

PART III

*Chapter 30*

**Social Partnership in Ireland:  
A Problem-Solving Process**

by

Deirdre Garvey, Chief Executive Officer, The Wheel, Ireland

When examining the structures and process that exist in Ireland for involving citizens in a partnership relationship with the state, it would appear to an objective observer that we rank relatively well. Here, I will briefly describe those structures and systems and then move on to a personal perspective on whether they are delivering open and inclusive policy making. To a certain extent, there are no straight answers to these types of debates and the “perfect system” does not exist, and so ultimately I offer some recommendations for change, which I believe could strengthen the systems of policy making in Ireland.

### Social partnership across four pillars of activity

In the Republic of Ireland, the main set of structures and processes which exist through which citizens can become involved in policy making at a national level – other than the parliamentary democratic system – is called “social partnership”. This is essentially a space in which the state interacts in a structured way with representatives of society through a four “pillar” structure. In total there are 27 non-profit organisations across all four pillars involved in this system:

- Business and employers pillar: four representative organisations.
- Trade unions pillar: one representative organisation.
- Farming pillar: five representative organisations.
- Community and voluntary pillar: seventeen representative organisations.

Many organisations in various spheres of life have sought to become members of a particular pillar (i.e. become Social Partners), but it is only the Government which chooses the social partners from its own analysis as to which organisation(s) provides the best representation in the various areas.

The social partnership process was set up in the mid 1980s, when unemployment was so high that the shared objective of reducing it became a common objective. It brought the initial three pillars (the community and voluntary pillar only got invited into this process in the late 1990s) to the negotiating table with Government to create what became the first national agreement “A Programme for National Recovery”. The ongoing purpose of the social partnership process has been the negotiation of a series of such “national agreements” – usually lasting three years each – between the pillars and the government. Originally comprising purely pay agreements, they now cover a very wide range of socio-economic policy areas that affect most of the citizens in Ireland. This reflects the changing reality of Ireland’s economic development as well as the developing rationale behind each pillar’s reason for engaging in this process.

Social partnership is, in effect, a problem-solving process that allows the various participants involved to influence policy making. It provides the space and structures for the four pillars – and the people they represent – to sign up to a shared vision. Key to identifying a shared vision is the publication every three years, immediately in advance of the commencement of the negotiations, of the “Strategy Report” by the state-appointed

think-tank, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC). Membership of NESC is determined by Government, but each of the four pillars in social partnership is entitled to five seats. The development of the Strategy Report with all the social partners in non-negotiating mode, allows for a shared analysis of the current social and economic environment. This is then used as a basis for the ensuing negotiations between the pillars and Government as a national agreement gets negotiated.

Within the community and voluntary pillar, the 17 organisations are organised into strands which are defined by themes *e.g.* disability, older people, housing, labour market, poverty, networks/voluntary. Although a debate has existed within the sector as to the actual benefits to the more marginalised and vulnerable in our society of participating in the social partnership arena, it remains the most powerful avenue for associations of citizens to provide input to policy making. Therefore, any organisation invited by Government to become a social partner tends to accept. In the light of this, it is instructive to note that in 2003 two organisations in the community and voluntary pillar withdrew from the process as they felt that they could not sign up to the national agreement of the time, “Sustaining Progress”, as they felt that nothing had been won for their respective constituencies in the document. Not signing up to the agreement lost them their status as social partners and with it their access to various policy-influencing committees to which only social partners have access. It also lost them the ability to participate in the ensuing (and current) national agreement, “Towards 2016”, which is a ten-year framework agreement. The two organisations concerned subsequently applied to Government to come back into the process and they were duly invited back in, but only after a three-year period and subsequent to the end of negotiations on the current agreement. Their experience seems to have been that although it is a flawed process, it is better than trying to influence policy making “on the outside”.

### Community Fora at the local level

The system of social partnership at a national level has been somewhat replicated at local levels, although in a very different context. Decision-making by the state in relation to policy making and budgets is highly centralised in Ireland (which is one of the reasons why being a social partner carries with it such power in terms of access to policy makers). The structures that have been set up in every local government jurisdiction, which involve a similar range of social partners to that at national level, is more about implementation rather than actually influencing policy making. That said, associations of citizens’ organisations have been formed in every local authority area and they are called Community Fora. Twenty five people are elected every three years onto the Community Forum by the community and voluntary organisations in that area. Members of the Community Forum sit on a wide range of strategic and implementation bodies that affect all aspects of life at local level, including the County Development Board. All of these Community Fora were set up by the Reform of Local Government Act in 2001 and although some of them were created by merging previously existing grassroots community representative structures, many remain in a kind of “limbo” where their only purpose as a representative structure is to provide the Local Authority with representatives so that it can complete its social partnership style structures.

