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COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE
Syracuse University
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Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

A Place to Call Home:
Addressing Dublin's Homelessness

'Out of home'… the inability to provide accommodation from one's own resources.

The Challenge: How 'Best' to Serve Dublin's Homeless?
It is April 2011 and Mary Higgins, the former director of the *Homeless Initiative* (1996-2001), as well as the *Homeless Agency* (2001-2005), is contemplating the passing of 2010. In 2000, the *Homeless Initiative* had the vision to set an audacious goal of ending homelessness in Ireland by 2010.

Mary Higgins

I can't believe that last year has been and gone and there has been no public statement from any body, voluntary or statutory (or at least none that I could see), about whether and to what extent the vision to end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Dublin by 2010 was achieved. The vision set a clear target for the Agency, Government and some campaigning voluntary organisations, which was often publicly repeated over the last decade. Its articulation was an important turning point for homelessness in Dublin, marking a new way of approaching what was seen as an intractable social problem and offering confidence to policy makers, the public, and people who were homeless, or at risk of homelessness, that something could really be done about it. For its deadline to have passed without comment seems a little odd (Higgins, 2011, p. 11).
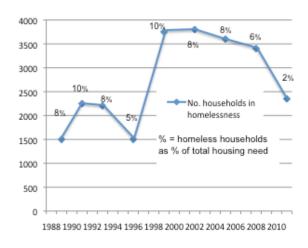
Her reflections also dwell on the unsettling realisation that there may be more people 'out of home' in 2011 than in the late 1990s, when the initiative began (see Figure 1). The *Homeless Agency*, primed for closure in 2010, is "to be absorbed into the newly established *Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency,* apparently without a clear plan of how this will work" (Higgins, 2011, p. 12). Despite her disquiet, Mary believes ending homelessness in a sustainable way is still a realistic goal. She believes there is a unique opportunity that should not be lost; "to review carefully the experience of the Agency over the last ten years, so that what worked well can be retained and developed and what didn't work can be abandoned" (Higgins, 2011, p. 12). The challenge is to identify what should be the next steps to best serve Dublin's homeless community.

Policy and Services for the Homeless: The Early Context

Up until the late 20th century, Ireland's approach to policy and services for homeless individuals was minimal. Indeed, homelessness did not appear on the national policy agenda; it was "at best a marginal concern to the Irish administrative system" (Harvey, 1995, p. 76). Services for the homeless were provided by a number of voluntary, non-profit organisations, as well as state agencies, resulting in an uncoordinated and uneven response. For example, the statutory responsibility for homeless individuals was ambiguously shared between the health authorities that managed the county homes, and the local authorities that provided local housing.

Figure 1: Number of Households in Homelessness 1988 - 2011

Given that no one organisation was clearly responsible for their welfare, coupled with the general lack of concern, homeless people were shunted between government agencies, resulting in the inadequate provision of services. In comparison, there was a clutch of independent agencies, which were actively engaged in designing services specifically for homeless individuals, such as drop-in centres, emergency shelters, hostels and food kitchens. These agencies (e.g., Simon Community, Focus Ireland, St. Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army), many with roots in established religions, operated on a non-profit and voluntary basis.

In the 1990s, the issue of homelessness garnered greater social attention due to a combination of influences: the adoption of a 'corporatist approach', which emphasises a close integration of social and economic policy development (Wiarda, 1997); the popularity of the 'steering not rowing' governance model, where the government is a catalytic agent facilitating the provision of services through other agencies (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992); the existence of a network of voluntary bodies aiding the

homelessness; and the introduction of policy instruments, namely the *Housing Act 1988*, to resolve the legal uncertainty surrounding homelessness.

Resolving Legal Ambiguity: The Housing Act 1988

Intensive lobbying by the National Campaign for the Homeless, a network of non-profits aiding the homeless, is credited with the impetus for this legislation. The *Housing Act 1988* not only provided the first legal definition of homelessness, but also provided the basis for local authorities to assist people who were 'out of home'. The *Act* empowered local authorities to either provide accommodation, or fund the provision of accommodation through other agencies. It also required local authorities to determine the number of a homeless people in their area, at least once every three years, and to allocate housing to them as a matter of priority.

In an effort towards greater social inclusion, Section 10 of the *Act* also led to the expansion of services to address issues accompanying homelessness, such as addiction, mental health and disability. The provision of these services, typically by the non-profit sector, sought to alleviate the array of issues exacerbating homelessness, and most importantly, were recognition that the causes and conditions of homelessness were highly individualistic. That is, homelessness is not epitomised by a particular scenario, or sort of person. Nevertheless, there were those who believed it was not necessarily social inclusion, but economic constraints that motivated the funding of these services (Kenna, 2006). The fiscal crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s restricted the Government's ability to implement structural reforms, which meant it was more attractive to invest in the non-profits' relatively less expensive individualistic services, than to compel local authorities to provide homeless people with housing.

