovan, 1981, Chapter 1; Taggart, 2000, Chapters 1 and 2; Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005), we would still contend that it has the advantage of highlighting the centrality of 'power' to the collective action of subordinate groups and to state initiatives designed to improve the position of subordinate groups. It is this facet of populism that we will seek to develop here so as to help us describe and interpret the 'politics of empowerment' in a rural area partnership.

At the heart of the facet of populism of interest to us is not just a concern with power but with how central a political process of negotiating a perceived opposition between power and powerlessness is to the collective action of groups that project themselves as relatively powerless vis-à-vis relatively powerful forces in society. Similarly, a process of negotiating a perceived opposition between power and powerlessness can be seen as lying behind state interventions on behalf of relatively powerless groups in society.

To get behind the politics of negotiating these perceived oppositions between power and powerlessness, we will make use of the distinction

between 'power to' and 'power over' that is well known to students of power (see Goverde *et al.,* 2000, pp. 37-8). Thus populist-type collective action on the part of the relatively powerless can be construed as beginning or continuing a process of generating the 'power to' negotiate or counter those dominating and exploiting forces that exert 'power over' subordinate elements in society. Similarly, populist-type state interventions (such as the area partnerships) can be read as presenting themselves as capable of generating the 'power to' negotiate relationships of domination and exploitation for the benefit of those historically left disadvantaged by the play of dominating and exploiting 'power over' forces.

Viewing populist-type collective action and state interventions as revolving around the politics of negotiating perceived oppositions between power and powerlessness may reduce populism's complexity, but it cannot banish it entirely. There are four reasons for this. The basis and experience of popular powerlessness may vary between groups. Groups may find themselves subject to different 'power over' forces. The forms assumed by populist-type collective action and state interventions may vary considerably. What may further vary significantly among state and collective actors is how far they are prepared to go in framing and in attempting to negotiate perceived oppositions between power and powerlessness.

So as to explore the question of what sorts of popular powerlessness and 'power over' forces are of relevance to state and community actors in the rural area partnerships we will first discuss certain strands of state populism (or populism from 'above') and the populism of civil society groups (or populism 'from below'). We will then turn to consider how far state and community partners might be prepared to go in framing and in negotiating perceived oppositions between power and powerlessness. This will involve sketching ideal-typical scenarios of how the opposition between power and powerlessness might be negotiated by 'radical' and 'pragmatic' populist state and collective actors.

With these scenarios providing the elements of an interpretive framework we will be ready to ask how well this framework can serve to illuminate the politics of negotiating power realities in an Irish rural area partnership. The case we take is the still functioning Forum partnership of northwest Connemara, the only rural model action partnership of Poverty 3 to be sited in the Irish Republic. This case is selected on account of its remote rural location, the long history of community development in the district and the fact that Forum has now existed for 16 years. Another reason for choosing Forum is the long association one of us has had as internal evaluator of the partnership. This 'insider' role has provided access to all of Forum's deliberations, documentation and personnel since its inception in 1990.

II POWERLESSNESS AND 'POWER OVER' FORCES

What sort of popular powerlessness and 'power over' forces are likely to be relevant to state and community actors in the rural Irish area partnerships? Two strands of state populism – the 'participative' and the 'small man' – can be introduced in discussing state actors. Prompted by attempts to address issues of powerlessness thrown up by economic crises and/or crises of representation, the participative strand gives voice to a radical sounding rhetoric of returning power to the people by extending the possibilities of 'active' citizenship. In the sphere of 'development' this can entail inviting 'the people', typically in the form of the 'local community' or 'community interests', to become involved in partnership-type initiatives of finding and implementing solutions to local development problems, and so be empowered in a process of development that promises to be at once participative and effective.

Under the small man strand of populism from above, state agents are prepared to intervene on behalf of the 'small man' or the 'little guy'. Ideological acceptance of a populist small man ideal marked the early years of Fianna Fáil rule in particular (Mair, 1987, pp. 25, 51). Though much attenuated today (Curtin and Varley, 1991), this strand of state populism – as is clear from the local area partnerships – has never disappeared entirely in Ireland.

What sort of popular powerlessness and 'power over' forces are likely to be relevant to community actors in the rural Irish area partnerships? Of relevance here are the suggestions that popular powerlessness can attach to the local community – by virtue of its remote location and declining economy, for instance – and to struggling smallholders.

'Communitarian' populism, built around the defence of community interests, asserts an ethical commitment to the centrality of community life and to the welfare of local communities (Midgley, 1995, p. 90). Community movements – Muintir na Tíre is a good Irish example – have typically sought to use collective action to protect the local community from an array of threatening 'power over' forces (Varley and Curtin, 2002b).

