CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE GOVERNANCE OF IRISH SUBURBS

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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE GOVERNANCE OF IRISH SUBURBS

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Executive summary

In 2002, and as part of a larger *New Urban Living Study*, a survey of Ratoath, Co Meath was conducted. A small, predominantly rural, townland until the late 1980s, Ratoath had, during the 1990s, quickly turned into a new suburb of Dublin. The survey, in its most general objective, endeavoured to comprehend the social fabric produced in such localities. The idea of social capital was used in a rather loose way to help focus on the key social resources available locally: a sense of attachment to the place; integration in networks of personal support; memberships of voluntary organisations; local activism and a sense of collective efficacy. The relevant findings of the Ratoath survey are presented in this paper. A number of policy implications arising from the emergence of such 'new suburbs', particularly in the context of local governance, are considered in the light of these findings.

The survey pointed to a moderate level of social capital in Ratoath:

- Attachment/commitment to the locality remained modest, with only a third of local residents stating that they felt strongly attached to Ratoath.
- Most residents belonged to networks of social support and had people to turn to for help, socialising, etc. These networks included on average five/six people. Close relatives and neighbours represented the main elements in these networks. Crucially, about two-thirds of the members of residents' networks lived locally.
- About one-third of respondents indicated that they belonged to a local voluntary association and as many as 60 per cent of these members were actively engaged. This means that roughly 20 per cent of all respondents in this representative sample were actively engaged in such voluntary organisations.
- Local residents agreed about the main problems in the locality. About half the residents stated that they had acted in some way to deal with local problems. This action mainly consisted of approaching local politicians and signing petitions. This conveys a generally low level of activism.

- The action of respondents, when it took place, was not perceived as very effective. Of those who stated that they did something about local problems, two-thirds did not think that their action had improved the situation. This highlights a low level of empowerment and political efficacy.

The survey identified serious difficulties in terms of governance. It revealed the challenge faced by local residents in developing an agreed view of what constitutes the common good. The story of the Combined Resident Association in Ratoath gives a vivid illustration of the difficulties which such localities experience. Confronted with a range of problems, some of them quite serious (such as the increase in transient traffic and the corresponding rise in serious traffic accidents), Ratoath has found it very difficult to articulate a coherent view of what constitutes the public good for the locality. In the absence of any legal and institutional framework that would facilitate such a task, it is left to localities themselves to devise their own structure of governance. Ratoath's residents encountered an institutional void, which they could not overcome with their own resources despite their best efforts.

The absence of a meaningful form of local government, below the county, has produced problematic forms of governance, particularly with the demise of traditional governance associated with the parish. It has obliged local residents to enter into clientilistic relationships with political brokers, in an effort to ensure some kind of access to the formal structures of local government. More often than not, it has forced residents to adopt a defensive and oppositional posture. Rarely consulted and unable to participate in the decision-making process, they can only uphold their interests through various forms of resistance to external pressures and interests.

The institutional void that characterises most localities has exercised the minds of many commentators. One does not observe a strong political push towards the introduction of municipal democracy. However, partnership has become a generalised mode of governance in Ireland and constitutes a recognisable element of its political repertoire. Most local partnerships have been put in place to perform a particular task, usually to overcome some acute disadvantage in the locality. They represent an exceptional form of local government. Nevertheless, partnerships involve two crucial

aspects. Firstly, they rely on a close collaboration between public agencies and local voluntary associations. Secondly, this collaboration goes beyond consultation, because voluntary organisations play a formal role in the process of decision-making.

The devolution of local government needs to take these requirements on board, namely the participation of voluntary organisations and the granting of a formal role to them. However, such a framework requires that the voluntary sector is properly constituted and able to represent the views and interests of the locality. This representative voice is not a given and is articulated through negotiations and debates between the various views and interests within the locality. This implies that a political process has to unfold, and this paper suggests that some kind of community council, organised as a forum composed of representative, local organisations, offers the best setting for this process.

With decision-making remaining vested in the county council, the political process that occurs in the community council needs to be extended to the county. The various localities within the county may develop different and possibly conflicting views, preferences and interests, and at times they may compete with each other. These differences can be overcome through negotiations and debates, and it is proposed that this would best take place in a county forum, which would be established as a federation of community councils in the county. To follow the logic of partnership, the granting of a formal role to the county forum vis-à-vis the county council would provide the final element in the proposed revised structure of local government.

New suburbs like Ratoath are far from being anomic. Local residents have collectively generated a range of resources that, in a civic sense, binds them together. However, the lack of local government institutions at that level means that they are struggling in their efforts to manage their own local affairs and deal with the problems they inevitably face. The social capital that is generated in the locality cannot be taken for granted, and it risks depletion if the institutional void of local governance is not addressed. The paper concludes with the assertion that it is in the power of public authorities to expand or waste the social capital of the new suburbs.

Acknowledgements

1

Introduction

1.1 Outline

The paper begins with a discussion of the sociological survey conducted in the Dublin suburb of Ratoath by the authors and progressively works out the policy implications of the development of such localities. Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework used in the analysis, as well as detailing the methodology followed. Chapter 3 presents the main findings of the Ratoath survey, as they relate to the level of social capital observed in this locality. Chapter 4 addresses the policy implications of these findings. It focuses more particularly on the institutional void in the governance of suburbs revealed in the Ratoath survey. Such a void, and the social practices that emerge to fill it, make it very difficult for Ratoath residents to speak with a coherent voice and uphold the quality of life in the locality. Chapter 5 considers the main policy options for addressing this issue of local governance. It assesses their relative advantages and puts forward a policy proposal that builds on already established practices. Both the presentation of the findings and the discussion of their policy implications are deeply embedded in the empirical information generated from the survey.

1.2 Goals of the survey

The rapid transformation of Ireland has been accompanied by the creation of new suburbs and peripheral towns. Suburban living is not new (McManus, 2002), but it has acquired a greater significance since the 1990s. This enhanced significance relates to the increase in the number of people who reside in the suburbs of Irish cities and towns, as well as the speed and scale of this development. What is increasingly referred to as 'the urban sprawl' is generating a range of problems, much of which arise from the frequency with which the often ad hoc nature of this development contradicts the various plans elaborated by local authorities.

This paper presents the findings from a policy perspective of one aspect of an overall study, The *New Urban Living Study*, which

explores the texture and strength of suburban civil society. It examines the kind of lifestyle that is sustained by suburbs, both in terms of domestic life (such as families and networks of social support) and local participation in social and public life. Does suburban living prove viable in social terms, does it facilitate the generation of those social resources which allow local residents to deal collectively with the many problems they face, and sustain the quality of their lives? How far does it create sufficient 'connectedness' among residents and uphold an adequate level of social participation? Suburban living would become fragmented and highly problematic without such local civic engagement.

The paper endeavours to answer a series of questions, which are relevant from a policy point of view:

- do the new suburbs, which are developing around Dublin and elsewhere, generate a level of social capital sufficient to uphold the civic participation of local residents?
- to what extent are people living in these new suburbs able to define what is good for the locality and act on it?
- do the forms of local government in Ireland promote social capital in the locality?
- what changes in local government are required to sustain or promote social capital and maximise civic participation in new suburbs?

The answers to these questions will contribute to a renewed debate about the changing nature of local communities and about their ability to respond to the challenges they face.

1.3 Methodology
The questions outlined above are addressed in this paper through a sociological survey of what nowadays must be considered the suburban town of Ratoath in County Meath. A very small and rural place until the mid-1980s, its population has increased tenfold. It provides a good example of a totally new peripheral suburban development. A similar survey has also been conducted in three other suburban locations (Leixlip, Lucan and Mullingar), and the analysis of this survey is in progress. However, this paper's considerations are based exclusively on the research done in Ratoath.

The survey adopts a triangular approach reliant on a range of research methods. Such an approach ensures that the results are not biased by the method employed, or at least that the possible shortcomings of any one method are neutralised. It combines data techniques which are both quantitative and qualitative.[1] The first step of the research involved a standardised questionnaire survey of a representative sample of 265 individuals in separate households. The survey took place from late May 2002 to August 2002. Two hundred Ratoath residents answered the questionnaire, and this represented a total response rate of 75.48 per cent. Eight focus groups were organised, in September and October 2002, in the form of small discussion groups composed of selected local residents including school children, retired members of the locality as well as young parents. The main purpose of the focus groups was to draw out residents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions about the locality. The groups offered an opportunity to obtain 'insider accounts' which supplement and deepen the data gathered in the social survey.

A series of in-depth interviews were conducted from April to June 2003, as a follow-up to the survey. The interviewees were selected from the residents who had answered the questionnaire. The residents interviewed had been identified, on the basis of the questionnaire, as active in some way within the community. Some belonged to local organisations and appeared quite central to the life of the locality; others had volunteered for a range of activities while others had initiated a local organisation. Seven such residents were interviewed and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews took place at the residents' homes and covered a range of questions about their involvement in voluntary organisations, the state of civic engagement in Ratoath, the perceived effectiveness of their actions, and general considerations about the locality.

1.4 Social resources available in Ratoath
The viability of suburbs, as a social form, is to a large extent determined by the ability of local residents to come together and address the problems that they may collectively face. This ability depends on the kind of social resources which are available locally.

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[1] See Appendix 1 for further information on the survey methodology.

The extent to which local residents are linked with, and relate to, each other in various ways constitutes a prominent resource. Such resources, which promote closer connections between residents, have been given the generic term of 'social capital'. Therefore, the question becomes: do suburbs generate sufficient social capital to uphold a meaningful social participation in the locality?

Social capital refers to a range of resources, of a social nature, which allow local residents to come together and act in a coordinated way. Taking its clues from Putnam (2000), the survey investigated the level of the following resources: a sense of attachment to the place, networks of personal support, membership of local voluntary associations, local activism, and a sense of efficacy. The study of Ratoath reveals a rather mixed picture, as far as social capital is concerned. The integration of local residents into networks of personal support, the level of social participation along with a reasonable level of attachment to the place are not matched by a high level of local activism or a sense of civic efficacy.

1.5 Local governance and policy responses

The difficulty that Ratoath experiences in generating sufficient social capital raises the issue of local governance. Local governance does not simply refer to the formal institutions of local government. The term 'local governance' recognises and includes the many organisations and networks that are typically mobilised to make decisions about such localities as Ratoath and manage them. This includes the way local problems are defined and how they are addressed by all relevant participants: local councillors, various public agencies, an array of voluntary organisations and also, crucially, residents. The latter remain the ultimate judges of the quality of life in the locality. Local governance points not only to the way public authorities manage the many problems which local residents may face, but also to the way local residents collectively respond to such problems. This Ratoath study asks one central question: does a type of urban development which relies on the growth of suburbs, and even on the creation of totally new suburbs, produce forms of urban living which are viable from a social and civic point of view?

The range and scope of institutions of local government below the county level remain limited in Ireland. Residents of localities find it difficult in such circumstances to manage their own affairs. Hence the institutional void which was revealed in the study of

Ratoath. In many countries municipal democracy has been the preferred solution for local governance: villages and towns elect a council and mayor to manage local affairs. The political demand does not exist in Ireland for this kind of municipal democracy and does not offer, for this reason, a realistic response to the institutional void.

A particular form of governance has become widespread in Ireland, as evidenced by the many partnership schemes set up during the 1990s. Partnership programmes were originally devised for a particular task: mainly helping disadvantaged areas to participate in their area's social and economic development. They do not present themselves as a permanent form of local governance but, nevertheless, these partnerships formalise the participation of local voluntary organisations in public administration. A similar process is required in the context of local governance. Localities have themselves been involved in the creation, inevitably in a haphazard and tentative way, of bodies which 'represent' the locality as a whole. These local bodies, when they emerge, are constituted in various ways and given different names. Typically, however, they revolve around the constitution of a community council or forum. Such bodies, based on resident associations and local voluntary societies, are often self-selected. They may involve themselves in negotiations with outside agencies about local matters. For example, a relevant development is the representation of the voluntary / community sector on a number of city and county council committees such as Strategic Policy Committees and County Development Boards.

A statutory role in local government can be granted to organisations only if they are representative of the locality. A federation of all associations operating in the locality into a 'community council' does not guarantee this representative character. All local interests and concerns may not find an organised expression, and the goals pursued by the various associations must reflect the concerns and the preferences of members. Localities, far from forming homogenous groups, are composed of various interests and views, and severe conflicts often develop. A collectively agreed view (for example, a definition of the common good for the locality) is not a given; it is only achieved, if at all, through a complex and possibly difficult political process through which the various views are articulated and negotiation takes place.

This participation of organisations representative of the locality must satisfy the dual requirement of inclusion and legitimacy.

Each city council and county council covers a wide range of 'communities', which refer to either localities or neighbourhoods. In the absence of consensus between the various community councils, no single voice articulates the preferences of residents in the county. The process that leads to the formation of representative community councils could easily be extended to the whole county. For example, community councils are aggregated into 'county forums', within which collective preferences are negotiated and articulated. The county forum would introduce another form of representation, based mainly on residential groups, and operate as a second chamber, directly involved in the decision-making of the county council.

Public policy, that is the action of state or other public agencies, plays an important role in generating local social capital and shaping the pattern of 'connectedness' or social relations within society. The proposal for the statutory establishment of a 'community council' and then 'county or city forum' should be seen in this light: as an attempt to give a statutory function to a representative association of local residents and sustain their civic engagement. Such a framework of local participation would go some way towards producing the social capital which is required for a robust local democracy. In the absence of such a framework, the social capital available locally would continue to be deflated. Furthermore, the requirement that local organisations be regulated to ensure inclusion and legitimacy can only be fulfilled if such voluntary organisations enjoy some institutional support and receive public resources. The viability of new suburbs in terms of civic participation and the ability to address collectively the problems they face depends on a range of resources, which together form their social capital. This social capital is deeply rooted in the social fabric of the locality. But it also depends on the state and on the way institutions of local government are set up.

2

The *New Urban Living Study**

2.1 Introduction

New modes of urban living are taking shape in Ireland: inner-city neighbourhoods are reclaimed and gentrified; suburban estates are spreading to quiet rural locations; peripheral towns are growing from the influx of long-distance commuters. This transformation has already led to the creation of new suburbs and peripheral towns, and the process shows no sign of weakening. The authors undertook a study of 'new urban living' to investigate the suburbanisation of Dublin and included various types of suburban development in the study. Little is known about life in such emergent suburban forms, and less about how those who reside in these places organise their individual, familial and civic lives. The study is particularly interested in the texture and strength of suburban civil society. Who are the people who have moved into these new suburbs and how do they live there? How do residents in these suburban localities adapt to their new social environment, respond to it and actively shape it? This sociological study of suburban living seeks to fill a gap in our knowledge and understanding of the social environment in which a growing number of people live. Not only will this knowledge and understanding help make sense of contemporary urban living in Ireland, but it will also inform and enlighten policy-making. It contributes to an Irish urban sociology that is just beginning to develop.

Very little has been written on the social fabric of Irish cities since Humphrey's (1966) study of families in Dublin in the 1950s. Most research on urban neighbourhoods and communities in Ireland has focused on disadvantaged areas experiencing social marginalisation and exclusion. Fahey's 1999 study of social housing offers some insights into selected local authority housing estates, as does Saris's (2000) study of Cherry Orchard. The theme of urban development, mainly related to Dublin, has in the past attracted some attention (McKeown, 1986), and this attention has become more sustained of

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* References to 'this study' and 'the study' in this chapter signify the *New Urban Living Study*.

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late with studies of Temple Bar (Corcoran, 1998), peripheral commercial centres (Corcoran, 2000), the Digital Hub (Hazelkorn and Murphy, 2002), the saga of the Dockland Development (Corcoran, 2002) and some of the problems associated with urban growth (Wickham and Lohan, 2000). Curiously enough, various aspects of urban culture have received more attention than the actual social fabric of cities: one may refer to the edited work *Irish urban cultures* (Curtin, Donnan and Wilson, 1993), the study of street traders by Bennett (1984) or, more recently, the interest in the constructed symbolism of the Dublin landscape (Whelan, 2003). One should also note a few sociological analyses of small towns. The classical study of rural Ireland by Arensberg and Kimball (1940) includes a part on the town of Ennis, but it is presented really as part of the rural scene. Other relevant studies include Jackson's 1967 study of Skibereen and that of Bantry by Eipper (1986).

Suburbs themselves and suburban living have received rather scant attention. Sociological research was conducted on the suburbs of Leixlip in the 1980s, although it focused more particularly on the impact of suburban growth on the relations between long-established residents and newcomers (Weafer, 1982, 1985). A small piece was published by a visiting anthropologist on the Ballinteer suburb, at the edge of Dublin (Varenne, 1993), while Quilley (2002) identified and discussed some of the difficulties of commuter living. With so little published about the social organisation of Irish suburbs, this study of suburban living addresses the issues of social life, social processes and social structure in suburban Ireland.