Although the *Housing Act 1988* had been heralded as a resounding achievement, on many levels the initiatives resulting from this *Act* were considered to be uninspiring and ineffective (National Campaign for the Homeless, 1992). "Local authorities simply added the category 'homeless' to their classification scheme for allocating housing, health boards continued to refer people presenting as 'homeless' to whatever organisation had appropriate accommodation available, and the voluntary organisations continued to provide the services they deemed necessary and for which they could get funding from government agencies" (Rhodes et al., 2008, p. 20).

Although housing had grown by 35% in the five years following the introduction of the *Act*, homelessness increased by 45%. Indeed, data collected under the auspices of the *Act*, indicated homeless households had increased 70% between 1991 and 2002 (See Figure 1). There were some who suggested the rise in homelessness was due to a more accurate assessment of the homeless situation. Nonetheless, the reasons for the rise in homelessness were largely attributed to the lack of planning and co-ordination among local authorities and other service providers (Kelleher, 1990; Fahey and Watson, 1995). For example, non-profit service providers operated autonomously and liaised independently with statutory agencies, which resulted in the duplication of some services, as well as a deficiency in critical services for homeless people.

Provisions for the Homeless: A Question of Network Effectiveness

The rise in Dublin's homelessness was the stimulus for exploring alternative approaches to policy creation and service delivery. The Dublin Corporation and the Eastern Health Board's report, *Review of Service Provision for the Homeless in the Dublin Region* (1995), recommended the establishment of a state-funded body, with the remit of improving the efficacy of homeless services through co-ordinated planning and implementation. In 1996, the Government agreed to fund the *Homeless Initiative* for a three-year period, with a view to promoting partnership among agencies working with the homeless (Homeless Initiative, 1997). The *Initiative*, managed by a committee of senior officials from the local and health authorities, was assisted in their work by a consultative board, comprising of representatives from non-profit and statutory agencies. The overarching aim was to seek opportunities for co-operation, common goals, and institutional links.

Reviews of the *Homeless Initiative* attest to its success in achieving its mandate (Boyle et al., 2001). Examples of key outcomes associated with the *Initiative* were formal agreements between agencies in the provision of services, 'best practice' standards to ensure service quality (Homeless Initiative, 1999), and grant aid to implement innovative services by non-profit agencies. Hence, the networking arrangements had given non-profit sector partners an improved knowledge of how other homeless service providers operate and increased input into policy, while statutory agencies became more aware of the diversity of needs of the homeless population and the diversity of responses required to address these needs.

Undeniably, the *Initiative's* most significant outcome was its influence on the Irish Government's policy statement on homelessness, *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* (HAIS), as many of the document's proposals can be traced directly to the *Homeless Initiative's* scheme of activities (Department of Environment and Local Government, 2000).

In this context of information exchange, the *Initiative* was critical in highlighting pertinent issues that merited further attention, such as the:

- Lack of user-friendly information about the services available to homeless people;

- Fragmented provision of services spread across various agencies in disparate locations (i.e., different agencies in different locales to avail of basic services: to apply for housing, collect welfare checks, obtain free meals, and access health care);

- o Need for additional organisational skills among the non-profit staff providing services (e.g., planning, resource management, performance measurement, and budgeting);

- o Limited resources non-profit agencies have in meeting the diverse needs of homeless people; and

- o Dearth of information about homelessness.

Despite these successes, the network process was challenging, as it took time to establish relationships among participants, with a reasonable level of trust and communication. Non-profit and statutory agencies both believed entities within the 'other sector' did not understand their position. As is often the case within the context of collaboration, the meaning attributed to partnership varied among participating agencies. Hence, partnership within the *Initiative* was loose and vague and this absence of clarity was expressed by some parties' uneven commitment. "For instance, complaints were voiced about the level of turnover among the representatives of statutory agencies on Initiative committees, their poor attendance rates at meetings, and the consequent dominance of meetings by the non-profit sector" (Rhodes et al., 2008, p. 11). Further, the *Initiative's* efforts to enhance service provision and eliminate homelessness were less auspicious. In the Dublin area, homelessness and waiting lists doubled, which contrasted sharply with the country's healthy economic conditions of rapid growth, low unemployment, substantial immigration, and high private sector housing outputs.