The small man strand of populism from below has long been associated with movements of small-scale propertied agrarian interests (peasants and commercial family farmers especially) who find themselves under increasing pressure in the modern world (Kitching, 1989; Mudde, 2002). Rural small man populists have often attributed the declining position of their constituencies to external threats associated with city-based large-scale forces and developmental tendencies. In the farmers' party, Clann na Talmhan (Family of the Land) we have an historical example of small man populist collective action in twentieth-century Ireland (Varley and Curtin, 1999).

III NEGOTIATING POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

By offering membership to state and community partners, the area partnerships present themselves as an arena where populism from above and below can meet. But how far might state and community interests go in negotiating perceived oppositions between power and powerlessness? To explore this question, with a view to providing 'benchmarks' for our discussion of the politics of empowerment in Forum, two contrasting ideal typical scenarios – the 'radical' and 'pragmatic' – will now be briefly outlined.

These scenarios are not intended as descriptions of empirical realities. Their purpose is rather to allow us to identify and explore very different *possible* ways of how state community actors might frame and negotiate power realities within the area partnerships. Our ideal-typical radical and pragmatic state actors will thus be made to differ in who they take to be the relatively powerless, in their conceptions of the 'power over' forces that produce popular powerlessness, in their view of what community empowerment *via* partnership might look like and in the conditions they consider necessary to achieving such empowerment. Radical and pragmatic collective actors, in turn, will be modelled as holding different conceptions of popular power-lessness, 'power over' forces and in how they see popular powerlessness being countered within the area partnerships.

How then might the politics of community empowerment appear from the vantage point of ideal-typical state actors sympathetic to radical populism? Here we can imagine the presence of state agents who, though possibly spurred into action by crisis conditions, can develop a radical analysis that focuses on the most vulnerable community interests and that links popular powerlessness to structural forces existing outside and inside localities. The scenario they are drawn to is one in which the prospects for community empowerment depend on radical populist-type collective actors becoming the driving force in local partnerships, pushing their agendas in a radical direction, using them to build their own capacities for democratic self-organisation and standing to benefit from a process that is at once well-resourced, enduring and serious about striving for a measure of structural change.

This optimistic scenario reverberates with the normative commitments of many Irish Community Workers' Co-operative members (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, pp. 225-55), and with the preferences of those communitar-ians and theorists of 'participatory', 'associative' and 'third way' democracy that have been drawn to partnership-type arrangements involving civil society interests as a means of extending the boundaries of social policy and of regenerating democracy (Tam, 1998, pp. 153-69; Goodin, 1996; Hirst, 1998, pp. 87-91; Giddens, 1998, pp. 70-118).

What sort of a scenario would ideal-typical state agents sympathetic to pragmatic populism favour? Far from associating local collective action and local partnerships with attempts to address the causes of structural decline, we will take our ideal-typical pragmatic state agents to be preoccupied with alleviating short-term crisis conditions and delivering palliative and restorative change. Local community interests are viewed as malleable material that is there to be re-fashioned as rationalised and professionalised agents of local development and as service providers. Whatever hope there is for 'community empowerment' resides in the success of this re-fashioning process in delivering new capabilities to community interests. The state's capacity to orchestrate and control what goes on must, therefore, remain undiminished in partnership-type participative development ventures.

Such a scenario chimes with the tenor of the pessimistic literature that judges the area partnerships to be incapable of delivering radical change, and as tending in practice to result in the co-optation and control of community interests (Murphy, 2002; Geddes, 2000, p. 797; Broderick, 2002, pp. 107-8; Meade, 2005, pp. 350-1; Taylor, 2005, pp. 143-6).

Would our ideal-typical radical community interests see eye-to-eye with radical state actors in their approach to the politics of empowerment? Based on a definition of the situation as one of long-term structural decline, these too aspire to bring about a measure of radical change in the position of the most vulnerable local groups. Besides attributing popular subordination to the dominance of external large-scale forces, the radical populist gaze falls as well upon the way local power structures can mediate external large-scale forces (see Gaventa, 1980, pp. 259-60). For radical community activists a participative culture that aspires to universal active participation, and that sees the organisation of collective action as ideally membership- rather than leadership-led, is held up both as a desirable end in itself and as a useful organisational resource. To exploit the ongoing crisis conditions brought by structural decline to best advantage, radical populist community activists look to tactics that combine alliance building with kindred groups and opposition to the state.

How might radical populist collective actors see organised community interests faring under the area partnerships? Numbering the state among the major centralising and large-scale forces of modern society, and as facilitating or even spearheading processes of rural decline, our radical populist collective actors would tend to dismiss as wishful thinking any suggestion that the official architects of area partnerships might be genuinely interested in structural change, that the partnerships themselves might be organised in a

way capable of achieving it and that community partners might be equal with other partners in any strict sense. The only slight chance of things being otherwise would depend on the existence of well-organised and radicalised subordinate interests that somehow might succeed, against the odds, in influencing state-sponsored participative development initiatives to their own advantage. Again, the general pessimism of our radical populists finds echoes here in the wider pessimistic literature on the prospects for community empowerment *via* partnership.