2.2 What is social capital?
The suburb has emerged as a significant form of residence in Ireland over the last half century. Recent urban and suburban growth, particularly around Dublin, has become a matter of concern, not least because of the population imbalances it creates and also because of the way this growth is spreading to adjoining counties. This kind of urban/suburban growth generates a range of problems that must be addressed and managed.

The Dublin Metropolitan Area has elaborated a plan to provide a coherent framework for its development, but with little effect. More recently in 2002, the government issued the national spatial policy (Department of the Environment and Local Government, *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020*).

This study of suburban living does not focus on problems of development, at least not in a direct way. They are registered by the study only to the extent that they have an impact on the daily life of suburban residents. The study deals, rather, with the social consequences of development, which relevant authorities have so far failed to contain and regulate:

- do residents in suburban localities find the social support they need, from both private and public sources?
- do suburbs sustain an appropriate quality of life and do they generate a sufficient level of civic engagement?

The study examines the capacity of suburbs to ensure a viable (or sustainable) social environment. The conclusions reached on the basis of this work, if well founded, will provide invaluable information for policy-makers in the area of urban development and urban planning. It will, in short, offer a solid basis from which to assess the social impact of contemporary urban development.

Local government structures should not treat urban and rural residents as objects of an administrative practice. Quality of life relates to the preferences of residents, that is to say the way they define what is desirable or not within their locality, and depends to a large extent on their actions and decisions. The issue of quality of life points not only to the many problems that they may face, but also to the way they respond to such problems in a collective way. In negotiating and managing the communal and civic life in the locality, they have to draw on existing social resources. The viability of suburbs depends in a direct way on the ability of the localities to generate those social resources that are necessary for collective living. It relates to the way 'local communities' constitute themselves, define their collective interests, identify the public good, engage in collective action and cooperate in order to achieve their goals. The extent to which community and voluntary activity in such suburbs sustain a vigorous civil society represents a central concern in the *New Urban Living Study*.

The concept of social capital has recently come to prominence with the work of Robert Putman. Putnam's book, *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community* (2000), argues that the capacity of people to cooperate and deal with public issues has

declined in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He reviews the many forms that this decline has assumed and puts forward a number of reasons as to why this is happening. Although this theme is not addressed in this paper, Putnam's work appears relevant to the wider issues in that it examines the context and factors which undermine or promote the generation of social capital. A range of criticisms have been directed at his idea of social capital, and some of them will be considered later in the light of the study's analysis and findings. But first it is important to establish what is meant by social capital and how this paper makes use of the term. Certainly the concept is under-theorised and simplified by most of those who mobilise it, and it remains in many ways ambiguous, with Schuller et al noting:

> One criticism of Putnam is that it conflates means and ends, so that it is unclear whether high levels of social capital constitute a desirable end-state where people interact trustfully and morally, or a way of achieving a good society which may be characterised in a different way (2000: 10).

This ambiguity also reappears to produce what some have called the circularity of an analysis in terms of social capital: social capital is used both as the explanatory variable (for example, of social cohesion), and as a way of describing the same social cohesion. The sources of social capital are often presented as social capital themselves (Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Putnam gives a great deal of attention to membership of, and participation in, voluntary organisations, particularly at a local level. Ambiguity appears, in the relevant literature, about the link between social capital and voluntary organisations. Sometimes, voluntary organisations are presented as a crucial site for the generation or fostering of this social capital: they produce a particular type of civic 'connectedness'.

> The dominant model for explaining the origins of social capital suggests that it arises from interactions between individuals within voluntary associations. Such associations are seen as being the key mechanism for promoting co-operation between citizens, and providing a framework in which trust can be fostered' (Whiteley, 1999: 25).

Although Putnam's formal definition of social capital provides a useful background to this study ('… social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (2000: 19)), the study relies more directly on his characterisation of social capital (Social Capital Index) in which its empirical dimensions are specified (p. 291):

- community organisational life
- engagement in public affairs
- community volunteerism
- informal sociability
- social trust.

Social trust is not examined in this study, because it relates more to attitudes than to practices. However, the study does consider two other social resources that appear relevant to the collective life of localities: one concerns the sense of attachment to the place and its residents, and the other involves what can be referred to as a sense of collective empowerment or collective efficacy. Both relate closely to the theme of social capital.

The availability of a range of social resources in the locality is crucial for sustaining and enhancing the quality of life and to support residents to cooperate in promoting a communal interest. The term 'social capital' is used as a generic term for these relevant resources. These resources are of a social nature, for they are rooted in the way local residents relate to each other: '… they inhere within particular social relationships…' (Smart, 1993: 281). For this reason, social capital does not refer to anything that an individual may possess, but something that is embedded in relationships between agents and between social institutions. This central characteristic of social capital underpins the sociological nature of this paper's investigation as it is primarily interested in social links and relationships. Attempts have been made to recast social capital in individual terms, as the set of resources which are accessible through social relations and ties (Lin, 2001). These resources become an attribute of individuals in that they refer to the material wealth, power or prestige which some individuals may possess or enjoy. However, this paper (in line with most commentators on social capital) treats social capital as a set of resources that are rooted in the way people relate to each other.

A certain ambiguity remains in relation to the concept of social capital. Coleman states that: '… social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons' (1990: 302). This means that networks of social relations allow individuals access to resources that they do not actually own or control. For example, Portes argues that '…social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (1998: 5). While he acknowledges that social capital can be seen as a collective resource which pertains to a particular type of social relation (as opposed to a resource which is available through social relations), he considers that an individualised definition of social capital is more useful. He also puts the onus on those who prefer a 'collective' definition of social capital to clarify and develop the concept further:

> While I believe that the greatest theoretical promise of social capital lies at the individual level – exemplified by the analysis of Bourdieu and Coleman – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with redefining it as a structural property of large aggregates. This conceptual departure requires, however, more care and theoretical refinement than that displayed so far (1998: 21).

Even when agreeing on the collective character of social capital and its rooting in social relations, the actual composition of social capital is subject to considerable discussion. The main distinction is made between those who, like Coleman, stress the normative character of such relations: they view social capital mainly in terms of values and attitudes which uphold stable social connections – obligations, expectations, reciprocity, trust, norms and sanctions. For Putnam too, social capital denotes such features as trust, norms of reciprocity and cooperation. However Schuller et al (2000) contend that Putnam has, in relation to this aspect of social capital, changed the emphasis from trust to reciprocity, and consequently from attitudes to basic rules. Ultimately, social capital refers to those social resources which make it possible for participants to act together in pursuing shared objectives (Lochner et al, 1999: 260) and, one may add, to cooperate in deciding on which goals should be shared and pursued collectively.

These critiques of social capital, although they need to be addressed, are not such that they make the theme of social capital

irrelevant or totally debilitate it. On the contrary, they emphasise the flexibility of a concept which offers a useful point of departure for various kinds of analysis. This remains true only to the extent that one retains some critical distance from the concept, and does not close it up by proposing a fixed definition of what it means. For this reason, in an attempt at constructive ambiguity, this study adopts a loose definition of what is meant by social capital and equates it simply with those features of social relations and social organisations which facilitate co-operation and collective action (Lochner et al, 1999).

2.3 The social capital of suburbs

This study of selected Irish suburbs investigates the extent to which people living in new suburbs can:

- draw on those social resources which facilitate a meaningful public life in the locality
- elaborate a view of what constitutes the public good for the locality
- identify the goals which should be pursued collectively and
- cooperate in an effort to achieve them.

The term 'social capital' as used in this paper includes a range of social resources which appear significant for civic cooperation at the local level – however this list is certainly not exhaustive.

a) Belonging: the way suburban residents relate to the locality
The quality of suburban life, and its very fabric, depends in part on the way local residents relate to their place. This involves several dimensions. It implies in a direct way the extent to which local residents identify with their locality. Identification refers to the ability of local residents to define the identity of the locality (i.e. the characteristics which make the place special for them), and also to an actual sense that this identity extends to them and encompasses them. It manifests itself through the way they perceive their place: what they feel, like and dislike about it. The sense of feeling part of the group, of belonging to it, constitutes a separate aspect. The sense of belonging refers to the feelings of attachment to the group, to emotions about the place. These feelings and emotions are sustained

by shared memory such as symbols, festivals, gatherings, etc. This study is interested in establishing if the new suburbs allow for the generation of this crucial and multifaceted resource.

b) Networks of social support
Social capital gives a measure of the extent to which residents in suburban communities relate to each other in a way that allows them to cooperate with each other. This cooperation has traditionally been viewed in terms of mutual help and reciprocity among neighbours. This study looks at the networks of support and social ties that count: family, kin, friends, neighbours and colleagues. It investigates the ability of suburban residential localities to produce social support as part of its very social fabric.

c) Social participation
People make the urban environment their own by developing ways of addressing whatever collective problems they encounter. This occurs, in part, through local residents joining organisations, clubs, societies and contributing to the provision of a range of services whether of a private or public nature. Local voluntary associations form one of the main mechanisms through which people in the locality have contact with each other, outside the very immediate neighbourhood. They represent a central aspect of the organisation of civil society. The presence of voluntary organisations and the extent of local residents' involvement in them gives an indication of the strength of communal life. Therefore, the level of local residents' participation in such organisations gives a measure of associational density.

d) Local activism
Local residents act together to respond to possible problems in the locality. Most issues that trigger local actions involve a direct threat to the quality of life of residents. A large proportion of occurrences of protest and collective action nowadays take place in the local area in which one lives – these protests typically mobilise local residents around local issues such as traffic, exclusion of undesirable groups, neglect by public authorities, unwelcome housing developments, etc. The ability to act collectively when confronted with threats or problems and, perhaps more essentially, the cooperative endeavour

in achieving the goals that have been set collectively must be seen as an important form of social capital.

e) Collective efficacy

Local residents engage in a complex process through which they come to agree on a definition of the public good for the locality and cooperate in an effort to attain it. But they do so only if they consider themselves able to exercise some influence on the situation. This collective efficacy refers to the ability of local residents to define their collective preferences, act effectively and achieve the goals which they set for themselves. It relates to the expertise which is available locally, the civic engagement of local residents but also the feeling that individual or collective action will make some difference. Collective efficacy expresses the extent to which the locality feels empowered to shape, at least to some extent, its own future.

Leyden (2003) conducted a survey of a number of Irish suburbs in and around Galway city in terms of the social capital that they generate. He contrasted what he called 'complete neighbourhoods' (which are of mixed use and pedestrian oriented) and 'new suburbs' (which are car dependent) and examined the extent to which these two different types of neighbourhood produce social capital, concluding that complete neighbourhoods enjoy a higher level of social capital. Despite some similarities, Leyden's study of the two types of neighbourhood appears to be of little use to this study, which focuses entirely on new suburbs. More crucially, the features of social capital which he considered differ quite significantly from those considered significant for this paper. In contrast with Leyden, this paper's main concerns are about a sense of belonging, networks of social support, social participation and local activism. Leyden's study nonetheless shows that the nature of the neighbourhood has a significant impact on the amount of social capital generated – mixed-use and pedestrian-oriented neighbourhoods fare better in that respect than car-dependent and single-use neighbourhoods.

2.4 A comparative study: the choice of locations

This study of new urban living was elaborated from the start according to a comparative framework. One needs to move away from a uniform view of suburbs according to which suburban lifestyle and characteristics are perceived as similar. The study

began with the idea that suburban localities may also generate very different types of collective life and that they shelter different kinds of social relations or 'connectedness'. If one discovers that some suburbs 'work' better than others, then it becomes a matter of considerable importance to find out why and to identify the factors that make them work. Some of the factors impacting on suburban living are rather obvious. The relative affluence or even occupational composition of such localities play a role there. This study selected suburbs composed of, in the main, privately owned housing estates, with only a small amount of public housing.[2] It was particularly interested in factors which determine the dynamic of the collective life in the locality as they influence the level of social capital which is generated or available locally. The age of a suburb is likely to exercise such an influence, with older suburbs being more likely to have developed regular ways of responding to collective problems. One also anticipates that the distance of suburbs from the urban or metropolitan centre has an impact on collective life in the locality. Proximity to a small town or an already established suburb constitutes a significant resource for developing suburbs.

In that spirit, this study identified four different suburban situations relevant to the investigation:

> 1   Suburban development has in the past ten years taken place in primarily rural locations. This kind of peripheral suburban development is well illustrated by Ratoath, County Meath. A very small place until the mid-1980s, its population has since increased tenfold. It provides a good example of a totally new peripheral growth.
>
> 2   Suburban development sometimes continues at a staggering pace in localities that are already heavily suburbanised. The electoral division of Lucan-Esker (within the greater Lucan area) has experienced very rapid growth since 1986, particularly from 1996 to 2002 during which time its population nearly trebled in size. This continuing suburbanisation occurs in a context which differs radically from the previous case. It

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[2] Social housing in Ireland has been widely surveyed, mainly in the context of social marginalisation.

remains close to an already established urban/suburban locality: Lucan village has long enjoyed a separate identity as a small urban/suburban locality. Not only does it offer a wide range of services, but it also possesses a tradition of collective life on which new residents may draw.

3   An intensive wave of suburbanisation took place in the 1960s and 1970s around Dublin. These suburbs have now stabilised and aged. Leixlip provides a good example of this type of development. Most of its growth happened in the 1970s and while it did continue to grow at a far slower pace in the 1980s, the level of growth stabilised in the 1990s. It offers a good opportunity to investigate the effect of stabilisation and time on the collective life of a suburban community. As it happens, in the 1980s Leixlip was the object of a relevant study by Weafer (1982), which focused on the impact of the rapid suburban growth of the time on the relations between well-established and new residents.

4   A new phenomenon of long-distance commuting has emerged in the last few years, prompted by the high cost of housing in Dublin but also by the more positive factor of opting for a rural lifestyle. Mullingar was chosen as the focus for this type of suburban development because many new estates have been recently built around the town, representing suburbs of the town itself. However, Mullingar now belongs to the commuter belt and the new housing estates in its suburbs are meant, at least in part, for the growing number of residents who commute daily to Dublin. Mullingar constitutes in that sense an example of a complex situation, one in which the suburbs of a provincial town also function as a suburb of the distant metropolis of Dublin, with the possibility of the town itself becoming a far suburb. Mullingar town (referred to in the Census of Population as Mullingar Town, North and South) has experienced a decline in its population in the recent past; however, significant growth has been recorded in Mullingar's hinterland (referred to in the Census as Mullingar Rural) from 1996 and 2002. What is the impact on local life and

civic engagement of this type of long-distance commuting from suburbs of well-established provincial towns?

Table 1, which draws on a series of Census of Population datasets, sketches the growth profile of the four locations selected for the comparative study of suburbs undertaken for this study.

Table 1: Population in four selected localities, 1971–2002

	1971	1979	1981	1986	1991	1996	2002
Leixlip	2,414	7,327	9,293	11,938	13,194	13,585	15,143
Lucan (Esker)	—	—	2,069	1,977	3,099	7,451	21,785
Mullingar Rural	2,455	—	4,104	4,413	4,157	4,747	7,007
Ratoath	369	443	541	551	2596	3,064	5,585

Source: Census of Population, various years

3

Social resources available in Ratoath

3.1 Profile of Ratoath

Ratoath residents display a rather distinctive profile. The recent housing developments in Ratoath ensure that the population is largely composed of newcomers. Only two per cent of the study's sample were actually born in Ratoath. The majority of the respondents (58 per cent) came from the Dublin Metropolitan area, and more than 90 per cent came from Dublin or adjacent counties. With locals in the minority in Ratoath, new population flows are taking people out of built-up urban areas and into peripheral urban localities. This reverses the population flows which historically saw rural populations moving to cities. What is clearly visible is that this changing population reflects movements within the greater Dublin area which see the population move from the metropolis to peripheral suburban locations.

The focus groups and interviews revealed that respondents had chosen to move away from Dublin. Most of the people had previously lived in Dublin, or close to it, and made the move to Ratoath after they had children. A key reason advanced for this movement was the perception that Dublin was not safe or, more simply, not a fit place to bring up children. Respondents also noted that the move allowed them to avail of fairly large houses for the price of the smaller houses they left in Dublin. The move to the periphery of Dublin was perceived as a very positive one as far as their quality of life was generally concerned.

The newness of the resident population is indicated by the fact that just about half of the respondents had resided in Ratoath for no more than five years. Although newcomers dominate the population profile, the vast majority of those surveyed expected to continue to live in Ratoath for the next five years. This must be qualified, however, by a fairly high turnover of population. The survey's sample was based on the relevant Register of Electors; however, a fairly significant number of the individuals selected (56 in total, that is to say nearly a quarter of the sample) were no longer

residing at the address indicated when called upon by the interviewers. Nevertheless, the expressed commitment of many residents to remain in the locality suggests that families will put down roots, develop social networks and avail of facilities locally. The population will continue to expand in the short term, because planning permission has been granted for a further 700 housing units in the Jamestown area close to the village. Furthermore, brief follow-up visits to the area have revealed that quite large apartment blocks are being built in or near some of the housing estates. All this reflects the acceptance of a higher housing density by county planners and points the way to the arrival of a very different kind of resident than those that have moved in thus far.

