

SUPPORTING LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS: THE ROLE OF AN INTERMEDIARY BODY

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Description of the approach (aims, delivery, budget etc)

Pobal is an intermediary body established by the Irish Government and the EU in 1992. It is not established under legislation but is subject to Irish Company law with respect to freedom of information ethics etc. and is also audited by the Controller and Auditor General. The Irish Government appoints the Board and chair. Its purpose is the management of programmes which promote social inclusion, reconciliation and equality through integrated economic and social development within communities.

In the current year, Pobal manages 17 Programmes for 7 Government Departments. Funding is both national and EU. Programmes address themes related to local development, childcare, peace building, community transport, social enterprise, the labour market, rural development, integration of immigrants, access to education and service integration and co-ordination. This case study focuses primarily on Pobal's role vis a vis partnership companies. Partnerships in Ireland implement local development strategic plans for their areas that tackle social and economic exclusion. They have widespread participation in their structures and activities from the political, social partner, state and community and voluntary sectors.

Pobal works with over 4000 community and voluntary organisations across all the programmes managed. It carries out its functions on behalf of the relevant Government Departments within the context of framework and service level agreements. In 2007, the funds managed will amount to Euro 350 m.

The functions of the organisation are as follows:

- The provision of developmental and strategic supports. These range from capacity building and training measures to expert inputs on thematic areas aimed at advancing the contribution to national policy goals.
- The appraisal of applications for funding and the allocation of resources.
- Monitoring performance and finance and carrying out audits and verifications of expenditure.
- Formal reporting on programmes and information provision.
- Supporting the analysis of, and research on, the impact of programmes.
- Influencing public policy based on the learning the lessons arising through implementation at local and county level.

Why the approach is relevant to Croatia?

The position of Pobal as an intermediary, located as it is between government and the local partnership / or other implementing community based structures has a number of features which could be

of interest to Croatia. In the Irish context, it has been the subject of external evaluation confirming the approach as an important mechanism for managing the implementation of policy objectives on behalf of Government. It has also been recognised as providing necessary technical support to develop and assist the organisations that deliver and mobilise the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in tackling difficult issues at local level.

There are a number of functions an intermediary is optimally placed to deliver on. A brief summary of some of these are set out below:

- Its position to act as a co-ordinator of the partnership work and to maintain information flows horizontally and vertically with all stakeholders is important.
- An intermediary has an overview across all partnerships which facilitates the extraction of learning arising from local practice and the evaluation and analysis of the outputs and impacts. Facilitating networking is an important tool utilised in this regard.
- Interacting in the course of its work across vertical and horizontal sets of relationships, the intermediary is in a position to inform policy development based on a sound knowledge of what works or what is innovative across a very wide range of beneficiary organisations. Good communication links to Government Departments, beneficiary organisations and other relevant networks has been central to the capacity to influence the evolving policy making process. The secondment of staff to Pobal from Departments has assisted further in strengthening linkage to the centre.
- A key task to be carried out is in strengthening local partnerships. Pobal has been able to provide objective, professional and wide-ranging supports to meet changing development needs of local organisations. An ability to translate ‘top down requirements’ with methodologies and understanding as to how this can be supported to happen ‘on the ground’ has been important. The capacity to respond constructively, and if necessary authoritatively, is also pertinent in some situations.
- The provision of leadership and direction through an intermediary can be helpful to the local / county level. In this regard the parameters of national programmes and their funding requirements need to be understood while maintaining and valuing local input and decision-making. Leadership roles can be of assistance particularly in times of change and at the early stages of organisational/ programme development.
- Pobal works in a transparent and accountable manner and is responsible for ensuring organisations funded reach the highest standards of governance with respect to same. Training is provided to ensure standards are adhered to and steps taken if issues arise.
- A further role played is in assisting in the development and monitoring of framework and other agreements with Government Departments and agencies to support the co-ordination of the work with mainstream provision. The neutrality of an intermediary can be useful in mediating solutions to assist all stakeholder deliver optimally on their objectives.
- Finally and importantly, an intermediary can play a key role in leading the vision for a programme and in supporting the ethos and principles of partnership working.

Reasons for the success of the approach

Reasons for the success of the model are its contribution to government and governance. The model has demonstrated an ability to respond quickly and flexibly to new national priorities and to manage and support programmes and communities in a transparent and accountable manner. It is also cost effective and provides information and analysis on the outcomes of the national investment in relevant areas. As an intermediary, Pobal is uniquely placed also to support the implementation of cross-sectoral and cross-departmental collaborative approaches and to inform policy arising from that experience. There is widespread recognition that many difficult issues in communities require holistic, multifaceted responses. An intermediary organisation is an important 'non-interested space', to assist partners at all levels to advance co-ordinated services and integrated approaches to these issues.

The obstacles that were faced and the quality of the response taken

There can be tensions between priorities and requirements of the centre and the local level. An intermediary organisation has to be attentive to balancing carefully, what can be conflicting expectations and demands, and to manage communications, and change processes skilfully while ensuring progress and delivery on overall programme goals.

A difficulty that arises is that as an intermediary organisation is entrusted to make a range of operational decisions that at any given time may not be popular with some groups. It is most important that it operates in a transparent manner under clear, publicly available criteria and on the basis of understood principles. Over time this can lead to a general confidence that even if particular decisions made are not agreed with, these are subject to review and there is an independent and fair process and procedures in operation.

Considerations for adoption of this type of approach in Croatia

An emphasis on the themes of subsidiarity, partnership, and enhanced governance underpin many national and EU policy priorities. However, the operationalising of these concepts can be a challenging task. Bringing delivery, coherence, public accountability and assistance to the enterprise requires besides other aspects, enabling supports and structures across a range of spheres. One mechanism that contributes actively to achieve this is the model of the intermediary presented. It is also a partnership model that has been acknowledged from different perspectives as useful. Fundamentally, it enables other players to benefit. What is an important consideration though is the acceptance that the concepts of partnership, participative governance, local capacity building etc. will not be achieved without some commitment of resources both at the partnership level and at the level of a co-ordinating or management/ support structure. The Pobal model aims to encompass all the functional aspects described above but it may, in different contexts, be appropriate and effective to separate out different elements. Nevertheless, both through the local/ county partnerships and through Pobal's role on behalf of Government Departments and the EU, the Irish experience is that the investment provides significant benefits and value for money.

Contact details and website for further information

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