Would our ideal-typical pragmatic populist collective actors go along with the scenario of tight state control? The stance we associate with these centres on projecting the 'whole community' as being left powerless by crisis conditions that upset the balance between large- and small-scale forces. Aware as they are of rural decline and conscious of the need to combat it, our pragmatists remain relatively optimistic (at least in principle) that some acceptable (if unequal) balance can be struck between large and small-scale forces. With crisis conditions causing the desired balance to be upset, a central challenge for community interests is to restore the balance that has been lost. Our pragmatists, therefore, are ultimately content to settle for restorative rather than radical change. In thinking about the resources that need to be mobilised and the opportunities that need to be exploited if collective action is to be effective, what appeals to pragmatic populists is an organisational style that is more executive than participative and tactics that are more integrationist than oppositional in type.

Unlike then their radical counterparts our ideal-typical pragmatic populist collective actors would optimistically see the area partnerships as offering valuable opportunities and resources to local community interests. There is always a good chance that community interests – especially those in the hands of a competent local leadership – can create sufficient room to manoeuvre to be able to use the area partnerships to their own advantage. Effective leaders are assumed to be few in number, drawn from the ranks of the local notables, inclined to an executive leadership style and skilled in pursuing change based on community defence and incremental improvements.

The pragmatic interest in 'room to manoeuvre' evokes an actor-centred 'interface' perspective that wishes to shun determinism and reductionism while stressing the exercise of agency and 'the dynamics of interface encounters' (Long, 2001, p. 91). What this implies for the politics of negotiating power realities in the area partnerships is that even strong states have to deal with local actors that can be expected to make some appreciable difference when it comes to implementing policy (Long, 2001, pp. 88-92).

IV MODELS AND REALITIES

Our ideal-typical radical and pragmatic populists can agree that to counter the powerlessness that comes of domination by large-scale forces, collective and state actors need to build 'power to' capacities. They differ, however, in how they see popular powerlessness, 'power over' forces and in the ways the area partnerships might contribute to the 'empowerment' of community interests. With these differences providing the elements of an interpretive framework, our discussion of the Forum partnership can now commence.

We will begin by examining the contributions state/EC actors and local community interests have made to Forum's initial appearance and to its early programme. We will then turn to issues of control and participation by reviewing the dynamics of Forum's organisational development. Our third topic will consider the sort of change Forum has actually delivered to local community interests and to the constituencies they purport to represent.

V A PARTNERSHIP BORN

Local community interests in Ireland may have been involved in implementing European anti-poverty programmes since the 1970s, but their direct influence on the decision to launch these initiatives in the first place has been negligible. Poverty 3 was to be no exception here. After it had acquired European approval, the Irish Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) invited applications for inclusion in the programme. The CPA then recommended a list of sites to the EC Commission whose officials would make the final selection. A local community group – Connemara West plc (based in the village of Letterfrack) – had taken the initiative in preparing the Republic's only successful rural application, a process that involved selecting the 'target groups', recruiting the state partners and outlining a programme of work.

Not only was Connemara West one of Ireland's best known rural community groups (O'Hara, 1998, pp. 60-8), but uniquely it had participated in the two previous European anti-poverty programmes. Apparently an ability to be a 'winner' and to demonstrate a proven capacity for sustaining partnership-type community-state relations – something Connemara West had in abundance (Curtin, 1994a, pp. 19-20) – was critical for success at the application stage of Poverty 3.

What can be said about Connemara West's conception of desirable change? Broadly speaking effective collective action for Connemara West has been always about resisting the developmental tendencies that produce rural

decline. In line with local historical experience that encouraged identification with communitarian and small man populist ideals, Connemara West has lent its support to local initiatives to resist the ongoing decline of small-scale agriculture. Its own efforts, however, have focused historically on acquiring and running community facilities, promoting tourism and providing training opportunities for young school-leavers.

Over the years Connemara West activists have been critical of much of the trend of public policy in the western countryside. At the time of Forum's inception they were well aware that the context in which the partnership would shortly be piloting new ways of extending the scope of state intervention along partnership lines was one in which other arms of the state had been reducing or eliminating services (Byrne, 1991; Cawley, 1999). Yet, as much as the EC/EU and the Irish state have been seen as complicit in and partly responsible for the decline of the countryside, these same institutions have also been viewed as the source of the external resources required to resist the forces at work. Such an analysis has always made Connemara West highly receptive to the ideal of state-community partnership.

Did the European architects of Poverty 3 develop a critical analysis that thought in terms of either structural or short-term inequalities? These may not have argued explicitly that large- and small-scale economic and social forces were mutually opposed, but the stress laid on small-scale enterprise and on the social economy as ways of dealing with rural decline did imply an analysis that large and small-scale economic and social forces were seriously out of balance. Such imbalance, by drawing young people away to the city, had in effect to be viewed as central to the rural problem.