3.1.1 Age profile of community

As can be expected with so many newcomers, Ratoath displays a fairly young age profile; 60 per cent of respondents were aged between 26 and 39 years. However, this feature should not be exaggerated. Although only 10 per cent of adults were either under 25 or over 55 years of age, one notes a significant proportion of respondents aged between 40 and 55. Some in-depth interviews and casual conversations with respondents indicated that many Ratoath residents moved to Ratoath when already well engaged in the process of family formation. This implies that Ratoath may differ quite significantly from other Dublin suburbs which have undergone significant growth in the recent past, a growth that relied to a far greater extent on young couples purchasing their first house. It also means that Ratoath will soon probably experience some of the problems which are associated with an increasing adolescent population. Information on the age of children could only be gathered in an indirect way. One question asked as part of the interviews yielded information about sons and daughters living at home and another question asked about the number of children aged 12 years or under. The data gathered made it possible to estimate that only 87 of the 372 children reported by the respondents (that is to say roughly a quarter of them) were aged over 12.

Table 2: Age structure of respondents

Age categories	Percentage of respondents
19–25 years of age	3.6
26–39 years of age	59.8
40–55 years of age	29.9
> 55 years of age	6.7

3.1.2 Family composition

The family profiles of the sample point to a highly homogenous population, owing to the fact that the great majority (86 per cent) of respondents are married. Only a small proportion of respondents stated that they were living with a partner (4 per cent) or separated (one per cent). This does not fully correspond to the profile given in the 2002 Census of Population for the Ratoath electoral division (DED). From the latter it can be estimated that 67 per cent of adult residents were married and 3.6 per cent separated. The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that our survey sample was not drawn from the whole Ratoath DED, because it excluded townlands at some distance from Ratoath village. This survey's sample therefore seems to exaggerate the homogenous nature of marital status and family type in Ratoath.

The conventional nature of Ratoath families was further highlighted by the fact that the vast majority of respondents described the composition of their households as 'two parents with dependent children' (75 per cent compared to the 59 per cent identified for the Ratoath DED in the Census). At the same time, one-fifth of these households had no children or no children living at home – this represents a fairly atypical or new family type. This figure corresponds quite closely to that given for the Ratoath electoral division in the 2002 Census of Population.

Table 3: Marital status of respondents

Marital status	Percentage of respondents
Married	86.4
Living as married with partner	4
Separated	1
Widowed, never married	8.6

3.1.3 Labour force participation

The family type also depends on the work status of respondents. The labour force participation rate of Ratoath women (at 58 per cent) appears to be somewhat higher than the national average of 48 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2002). This probably reflects the relatively young age of the sample. However, 57 per cent of employed women in our survey were working part time, compared to 31 per cent nationally. The proportion of women engaged in full-time home duties (35 per cent) corresponded quite closely to the national average.

Table 4: Labour force participation of women respondents

Forms of labour-force participation	Percentage of women respondents
Working full-time	25.2
Working part-time	31.8
Full-time home duties	34.6
Other	8.4

This work pattern is closely related to childcare conditions and strategies. Sixty-eight per cent of the households have one or more young children living in their households, and childcare is a crucial issue for these households. On the Monday preceding the interview, when not at school, most of the children were cared for at home by a parent or relative. Only one-third of children under six years attended a nursery, crèche or pre-school between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. Parents, and particularly mothers, seemed to have adopted a strategy of not working if they had very young children or working part time if they had children of school-going age.

Examining the Ratoath sample in terms of households' participation in the labour force (Gray, Corcoran and Peillon, 2003) shows that the 'breadwinner-homemaker' model is the most prevalent (32 per cent of all householders). The next most common pattern, at 27 per cent of households, is a combination of the male in full-time employment with the female doing part-time work. 'Dual income' households, where both partners work full time, comprised only 19 per cent of all households. This household structure is clearly linked to the stage of development of children.

Almost half of all households with children of primary school age and younger have adopted a 'breadwinner-homemaker' strategy. Amongst families with older children, particularly where the children have reached secondary school age, a greater strategy of female part-time working is noticeable. In Ireland as a whole, while 43 per cent of all families with pre-school children regularly relied on non-parental care in 2002, only 27 per cent of these families availed of the service of a crèche or Montessori school. Throughout the state, 29 per cent of families relied on a paid carer and 31 per cent relied on unpaid relatives to care for their children (Central Statistics Office, 2003). In Ratoath, at least half of all families rely on crèche facilities when their children are not cared for in the home, and this is probably a reflection of their relatively high social status.

Table 5: Family types, in terms of labour force participation

Labour force participation	*Percentage of respondents*
Both working full time	19.9%
One working full time, the other with full-time home duties	33.7%
One working full time, the other working part time	27.5%
Other	18.8%

3.1.4 Socio-economic profile
Ratoath residents are characterised by a very distinctive socio-economic profile, with the majority belonging to Class 2 in the Social Class typology of the Census of Population. This class remains clearly distinct from the old, conventional professions (which are not highly represented in Ratoath at only 10 per cent of respondents) and mainly includes managerial and highly technical occupations (many of the respondents were employed in the information technology sector). These professions probably come very close to what is often referred to as the 'new middle class'. The latter corresponds to the growing number of individuals, with a high level of education, employed in service sectors such as information technology, finance, health, education, etc. It also differs, by its status and access to wealth, from the lower middle-

class, which includes more subordinate and routine occupations. Manual workers accounted for only 17 per cent of the sample.

Table 6: Socio-economic structure of gainfully occupied respondents

Occupational category	Percentage of respondents
Professional workers (Class I)	10.3
Managerial and Technical (Class II)	59.3
Non-manual (Class III)	13.1
Skilled manual (Class IV)	11.7
Semi-skilled, unskilled (Class V and VI)	5.5

Note: Class numbers refer to the social class categories of the 2002 Census of Population

3.1.5 Implications of population profile for level of social resources available

The profile of the Ratoath sample, which is representative of the suburban core of Ratoath (as it does not include the townlands within Ratoath parish and electoral division), probably influences the level of social resources available in the locality. The relatively recent character of many of its housing development militates against a high level of social capital. It is reasonable to assume that it takes time to develop social capital in a locality, and that older suburbs have generated the 'infrastructure' of social relations as well as established ways of responding to local problems. They have developed a tradition which facilitates collective action. One is likely to record a low level of social capital in Ratoath, mainly because of its youth. Other features of the Ratoath profile point in the opposite direction. The dominant socio-economic composition of Ratoath residents, the age structure and the stage in the family life-cycle of most residents have been associated with a high level of social participation and civic engagement (Bell and Force, 1956; Scott, 1957; Babchuck and Booth, 1969; Knoke and Thomson, 1977). One needs to keep in mind these features when interpreting the findings concerned with the level of social resources in Ratoath.

3.2. Belonging and identification with the locality

Identification with a place constitutes an important resource for local social life. It requires that the residents identify what is distinctive about the locality and feel that they are in some way related to, or participate in, this identity. Respondents had a great deal of difficulty dealing with the question asking them to define Ratoath as a place, and they sometimes struggled to think of something. They referred mainly to the village atmosphere (52 per cent) and 'country feel' (39 per cent), perhaps associated with the quietness of the place (19 per cent). They also mentioned the fact that it was changing (46 per cent). The third main theme identified related to the friendliness (32 per cent) of the place and its community sense (21 per cent).[3] The issue of identity was brought to the fore in a focus group involving members of the Active Age Group. These older residents saw Ratoath in the past essentially as a village which they associated with big farms and hunting. They stressed the significance of the Fairyhouse racecourse as a source of identity and pride for the community in general; for example, on Easter Monday, the Grand National was run at Fairyhouse and the people of the village would whitewash their houses for the occasion. These same residents also stated their allegiance to County Meath, indicating in this way an identity clearly distinct from Dublin. But children growing up in Ratoath had some difficulty in responding to questions regarding their primary identity. Many simply did not see Ratoath as the countryside, and they regarded themselves as city people: they measured the urban character of the place by the density of housing. Others pointed to the existence of fields around the village and argued for the rural nature of Ratoath, proudly referring to themselves as 'boggers'. It should be noted, however, that this ambiguity in the identity of Ratoath is itself patterned according to the place of residence within Ratoath. Those who lived outside the housing estates and in more rural, detached residences identified themselves more definitely as country people and expressed allegiance to County Meath rather than Dublin.

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[3] A heritage group has been formed and conducts some research into the history of Ratoath and what concretely remains of this past. Ratoath possesses a limited historical heritage in the form of buildings or physical features. Its heritage is mostly to be found in the memories of local residents, particularly the older ones. Heritage relates in that way to features and markers of the locality as they were experienced and as they are remembered. The group plans to publish a book on Ratoath heritage, very much along this line of memories of living in the place.

3.2.1 Level of attachment

The level of attachment to the place is not particularly strong. Although only 21 per cent of the residents stated no attachment to the place, those strongly attached to Ratoath represented less than one third (31.7 per cent). The limited sense of belonging is partly related to the newness of the place. After all, half the population in the core of Ratoath had resided there for less than five years and it takes time to develop this sense of belonging and attachment to a place. However, residents may not stay sufficiently long in Ratoath to acquire this sense of belonging. Ratoath experiences large population flows, not only involving incomers but also people moving out of Ratoath, and many residents listed in the register have already moved on.

The difficulty in identifying Ratoath as a distinctive place also militates against a strong sense of belonging to the locality. The way residents define Ratoath, plus the features they like about it, could apply to many localities: the rural feel of a village, a quiet and friendly community. The tendency to identify with the estate rather than with the locality as a whole also plays a role. For children, housing estates are the place where they have most of their friends. Many respondents in the survey express a similar attachment to the housing estate: they like their house, they like their neighbours, they like their estates. But this strong attachment is not always extended to the locality as a whole.

Finally, local attachment may be related to the balance of satisfaction about the place reflected in what the residents like or dislike. The likes and dislikes of local residents correspond quite closely to the way they define the place. The most liked features were that Ratoath has retained a countryside feel (28 per cent) while located close to the city (22 per cent). Friendliness (19 per cent) and community sense (20 per cent) were also much identified and the peaceful (15 per cent) and safe (11 per cent) character of Ratoath was also appreciated by local residents. The disliked features were reflective of the transitions which Ratoath was experiencing. These features included the lack of facilities (25 per cent), particularly for children (12 per cent), traffic (28 per cent) and the state of the roads (13 per cent), and a lack of appropriate public transport (15 per cent). 'Excessive' development (19 per cent) will, of course, remain a feature of the locality, at least for some time.

One should not assume that the expressed likes or dislikes about the locality are related to the sense of belonging to, or identifying

with, it. A survey in Chicago (reported in Gerson et al, 1977) found that many residents stated that they felt attached to their neighbourhood, although they did not particularly like it. But no significant association was found between the likes and dislikes of Ratoath residents about their place and their sense of belonging. A link was registered between the type of estate and attachment to the place: those residing in a council estate or not in a housing estate at all expressed a stronger sense of belonging (contingency coefficient 0.246, significant at the .013 level). One would have thought that this relationship is accounted for by the length of residence, itself strongly associated with the sense of belonging. In fact, when controlling for age, it was found that among Ratoath residents of at least five years standing, those living in the council estate were far more likely than residents in private estates to express a strong sense of belonging: 75 per cent of residents of council estates stated this strong attachment, as opposed to just over 25 per cent of old residents in private estates. The stronger sense of attachment to Ratoath which was recorded among residents in the local authority estates is possibly related to the procedure for allocating local authority housing: most applicants have to reach the top of the waiting list and are likely to come from Meath county or even the Ratoath area. This re-establishes the relevance of the length of residence for generating a sense of belonging to the locality. Furthermore, when the estate type was controlled, no significant relationship was observed among private estate residents between length of residence and sense of attachment to the place.

3.3 Networks of social support

Personal networks of social support are those people to whom we turn when we need help of one kind or another, or even for socialising – these personal networks constitute a crucial resource to residents in their daily lives. It has been suggested that such networks are moving away from family and kin ties, and revolve more around neighbours, friends and colleagues (Wellman, 1999) and are no longer focused on the locality. The survey has generated information on such networks in Ratoath, and one can elaborate a profile of such close relationships. These informal networks, with a mean size of 5.33, appear small by international standards. Some technical reasons may account for this feature (for example, the stress which was placed in the interviews on naming those people

who really matter for respondents). Table 7 gives the distribution of such networks according to the number to people (referred to as ties) in the network.

Table 7: Distribution of networks according to the number of ties

Number of Ties	Distribution of networks
None	13 (7%)
1–4	74 (37%)
4–8	78 (39%)
9–12	35 (18%)

More significant perhaps is the actual composition of personal networks. Table 8 presents the information about the distribution of types of tie and indicates the importance of neighbours and family in such networks. For instance, the second column indicates that, for the study's 200 respondents (each with her/his own personal network of social support), 187 personal networks included no ties with colleagues, 13 networks had a small number of ties with colleagues (between 1 and 4 ties), and no personal network of social support comprised a high number of ties with colleagues (between 5 and 12 ties).

Table 8: Distribution of types of tie

Number of ties	Colleagues	Family	Neighbours	Friends
0 tie	187	74	70	110
1–4 ties	13	107	98	78
5–12 ties	0	19	32	12

The mean number of the respective types of ties per network clearly indicates that the family retains its importance in personal networks of social support (1.7 ties per network on average), although it lags behind neighbourly ties (2.23 ties per network on average). Friends matter less (with 1.08 ties per network on average). The same conclusion is reached by calculating the proportion of the respective types of tie:

- 5.6 per cent of all ties recorded are with work colleagues
- 32.5 per cent of all recorded ties are with family
- 41.2 per cent of all recorded ties are with neighbours
- 20.7 per cent of all recorded ties are with friends.

Personal networks revolve mainly around neighbours and family and friends (to a lesser extent); work colleagues play practically no role in this respect. This corresponds broadly to the pattern of relationships observed by Gordon (1977) in his study of women in two areas of Cork city. One should also note that a significant number of networks are homogenous, that is to say exclusively composed of one type of tie:

- 35 such networks are entirely neighbour oriented, while 59 include no neighbours at all
- 15 networks are entirely family oriented, while 62 include no family connections at all
- 10 networks are entirely friendship oriented, while 97 include no friends at all.

Part of the debate about personal networks relates to the extent to which they are centred locally or not. It has been suggested that personal networks are decreasingly rooted in the locality. This would mean that residents depend less and less on other local residents and that integration into the locality becomes in a sense irrelevant or of lesser importance for the social life of individuals. Furthermore, the Ratoath survey investigates a very new suburb, and should point to a low local orientation (as residents would have retained their family and friendship ties from their previous residence). In fact, the results do not uphold such a view. Close to two-thirds of the respondents' ties are local. Furthermore, the data in Table 9 point to the fact that local ties are predominant in 62 per cent of the respondents' support networks:

Table 9: Predominance of local ties in respondents' support networks

Percentage of local ties	Percentage of ties in overall support network
0–24%	25 (17%)
25–49%	32 (19%)
50–74%	37 (20%)
>75%	80 (42%)

Personal networks of social support remain very strongly local with about two-thirds of these networks composed of a majority of local ties. The locality still acts as the main focus of social integration and neighbours play a significant part in this. However, one records a significant statistical association between the size and the local orientation of networks. This means that residents' networks which are predominantly local tend to remain small, while networks which include a low number of local ties are larger in size.

3.4. Social participation

The extent to which a locality or neighbourhood acquires a collective social existence depends in part on the cooperation of local residents and their ability to address a range of issues or perform a set of services. This is achieved mainly through the activity of voluntary associations within the locality. Overall, 37 local voluntary organisations were identified during interviews with residents.[4] The 37 organisations in Ratoath were classified into broad categories indicated in Table 10. The bulk of voluntary associations active in Ratoath were made up of sports clubs, followed by recreational, and resident associations. This classification should be seen as ad hoc and does not follow any particular rationale. Nevertheless, it underlines the predominance of organisations which provide services that are availed of, and are in fact purchased, by individuals or families.

Table 10: Main categories of voluntary organisations in Ratoath

Type of voluntary organisation	Number of organisations
Charitable	3
Political	1
Recreational, leisure	11
Quality of life in locality	7
Religious	2
Parents	1
Sports	12

[4] This, incidentally, does not compare well with the density of voluntary associations noted in other localities: in Togher, 100 clubs and societies have been registered and 40 in Moyross (Ó Cinnéide, 1999). In Ballymun, 90 groups were active in 1987 (Power, 1997).