Social Partnership: An Irish Solution

Collaborative arrangements among statutory agencies, non-profit social service providers, and lobby groups, reflected the increasing readiness to address economic and social policy through 'social partnership'. This approach reflects the development of national networking arrangements for pay negotiation and policy-making, which were established in Ireland in the mid 1980s. These arrangements, which are colloquially termed 'social partnership', initially involved representatives of government, employers, trade unions and the farming community and focussed principally on negotiating national pay levels, employment conditions and fiscal, economic and social policy. However by 1990, the social partners were expanded to include non-profit social service providers and lobby groups and, as the decade progressed, the attention devoted to economic and in particular social policy matters in social partnership significantly increased. Commitments to address homelessness were included in several of the agreements negotiated by these partners during the 1990s.

One factor significantly aiding this process was the increasing professionalisation of the non-profit social services sector, which was expressed through the increased reliance on paid rather than voluntary staff, as well as the increased secularisation of management who replaced religious personnel.

To implement the Government's HAIS required a sustained co-ordination of homeless services across the statutory and voluntary agencies. In response to the HAIS, local authorities were required to set up 'homeless fora', comprising of representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies to devise and implement 'homeless action plans'. In Dublin, the proposed solution was to create a new agency to delineate the area's homelessness strategy and to ensure the strategy goals were met. The *Homeless Agency* was established to replace the *Homeless Initiative* and to supervise the implementation of Dublin's action plans, as well as to serve as the central body through which *all* funding for homeless services would be channelled. Hence, a key management process for the *Agency* was the allocation of funds to homeless service providers. This process resembled grant mechanisms, where applications were invited and then assessed by an expert panel. It is worth noting that devising the terms of reference and assessment formulae for these 'grants', required considerable management attention to attain consensus.

Subsequent to the HAIS, two additional national strategies on homelessness were published: the *Youth Homelessness Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2001) and the *Homeless Preventative Strategy* (Department of Education and Science et al., 2002). Building on the lessons drawn from the *Initiative*, the *Youth Homelessness Strategy* called for the creation of additional fora focussing on youth homelessness, and the formation of guidelines establishing best practice for agencies working with young, homeless people. What distinguished the *Homeless Preventative Strategy* from other national strategies was its emphasis on the prevention of homelessness by collaborating with institutions that work with people at risk of becoming homeless, namely, psychiatric hospitals, Irish prison service, and other 'institutional care' facilities.

During the same period and germane to tackling homelessness, the *Planning and Development Act 2000* stipulated that 20% of all new sector housing development was to be reserved for social and affordable housing. Although fiercely contested by the development and construction industry, Ireland's Supreme Court upheld the legislation, which in turn facilitated local authorities in augmenting their supply of housing. Ultimately, the *Planning and Development Act* could be construed as legislative intervention, to rectify deficits in the housing system, by providing housing for those most in need.

The Homeless Agency: Its Raison d'Être

Paralleling the *Initiative's* structure, the *Agency* had a management board and consultative forum to support the *Agency's* management team. The management board, comprised of representatives from the voluntary and statutory agencies, was charged with implementing the *Agency's* action plans. While the consultative forum, comprised of representatives from voluntary sector, was charged with providing information pertinent to service needs and service provision, as well as monitoring the 'on the ground' outcomes that flowed from initiatives.

In addition to establishing its governance structure and its funding mechanisms, the *Agency* outlined its aims arising from the national strategies in two action plans:

Shaping the Future: An Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2001-2003 (Homeless Agency, 2001) and *Making it Home: An Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2004-2006* (Homeless Agency, 2004a). These action plans consisted of a series of objectives, their associated actions, and the performance indicators to assess the level of service provision for homeless people.

Broadly, the *Agency's* key objectives related to:

o increasing the supply of long-term housing;

o facilitating economic support for those sleeping rough (i.e., the collection of Social Welfare payments);

o creating a continuum of care for homelessness by establishing a 'link' system to gather and share information on homeless persons and services; and

o establishing an on going research programme on issues associated with homelessness.

Ultimately, the *Agency's* overarching goal was the elimination of long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2010. Hence, another strategic dimension was how it should be phased out, while ensuring local service providers maintained the continuum of care for homeless people. A criticism of the plans was the relatively few initiatives that addressed the *structural* causes of homelessness. That is, there were a limited number of general actions and policies aimed at having an indirect effect on homelessness. The majority of the *Agency's* initiatives were *individual*, as they related to homeless-specific service provision and policy, such as addressing addiction and mental health. The focus on individualistic solutions to homelessness reflected the interests and actions of the non-profit partners, which were naturally individualist in orientation. Further, most structural solutions were within the Government's remit and, it could be argued, the State may have had an interest in deflecting attention from this area.

Implementation: The Challenges in Assigning Responsibility

Some predicted the *Agency's* statutory/non-profit coalition would result in an 'arm's length approach', where statutory agencies would 'contract out' to the non-profit agencies the provision of homeless services. Indeed, some members within the non-profit sector believed statutory agencies were 'off-loading' their responsibility to voluntary agencies, because it was the State that was obliged to provide the housing to which homeless people were entitled.