Connemara West activists, those of the European architects of Poverty 3 and state partners were agreed then that some of the consequences (and to a lesser extent some of the causes) of structural decline would have to be addressed by Forum. The concern with addressing the causes (in particular those finding expression in the historical inability to generate adequate sources of local employment outside agriculture) as well as the consequences of structural change, and with giving community interests a central role in the partnership, would indicate that traces of radical populism were not entirely absent in the early stage of Forum's development.

VI ORGANISING PARTNERSHIP

We will now consider how Forum came to develop organisationally and the working practices it came to adopt. Poverty 3's own rules stipulated that all 'model actions' take the form of four-year 'partnerships' between state and

voluntary/community actors and that these arrangements have 'innovation', 'participation', 'multi-dimensionality', and 'visibility' as their defining features. The formal structure of the Forum partnership, adopted in June 1990, provided for legal ownership of the project to be vested in a directorate that initially contained Connemara West and five state partners.[1] A board of management was given responsibility to run the project. With a budget of £1,733,869 (€2,201,559), Forum would in time come to support a complement of seven full-time and eleven part-time paid staff.

It was within a complex structure of external control that Forum took shape organisationally. The partnership became answerable to the CPA, one of whose officials joined Forum's board of directors, and to Poverty 3's sub-contracted central executive at Lille, a body that imposed its own reporting and financial procedures. In addition Forum had numerous dealings with a Research and Development Unit (RDU), a body set up to assist the projects with evaluation, ensure compliance with Poverty 3's general objectives, facilitate communication with regional and national policy-makers and disseminate information about the initiative.

While Connemara West was crucial to the early Forum, one of the partnership's main aims was to build a wider spatial alliance (and identity) around the pursuit of rural development in English-speaking northwest Connemara. Local community action was viewed as critical to the realisation of such an aim, though it soon turned out that a much denser and more vibrant network of representative community actors had been assumed than actually existed on the ground.

To organise the spatial dimension nine community areas were identified across northwest Connemara and local community councils, or representative local development groups, were offered representation on Forum's board of management. This process of recruitment was far from straightforward. In some areas the absence of any properly constituted council or group – three areas had more than one community group, sometimes making rival claims to represent the 'local community' (Tierney, 1994, pp. 65, 86, 96) – meant that when individuals were nominated they lacked democratic standing as well as a body to which they could be publicly accountable. Another problem was that the delay in involving areas without adequately constituted community groups lessened their sense of 'ownership' of the partnership, in that effective working arrangements had been worked out by the time of their inclusion.

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[1]These were FÁS, City of Galway VEC, County of Galway VEC, the Western Health Board and Galway County Council. As time went by some deletions (such as City of Galway VEC) and additions (such as BIM and Teagasc) were made to the list of state partners.

What came to be the most significant feature of Forum's organisational structure – the 'working groups' – was partly a response to the uneven organisation of community interests across northwest Connemara. The need to specialise within Forum that targeting entailed an even greater stimulus to working group formation. The five working groups to appear would concern themselves with community development, women (later to be called 'family support'), older people, youth and the unemployed/ underemployed. As time went by considerable responsibility for the making and execution of policy would be delegated to the working groups. Initially their memberships contained community activists, representatives of state agencies and Forum staff. Eventually, community representatives came to dominate the working groups numerically, although they have always contained a member of paid staff and on occasion one or more state representatives as well.

Public meetings were held to allow each of Forum's nine community areas elect representatives to the working groups. Each working group was then asked to select a member to join Forum's management board. Following a review in 1992, local representatives from the five working groups joined Forum's directorate.

The dynamics of the area partnerships depend on their operating style as well as their formal organisation. Both the changes to the composition of the directorate and the evolution of the working groups show that amendments to Forum's formal organisation were possible and did occur. But can the same be said of its operating style?

In the early days much would turn on local perceptions of the operating style of the state partners. All of these were state agencies; the one ministry invited to join, the Department of Education, declined, preferring instead to maintain a bilateral working relationship with the relevant Forum working group. Harvey (1994, p. 110) suggests that those agencies that took to partnership within Poverty 3 most avidly had a brief for 'development'. There was nonetheless considerable variation among the Forum state representatives in their openness to partnership and in their commitment to making it work. To some extent this can be accounted for by the amount of autonomy the regional offices of nationally organised state bodies have in their possession. What also varied a good deal, as was true of the general run of Irish area partnerships (Walsh, 2001, pp. 122-5), was the extent to which the representatives of state interests could speak for and commit their agencies to specific courses of action.