The survey found a far lesser number of organisations which articulate and promote interests or goals relevant to the locality as a whole and which, for this reason, constitute a public good. This issue has been raised in general sociological debates with Levi, in particular, wondering how membership of leisure clubs is associated with, or leads to, civic engagement:

> My major concern in this essay is with the mechanisms by which membership in such groups as bird-watching societies and soccer clubs leads to a higher level of civic engagement, democratic politics, and high quality government performance. Putnam argues that the act of involvement in secondary (really tertiary) associations produces civic communities whose members engage in collective action for mutual benefit and who demand government responsiveness. Participation in soccer clubs, choral groups, and bird-watching societies creates social capital in the form of dense networks of civic engagement, norms of generalised reciprocity, and generalised trust. In the civic communities, individuals become citizens who will act with and trust others, even when they do not know them personally. This may be a description of what is, but it is not a theory that identifies the mechanisms of production, maintenance, and growth of social capital (1996: 46).

This does not invalidate the view that the provision of individual services contributes to the public good: offering sport or recreational activities to local children, even on the basis of a membership fee, can greatly enhance the quality of life and bring together many people who would otherwise have little opportunity to meet and interact. It remains that access to this service stays 'private' and individualised, and represents a public good only in an indirect way.

Most respondents were aware of voluntary organisations active in Ratoath with only 14 per cent not giving at least one relevant name. Local sports clubs enjoy a high profile, not only the GAA and the local soccer club, but also other sports activities recently established in the area such as martial arts. The interviews invited respondents to indicate how they became aware of the existence of these local organisations. Thirty respondents stated that they obtained this knowledge through formal channels such as leaflets (12), newsletters (12) and canvassing (12). Informal channels were

slightly more prominent, with respondents getting this knowledge from friends (10), neighbours (18) and family (18). But many (54) obtained this information through various channels. It appears, on balance, that informal channels play a more significant role in the awareness of the existence of local organisations.

Sixty-seven (34 per cent) respondents indicated that they belonged to a local organisation. Most had joined only one such association, with only 10 per cent participating in more than one. The figure for enlisted residents (34 per cent or roughly one third of all respondents) would rise sharply if membership of all voluntary organisations (not only local) had been included. A number of studies of American neighbourhoods have sought information about membership in local organisations and pointed to a level of around 30 per cent (Babchuck and Booth, 1969). Ratoath conforms to these findings but at present it is not possible to rate the figure as high or low (compared for instance to established suburbs, urban neighbourhoods or even rural localities). The empirical evidence remains contested. Early studies (Martin, 1956) recorded a lower rate of social participation in suburbs. For other scholars in the field, suburban residents are particularly prone joiners in voluntary associations (Gans, 1967). Others simply register no significant differences between urban and suburban neighbourhoods (Monti et al, 2003).

These statements, which relate mainly to the American context, must be set in a broader comparative context. Ireland does not fare well in comparative terms. A recent study placed it close to the bottom of a list of twelve countries in relation to the levels of membership of voluntary organisations (with a rate of 49 per cent in 1990). It ranked slightly higher for volunteering, with 26 per cent of the adult population indicating that they have performed some voluntary work (de Hart and Decker, 1999: 77). A more positive light is placed on Ireland in a 2003 report by the National Economic and Social Forum which found that: '… over a quarter of Irish adults are members of sports and recreation community or voluntary organisations compared to only just under one in six on average across European countries' (NESF, 2003: 62). The European Values Survey recorded, for Ireland in 1999, a 33 per cent rate of volunteering among the adult population (Fahey, Hayes and Sinnott, 2005). It remains difficult to draw definite conclusions from such figures, because membership and volunteering are often

measured in very different ways. However, a membership rate of around one-third of the residents in Ratoath does not suggest an exceptionally low level of participation.

If one looks at the total membership of local voluntary associations, which includes both single and multiple memberships, the number of residents rises to 101 and is distributed in the manner indicated in Table 11.

Table 11: Membership of the Ratoath sample, by types of voluntary organisation

Type of voluntary organisation	Number of resident members
Charitable	2
Political	1
Recreational, leisure	17
Quality of life in locality	36
Religious	2
Parents	5
Sports	35
Other	3

3.4.1 Rationale for participation in voluntary organisations

In his quasi-classical statement 'Urbanism as a way of life', Wirth drew on mainstream classical sociology to portray the city as a place of impersonal, superficial and transitory social contacts, declaring:

> Being reduced to a stage of impotence as an individual, the urbanite is bound to exert himself by joining with others or similar interests into organised groups to obtain his ends. This ends in the enormous multiplication of voluntary organisations directed toward as great a variety of objectives as there are human needs and interests (Wirth, 1938: 22).

This shift to formal voluntary organisations has found many echoes in the literature. A decline in the strength of family and kin relationships, along with a weakening of informal networks of social support, would lead to an increased participation in formal voluntary associations. The reverse approach is also advanced: namely, that the level of participation in voluntary associations

depends to a great extent on informal group participation with both types of participation said to be interdependent (Axelrod, 1956). An early review of the literature on participation in voluntary associations concluded that people with many friendship links are more likely to join voluntary organisations (Scott, 1957). This approach is generally supported by the social network literature that views informal links as resources that promote participation in formal organisations. Oliver (1984) argues that the presence of close friends or relatives in one's local area is a good predictor of active participation (see also McAdam and Paulsen, 1993).

In-depth interviews of local residents in Ratoath who are involved in various ways in community life provide some insight in this respect. Several interviewees accounted for participation in, and volunteering for, associations in the following terms:

A – 'I think people mostly get involved when their kids get in some of the sporting groups. I think it kind of centers around the kids. The needs of their kids, they get involved in the school activities when the kids are at school, then they move on to the secondary school. When the kids are into soccer.'

B – 'It depends on the issue. It depends on the time of your life when you stand. There are a lot of people who are very keen, especially for young people. Because they have an interest in sport and because they have young people of their own. There are others who are interested in taking care of the elderly, because they see it from the point of view of their own parents.'

C – 'I would just be a parent. I would not be involved in training or anything, but just bring the kids to, say matches or whatever. That type of thing. [Your own children.] Sometimes other people. [So you would be mobilised on a regular basis.] Yes. I would. But I would not be involved in training or anything like that.'

However, participation in local organisations whose remit is more directly involved in public matters does not necessarily result in the satisfaction of the needs of various family members. This kind of activism is deeply rooted in networks of social relations, particularly of friendship:

D – 'I think when a friend asks you as well, it can give you the confidence to go out there may be and do it, that you would not otherwise have.'

E – 'A friend of mine … got me involved into that.'

Many surveys have found that membership in voluntary associations in general is related to a range of factors such as gender, age, level of education, class, religion, home ownership (Bell and Force, 1956; Scott, 1957; Babchuk and Booth, 1969; Knoke and Thomson, 1977). The Rataoth survey's findings did not register significant correlations between membership of local voluntary organisations and a range of factors that are conventionally linked to higher/lower membership of voluntary organisations such as gender, work status, last residence or future residence, even the number of young children in the household. The survey's key finding points to the great importance of individual insertion in social support networks that are rooted locally; that is, membership in voluntary organisations depends on the number of local ties.

3.4.2 Association between residents' networks of social support and membership of voluntary organisations

The Ratoath survey records a definite association between the actual number of local ties in the personal network of social support and the number of memberships in local voluntary organisations.[5] Membership of voluntary organisations is significantly associated with the inclusion of residents into networks of social support, but only to the extent that these network ties are locally rooted. This finding may be interpreted in several ways. Local ties produce a commitment to the locality, which may express itself in terms of social participation. Alternatively, friends and neighbours exercise a direct pressure to join and participate in various organisations.

Some residents are far more embedded in the locality than others, either because of their work or their personal circumstances. For instance, some people commute a long distance to work and this may influence the extent to which they can participate in the formal life of the locality. Martin (1956) suggested that commuters were less likely to join voluntary associations and informal groupings. In more recent years Putnam contended: '… increased commuting time among the

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[5] R= 269, significant at the level of 0.01.

residents lowers average levels of civic involvement – even among non-commuters' (2000: 213).

The Ratoath study found that the commuting time of Ratoath residents is not related to their civic engagement. However, commuting time negatively influences their membership of local voluntary associations that provide a service.[6] This would suggest that those who commute long distances are no less engaged in the civic life of the locality, but that the act of commuting does curtail the extent to which they can join leisure and recreational associations. Private leisure time, rather than public engagement, suffers from commuting. Some residents are also more present in the locality, mainly because they do not typically leave it for work. This includes retired or unemployed people and, more particularly, those residents (practically always women) who stay at home to look after children and family. One would expect to find a significant relationship between the work status of respondents and their civic engagement: but none is observed in Ratoath.

People can become members of local voluntary organisations through various processes. Informal networks sometimes activate membership of such organisations with neighbours, friends or even family encouraging or even urging such membership. Members may also follow more formal mechanisms, such as canvassing or a direct approach. In relation to Ratoath, formal and informal channels played an equal role in explaining their membership of organisations. It is interesting to note however, that thirteen respondents stated that they themselves approached the organisations (self-approach). This points to an act of individual agency and does not depend, at least not directly, on either contextual or structural factors, formal or informal.

Membership of local voluntary associations remains relatively limited, in the sense that only a minority joins them. But this membership does not represent, for many of the respondents, a mere formality. Forty respondents (that is around two-thirds of the joiners) are actively involved in the associations of which they are members. For the whole sample, this means that roughly 20 per cent are actively engaged in such voluntary organisations and typically spend a few hours every month performing various tasks. Membership of voluntary organisations in Ratoath is largely associated with volunteerism, meaning that while only a third of

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[6] Kendall tau-b= 0.107, significant at the 0.05 level.

local residents participate in voluntary associations those who do so are quite active members.

Table 12: Activities of members of Ratoath voluntary organisations

Activities	*Number of participant residents*
Attending meetings	24
Fundraising	18
Committee members	8
Distributing newsletters	3
Secretarial work	11
Organising events	13
Participating in events	9

3.4 Social activism: local problems and how they are addressed

The residents of Ratoath frequently mentioned four problems:

1 traffic
2 infrastructure
3 lack of basic amenities
4 poor primary school facilities.

Half of the respondents identified traffic and infrastructure problems. The heavy traffic passing through Ratoath (including commuters but also numerous lorries which use Ratoath as a shortcut) is compounded by the fact that one gains access to Ratoath through what have remained country roads. Numerous accidents are reported, and a young girl was killed on the road while the survey was being conducted. Many respondents also identified the lack of basic infrastructure, such as public lighting and pavements, as a problem. The number of housing estates has multiplied in the last few years, but the basic infrastructure has not been put in place to sustain this growth.

Numerous references were made to the lack of basic amenities. Close to a third of respondents stressed the general lack of amenities, and another quarter pointed to the lack of amenities for children (play areas, etc) as a major issue. It is arguable that the development of the area has taken place without sufficient forward

planning, with the result that the level of services that were sufficient for a small village cannot cope with the rapidly growing population. For instance there was no bank branch in Ratoath and, at the time of the survey, only one ATM operated in the area, in a petrol service station. A purpose-built small supermarket was being constructed. An associated issue was the inadequacy of the primary school facilities (evidenced by the over reliance on temporary prefabricated structures to house pupils) and the absence of a secondary school in Ratoath.

Other problems identified by respondents, albeit less frequently, include:

- overdevelopment of the area (14 per cent)
- inadequacy of public transport (12 per cent)
- vandalism/general security issues (3 per cent).

It is clear that local residents have clearly defined the main problems in the locality and talked about them widely. Problems were widely talked about in the community, with the majority (85 per cent) of residents indicating that they had talked about them with others. A majority of respondents stated that they talked about such problems with their neighbours (71 per cent) and friends (60 per cent). They raised the issues with canvassers in 40 per cent of cases. Some 24 per cent of respondents had discussed these problems with shopkeepers. Although much talked about, local residents did not necessarily try to address the identified problems. Practically all respondents (95 per cent) expressed awareness that some action had taken place in the past to address the problems they mentioned. The most typical action of which people were aware was that of approaching local politicians (62 per cent), followed by the collection and delivery of petitions to the relevant authorities (mainly to Meath County Council) (41 per cent). Thirteen per cent of respondents stated that actual delegations had been dispatched to meet county councillors, but demonstrations rarely occurred in Ratoath. Although nearly half of the respondents (47 per cent) declared that they had done nothing in relation to such problems, more than half of the local residents stated that they engaged in some kind of action. This action consisted mainly of approaching local politicians (22 per cent) and the signing of petitions. These responses indicate a rather high level of concern

about the problems, but also a rather low level of activism amongst community residents.

3.6 Local civic efficacy

Social agents come together, adjust their preferences and pursue the goals that have been collectively defined. This occurs only to the extent that such social agents feel confident that their actions may have an effect and bring about results. In effect, they must experience some kind of empowerment – a subjective feeling that they exercise some control and can bring about a change to the situation which they find themselves in. This is what is referred to as civic competence – 'Community competence can be thought of as the problem solving ability of a community that arises through collective effort' (Lochner et al, 1999: 267). It points to a sense of collective efficacy, when the members of a group believe in their overall ability to act effectively

This paper has already noted that about half of the study's respondents in Ratoath declared that they had done nothing to address the local problems which they identified. This suggests that half the population in Ratoath did not feel sufficiently empowered to act either on their own or with others. This inactivity already manifests some kind of distance, an unwillingness to be mobilised. However, the really significant information relates to the weak sense of civic efficacy of those who had done something to address the problems that they had identified. The respondents' action (when it took place) was not perceived as very effective. Of those who stated that they did something about local problems, two-thirds (68 per cent) did not think that their action had improved the situation. This points to a low sense of empowerment and political efficacy. These feelings were also expressed during the in-depth interviews of some local residents who had actively participated in the public life of the locality. Some had been involved in the past, but were no longer – this withdrawal from civic engagement was not simply caused by a perceived failure to get results or by a sense of futility, at least not in a direct way.[7] This alienation from local life has been generated, instead, by bitter internal conflicts which derived from a failure to find an agreed basis for collective action. The story of Ratoath's Combined

[7] Oliver (1984) found that activists express more pessimistic views than non-activists about the prospect for collective action in their neighbourhood. Lack of success would not, in that sense, deter them.

Residents' Association, as reconstituted on the basis of a series of in-depth interviews and told in Chapter 4, clearly points in that direction.

3.7 Relations between social resources

The previous sections provided an overview of those social resources which in Ratoath sustain civic engagement in the locality, namely:

- identification with and attachment to the place (belonging)
- ties of social support (personal networks)
- membership of local voluntary associations (participation)
- local activism
- sense of civic efficacy.

These resources should not be viewed as separate features which independently of each other add up to form some type of 'social capital'.

> Social capital is composed of various elements. The relevant literature postulates that the different elements are quite closely linked and support each other. The presence of a particular feature of social capital would generate other forms of social capital. For instance, social participation, defined in terms of membership of voluntary organisations, is said to be related to other forms of social capital: 'At the broadest level, we find a robust connection between membership in associations and the various indicators of social capital (such as political involvement, generalised trust)' (Stolle and Rochon 1999: 205; see also Billiet and Cambré, 1999).

The Ratoath survey investigated various aspects of social capital and offers an ideal opportunity to examine this issue. Furthermore, the question has policy implications if one is interested, for instance, in maximising the ability of localities to address collectively the problems they face. The following conclusions are based on the statistical measurement of associations of the relevant variables (along with appropriate tests of significance) and give some idea of how such factors relate to each other:

- attachment to the locality is statistically associated only with the sense of efficacy
- the extent of local ties is related to participation, activism, but not to local attachment or political efficacy
- membership of local voluntary associations is related to network ties and activism, but not to attachment to place or efficacy
- local activism is related to the local orientation of support networks and social participation
- political efficacy is only related to attachment to the locality.

The picture is quite clear: all core elements of social capital (local ties, membership of voluntary organisations and activism) are related to each other, although only in a weak fashion.[8] This simply means that the statistical significance of these associations is established, but the strength of the association remains in most cases rather low. The only exception to this mutual reinforcement is given by 'attachment to the locality', which is not influenced by the other elements.

The interconnectedness of all these social resources which generate and sustain civic engagement implies that it may be possible to intervene in order to avoid vicious circles or, on the contrary, to produce 'virtuous spirals'. If one increases the level of one type of social resource, this increase will reverberate and increase the level of other social resources. But if, for some reason, a particular type of resource is allowed to become depleted (for instance, the low level of civic competence in Ratoath), this depletion will have a negative impact on the level of other resources and lead to a decrease in the overall amount of social capital in the locality. The level of interconnectedness of the various social resources does not, in that sense, represent a purely academic question. It occupies quite a central place in the analysis of Ratoath findings and its policy implications. This analysis is undertaken in chapters 4 and 5.

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[8] Attachment to place/efficacy (Kendall's tau-c .126, at the 0.43 level of significance). Network ties/membership number of local ties (Kendall's tau-c .184, at the .013 level of significance). Network ties/activism number of neighbour ties (Kendall's tau-c .154, at the .05 level of significance). Number of local ties (Kendall's tau-c .250, at the .001 level of significance). Membership/ activism (Kendall's tau-c .214, at the .001 level of significance).