All of the above refers, of course, to just one of the systems through which citizens can become involved in public policy making – the participatory democratic process. The alternative of the elected representative democratic process is also a key access route to

influencing policy. Over the last twenty years Ireland has had coalition governments and in all but three of those years the largest party, Fianna Fáil, has been the dominant coalition partner.

### How open and inclusive is social partnership?

There is an irony in that Government claims that Ireland's innovative social partnership structure makes policy-making more inclusive. Yet, the opinion of the opposition parties, and indeed many government back-bench members of the Dáil (lower house in the parliament) is that social partnership is actually making policy-making more opaque and less inclusive. This is not just the gripe of parties that have been in opposition for 17 of the last twenty years, there is a valid point here because it has to be acknowledged that social partnership is not an openly democratic process as the people involved are not elected. The counter argument, of course, is that all social partnership deals are agreed with the elected Government of the people and therefore social partnership is democratically accountable.

Social partnership, in my opinion, is a positive step towards the distribution of democracy on a continuous basis as opposed to exercising democracy once every five years at election time. It succeeds in giving a voice and a say to those organised parts of society and civil society which are invited into the process, but obviously challenges remain. The main challenge is to ground the institutions of social partnership in an appropriately accountable framework. This would allow the civil society partners to become more representative without threatening or alienating the opposition parties and the appropriate role of the Oireachtas (the two houses in the parliament).

It must be noted that both the social partnership process as well as the elected parliamentary process are all based on the existence of intermediary organisations between individuals and the state. A different challenge in terms of open and inclusive policy-making is to involve citizens directly – without the need for intermediary organisations. In 2007 the Government-appointed independent Taskforce on Active Citizenship published a report with recommendations as to how citizens might be enabled to become more involved in their communities and all the recommendations were accepted by Government. One of the strongest messages coming through to the Taskforce from the thousands of people who contributed to its consultations was that people are sick of “cynical consultations” conducted by various agencies of the state just for the sake of it, so it is doubly disappointing to report that almost 12 months later the implementation group for the recommendations has not been appointed and much momentum has been lost. It would be a real pity if this report is not progressed in its entirety or if purely the “volunteering related” recommendations were to be picked up upon, leaving the more important element of empowering citizens aside.

In looking at all the various dimensions of the policy-making framework, one thing is clear from my perspective as CEO of an umbrella network for the community and voluntary sector: the Irish community and voluntary sector is a component in a healthy parliamentary democracy and not an alternative. The challenge for those of us involved in civil society representative roles is how we and the system can develop to enable us to better perform that role.

As mentioned earlier, one of the risks that are inherent in either making social partnership too strong and/or increasing the direct involvement of citizens is that of

diluting the role of parliamentary democracy. In Ireland there are two houses in the Oireachtas (parliament), the lower house (the Dáil) and the upper house (the Seanad or Senate). The answer to the balancing act could potentially lie with the Seanad. Originally, it was conceived of being the forum in which civil society could debate and interact with policy and legislative developments. It is comprised of 60 members. Eleven members are nominated by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), six members are elected by university graduates and 43 are elected from panels of candidates representing specified vocational interests: Cultural and Educational; Agricultural; Labour; Industrial and Commercial; and, Administrative. The way that it has developed over the years, however, has been along party political lines where the majority of members belong to political parties and the party whip is imposed. Therefore the Seanad does not perform the role for citizens and civil society that it was intended to.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would observe that the access to policy making provided to organised parts of civil society is not bad in Ireland. However, the openness and transparency of the practice of actually influencing policy could do with some improvement. In seeking to make the Irish system of policy making more open and accessible, I would suggest that we need to ground social partnership by making it more open and accessible to a broader reach of civil society. We need to reform the institutions of parliamentary democracy to engage more with institutions of policy making in social partnership, as well as reforming the Seanad and its role within the parliamentary system. And we need to find better ways of engaging citizens by removing the barriers to their engagement in policy-making.



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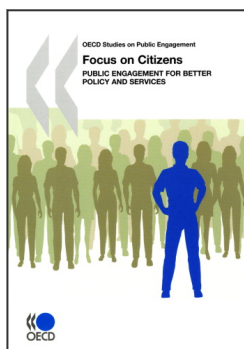
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**From:**  
**Focus on Citizens**  
Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264048874-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

Garvery, Deirdre (2009), "Social Partnership in Ireland: A Problem-Solving Process", in OECD, *Focus on Citizens: Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264048874-33-en>

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