Another early feature of Forum was the way the disparity in the organisational and financial strength of the partners (constituted as formal 'equals' within Forum) encouraged the perception to grow among some community activists that the partnership's management was excessively

reflecting the state sector's organisational culture (especially its executive decision-making style). Such a perception, common enough in the Irish experience (Walsh, 2001, pp. 129-30), would wane within Forum as experience was gained and relationships established.[2]

Something else impinging on the way the partnership was run was the tension that developed between two contrasting styles of doing community work evident among the partnership's paid community workers. The gradualist style thought in terms of building up the capacity and awareness of local actors gradually in line with participatory and emancipatory ideals. What the contrasting instrumental style emphasised was the need to organise community work so as to deliver identifiable end products as soon as possible (see Lumb, 1990). Inevitably, the pressure to produce results within tight timeframes and reporting deadlines generated by fixed-term state initiatives threw these two styles into conflict in Forum. This, and the fact that many of the local community activists sympathised more with instrumentalism, helped tilt the emerging consensus in its favour.

Flowing directly from instrumentalism was the view that local community actors needed to become more rationally organised and more formally representative. Connemara West had already set a standard in opting for a formalised model of community organisation – based on specialisation, professionalisation and acquiring property for community purposes – that Forum in effect was now holding up to others to emulate.

Did Forum create opportunities for community 'participation' along the lines envisaged by radical populists? Apart possibly from certain critical junctures (Varley *et al.,* 1990, pp. 197-8), the ambitious radical populist ideal of having everyone participate actively on an ongoing basis came nowhere to being realised in northwest Connemara prior to Forum. This is not to say that many activists would not dearly welcome greater levels of involvement. For some the relatively small numbers actively involved in community development – and therefore prepared to accept recurring responsibilities – has long been a source of worry (O'Donohue, 1993, p. 20; Byrne, 1991, p. 147). Small as the activist core has been this does not imply that an executive type leadership style (practiced by local notables) has been widely favoured.

Has the same pattern of the active participation of but relatively small numbers been replicated in Forum? Here we must remember that Forum was formally organised along indirect democratic lines that ultimately gave control to the few rather than the many. At the top level, where broad or strategic decision-making power is concentrated in a board of directors, only small

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[2]Harvey (1994, p. 114) makes the point that some of the business of partnerships 'at the formal decision-making stage' is so technical as to require special expertise.

numbers can participate directly.[3] It is the working groups, with an active membership up to 50 individuals (some new to community activism), which have provided the most scope for active participation.

What can we say about the social composition of those willing to serve as community representatives? Do we, for instance, find the most subordinate elements of local society on the Forum board and in the working groups? The original set of Forum community directors contained no officially unemployed person, and today but one such person is a board member. Schoolteachers (or retired teachers) and medium-sized farmers make up the two largest occupational segments among the community directors today. Historically schoolteachers and larger farmers may have been numbered among the local notables of Irish rural society (Arensberg and Kimball, 2001, pp. 264-72), but the Forum board contains no Catholic priest or elected politician (two elements of Eipper's (1986) 'ruling trinity') and but one businessman-farmer.[4] Individuals from low-income households are well represented on the family support and older people's working groups.

Nothing like gender equality had been achieved on the original Forum board. Fifteen of Forum's eighteen paid workers may have been women, but only four women (representing three of the working groups and the Combat Poverty Agency) sat on the eighteen-member Forum board.[5] Not one of the state directors was female. The situation today is that six of the eighteen-member board are women, four of whom represent the community and the others the state strand. Where women have achieved an overwhelming numerical superiority today is in the working groups, accounting for as many as twenty-eight of thirty-three members of the community development, family support and older people working groups.

How then did community interests contribute to the organisation of Forum? Were they the 'driving force', as our ideal-typical radical populist state actors desire, or were they subject to ever-tighter control by virtue of the dominance of state partners? Significantly, it was left to the local community promoter to specify, within the parameters of the European guidelines, the specific actions to be undertaken. The way the Forum application was written (on behalf of a community group) envisaged organised community interests having a decisive role to play in implementing what was being proposed.

What is further evident is that community interests had a big say in the creation of the working groups and that the appearance of these greatly

[3]Walsh (2001, p. 129) rightly reminds us how 'the governance model of local partnerships is influenced by the legal status of a private company with individual directors…'.

[4]All LEADER and Local Development Social Inclusion Programme partnerships are now obliged to have representation from elected local government representatives on their management boards.

[5]Much the same pattern is replicated in many local partnerships (Geddes, 2000, p. 794).

strengthened the hand of local community interests. Community representatives (currently with ten of the eighteen seats) would greatly increase their representation on the Forum board. This, together with the greater rationalisation of community activity and the personal relationships and commitments built up over the years, has tended to lessen differences in the 'operating styles' of state and community partners.

The Forum experience of trying to involve representatives of the most powerless elements of local society in partnership decision making – especially through the working groups – may have gone only a certain distance but it has nonetheless been notable, especially when compared to some other Irish area partnerships (Curtin and Varley, 2002, p. 25).