This shifting of responsibility for implementation from public agencies to the voluntaries might have been expected to decrease the influence of the Government, but in practice the establishment and operation of the Homeless Agency enabled the State to greatly increase its influence over the network. Although it would be erroneous to conclude the Government dictated the agenda, its influence on *Agency* partners was exercised through funding and the central role of the statutory agencies on the Board and Management Committee of the Homeless Agency. Granted, there were other less prominent decision-making arenas in which voluntary agencies participated, such as the Consultative Forum, issue-based working groups, networks and reviews.

Availing of social partnership to achieve the State's agenda resulted in significant pay increases for employees of non-profits that provided homeless services. In return, these organisations were required to adopt 'new public management techniques', such as performance measurement and performance related pay, practices more commonly found in the private sector. Accordingly, contracts for homeless services were put out to tender, successful organisations signed service agreements, and they were monitored and assessed to ensure they met the *Agency's* standards of 'good practice'. Consequently, the more 'competent' providers were rewarded with increased funding, while others – deemed to be 'underperforming' – found it difficult to secure funding.

Many service providers regarded these new public management practices as positive reforms in accountability. Yet, support for the *Agency*'s reforms was not universal. Many criticisms were ideological in nature, as the recommendations regarding staff training and the quality of services were too onerous for volunteers. As a result, it was perceived the sector had moved away from its original volunteerism ethos, and most agencies were now reliant mainly or solely on paid staff. Further, some volunteers found the new approach to be too distant from a religious 'ethos of service'. Others believed the increasing professionalism within the sector compromised the voluntary service providers' autonomy. Alice Leahy, a prominent homelessness campaigner, argued the:

Alice Leahy

... major campaign to professionalise the voluntary sector with large grants to independent organisations, once powered by volunteers, to provide services once provided by the state. It is a form of nationalisation and it is a very effective blanket to muffle the sounds of dissent. It effectively silences once problematic voices in the defence of the most vulnerable in Irish society. Once the independent agencies become part of the bureaucracy they must adopt the language of management, the performance indicators and promotion systems that separate so much of decision making from the flesh-and-blood reality (Leahy, 2005, p. 12).

Evaluation: (Some) Measures of Success

Despite the concerns surrounding the professionalisation of the voluntary service providers, the most compelling measures were whether fewer homeless people slept rough, and whether their living conditions improved. The reforms to the homeless service policy and governance did have a significant and positive effect for homeless people (Weafer, 2006). Between 1999 and 2008, the number of people sleeping rough in Dublin declined by 60%; there was also a smaller decline in the number of people identified as 'homeless' (Rhodes and Brooke, 2010). Yet, the long lead required to contract homelessness suggested a lack of clarity around measurement and accountability might have curbed the efficacy of policy initiatives (Rhodes and Brooke, 2010).

Among the *Agency's* more important decisions, was to ensure policy responses were based on verifiable evidence within the context of a robust research programme. The studies on which the *Agency* embarked aimed to understand 'what worked' and the process by which it 'worked best'. This evidence based approach sought to link the appropriate funding streams with models for long-term housing. In this manner, the Agency institutionalised a cycle of objective setting, action, and evaluation. Simultaneously, other key players within the non-profit sector pursued their own cycle of assessment to gauge their efficacy in homeless service provision. This plethora of evaluation afforded, for the first time, a comparison of agencies' services in relation to quality, access and cost.

As the Irish Government's finances deteriorated, cost, value and return became increasingly important. As a result, there was greater partnership and consolidation among the voluntary agencies to achieve maximum effect through shared resources - to the extent that some agencies merged (Morgan, 2011). This process of consolidation even touched the *Homeless Agency*; although never intended to be a permanent institution, it became part of the *Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency* in 2011. With homelessness on the rise again, a new government in power and uncertainty in the economic, organisational and political environment, in the quest to address homelessness, the question remains – what is next on the agenda?

Questions

1. In the provision of services to the homeless, how would you characterise the relationships among the various actors.

2. "Partnership … is hard work and requires effort and constant attention (Morgan, 2011, p. 8)." This sentiment, that organisational collaboration is not easy, is especially resonant for non-profit organisations. What lessons might you draw from the case for improving collaboration among partner organisations?

3. What do you believe are the likely responses of non-profit organisations to altered conditions of support?

4. If you were appointed as the 'special advisor' on homelessness, how would you counsel the Director of the newly established *Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency*?

5. To what extent do you believe the end of homelessness is a real possibility? In your consideration, what would it take to eliminate homelessness in Dublin?

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