3.8 Conclusion: a low level of social capital

No other similar study has been conducted in the Irish context which would help us decide if the level of social capital in Ratoath can be considered high or low. The survey points nonetheless to a relatively low level of those social resources which allow localities to develop a rich collective life and cooperate in attaining their goal of sustaining the local quality of life, as they define it. On the basis of the survey findings, the profile of social capital in Ratoath is summarised in the following way:

- moderate attachment to the locality
- strong local orientation of personal support networks
- middling participation in local voluntary associations (these organisations mainly provide individual services and are less likely to address public issues)
- low level of activism
- limited repertoire of collective action
- low level of civic empowerment.

It is difficult to formulate meaningful conclusions about the ability of suburbs to generate a level of social capital which enables such localities to engage in the process of defining the 'public good' for the locality and to effectively cooperate in pursuing collective goals. Ratoath constitutes a young suburb and it may take time for the social capital of the locality to be formed. Its remote location means that it must to a large extent improvise in forming this social capital and can hardly draw on a tradition of collective action. The full comparative *New Urban Living* study of the four suburban locations, each representing a distinctive type of suburb, will allow this issue to be more fully addressed. That broader study poses a central question: does a type of urban development which relies on the growth of suburbs, and even on the creation of totally new suburbs, produce forms of urban living which are viable from a social and civic point of view? The difficulty that Ratoath experiences in generating sufficient social capital raises the issue of how local governance is linked with the broad institutional framework of both local and state government.

4

Weak local governance and institutional void

4.1 Introduction

With the publication of the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020* (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002), urban and suburban development came to the fore as a policy issue. However, the Strategy does not refer to suburbs as such. It states that the creation of completely new cities or towns is not required and that a key aim is to minimise 'urban sprawl'.[9] Instead, existing urban space will be used more systematically and a higher density encouraged: it is envisaged that this will happen through the consolidation of existing settlements, the re-development of central urban areas and the re-allocation of under-utilised land and buildings. Nevertheless, it was estimated that in 2000 the number of households in the state was about 1.25 million; the number of households in 2020 is estimated at about 1.9 million on current trends (Department of the Environment and Local Government 2002: 32). It is difficult to imagine that this will not involve the growth of suburbs, of which a large proportion will be situated around Dublin.

The National Spatial Strategy seeks to generate sustainable, inclusive settlements which enhance the quality of life. It endeavours to promote 'socially integrated communities'. This, of course, cannot be achieved solely through a spatial policy which outlines how people should be geographically distributed. Indeed, achieving such an objective involves not only a particular type of government (that is, the set of structures and institutions according to which decisions are made), but a form of governance (which implies a wider range of practices and mechanisms) through which local residents and various authorities and agencies are related to each other. In the National Spatial Strategy this link is viewed mainly in terms of partnerships between central government, local authorities and the

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[9] Urban sprawl represents a codeword for the kind of suburban and peri-urban development which has taken place around the main cities in Ireland in the recent past.

private sector. Ministerial departments, relevant semi-state bodies, regional and local authorities and the private sector (particularly developers) represent the main agencies implicated in this process. The emphasis is placed on the mobilisation of local interests and, in this context, the role of local authorities becomes the

> Mobilisation of the appropriate civic, business and community interests to establish a consensus on the objectives for the gateway or hub and future development issues … The development and implementation of future national investment proposals will provide opportunities for local authorities and other partners, such as the private sector and local interest groups, to mobilise around the NSS proposals relating to the development of the gateways and hubs. The process of mobilisation will be critical to establish local consensus and commitment to the integrated spatial planning frameworks for the gateways and hubs (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002: 123).

The consultation which is advocated involves the usual agencies and groups – the central state, social partners, local and regional authorities and various interests groups. The role of the local authorities is to keep on board the various interests which emerge at a local level: they are meant to mobilise local interests behind projects of development which are, to a large extent, defined at the political centre. However, this vision does not allow for a political process within localities and for the political representation of such suburban localities/communities. With minimal democratic representation below the level of the county council, who can legitimately claim to represent the locality, define its interests, negotiate with the public authorities and cooperate or enter into partnership with various agencies?

In this paper, governance refers to the fact that decisions about localities cannot be subsumed under the heading of formal institutions of local government. Perhaps the following quotation catches the central thrust of the idea of governance:

> … the process of governance in complex societies is about much more than government. Successful governance, whether of a city, a nation-state, international relations, or economic processes almost always depends on the availability and mobilisation of

resources and actors beyond those that are formally part of government (Painter, 1997: 128).

Key participants in the process of local governance typically include the private sector, non-governmental organisations, various semi-public agencies and local associations. The many ties which bind local residents, patterns of cooperation, relations of trust, but also the unequal amounts of resources they can mobilise are part of the structure of governance. It would be tempting to postulate a close correspondence between government and political society on the one hand and governance and civil society on the other. But the significance of the concept of governance rests with its ability to overcome this kind of dualism. It points to the mutual involvement of civil and political society, of formal institutions and informal practices.

4.2 Local governance: an institutional void

If one takes seriously the view that local residents should be involved in the shaping of the place wherein they live, that they should be consulted about and participate in the decision-making process, that they are ultimately the arbiters and defenders of the quality of life in the locality, then one should be concerned with the findings in this study that most of those who have been active in some way in Ratoath considered that their action had not led to any particular improvements. In brief, local civil society is considerably weakened if it is not in a position to take charge, in some way, of its own destiny. The alienation of Ratoath residents is also expressed in their identification of a lack of infrastructure and a lack of amenities as key problems. Respondents repeatedly pointed to the unrelenting housing development in Ratoath, a development which had not been planned and was entirely market led and which they felt utterly powerless to control or regulate in any way.

This sense of alienation and powerlessness must also be related to another feature of Ratoath's collective life: that of its fragmentation. In the context of the questionnaire survey, some respondents stated that they felt strongly attached to their house, their neighbours and their estate, but did not feel particularly attached to Ratoath as a whole. A question about the respondents' awareness of local voluntary organisations revealed the existence of a now dormant, or even defunct, Combined Residents' Association. Information about this organisation was given in the form of asides; through the course

of the survey it became clear that some problem or difficulty was associated with this Association but it remained difficult to get clarification. The story of the Combined Residents' Association emerged at a later stage through the in-depth interviews of local residents involved in various ways in the civic life of the locality. This story is now told as the study's authors reconstructed it: not through the voice of any one particular respondent, but through putting all the pieces together in a tentative way.

Ratoath has developed since the mid-1990s. This development has mainly taken the form of private housing estates that have branched off one of the local roads leading to the village. This means that the estates are not actually visible from the road. Each estate had a residents' association, mainly for the purpose of looking after green areas and keeping an eye on surrounding new developments. The growth of Ratoath led to the creation of a Ratoath Action Group whose aim was to ensure a more balanced local development and to promote better amenities for the area. The Action Group was composed of a coalition of local businessmen, individuals involved in community development and also included some local politicians. This coalition bargained with the developers to obtain funds for local amenities and, for example, obtained from developers a number of significant benefits for the locality including donations for the soccer club, the Community Centre, the pitch and putt club, as well as a series of sites for a new community centre, a secondary school, a gardening centre for the elderly, etc.

About three or four years prior to this study, the residents' association of two large estates initiated a move to amalgamate the various residents' associations into one unified organisation. The newly formed Combined Residents' Association adopted an 'anti-further-development' orientation: it would object and oppose any new housing development in Ratoath. This was largely perceived as a fairly desperate effort to retain the rural character of Ratoath which the influx of so many new residents directly threatened. The following two quotations from respondents in the in-depth interviews illustrate this point:

'Because they felt that when they came here they bought into Ratoath as it was, which was a small community.'
'I think the problem before was, people bought houses, they bought into what they thought was the country living. And then

suddenly realised it was not going to be, it was going to be suburban living.'

This policy, or rather the forcefulness with which it was put across, was not unanimously accepted by local residents. The Association soon clashed with the Ratoath Action Group, which pursued a policy more favourable to controlled development (and the Action Group was denounced by some residents as politically motivated). Several residents' associations objected to the strong line taken by the Combined Residents' Association and withdrew from it. It prompted the formation of a Village Residents' Association, which covered the centre of Ratoath: prior to this confrontation, these long-time residents had never felt the need for their own residents' association. These residents now considered that decisions were being made without their participation. They needed a voice, to be heard at meetings: all the more so because they had in fact adopted a very different approach to the future of Ratoath and favoured continued development and improved infrastructure.

All this meant that the formation of the Combined Residents' Association crystallised the divergences which had emerged among Ratoath residents on the issue of development. The conflict quickly turned bitter and personal and shortly after its establishment the Combined Residents' Association became moribund, without actually lapsing. At the time of the survey, some reference was made to it, but more or less as something of the recent past and no longer active. Nearly a year afterwards, on the research team's return to Ratoath to conduct a series of in-depth interviews, it emerged that the Combined Residents' Association had been revived mainly because of the Witness concert organised at the Fairyhouse racing venue. The promoters of the concert approached the nearly defunct Combined Residents' Association, which they saw as the proper channel to distribute the free tickets for local residents.[10] Some residents felt at this stage that the combined organisation may have a useful role to play and should be revived.

All residents' associations, whatever their size, send one delegate to the meetings of the Combined Residents' Associations

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[10] The promoters of the concert had, in the past, given free tickets to Ratoath residents in an effort to overcome the objections which some residents had lodged against the holding of such an event so close to Ratoath. It must be said that this strategy worked quite well, helped by effective policing of the whole event by both the organisers and the gardaí.

and these delegates are mandated by their organisations to vote in a particular way. The fact that some of these associations represent only a handful of residents while others represent large estates does not seem to create difficulties. It was agreed from the start that the issue of development would not be considered by the newly revitalised organisation. Development had occurred and had to be accepted: the Combined Residents' Association would focus mainly on improving the general public infrastructure in Ratoath and regulate further development. Furthermore, the organisation agreed that it would not become involved in matters that are divisive within the locality and today operates mainly by reaching consensus. Asked to define priorities, more particularly for spending the developers' fund (the levy on the construction of houses, to be spent in the locality, on which local residents are consulted), the need for pavements in strategic parts of the 'village' was emphasised. For example, some residents supported the construction of a relief slip road around the village and the issue was discussed at a meeting of the Association. But the relief road had already emerged as a key issue in the past, because it passes through quite a large estate and practically splits it in two. As it stands, the road leads nowhere and finishes in a cul-de-sac, servicing only the very local traffic within the estate. But this would change dramatically if it became a relief road, or part of a ring road. Residents in this estate remain utterly opposed to such a relief road and have emphatically stated that they would oppose it. The Combined Residents' Association did not feel that it could support the construction of such a road, because of the presence of a minority strongly opposed to it. This means that the Combined Residents' Association expresses the views of Ratoath residents as long as they more or less agree with each other. It does not take a position on issues which remain highly divisive within the locality and which matter greatly for some residents: it took the '*decision not to do something*'. Admittedly, this was the only occasion when such an approach was adopted. It nonetheless points to an enduring sensitivity to the destructive impact of sharp community conflicts, and to the preference to avoid such situations.

The story of the Combined Residents' Association appears crucial if one is to understand the internal life of Ratoath. Faced with a range of problems, some of them quite serious (such as dangerous traffic), Ratoath has found it very difficult to speak with

one voice and articulate a coherent view of what constitutes the public good for the locality. The Combined Residents' Associations has managed to survive by limiting its role to consensual matters. It probably contributes to the articulation and aggregation of interests within the locality, but within fairly narrow boundaries. In the absence of any legal and institutional framework, which would facilitate such a task, it is left to the locality to devise its own structure of governance. But most localities, particularly new suburbs growing at a rapid pace, lack the resources – such as a tradition of local civic engagement, existing organisations, skills and expertise, etc – which would allow them to face such a challenge. They are confronted with an institutional void which they can hardly overcome on their own despite their best efforts.

The institutional void and the difficulty of overcoming it have been recorded in other, more established localities. Peace points to a similar process of fragmentation and to the absence of either an encompassing association or an agreed, coherent voice which can speak for the locality. His comments refer to the 'Inveresk village':

> At this stage the point to be stressed is that all current associations are task specific: they rarely assume goals other than those which generated their formation … The nearest Inveresk has come to this transpired when the newly arrived priest, unimpressed by this associational proliferation, organised what he called 'the community council' under the auspices of which others were expected to function. But its committee members were quickly derided as the 'priest's pets' (or worse), it exercises no wider influence, and the end result was simply to add one more group to those already in existence (2001: 88).

4.3 Parish and community: the waning of traditional governance

The absence of formal institutions of local government below the level of the county council did not in the past create a major problem. The parish is not, of course, an administrative unit and it plays no formal role in local government: nonetheless it provided a significant form of local governance in Ireland. The assimilation of local community and parish is deeply rooted:

> The body is the Catholic Church and the local communities are its parishes. (This is not in any way to imply that the organisation should be regarded as the only possible source of identification, but that it does provide us with a good-rule-of-thumb for identifying the likely boundaries) (Tierney, 1982: 86).

The parish offered a stable framework for working out issues at local level and for elaborating a coherent response to various local issues. This proved possible because of the authority of the local clergy, who were concerned not only with the spiritual welfare of their flock, but also with secular matters. The local clergy was certainly portrayed as an element of the 'ruling Trinity' in Eipper's study of Bantry. It successfully claimed to uphold the collective interest in a way that no other individuals or organisations could. The capacity of any group to present its views and interests as an expression of the common good constitutes, of course, a formidable resource: 'Because the Church purportedly represented the "community interest", it became necessary for opponents of the clergy to demonstrate that they too had "community's" interest at heart' (Eipper, 1986: 104). This legitimacy was not enjoyed in an automatic way, and priests had to establish their usefulness within the locality. Furthermore, the clergy sometimes faced opposition or failed to achieve their preferences. However, in general, having the local clergy's support helped overcome local opposition or apathy (that is, it helped to mobilise local residents). Such authority was legitimate in the sense that the vast majority of the parishioners and/or local residents supported the leading role given to the priest. Not only did many priests see themselves as 'community' leaders, chiefly in matters of development, but they also acted as arbiters of the various competing interests within the locality. Within the framework of the local parish, a process of interest articulation and aggregation took place in the locality – whatever its shortcomings. Some kind of definition of what constituted the public good for the locality emerged from this process, and the clergy sometimes facilitated the mobilisation of local residents in order to pursue such public good.

Collier (2001) analysed the disintegration of local governance within a parish framework in a rural context. His study focused on the parish of Kilmore in County Wexford and the implementation of the LEADER I programme for 'integrated rural development',

launched in 1993. The programme sought to induce rural development through an alliance of various groups and assumed the existence of an already established rural 'community' with which to work. Parish groups specially constituted to liaise with the programme quickly voiced 'local needs'. However, the whole Leader programme was not framed to uphold local autonomy, and it did not enhance the ability of the locality to determine its own future. Although community evokes local association, in Kilmore it lacked a clearly demarcated public space. The religious and political fields were largely undifferentiated in the community and their boundaries remained problematic. Priestly authority had dramatically weakened, mainly because of decreasing local financial resources and an increasing dependence on state subventions. The priest found it more and more difficult to crystallise the symbolic expression of a unified parish/community. Nevertheless, this public or rather communal space was still inhabited by voluntary groups and voluntary action. This is the response of one of the respondents in Collier's study, when it was suggested to him that voluntarism was fast declining:

> No I don't agree with that. Voluntarism is very strong in rural Ireland. It comes out of what I call the 'cultural Church'. Most voluntary groups come out of the Church but nowadays the Catholic Church has no role to play in what we are doing no more than the man on the moon! Voluntarism in Ireland is now culturally based. I was raised in voluntarism. My family naturally became involved in needs of the community. Today there must be a change in the old style meetings of the parish councils. Today it must be Decisions-Action-State, Bang-Bang-Bang … (Collier, 2001: 272).

The difficulty of converting a rural parish into a rural community and then into a partnership between public agencies, clergy and local associations was well illustrated in the context of Kilmore Quay by the construction of a community centre. The Stella Maris Centre officially opened in early 1996 under the management of the local Development Association's committee. It was meant to symbolise the integration of the locality around the successful partnership of state agencies, county authorities and local community; it revealed instead all the tensions that accompanied this undertaking. The

construction of a community centre further intensified the differentiation of the locality by generating a new status group (i.e. those closely involved in local voluntary activity) which endeavoured to define the public good of the community in association with a range of statutory bodies. The Community Centre was also effectively absorbed into the state's mechanism for distributing employment support funds, with little influence in this given to the original development group. In short, local rural development was determined by a close association between a small group of 'local residents' and public agencies. It did not enhance the autonomy of the locality and increasingly relied on trade-offs between professional state agencies and voluntary civic activism.

