

# CENTRALISATION UNDERMINING AREA PARTNERSHIPS?

Unemployment is the most serious social and economic problem facing our society. In particular Ireland like the rest of Europe has a growing problem of long-term unemployment. In Ireland long-term unemployment as a percentage of total registered unemployment has increased from 37% in 1983 to 67% in 1990

Given the particular problem of long-term unemployment the Government and the Social Partners as part of the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) accepted the idea of a local area based strategy as the principal policy response to the problem of long-term unemployment. This has taken the form of Area Based Companies, twelve of which were established, on a pilot basis, under proposals contained in Chapter Seven of the PESP.

The boards of the companies are made up of a 'Partnership' of the local representatives of State Agencies such as FAS, VEC, IDA etc., employers, farmer and union organisations (Social Partners); such as ICTU, IFA, CIF, IBEC and community based organisations. All the companies are located in areas of high unemployment and disadvantage. According to Chapter Seven of the PESP, the overall objective of the Partnerships Companies is to integrate the actions of the various organisations at a local level in a planned way. This type of approach was advocated by both NESF in their document "A Strategy for the 90's" and more recently by the EC ERGO Action Research Programme which was established to examine the community-wide problem of long-term unemployment. The principle of local Partnerships has received support from various sources and would therefore seem an ideal policy from which to address long-term unemployment.

The principle of a local area response should entail the development of actions designed to meet the needs of a given local area, particularly in terms of the profile of the unemployed and the nature of the employment opportunities available in the area. Any labour market measure therefore has to be flexible to respond to local conditions. If one accepts this as an underlining principle an important question that must be asked is - have the partnerships as presently structured the capacity to develop and implement flexible local labour market measures?

Under the proposals contained in Chapter Seven the role of the Partnerships is primarily that of coordinating the activities of its constituent organisations at a local level. But the proposals states that the design of, and the budgets to implement, labour market measures for the long-term unemployed are

to remain within the relevant Government Department or State Agency at a national level, for example, the Department of Enterprise and Employment and FAS, the Department of Education, VEC's and third level institutions and the Department of Social Welfare. With such a proposed structure the Partnerships would appear to have the ability to design a local area action plan but lack the power or financial resources to implement this plan.

Despite the limitations of this structure the Partnerships have made efforts to respond to the needs of a given local area. For example, they have all received small amounts of global grant monies. (see article on page 5). The activities undertaken by the various Partnerships with this money vary, but in general, cover community and enterprise development, training and education activities. As well as being able to implement small scale programmes of their own, the Partnerships have proven of value in highlighting anomalies in State Policies which undermine participation in programmes or the take-up of employment by the long-term unemployed. However, it must be pointed out that the Partnerships are powerless to develop local actions to address these anomalies since they are dependent on a response at a national level by the relevant Government Department or Agency.

A major benefit of the partnerships is the opportunity they provided to create a dialogue between various agencies at a local level. Though this is good in itself the effectiveness of local dialogue, in terms of its impact on the local long-term unemployed, is again dependent on a national response and a willingness for individuals, at a national level, to become involved in and respond to the dialogue.

The important lesson from the experience in Europe is that neither labour market measures nor community development programmes alone can address the problem of long-term employment but that action in both areas is required to be implemented in an integrated local response. In Ireland we have accepted this principle by the establishment of structures in the form of local partnerships. Unfortunately we have still not developed labour market and community development policies/actions which have the capability to respond in a flexible manner to the needs of a local area. Irish labour market and community development policies are still far too centralised and particularly in the case of community development activities underfunded. This continuing insistence on developing and controlling policies at a national level is clearly restricting the development of a local response to the problem of long-term unemployment and undermining the potential of the local partnerships.

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