Does the Forum case bear any resemblance to the radical populist ideal of universal active participation? The structure of the partnership, even when modified to allow for the working groups, was never designed to encourage anything resembling universal active participation along radical populist lines. Most of all what the appearance of the working groups signified was a shift in thinking away from 'whole community' organising towards targeting the most vulnerable community-based groups.

Ultimately, area partnerships have to be seen as a form of indirect democracy by virtue of participation being confined to representatives of community groups. This means that the numbers actively participating will always be relatively small. But would the problem with community participation in partnerships such as Forum not run deeper for our ideal-typical radical populist collective actor? Given the general absence of formal elections in constituting community interests, questions can certainly be asked about the democratic mandates and accountability of some community representatives.

Purists might even see the potential for the area partnerships to become a flourishing site for participatory democracy – something widely expected in Ireland (see Sabel, 1996; Walsh, 2001, p. 128; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, pp. 237-241) – as inevitably diminished as long as the absence of elections leaves the formal representative standing of the community interest open to question. Indeed, it might be said that Forum, by emphasising the rationalisation of community action over its formal representativeness, has contributed substantially to an emerging pattern where the downplaying of representation is concerned in northwest Connemara.

VII OUTCOMES

From the start Forum showed a particular interest in community actors and the constituencies they purport to represent. But how have these

benefited from their participation in Forum? Anticipated benefits were conceived initially in terms of community actors acquiring experience and skill as well as building organisational capacities to represent constituencies and deliver certain public goods.

In many ways the benefits of participation have depended on Forum's ability to stay in existence. When Poverty 3 (1990-4) came to an end Forum was accepted into the national Community Development Programme (CDP). At that point, in recognition of its track record and original scale, the partnership succeeded in securing double the normal CDP project funding. A number of the state partners – the Western Health Board, BIM, Galway County Council, FÁS, Teagasc and the then Department of Social Welfare (regional office) – were prepared to continue in Forum and to part fund the project. The CDP funding provided to Forum (at the annual rate of *circa* €190,000 currently) comes in three-year cycles. Most of Forum's income however – at present *circa* €1 million – flows from the administration of three community enterprise schemes and one jobs initiative scheme.

During Poverty 3 a full-time community development worker had been assigned to work with community actors and various types of assistance were made available. Aiding local community interests to become more formally representative and accountable was an important early concern. Once the working groups had emerged, however, the questions of representativeness and accountability tended to lose their urgency. The loss of interest in the democratic standing of community actors – not universal among the area partnerships (Craig, 1994, pp. 20; 31-2; 90) – has persisted and can be linked to a general decline in groups claiming to represent the 'whole community' and the rise of community-based groups (such as women's and older and younger persons groups) who seek to represent more narrowly defined vulnerable community interests.[6] Reflecting, as well as reinforcing this pattern, is the related shift in Forum towards targeting groups whose disadvantages are not primarily socio-spatial in nature. At the same time, much importance is still given to spreading Forum activity as evenly as possible in space.

Forum's work with its main target groups (such as low-income women, the young, the elderly and the unemployed/underemployed) has consistently sought to build up new or to strengthen old collective organisation, in the hope that this 'power to' capacity would of itself constitute a significant step in combating social exclusion. Strides were thus made in assisting the formation of seven women's groups and, in collaboration with FÁS and the Western Health Board, in helping design and implement an educational and training

[6]These community-based groups derive some of their identity from being rooted in a specific place, but their support and membership are primarily constituted on a basis other than local space.

programme for women. Under a Forum initiative older people came to benefit from the provision of three partly self-managed resource centres, a programme of social events, special transport arrangements and housing repairs.

Similarly Forum was committed to encouraging co-operatives (especially in shellfish aquaculture and tourism) as a means by which small enterprise might better meet the challenges of survival in a situation where agriculture was in steep decline.[7] All this, together with the desire to provide the young with livelihoods locally (McGrath, 2004, pp. 135-9), was in keeping with Connemara West's previous practice.

So, was the basic pattern of community action in north-west Connemara changed on account of Forum? Certainly Connemara West was able to use the resources that Forum provided to add to its facilities and to its overall capacity to be an effective force for certain sorts of local change. Other community activists that committed themselves to Forum saw the initiative as offering new opportunities, and were eager to use the new resources and contacts for the benefit of their groups and constituencies. Community activists could also hope to gain experience *via* alliance building at the local and supra-local levels (see Mernagh and Commins, 1997). In catering to the social needs of older people in particular, Forum became the means of establishing a new pattern of state-financed local social care activity that still continues (see McGrath, 2001).

Of course, not all the ventures supported by Forum have flourished. In particular, co-operation would prove to be no universal panacea and serious internal difficulties – already evident by 1994 (Curtin 1994b) – would cause the collapse of one of three local shellfish farming co-operatives.