For many reasons the clergy is no longer in position to perform the function of interest aggregation. This is more so in emerging suburbs where many residents are not churchgoers; the clergy no longer commands the traditional authority of the past and parish boundaries have become blurred. Several parishes have been divided to cope with a dramatic influx of population. Roads and housing estates are allocated to respective parishes according to lines drawn on the map, which may not reflect any meaningful social or cultural clustering. The decline, and one could even say the decay, of the parish form of governance has produced a void that has been filled by an administrative or bureaucratic form of governance which has crystallised around various partnership schemes.

Although the void of local governance is no longer filled by the parish, one still detects a yearning for 'natural communities', for groups of people who live in the locality, identify with it and consider that they have a great deal in common with each other:

> Community is a popular word in Ireland. We like to think our society is made up of communities and permeated by a spirit of community. Public discussions assume that communities are good and desirable forms of social organisation. Those without community are said to live impoverished lives or are believed to be unstable and unreliable members of society. Leaders of church and state favour community responses to social problems like poverty, unemployment and crime. Local residents combine to defend the interests of their community against outsiders, whether property developers, roads engineers, or Travellers (Tovey and Share, 2003: 107).

The social sciences literature has generally rejected this notion of community as a name for localities, because of the in-built assumption that it carries of consensus. What about the deep conflicts of interests which characterise such groups? Should we ignore the structure of power which shapes them? According to which mechanisms is the public good defined in the locality? A newsletter of a residents' association, published on the website, emphatically stated: 'local residents know what they want'. Maybe the issue was so big, the threat to the locality so enormous, that indeed the common interest stood out clearly and one did not have to think much about it. Perhaps. But many localities have been deeply split over issues of development. The statement quoted above implies that localities do not need to engage in a process of interest articulation and aggregation: they are a community and they know their minds immediately (that is to say without mediation). This would constitute a most unrealistic contention.

Local governance would be made easier if the decision-makers at local levels only dealt with 'communities' with pre-defined (articulated and aggregated) interests, preferences and priorities. The task would then simply consist of aggregating the interests or preferences of the various communities at the county level. However, this assumes that no political process needs to take place within the locality, that governance only relates to relations between localities. The ideological connotation of the term 'community' should not obscure the fact that people share something in common when they reside in the same area. They face a range of problems and often come together and act in order to find an appropriate response to these problems. To that extent, all human settlements imply an element of community or, more simply, a basic solidarity. But community is never a given – contradictory interests and differing views within a locality have to be brought together. A local community becomes an agent when it transforms itself, in the words of Peace, into a moral community: 'Inveresk as a whole can be considered a moral community, a critical property for providing a basis on which collective political efforts can build' (2001: 11). A moral community does not imply consensus, similarity of interests or lack of conflict but instead implies that social relations are organised according to rules which reflect a shared perception of what is right or wrong. Suburban Ratoath actually shares many of the features displayed by rural Inveresk. It is fragmented and

unable to articulate an agreed view of the public good for the locality. Instead, it acts through specialised associations, pursuing single issues. Like their counterparts in Inveresk, Ratoath residents probably entertain few illusions about the willingness or the ability of outside agencies or powers to solve their problems: they too live according to an ideology of self-help and self-reliance. But Inveresk residents, neither powerful nor always successful, retain to a large extent control over what is happening in their locality: 'Far from their locality "moving away from their feet", they remain firmly in command of it, and they are proudly aware of the fact' (Peace, 2001: 136). This perceived control over the locality is not observed in Ratoath, whose residents express a deep sense of alienation at their inability to have some say in the way the place is developing. Could this be because they have not constituted themselves as a moral community?

4.4 Political patronage as distorted governance
Most respondents, when asked to indicate what they had done to deal with the local problems they have identified, stated (if they had done anything) that they had 'approached a local politician' and/or signed a petition. The low level of activism in Ratoath was noted earlier as was the narrowness of the repertoire of collective action. Approaching a local politician, in practice, means approaching the member of Meath County Council who is electorally based in Ratoath and who is very active on the local scene. This practice of approaching the local politician, who is seen as the guardian of the interests of local residents, is deeply rooted in Irish political culture (and is typically analysed in terms of political patronage and clientelism). But the practice only partly corresponds to the classical clientelism of some peasant societies, where the patron offers individualised favours. The clientelistic exchange of benefits seems to operate on two different levels, individual and collective. In the latter, electoral support is exchanged for upholding the preferences of local residents. Political patronage in Ratoath mainly produces a link between a broker and a group as a whole (what would be frequently referred to as the local community), although it also offers personalised benefits to individuals. The patron, or rather the broker, acts as an intermediary between local residents and the county council, which forms the relevant seat of power for a range of local matters. He becomes the spokesperson for the locality

within the county council. This logic is well illustrated by the fact that local residents' associations, even the Combined Residents' Association, often work through the local politician. Even a legitimate organisation considers that it relates more effectively to the county council through an intermediary broker.

In a series of follow-up interviews in this survey, some respondents who are actively engaged in the civic life of the locality were asked to indicate what they thought about this way of dealing with local problems. The following quotations give some idea of their views:

> 'I think it's a system if you have the right people being elected, does work. But I am not sure that we always elect the right people … Where it falls down, I suppose, is that from the town, it does not have that cross-community imprint on it.'
> 'I am very sceptical of that system. I think in a democracy nobody should count, not individuals. I think numbers should count in a democracy. And they don't. You can't totally ignore the democratic request.'
> 'I think that they [local politicians] are very limited in what they can do … You know they have to cut themselves in a hundred. They have to lobby for other people as well as you.'

The responses remained ambivalent: with one exception, the interviewees did not really see anything wrong in principle with such practices while conceding some difficulties and shortcomings. They stated the need to have their views and preferences articulated at county council meetings. Acknowledging that there are good and bad political 'patrons', they believed they were well served in Ratoath. However, some doubts were expressed about the effectiveness of this mechanism for addressing local issues. Some disapproved of the individualised side of the relationship insofar as local politicians hold clinics, and deal with some of the problems of individual residents. This ambivalence about clientelist practices is probably widespread. Peace records the dislike local residents felt about approaching politicians for favours: 'Inveresk residents certainly find it demeaning to have to go cap in hand to such figures to press for what are mostly legitimate claims' (2001: 118). Yet, they do it and they know that they must play the power game if they entertain any hope of obtaining some satisfaction for their collective claims.

Although enjoying some support, this kind of political practice cannot really generate the legitimacy required for defining, articulating and upholding the public good in the local context. One respondent, when asked who speaks for Ratoath as a whole, mentioned the local politician, arguing that the latter was elected mainly on the basis of the Ratoath electoral district. No one else made a similar suggestion. The main local politician can hardly be seen as the elected representative of Ratoath, for he was elected in a constituency larger than Ratoath. He does not enjoy the legitimacy of being solely elected in and for Ratoath. More than thirty years ago it was found that three-quarters of the respondents in a survey would turn to an elected TD or a local politician to oppose local measures which were considered unfair or pernicious, rather than considering some form of collective action (Hart, 1970). It would seem that this attitude has persisted over the years and that it still commands wide currency in the context of new suburbs, although it is not immediately apparent why local residents would not rely on a wider range of actions.

4.5 Filling the void: belligerent pressure

As early as 1985 when this phenomenon was perhaps less accentuated, the multiplication of robust protest actions about local issues was linked with the weakness of local governance:

> Another problem has been the emergence of ad hoc, often wholly unrepresentative, protest groups concerned to prevent, even by violent means, social action to resettle Travellers, establish industry, or whatever (Muintir na Tíre, 1985).

This form of protest has not been observed in Ratoath to-date. Respondents mentioned hardly any collective action in the form of marches and rallies. A reference was made to a protest rally within a housing estate aimed at putting pressure on a developer to tidy the estate. Despite this low level of activity in Ratoath, local residents have become a major source of organised protest in Ireland. This represents a relatively new phenomenon and is directly related to the institutional void at local level. Voluntary organisations exist or have stepped forward in a locality to either provide services to residents or else are engaged in actions which sustain or improve the quality of life in the locality. This forms an

important aspect of the activity, for instance of resident associations.

Local residents did not constitute a central category of protesters in the early 1970s: about 10 per cent of recorded protests originated in this category (employees were involved in half the total number of protests). By the mid-1990s, local residents were at the origin of around 30 per cent of all protests and formed, by far, the largest category of protesters (Peillon, 1998). This type of protestor relies on a fairly narrow range of protests: engaging mainly in marches/rallies and also obstructions. In 1998, 20 per cent of protests were initiated by local residents and were mostly triggered by what was perceived as threats to the quality of life in the locality. Table 13 categorises local residents' protests for 1998 in terms of their main issue:

Table 13: Main reasons for local residents' protests in 1998

Reason for local resident protest	Number of protests
The imposition of heritage centre	1
The location of a dump	4
The regulation of horses	2
Traffic, roads	5
Opposition to development	5
Opposition to erection of masts, pylons	10

In the absence of any mechanism through which local residents are consulted and their views taken on board, local residents can only respond by strongly rejecting such potential threats. They do not possess the resources or even the inclination to consider the issue, formulate alternatives or negotiate with other groups. This means that they appear to be engaged in what has been referred to as 'not in my own backyard' action – that is, their strategy is to make sure that whatever unpleasant development is needed will be located elsewhere and not endanger the quality of life in the locality. Such actions are perceived as selfish because they do not really address the issue of the need for such development and simply want to push the problem elsewhere. But such a perception of the action of local residents ignores their objective position: that they have to uphold the interests of the locality even against other localities which are engaged in a similar strategy and are perhaps more forceful, more

efficient or more resourceful. Yet, they are given no opportunity to go beyond the articulation of their interests and cannot join in a process of interest aggregation, which beyond their narrow short-term interests would possibly open up the prospect of a negotiated solution at the county or even regional level. In the absence of any stable and formal mechanism of interest aggregation, they resort to exercising as much pressure as they can muster.

This analysis also applies to the many occurrences of protest aimed at excluding some people from a locality, for example protests against drug-dealers, Travellers, asylum-seekers, mentally-ill patients, etc (Peillon, 2002). Local residents engaged in such exclusionary protests are often resisting a decision by external (mainly public) agencies which has been made without involving them. They are faced with what, rightly or wrongly, they perceive as threats to the quality of life in the neighbourhood. Their fears are intensified by the fact that they are given very little information about what is proposed by the relevant powers, they are not consulted, their views are not taken on board; and that ultimately they exercise no control over what will happen. In such circumstances, some residents turn to exclusionary forms of action. This does not justify the attempt to exclude some categories of people considered undesirable or to impede the location of services which would bring unwelcome people in the neighbourhood. Some of these actions are not edifying and the issues are dealt with badly. However, this largely reflects the lack of skill displayed by local organisations in responding to such threats. Nevertheless, exclusionary protests, edifying or not, point to the objective structure within which local residents must act. They are caught between the requirement of upholding the quality of life in the locality (for this is what a local community does and is supposed to do) and the necessity of locating public services or adopting policies which may have a negative impact on the locality. In the absence of any formal or informal mechanism to reconcile these two requirements, some local residents develop a highly belligerent attitude and seek to exercise forceful pressure.

4.6 Conclusion

The New Urban Living study, at least in one respect, is concerned with the extent to which viable urban social forms are generated in suburbs. Chapter 3 established that Ratoath, as a new suburb, has

produced only a limited amount of social capital. This may account for the difficulty that local residents have in coming together, defining common interests and co-operating in order to attain these interests:

> Theoretically, it [social capital] provides a comprehensive explanation for why some communities or larger entities (municipalities, regions) are able to resolve collective problems co-operatively while others fail to bring people together in support of a common purpose (Billiet and Cambré, 1999: 241).

Another factor is involved in this failure to bring people together for a common purpose – the institutional void, namely the absence of any meaningful form of governance below the county level. The institutional void identified in the Ratoath survey – as it concerns the participation of local residents in the process of articulation and aggregation of interests, both within the locality and across it – is filled by a range of informal practices and processes. However, the latter are characterised by a low level of legitimacy and do not ensure the inclusion of all groups within the locality. This was the case, as noted earlier, with the persistence of political patronage and also in the observed phenomenon of the exercise of belligerent pressure. Such a void does not help uphold the sense of competence in addressing local problems by local residents, and is associated, as seen, with a pessimistic outlook on the capacity of local residents to shape their own future. This perceived powerlessness and to some extent alienation from local public life is of course related to the fairly low level of social resources within the community required to promote and uphold civic engagement. In other words these low levels of social resources decrease the amount of social capital available locally.

The void of local governance manifests itself both in the low level of social capital and the absence of institutionalised forms of local government. These two factors do not stand alone, separated from each other. They are closely related, in that the lack of institutions of local government below the county (and the void of local governance itself) deflates the social capital available in the locality.

5

The governance of suburbs

5.1 Municipal democracy

Ireland is characterised by a very high level of political centralisation. This centralisation manifests itself in several ways including the level at which decisions are made, the range of functions performed by local government and the latter's lack of financial autonomy. Demands for the decentralisation of local government have been frequently expressed by organisations such as Muintir na Tíre, who promote a traditional version of community action. Some individuals have also been prominent campaigners on this issue – for example the late Tom Barrington was a persistent campaigner for the reform of local government in Ireland. His call for decentralisation included the introduction not only of regional authorities, but also of sub-county governance: '… the development of local self-development at the regional, county, district and community levels is overwhelming in the national interest and it should be the duty of active citizens to see that survival of out of date centralised and bureaucratic ideas does not impede this development' (Barrington, 1970: 140). This decentralisation was linked to a demand for greater representation and participation of people at each level and the establishment of elected district councils and community councils. He was particularly concerned with the fact that community groups and voluntary organisations are bypassing the political system, simply because it does not reach below the county. We are back to the institutional void.

Groups like Muintir na Tíre have also addressed the issue of local democracy. A Working Group set up to examine this issue called for the creation of sub-county elected bodies (Muintir na Tíre, 1985). Following this Working Group, the Department of the Environment established a committee of 'experts' to review local government in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1991). It produced what is widely known as the Barrington Report, which looked at two different models for sub-county government: (i) directly elected

districts councils or (ii) district committees of the county council. In both cases, the new bodies would co-operate with local voluntary groups. The debate was extended by the publication of an official discussion paper which, once more, emphasised the main weaknesses of local government institutions, and various proposals were put forward (Department of the Environment, 1996). The resulting report outlined the main weaknesses of local government at that time, particularly its narrow range of functions, the shortage of resources, low capacity for planning and excessive central control. It highlighted the need to enhance local democracy and widen participation, arguing that local communities and their representatives must have a say in the delivery of public services and that voluntary bodies and local groups must also be involved. However, it did not suggest the establishment of a sub-county structure of government. It was content to promote the participation of local communities in various county council bodies. The necessity of widening participation was repeatedly stressed and it was proposed that it should be addressed by the involvement of local people in specialised committees of the county council (e.g. the county Strategic Policy Committee). The Local Government Act 2001 went some way toward creating inclusive structures attached to the county council. For instance, Strategic Policy Committees bring together, in each county, councillors and relevant individuals from the various policy areas under discussion. But the procedure for selecting non-councillors has not been specified and is based on co-optation, thus raising issues regarding the range of representation and accountability on these committees (Ó Broin, 2002).

Calls for decentralisation were generally listened to with a sympathetic ear, but decentralisation never became a crucial issue in Irish politics. Attempts to establish mayorships in some towns did not add up to the continental model of municipal democracy, where every administrative unit (district, town, village) regularly elects a council. This kind of municipal democracy is particularly strong and alive in Scandinavian countries, where a wide range of decisions are taken at the municipal level and where these bodies enjoy extensive powers and autonomy in raising local taxes. This form of local government guarantees a high level of involvement in local issues. It enjoys legitimacy, although it does not necessarily ensure the participation of all in the policy-making process, because majority rule may lead to the exclusion of political minorities. Although a

great deal can be said in favour of this form of local governance, it does not represent a realistic proposal in the Irish context.

The local government structure includes another level below the county council: that of the town council, composed of town commissioners. The latter are elected in designated urban areas and consequently enjoy the full legitimacy of elected representatives. But, in the words of a Leixlip town officer well versed in local affairs: 'the town council has no control over the big issues'. It has limited power over the promotion of tourism, arts policy and litter control. She further adds: 'The Town Commissioners are now focusing their attention very much on the quality of life as opposed to infra-structural issues. For example, one of the current concerns is to stop young people going out "ditch drinking", getting the Tidy Towns back on its feet and giving a leg up'. Substantial demand for the introduction of a municipal democracy is not present within the political system or indeed within public opinion. It may be of interest at this stage to return to the study of Kilmore by Collier as he gives a vivid illustration of the absence of any form of municipal democracy in Ireland (see Box 1).

Any move to bring decision-making to a level lower than the county and root this process into some formal process of election would enjoy a high legitimacy. Majority decisions do not, on their own, guarantee inclusion and many categories of people within the locality could become marginalised in the process if the majority preferences do not reflect in a significant way the preferences and orientations of the minority. Depending on the way it is enacted, municipal democracy may not promote inclusion. In any case the prospect of any form of municipal or even sub-county democracy is remote. A democratisation of local government represents a persistent demand of many local associations and agencies who want to be more effectively involved in decision-making. Their lack of success in achieving this goal to date suggests that either insufficient pressure is exercised by them or else sturdy 'gate-keepers' ensure that this demand does not enter the political system. The introduction of a fully-fledged municipal democracy does not appear to be a realistic short-term prospect in Ireland.