The sort of future that participation in area partnerships such as Forum has opened up for community interests is open to optimistic and pessimistic interpretations. The optimistic reading suggests that what we have in the area partnerships is a radically new way of making and implementing social policy. Thus Walsh (2001, p. 131) has ventured that the local partnerships, for all their limitations, "… are attempting to revolutionise social policy from the bottom up, based on a model of local governance". While community interests have contributed to this development, it has depended very heavily on sympathetic state allies. The emphasis on social inclusion, participatory democracy and community 'empowerment' in ADM (now Pobal) and the CPA in particular has, if nothing else, kept facets of the radical potential of the local partnerships alive. Connemara West and other local activists were receptive to such an analysis and could easily relate it to local circumstances.

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[7]Salmon farming in north-west Connemara was already firmly in the hands of large-scale non-local private concerns (Ruddy and Varley, 1991).

A rather different reading of community involvement in the area partnerships resonates with the pessimism of our ideal-typical radical populist collective actor. From the outset some commentators saw community participation as inevitably restricted so long as the control the state (and the EC/EU) could exert was so great, the benefits of costly participation were small and the official commitment did not go beyond experimental pilot schemes (Varley, 1991; Webster, 1991).

Far from clearing the way for genuine community empowerment, the early critics saw the pattern emerging as akin to Midgley's (1986, p. 40) 'manipulative' mode in which the state's willingness to support 'community participation' springs from 'ulterior motives'. The constant danger with the 'manipulative' mode is co-optation of the sort that Midgley (1986, p. 41) construes as "… a process by which the state seeks to gain control over grass-roots movements and to manipulate them for its own ends".

Can events in Forum be read as mirroring such a scenario? As we have seen, community interests in Connemara have never been simply 'instruments' of policy delivery. They were able to exert considerable agency in deciding what to do and in putting Forum's organisational structure in place. In all this they were able to exploit the official rationale for having area partnerships to combat social exclusion in the first place – the idea that a consensus was achievable about what was required to combat social exclusion (or stimulate local development), and that rapid advances were possible on the strength of adequate resourcing and local and state interests operating in tandem. It was quickly accepted by all concerned that without a vibrant set of community partners Forum would never have been able to make its mark.

Where a pessimistic interpretation has perhaps most going for it is in the contention that Forum may be operating for nearly 16 years now, but there is still a sense (especially in its social care work) in which it continues to function on a provisional basis. The fact that Forum's service delivery activity with older people depends on paid workers employed on temporary community employment schemes leaves it continuingly vulnerable to collapse.[8] Indeed, the threat to reduce community enterprise schemes in 2005 was sufficient to throw the entire basis of its social care model of service provision into question.

Support for a pessimistic reading also comes from the way innovations pioneered and maintained by Forum (and other Irish area partnerships (Sabel, 1996, pp. 16-17, 85; Walsh, 2001, pp. 122-5) have yet to provide the bases of a more general policy, at either the local or national levels. Where

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[8]The recent advent of the Rural Social Scheme can be seen as an attempt to lessen the dependence of community actors on short-term funding schemes.

mainstreaming has fallen down most conspicuously in Forum is in the innovative servicing of the needs of older people that the partnership has pioneered. Even within the old Western Health Board area, this innovation has yet to be adopted as general policy.

VIII CONCLUSION

How much light has our populist framework shed on the politics of negotiating power and powerlessness in Forum? Populism as the basis of an interpretive framework, we would readily concede, has several difficulties to contend with. As an umbrella term, it gathers together much that is disparate in the social and political worlds. Besides, its present-day association with the New Right has given it a bad name in some quarters (see Taggart, 2000). We would nonetheless suggest that populism has the merit of pushing 'power' to the forefront in any analysis of the collective action of subordinate groups and of state interventions on behalf of subordinate populations in society.

Our opening suggestion was that building 'power to' capacities is central to the efforts of populist-type collective and state actors to counter the powerlessness that comes of domination by large-scale forces. To explore how far community and state actors might go in their conceptions of power and powerlessness, and in attempting to negotiate the opposition between them within the rural partnerships, ideal-typical radical and pragmatic scenarios were outlined as the main elements of an interpretive framework.

With this framework to hand we have examined Forum's inception, its organisational development as well as the sort of change it has actually delivered to community interests. Taking a long view has allowed us to explore how negotiating power and powerlessness *via* partnership has shifted over time and given rise to a sometimes complex politics of implementation (see Long and Van der Ploeg, 1989).

In a sense what transpired in Forum might be viewed as an effort at resolving some of the tensions between radical and pragmatic populism. But how far was the politics of negotiating power and powerlessness actually carried? It is obvious that what was proposed by Forum did not radically threaten the position of local notables by proposing, for instance, redistributive measures at their expense. Rather than dwell on the intractable structural difficulties of small-scale agriculture (see Tovey, 1999, pp. 102-3), the focus fell instead on opening up new 'diversified' lines of small enterprise for part-time farmers, especially in aquaculture and tourism.[9]

[9]This is not to indicate a total disinterest in farming. The partnership facilitated local farmers to join the REPS scheme initially; and today an IFA representative sits on the Forum board.

All of this reflects an acceptance that agriculture in the Forum area has been a diminishing income source for local smallholders. Within the partnership the enormous power of the forces behind agricultural restructuring is acknowledged as is the reality that the resources at Forum's disposal are insufficient to make any major impact on the operation of such forces. Thus, we find in Forum a desire to resist structural decline in agriculture existing alongside a pragmatic stance of focusing on what is acknowledged to be possible and achievable.

In other ways, too, the complexity of the patterns lends itself to differing interpretations. What the pessimistic interpretation would suggest is that acceptance of 'partnership' as the 'only game in town', by implying control and co-optation, can ultimately be disempowering for community interests (Murphy, 2002; Broderick, 2002, pp. 107-8; Taylor, 2005, pp. 143-6). To the extent that consciousness of partnership as the only alternative is widespread – and it is certainly strong within Forum – it might even be seen as having given birth to a new hegemonic form of 'power over' domination centred in the state. In so far as this is true, groups that look to partnership as a chance to generate the 'power to' capacities to deliver radical change paradoxically find themselves at risk of becoming actively complicit in their own co-optation and continuing subordination.

What such an interpretation of events rightly stresses is how central partnership has become to the thinking of community and state interests alike, and how much dependency is created by the way the reproduction of the whole approach lies substantially beyond the control of local community interests. What it risks overlooking in Forum's case – as well as in some of the English local partnerships (Craig *et al.*, 2004, pp. 228; 236-7) – is the way a capacity for collective agency built up locally over the years (and personified in Forum by Connemara West) can confer a certain power on local community interests to critically engage with and influence local partnership arrange-ments to their own advantage.

In the Irish context Connemara West's achievement is in many ways singular and can only be appreciated fully when placed in its wider context. Struggling rural interests – such as small farmers, farm labourers and small fishermen – have historically found it difficult to organise independently and effectively in Ireland (Varley and Curtin, 1999). In contrast, the power of community interests to assert themselves in Forum was grounded in a long tradition of local community activism associated especially with Connemara West (see O'Donohue, 1993; O'Hara, 1998). This became a key resource not only for Connemara West but also for other community interests in the districts round about. Again, the presence of such a tradition is consistent with the finding of others that the pre-existing strength of community actors is

important in determining how well they do in local partnerships (see Craig *et al.*, 2004, p. 228; Geddes, 2000, p. 793).

Aside from its own advantages what crucially has stood to Connemara West is the changing 'opportunity structure' associated with the shift that has occurred at the level of the state (or, at least, certain arms of it). Prior to the 1960s the state had tended to see 'local communities' as largely marginal to the process of capital accumulation, and to have but a very minor contribution to make to social service provision.[10]

It was the crisis-ridden 1980s that brought a considerable shift in official thinking as, frequently in response to European prompting (Geddes, 2000, p. 784), the idea of community involvement in partnership-based development began to take hold (Walsh *et al.*, 1998; Harvey, 2002). This is not to say that all the area partnerships are the same where community participation is concerned. Some of the LEADER partnerships, for instance, have had but token community involvement and have steered clear of concerning themselves with issues of social exclusion (see Curtin and Varley 2002, p. 25; Geddes, 2000, pp. 793-4).

Involvement in the first two European anti-poverty programmes was important in shaping the stance Connemara West would adopt to area partnership. It was its commitment to working within the system, its long (now over 30 years) experience, its considerable continuity in activists and staff and the sort of communitarian and small man populist analysis to be found among its key activists that would leave community interests within Forum with a strong basis for critically engaging with partnership and the possibilities it opened up.

That Forum was conceived as a Connemara West project gave the community interest an early advantage in staking out some of the terrain that the partnership would occupy. This feature ties in with a point made in the general literature on area partnerships. Partnership structures, in Geddes's (2000, p. 794) view, have a better chance of realising "… the potential for inclusivity and even solidarity with excluded groups…[when]…these are generated 'from below' rather than 'from above'." Subsequently, the changes made to Forum's programme of work, to its organisational structure and to its operating style embodied the wishes of community actors as much as those of state partners.

Of course, it is also possible to read what has transpired in Forum as part of a general process of the state having succeeded in turning community

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[10]An important exception here dates to the 1950s when Section 65 of the 1953 Health Act empowered health authorities to grant aid voluntary bodies to provide 'similar or ancillary' services to those of the health authority.

interests into service providers largely on its own terms (see Craig *et al.*, 2004, pp. 221-2). Certainly the continuing heavy dependence on temporary schemes speaks of a state willing to use partnerships like Forum as the basis of a flexible form of service delivery.

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