Box 1: The Story of Kilmore Quay

The curacy of Kilmore Quay is twinned with the Breton village of Crehan. A few years ago, twenty Bretons from this village spent an exchange week in Kilmore. They stayed in local houses, socialised with the local residents and had a good time. One of the Crehan visitors, Monsieur F. a local schoolteacher, had visited the Quay every year since the twinning took place some ten years previously. He stated how much he loved both the place and its people. He had a plan. He wanted to initiate an annual exchange between the primary schools in order to build on the relationship between adults, learn a bit of English and French and hopefully make friends for life. Monsieur F., as Mayor of Crehan, had access to public funds that would help organise the exchange between the two schools.

   At the end of the week, a communal dinner was held. Monsieur F. spoke in good English, thanked his hosts and invited everyone back the following year to France. He did not mention the exchange proposal. Asked afterwards about it, he commented that he had spoken to everybody about his idea. Everybody said how wonderful it was as an idea. He found himself going from one person to another telling them of his idea and hearing the same reply. '*Finally*', he declared, '*the truth dawned*':

   You see I love this country and people so much but after ten years coming here I have to admit that I understood nothing about their difficulty to organise their collective lives. They have no idea of a collective identity with which one can do things together. After a week looking around with my proposition for a local schools exchange project I was unable to find anybody responsible to plan the thing with. After a week of telling friendly stories about it, there was nobody here able to react. So this is what I think about the problem of local development in Ireland: there are always personalities but never roles (Collier 2001: 286).

This comment 'always personalities, never roles' identifies for Collier the core of the problem in building structures and creating roles to facilitate representation and responsibility in emergent local public spaces.

5.2 Partnership

Partnership has quite a long history in Ireland and has become in many ways a favoured procedure of decision-making. It is rooted, squarely in neo-corporatist practices adopted by Ireland at a time

when most European countries were moving away from them. This neo-corporatism evolved from centralised wage bargaining between the two main partners in industrial relations – employers and employees – in which the state participated as employer. Later, the state contributed to this centralised bargaining as both employer and the coordinator of national economic development. The state played an even more central role when, from 1979, the bargaining between the social partners involved trade-offs between social policy measures and economic measures. The whole economic and even budgetary policy was now decided on the basis of a negotiated agreement between the main socio-economic players. This kind of partnership remained at the centre of a long series of national programmes which set the framework for economic development and by which all participating partners were bound. Such programmes have formed a long and uninterrupted series and are still running today. However, their character changed, particularly when the bargaining was extended to formally include what is referred to as the 'fourth pillar', that is the representatives of various voluntary organisations that claimed to represent marginalised groups.

At a regional and local level, partnership has been adopted as a central policy response to the persistence of poverty and marginalisation in various localities, both rural and urban. This policy response was developed under the aegis of the European Union in its effort to decrease the level of poverty in Europe and promote 'social inclusion'. Substantial sums of money were made available to enable the development of local communities, but such development had to take place through a particular model of partnership, one in which the major socio-economic partners (employers, employees, central state) cooperated with the representatives of the local voluntary sector to bring about various outcomes. Such local partnerships have multiplied and in 1998, 389 separate programmes were recorded (Walsh, Craig and McCafferty, 1998).

A similar orientation was adopted when the state thought to negotiate a new welfare mix, particularly in the area of personal services. In *A Green Paper on the community and voluntary sector and its relationship with the state* (1997) the Department of Social Welfare pressed for a change in the relationship between public agencies and voluntary organisations. It envisaged a more contractual type of relationship, one in which the state would provide a stable

support to selected and accountable voluntary associations in the field. The extent to which these proposals have become actual policy is not clear. It remains that the policy response to a reorganisation of the personal social services has relied, once more, on this idea of partnership. Finally, the partnership idea has significantly shifted. It increasingly refers to the financing of infrastructural projects and the provision of services jointly by public agencies and the private sector (in the form of private investors).

5.2.1 What can the partnership process offer to new urban communities?

In Ireland, partnership represents a policy idiom with very many meanings. Easily recognisable as a policy response, it is associated with a range of measures and programmes which are viewed positively. Even recent economic advances are often attributed to the successful working of partnership, which ensured an orderly context for economic development along with wage moderation. Partnership has thus become a privileged form of governance. Does it hold any value for addressing the void observed in Ratoath? Does it offer a model of local governance, or at least the basis for one? Or can some useful lessons be drawn from the various partnership schemes set up during the 1990s?

Local partnership programmes have been devised to perform a particular function. They bring together the relevant partners and stakeholders in a particular practice and geographical sector. This includes the various voluntary associations which operate at local level and represent, in a sense, the 'locality' or rather 'the community'. However, the participation of the local voluntary sector is for a well-defined purpose and to fulfil a particular task, for example to help disadvantaged areas create employment or overcome marginalisation, etc. Each local partnership addresses one clearly defined issue, while the institutional void at local level is rather more generalised. It is not a matter of looking for a policy answer to a crisis situation, but of figuring a viable and enduring way of organising local governance.

However, the diagnosis is rather similar:

The rationale for a community development approach is that local development is dependent on strong local communities

taking part in planning and management. In disadvantaged areas the community infrastructure is often weak and a process of community capacity building is required (Craig and McKeown, 1994: 75).

The main purpose of partnership is to remedy the serious weaknesses in the social fabric of marginalised communities in order to uphold the infrastructure that will transform them into manageable entities. This task cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of individuals who, in various ways, 'represent' the locality. It constitutes an exercise in democracy: 'Partnership is defined in terms of democracy ... it is about empowerment with a broad social and economic focus' (Crowley, 1996).

Partnership formalises the participation of local voluntary organisations to public administration. This implies that relevant social categories define their needs (interest articulation), decide on their priorities (interest aggregation) and exert collective pressure on relevant public agencies (interest attainment). A similar formalisation is required in the context of local governance: to provide internal mechanisms for defining, aggregating and then attaining these interests. A partnership response to the void of local governance produces its own problems. Local partnership programmes have been subjected to quite close evaluation (see Walsh, 1994; Walsh, Craig and McCafferty, 1998). These reports raise a range of questions and point to difficulties in the way partnership operates. The relationship between the voluntary and the statutory sector, on which this idea of partnership is based, is always presented in such reports as problematic. Partnership schemes seem to depend on various statutory agencies. Each agency follows its own rules and pursues its own goals which, even if not contradictory, are not necessarily harmonised. Furthermore, state agencies function according to fixed rules and enjoy hardly any discretion in the way they function at the local level. They are constrained by their own organisational rigidities and display little flexibility. Their views and interests are given priority.

The state is keen on the idea of partnership because it offers a mechanism through which civil society is shaped, at least to some extent (Peillon, 2001). Partnership requires the emergence of voluntary organisations with definite characteristics, such as features favoured by statutory funding agencies. For instance some

of the voluntary organisations involved in the Poverty 2 programme were specifically set up for the purpose of applying to the programme. Furthermore most of these organisations formed an amalgamation of voluntary associations and acted as umbrella federations for funding purposes. Not only that, these groups had to organise themselves in a way that conformed to the statutory rules for availing of funds. The nature of the associations that operate on the public scene and the way people organise themselves form crucial aspects of the constitution of civil society itself. To impose an administrative template for deciding who speaks for the community or who articulates the common good upheld by the locality raises a serious issue of inclusion. It neatly bypasses the crucial and probably troublesome process of defining the interests of the locality (out of the multiplicity of local interests, some of them possibly contradictory).

How does one ensure that the voluntary organisations represent their sector of activity? Partnerships always face a deficit of legitimacy, because they find it difficult to 'prove' their representativeness. What mandate do they hold which allows them to make decisions for the group as a whole, particularly when they are set up, to a large extent, apart from, and possibly as rivals of, county councillors who have been duly elected through a formal process and can claim to represent their constituents?

The partnership idea revolves around the need to mobilise and bring together the relevant groups and agencies (with all their resources) in order to achieve the set goals. But this implies that such localities are able to define their goals and priorities: to achieve this requires an exercise in interest articulation and aggregation. Here, perhaps, one finds the partnership idea at its weakest: the representation of the 'community' is organised according to a definite blueprint and remains in a sense partial. It seems to assume the presence of an already existing 'political entity', rooted in an established pattern of local governance. Without such established local governance, no guarantee exists that the voluntary sector articulates the preferences of the locality or indeed includes all categories of interests and voices. It can be questioned on the basis of inclusion and legitimacy.

Partnership in Ireland already has a long tradition and any policy response which successfully presents itself as part of a tradition enjoys a clear advantage because it is 'recognisable' and

draws on a rich range of discourses and practices. It already belongs to a political idiom which makes sense to a large number of actors in the political system. In conclusion, the existing programmes of local partnership include two features which go a long way in addressing the void of governance at the level of localities.

- They have relied on the participation of those voluntary organisations that are active in the local area.
- They have granted voluntary organisations a formal role in the process of decision-making.

In the absence of a realistic prospect of municipal democracy, these two elements form part of a policy response which upholds local governance.

5.3 Community councils

The idea of a decentralisation of local government below the county council level suggests the form of community councils. These councils have already been advocated by groups such as Muintir na Tíre. One comes across the existence of community councils in several localities, although the way they are constituted varies greatly as does the precise role they choose to play in local governance (they are never part of the local government). The policy response to the void of local governance must include two central features, and the idea of a community council may help address two main issues at the core of local governance:

- localities must generate representative and legitimate bodies which articulate the negotiated and agreed views of the public good
- local agencies participate to the decision-making in a formal way.

How can we envisage the achievement of these two tasks?

- a representation of the locality
- a formal role for the representative body.

5.3.1 A representation of the locality

A significant reorganisation of local government structures was realised by the Local Government Act 2001. This Act provided for the reconstitution of local government into 114 local bodies: 5 city councils, 29 county councils, 5 borough councils and 75 town councils. Borough and town councils perform a range of functions (adopting of bye-laws, promoting community interests and the possibility of introducing community initiative schemes), but their significance does not match that of city or county councils. In fact, this reform ensures that the county council remains the crucial agency of local government and it does not significantly increase the role of local government at sub-county level. Various reports have in the past suggested the introduction of sub-county agencies with a more meaningful role (e.g. *Reform of Local Government, A policy Statement* 1985, the 1971 White Paper, the 1991 Barrington Report), but to no effect. The weakness of sub-county local government has been officially acknowledged, although not remedied:

> It tends therefore to lack the deep community roots that go to form the basis of continental local government – which evolved over time and predated national governments as widely accepted representative institutions (Department of the Environment, 1996: 14) (quoted in Callanan, 2003: 475).

While the recent reform of local government has not introduced new structures of sub-county government, it has gone some way towards addressing the issue of participation of localities in the process. This has come after a long series of calls for the increased involvement of local residents and voluntary associations in the management and decision-making of local affairs. The 'democratic representation of the local community' has become an important criterion of good local government. Local development can only be achieved if a range of local organisations are mobilised. This new orientation is summarised in the following quotation:

> The role of local authorities in Ireland has been evolving in recent years to one of wider co-operation with local community groups, partnerships and other such organisations and networks, towards a more consensual approach to planning through the Better Local Government reforms (Byrne, 2003: 367).

An adequate and legitimate representation of the locality seems extraordinarily difficult to attain. This view derives from a range of studies that have touched, often indirectly, on this subject. Peace's study of Inveresk concluded that a group of individuals or an association which endeavoured to represent the whole group, that is the locality, quickly became another organisation, one among many others. No such local association could claim to represent the locality as a whole, and various organisations represented the locality on specific issues. Eipper's study of Bantry also points to the conflictual nature of the representation of the locality, and ultimately the hegemony of a coalition of three dominant groups. Collier's study of Kilmore chronicles the disaggregation of a rural community in its very effort to engage in a community project which was meant to bring people together. This study of Ratoath discusses the difficulties associated with the setting-up of a Combined Residents' Association, meant to articulate the views of Ratoath residents as a whole. That the Combined Residents' Association has been revived, after serious initial difficulties, points to the need for such representation of the locality. But it also underlines the extreme difficulty of achieving representation when there is no institutional framework for doing so and residents are left to their own devices.

A community council has been set up in Lucan but its representativeness is unclear. It holds an annual general assembly and its committee is drawn from those who attend this general meeting and attendance is open to all Lucan residents. It deals mainly with issues of local development. The Lucan Community Council cannot be seen, in this context, as an organisation encompassing the locality, but really as one organisation among others, in that it does not constitute a federation or aggregation of local associations. In 1985 in the Shangan area of Ballymun, a community council brought together several tenants' associations. Residents' groups had already formed the Ballymun Community Coalition, whose main decision was to create a credit union to replace the bank which had departed and left the area without banking facilities (Power, 1997: 247). Today, every local organisation sends a representative to the community council: but this structure is now associated with the Ballymun partnership, and the community council operates chiefly to attain the goals specifically set for this partnership (mainly job creation and training).

The extent to which a voluntary organisation represents a group of local residents remains a vexed question. Voluntary organisations are formed by a small group of social entrepreneurs who work to their own agenda and endeavour to mobilise other individuals. They may provide a service to a vulnerable category of individuals and even defend their interests but they do not necessarily represent them. The representation of a locality through the voluntary organisations which operate within its midst could lead to a very distorted representation. Would a federated body of residents' associations offer an adequate 'representation' of the locality, once formal procedures of election and various safeguards are adopted? It is not sure that this kind of distortion is overcome by bringing together these voluntary organisations into a federated body (for instance a combined residents' association).

One is back to the issue of legitimacy and inclusion: how do we ensure that local councils are inclusive and indeed a legitimate expression of the locality? Or more realistically, do they form an appropriate framework for elaborating the views of the locality? This issue of legitimacy has been raised mainly in terms of accountability:

> First, the legitimacy and success of any arrangements made between the two sides depend on the representativeness and accountability of the local associations. In practice, this is difficult to achieve. Residents' associations can become self-perpetuating oligarchies … (Ó Cinnéide, 1999: 222).

For this reason, the participation of residents' associations in local governance (in this case, the management of council housing estates) is seen with a certain amount of suspicion: 'The consultative process may become over-formalised, be dominated by a small number of activists in the estate or may otherwise become remote from the majority of residents …' (Fahey, 1999: 265).

The legitimacy of a statutory involvement for local voluntary organisations would heavily depend on the way these organisations are constituted and operate. If such bodies are given a statutory role in local governance, the conditions of their formation become a matter for serious consideration. Statutory consultation needs to be balanced by a regulation of local voluntary organisations (such as residents' associations). This matters more particularly when

determining the relative significance of local issues and the way they should be dealt with. The constitution of community councils in each locality, bringing together residents' associations, produces a particular form of representation, based on residence. Such bodies are of course well positioned to know about local problems and to propose appropriate responses to them. But many of the problems faced by localities cannot be dealt with at the local level. For example, the local residents oppose the location of a waste dump nearby, but the need for the dumping site remains. This kind of problem requires negotiations with other localities. Community councils need to be federated at a county level, to form what corresponds to a county forum. Within this context, each locality has to address broader local issues and reach a solution which satisfies other localities affected by the issue. These county forums may even make room for a representation of the voluntary sector operating in the county. The voluntary sector (meaning voluntary associations performing a range of charitable, welfare, leisure or support functions) is normally given the role of partner in local governance. But the reliance on voluntary associations of this kind for voicing local concerns and negotiating with public authorities raises a range of issues.

The formation of county forums has been proposed as a policy development (Ó Broin, 2003) and a number of areas have set up trial forums. For example, the Dublin Community Forum is composed of a range of specialised clusters, each of which includes various groups and organisations operating in the city. The Community Forum sends three representatives to the County Development Board, and it participates in the elaboration of the local development plan, which the Board must elaborate at regular intervals. The voluntary sector at local level is given a say as one 'partner' in the process. Membership in the Community Forum is granted on the basis of an application. Even if, as it appears, a large range of local organisations have applied to, and acquired membership in the Forum, they cannot claim to represent Dublin residents. Not only do many local organisations not apply for membership, but none of these organisations can in any case legitimately claim a representative status. One crucial element of appropriate democratic governance at local level is missing.

The regulation of residents' associations and of relevant voluntary organisations must be offset by some financial support if they are to

play their role effectively: '… we found that most organisations, apart from purely social or sport clubs, rely to a greater or lesser extent on financial support from state sources: their success, often their existence, depends on their getting a grant' (Ó Cinnéide, 1999: 223). Successful local government requires the sustained participation of local residents, and the latter needs to be supported by public resources, even if the action of local residents takes the form of resistance to, or protest at, the policies of public bodies. The return to belligerent pressure always remains an option for local residents or groups, and this would distort local governance.

5.3.2 *A formal role for the representative body*
As broader powers are granted to local authorities to promote the interests of the local community, they are also given the responsibility for orchestrating the participation of the voluntary sector. This new policy is to a large extent inspired by the successful experience of partnership as a form of national governance. The public has always enjoyed a right of consultation, but the calls for public participation go beyond this kind of legal right of appeal.

- The 2001 Local Government Act requires that city and county councils set up Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) for each of the major functions they perform. Such committees draw on a range of expertise and relevant sectors, and no less than one third of members must come from six relevant sectors (such as the trade unions, farming organisations, the business/ commercial sector). The community/voluntary/ disadvantaged sector forms one such source of representation.
- County/City Development Boards (CDBs) elaborate a strategy for economic, social and cultural development within the county/city and monitor its implementation. The local community has become more central within the framework of such CDBs.
- Finally, it remains open to agencies of local government to recognise existing voluntary community councils and establish a formal link with them (O'Sullivan, 2003: 75).

The benefits of greater participation of the voluntary sector are now recognised. The inclusion of representatives of various sectors in Strategic Policy Committees and County/City Development Boards represents a step in the right direction. It does not go very far and simply allows for relevant voices to be heard. It does not really address the issue of the representative character of such voices. One of the six sectors involved is referred to as 'community/voluntary/ disadvantaged'. This amalgamation is quite interesting, because it assumes that the local community is adequately represented by those voluntary groups participating in partnership schemes which were set to overcome various disadvantages experienced by some 'communities'. These partnership programmes associated localities (or communities) with socio-economic disadvantages and voluntary organisations dealing with these problems. But many communities are not disadvantaged and have a similar entitlement to participative democracy. Furthermore, local residents usually form associations which represent their interests. But they remain separate from the voluntary organisations which operate in the locality and are usually initiated or animated by 'social entrepreneurs' pursuing a definite agenda. This issue matters when it comes to decide about the representative character of the different sectors. For instance, who do the voluntary organisations represent? The question is easily settled in relation to the officials of residents' associations who are elected within housing estates. It appears problematic for other voluntary organisations.

The diversity of interests within localities is also acknowledged, and this often produces tensions and conflicts. Callanan (2003) sees that as a potential difficulty and, taking his cue from the work of Jones and Stewart, states: 'However, part of government's role is to seek out the views of its citizens and to balance different arguments and points of view' (p. 501). Local government faces a diversity of contradictory views and interests as it endeavours to identify and promote the common good: it is asked to arbitrate between a plurality of interests. This view of local government corresponds to the pluralist perspective on the state: the latter is seen as a neutral authority balancing contradictory interests. It implies that local communities fail to agree, by means of negotiations and possibly compromises, on a definition of the common good for the locality. There can be no representative voice of the locality in that sense. However, the political process of defining and upholding the local

common good nonetheless proceeds in localities like Ratoath, even if the absence of an institutional framework makes this task quite difficult. A participative democracy loses any legitimacy if it does not guarantee the representativeness of the voices participating in such bodies. This issue has not been addressed by the recent reforms of local government. The emphasis on participative democracy should not be seen as merely facilitating the management of localities, but as a mechanism through which local residents increasingly 'represent' and manage themselves.

A model has to be generated which guarantees that whoever speaks on behalf of the locality and expresses their preferences does so on a representative basis. Once this challenge has been successfully managed, the issue becomes one of granting such a body a formal role. It seems generally accepted that local residents, organised in whatever form, should at the very least be consulted about decisions concerning them. Precedents exist for this kind of statutory consultation. For instance, the government is required by law to consider the recommendations formulated by the National Economic and Social Council. However, 'consultation is not enough … Some degree of consent to the emerging proposals has to be achieved. This is not easy. A system of education, consultation and consent, if it is to be effective, leads to some degree of participation in the decision-making of the community' (Barrington, 1970: 91). One hardly expects the expressed preferences of local residents, legitimately constituted, to be binding on deciding agencies at a higher level. The county council must take on board the policy preferences of a wide range of localities and mediate between them. This would become possible only if these community councils were federated into a council forum and enter into close association with the county council on a statutory basis. Such a framework would produce a type of governance based on two separate bodies claiming a different kind of legitimacy.

The constitution of a county forum would introduce another principle of representation in local governance. It generates a dualism in local governance and raises the issue of the respective roles of this proposed county forum and county council. At one extreme, the forum is only granted a consultative role. The county council is legally bound to acquaint itself with the forum views and take them on board when making decisions. At the other extreme, one could envisage a direct involvement of the forum in decision-

making. In many parliamentary democracies the parliament is composed of two houses: one which derives from universal franchise (one individual, one vote) and the other which is based on territorial units or even occupational sectors. The relations between the two Houses vary according to countries, but they both participate in a direct way in decision-making. All this implies that various models can be invoked to ensure the statutory involvement of the county forum in local decision-making. Putting forward an institutional blueprint for the involvement of local residents in local government would not really help as the final institutional outcome will ultimately be shaped by the actions of a large number of groups with a stake in the matter.

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter 4 identified the void in governance that is clearly observable in emerging suburbs. This void is closely related to the absence of institutionalised local government below the county level and also to the inability of emerging suburbs to generate the social resources necessary for widespread and sustained civic engagement in local affairs. This governance void is filled with ad hoc practices, which can be considered problematic from the point of view of two key requirements of democratic governance. The latter demands both the presence of legitimate procedures and guarantees the participation of all. Table 14 gives the profile of the practices and models of local governance we have considered in terms of these two criteria.

Table 14: Legitimacy and inclusiveness in the practices of local governance

	Legitimacy	*Inclusiveness*
Political patronage	Low	Medium
Belligerent pressure	Low	Low
Municipal democracy	High	Medium
Partnership scheme	Medium	Medium
Community council/forum	High	Medium/high

Ratoath residents perceive local political patronage as, at best, ambiguous. It is seen as necessary but not very effective. Hardly

considered legitimate, this type of practice remains highly individualised and is resented because it obliges individuals or organisations to 'ask' for favours. For this reason, it potentially leaves a great number of people out and is not really inclusive even if residents have individual access to local political brokers. The spreading practice of belligerent pressure does not fare better in terms of the two criteria because it is often undertaken by a small minority of residents and does not necessarily enjoy the support of the local population as a whole. Such actions often prove divisive, and do not fare well in terms of legitimacy and inclusion.

The practices that have emerged to fill the void of local governance do not satisfy the requirements of inclusion and legitimacy. But is there a model of local government that would? The introduction of municipal democracy, where elected local councils decide on a range of local issues, certainly meets the requirement of legitimacy, but not necessarily that of inclusion: majority government may operate in a way which excludes those in the minority from any real say in local affairs. The various models of partnership, when applied to local issues, are only moderately legitimate and inclusive. The capacity of the local voluntary sector to represent the locality in the partnership process depends on the way individuals are elected and on how such organisations are positioned within the locality. Furthermore they may undermine the function of local representatives who have been duly elected. In a similar way, the inclusive character of a partnership depends on the way local partners are constituted. Although partnership schemes appear extremely diverse and do not lend themselves to general statements, the range of partners is to a great extent pre-defined; the 'community partner' tends to be constituted in a way that includes voluntary organisations targeting social disadvantages. A wide range of local organisations are excluded. This raises the crucial issue of deciding what is required to ensure the inclusiveness and legitimacy of community councils.

6

Conclusions

6.1 Overview

The Ratoath study recorded the relatively low level of social capital in the area, despite the fairly high level of involvement of local residents in providing various services. It highlighted the extreme difficulty faced by local residents in coming together and addressing their common problems. Social capital refers to those resources, anchored in social relations, which allow localities to develop a collective life and local residents to co-operate in order to uphold the local quality of life**.** Ratoath constitutes a young suburb and it may take time for the social capital of a locality to be formed. Its remote location means that, to a large extent, it must improvise and cannot draw on a tradition of collective action. But other factors are involved in explaining the difficulty that its residents experience in coming together for a common purpose.

There is no mechanism through which the various interests and conflicting views within the locality could be, in some way, aggregated, and a negotiated view of the common good agreed upon. The attempt to create a kind of umbrella organisation for Ratoath as a whole, based on residents' associations, originally failed and while it has been revived, it remains reluctant to deal with issues on which there is no clear consensus. Nonetheless, it brings together the representatives of Ratoath residents.

The weakness of local governance is ultimately rooted in the absence of any meaningful form of local government below the county level. The void identified in the Ratoath study, concerning the participation of local residents in the process of articulation and aggregation of interests within the locality, is filled by a range of informal practices and processes including political patronage and the exercise of belligerent pressure. Such informal practices enjoy no legitimacy and do not ensure the inclusion of all groups within the locality. This void undermines the sense of competence that local residents may develop in addressing local problems; it is also associated, as the study shows, with a pessimistic outlook about the capacity of local residents to shape their own future.

The weakness of local governance is related to both the low level of social capital and the institutional void in the locality. These two factors are closely linked. The lack of any meaningful local government, which would sustain the civic engagement of local residents, makes it very difficult for residents to develop the resources of social participation, through which they would collectively address the problems facing Ratoath. This perceived powerlessness and, to some extent, alienation from local public life is linked with these two factors: a low level of social resources which are required to promote civic engagement in the community and the absence of institutions of local government below the county level. The void of local governance manifests itself both in the low level of social capital and the absence of institutionalised forms of local government. Again, however, these two factors are closely related – the lack of institutions of local government (and the void of local governance itself) deflates the social capital available in the locality.

The concept of social capital has been subjected to a range of criticisms. One such criticism challenges its key assumption, namely that civil society is by and large consensual. A focus on social capital can cause one to overlook the importance of the conflicting nature of civil society. However, the capacity of various groups to come together and address their collective problems does not require consensus. These resources appear more crucial when conflicting interests and contradictory views exist in the locality. In such a situation, a genuine process of interest articulation and interest aggregation must take place, if the conflict is going to be transcended. A 'political' process within the locality has to be activated, one in which the existing trust within the locality will be severely tested and the social networks fully mobilised. More to the point, social capital should not be seen simply as a resource generated within society if conditions are right. Can we realistically expect that suburbs, as a particular form of civil society, are able to produce from within themselves the social resources they require? Putnam has been taken to task for this same broad assumption:

> In general Putnam appears to neglect the role public authorities play in the creation and destruction of social capital … But, as we argue in more detail below, public authorities are deeply implicated in the shape and activities of voluntary associations, whether it is in terms of the institutions they create or the

resources they provide to encourage participation … (Maloney et al, 2000: 216).

Putnam has conceded this point and acknowledges the relevance of the state and public agencies for the generation of social capital:

Some states have provided tax subsidies to voluntary organisations, making it easier for them to form and attract members, while other states have actively discouraged such associations … And some states directly involve associations, such as unions and business organisations, in the making and implementing of public policy, thereby enhancing their sense of purpose and solidarity (Putnam and Goss, 2002: 17).

If '…the state has a substantial role in creating the conditions for social capital'(Schuler et al, 2000: 33), then the generation of social capital involves the state and consequently becomes a matter of public policy. The action of state or public agencies may play an important role in generating this capital and shaping the pattern of social ties. The transformation of the welfare system in Britain has been presented as an example of the way the state can contribute to a vigorous voluntary sector. Voluntary organisations were given a contractual role, and financial backing, to deliver a range of social services.

The proposal for the establishment of a 'community council' or 'community forum' should be seen in a similar light: as an attempt to grant a statutory function to a representative body of local residents. Such a proposal would be accompanied by financial support and a set of regulations governing the way it is constituted and operates to ensure the fairness of its procedures and its representative nature. Such a minimal framework of local participation would go some way towards generating the social capital required for a robust local democracy. It would also satisfy, at least partly, the two requirements of legitimacy and inclusion.

The sustainability of new suburbs in terms of their civic participation and ability to collectively address problems depends on a range of resources, which are labelled, in a summary term, social capital. This social capital is deeply rooted in the social fabric of the locality. However, it also depends on the state and on the provided framework for institutions of local government.

Appendix 1

Survey methodology

The questionnaire elaborated for the study of urban/suburban living was tested through a pilot survey of nine persons. This was conducted by submitting the questionnaire to a few acquaintances, and also by approaching residents in the suburban location of Celbridge. The pilot survey confirmed that the questionnaire was neither too complex nor taxing. Most respondents could relate to the questions asked but the pilot survey also identified a range of potential difficulties or ambiguities which were taken on board in the final draft of the questionnaire.

The start of the actual survey was delayed by the holding of two national elections in the first half of 2002. This time was used to prepare the ground and approach key individuals in the locality. A visit to the parish priest proved informative and useful (as it became quite clear that some respondents, particularly among the older ones, cooperated with the survey on that basis). Furthermore, five officials of resident associations were also approached and interviewed; all expressed interest in the survey. Notices announcing the forthcoming survey were placed in various local newsletters: of resident associations, of the parish, etc. Practically everyone in the locality knew about the survey. This greatly facilitated the task of the interviewers and probably increased the rate of response. Finally, an individual letter was sent to every respondent a few days before the fieldwork started.

The survey is based on a representative sample of the suburban core of Ratoath, which on the basis of the electoral register included a population of approximately 1,500 people. Roughly three-quarters of these residents lived in housing estates, with a few living in apartments or townhouses. Semi-rural and townland residences in the proximity of Ratoath were excluded from the sample. The decision to survey only the suburban core had practical implications for the carrying out of the survey. The electoral register for Ratoath did not always allow us to discriminate, from the start, between residents close to Ratoath and those at some distance. In the cases of some roads which, like Fairyhouse, start in Ratoath itself and go on

for several miles, it was only when the interviewers on the ground endeavoured to locate a respondent that it was possible to determine if s/he legitimately belonged to the sample. Thirty-one respondents were rejected on the basis of being too far from Ratoath, and were simply replaced by a set of new names selected on a random basis.

The decision to exclude residents not close to Ratoath raised significant theoretical questions, which were not envisaged and addressed in the preparation of the study. If suburban residents refer to all those who live outside an urban centre, while depending to a great extent on this urban core for work and services, it seems legitimate to argue that residents living in a rural setting close to the city can be qualified as suburban residents of a particular type (if, for instance, they commute to work every day or rely regularly on the urban core). The decision not to include residents from the electoral division which were not close to the actual suburban core of Ratoath removed from consideration one possible form of suburban living.

A second methodological issue arose in relation to who exactly the study needed to interview. The decision had to be made as to whether the sample would include households or individuals. Interviewing any member of a household was of course easier. It was felt, however, that using the household as sampling unit would introduce some serious biases: more particularly, that it would mainly result in interviews with women. The decision was made to try to interview chosen individuals. If reaching these individuals proved too difficult, it would be possible to revert to a household sample (by assigning a household to an individual).

It was not necessary to revert to household sampling, even if reaching some individuals proved quite difficult at times. Instead, a range of procedural rules were adopted.

- The interviewer would call three times at a house. If s/he got no answer at all, it would be classified as 'not in'.
- If the actual person in the household were not in after three calls, another individual in the household would be asked to answer the questionnaire. The word 'household' would be written on the front of the questionnaire.

- The Ratoath population is very mobile and many people on the electoral register no longer lived at the address indicated. As we were interested in actual residents, interviewers were to proceed with the interview with a member of the new household, if willing to do so, and to indicate 'household' at the front of the questionnaire. If it was learned, from neighbours for instance, that 'they' were gone or if the new residents had not lived long enough in Ratoah, then they were registered as 'not living there'. A high number of names in the sample fell in this category: fifty-six in all. Other residents in Ratoath, selected on a random basis, replaced these individuals.

The sample for the survey was generated by assigning a number to each relevant individual in the Ratoath electoral register. A computer generated a random series of numbers for the population considered. The first two hundred numbers were matched with the numbered names in the population list. As the survey proceeded, all the addresses for which we did not get a filled questionnaire, for whatever reason, were replaced by new addresses. This process continued until the 200 hundred questionnaires we were aiming at were actually filled. Non-completions fall into one of four categories:

no longer living at the address	56
reside too far from suburban core	31
could not be contacted (after three calls)	40
refusals	25

The eighty-seven residents who did not legitimately belong to the sample, either because they no longer lived at the address stated or because they resided too far from Ratoath, were simply replaced by new names. They were not considered when calculating the response rate of the survey.

Interviews took place exclusively in the evening and many of the interviews had to be made on appointment. Some individuals, although living at the stated address on the sample, could not be contacted: this was the case for forty residents. Only twenty-five residents actually refused to answer the questions. The survey took place from late May 2002 to August 2002, at a time when the days

are very long (but residents also socially busy). On that basis, our total sample included 265 individuals in separate households. The actual refusal rate was 9.77%, but the total non-response rate was 24.52%. It is, of course, this latter figure, which matters, as both refusals and 'not in' may have an effect on the representative character of the sample. But a response rate of roughly 75% is satisfactory and is much in line with the response rate of other surveys undertaken in Ireland.

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