Tackling Social Exclusion in the European Union? The Limits to the New Orthodoxy of Local Partnership*

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Social exclusion in the European Union

The process of European economic integration is intimately associated with the emergence of new patterns of unemployment, poverty and deprivation. While the relatively privileged position of the EU within the global economy means that many of Europe’s citizens have benefited from increased incomes and improved living conditions, unemployment and poverty are now widespread across the European Union (Abrahamson and Hansen, 1996). In the mid-1990s, unemployment was around 11%, nearly 3 million were homeless and over 15% were living in poverty, reflecting the new fissures opening up in welfare capitalism under the assault by capital on the Fordist working class and the welfare state (Lea, 1997; 1999). Increasing numbers of the population are now exposed to, rather than shielded from, insecurity, and cannot any longer rely on the extension of a stable employment base and high rates of economic growth (Mingione, 1996: 13). Contemporary poverty and exclusion are further associated with a consumerist capitalism which is undermining the work ethic and welfare systems predicated on work, in a world where capital no longer needs the work-disciplined reserve army of the past (Bauman, 1998), and traditional class distinctions and allegiances are weakened and ‘churned up’ by post-Fordist or late capitalism. While some emphasize the segmentation of identities and social divisions on ethnic, sexual or local lines, in an as yet unstable class structure in which ‘those above have the coherence of privilege, while those below lack unity and solidarity’ (Anderson, 1998; and see Leonard, 1997), conceptions such as the ‘social proletariat’ may be deployed to encompass all those groups excluded from, or within, the changing forms of the wage relationship (Byrne, 1997; 1999).

These processes have been accompanied by a shift in both policy and academic discourse from a dominant conception of poverty to a focus on social exclusion, signifying a significant redirection of emphasis from the material deprivation of the poor towards their inability to fully exercise their social, economic and political rights as

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citizens (Liebfried, 1993). Social exclusion is a slippery and contested concept (Mingione, 1996: xv), capable of a wide range of analytical and political perspectives (Levitas, 1998; Byrne, 1999), and of both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ interpretations and associations (Veit-Wilson, 1998). In much of the policy literature, including important elements of the EU’s policy discourse, an emphasis on the multidimensional nature of disadvantage is typically coupled with a neopluralist politics. Social exclusion signifies the combined impact of factors such as lack of adequate education, deteriorating health conditions, homelessness, loss of family support, non-participation in the regular life of society and lack of job opportunities. Each type of deprivation has an impact on the others. The result is seen as a vicious circle, posing a serious threat to social cohesion and the European integration project which can only be broken by the combined efforts of many social actors (CEC, 1997).

The association of social exclusion with a crisis of social order, in comparison with the association of poverty with a crisis of fiscal redistribution (Duffy, 1997), is closely linked to the ‘new geography’ of deprivation and the problems of disorder (crime and fear of crime) associated with economic, physical and social degradation in many urban neighbourhoods (Lea, 1999). Recent research has placed particular emphasis on the ‘spatiality’ of social exclusion (Madanipour, 1998; Byrne, 1999), reflecting not only the different positioning of localities within shifting regimes of accumulation (Paugam, 1998), but also political and policy traditions embedded in welfare regimes (Silver, 1995). While ‘local’ dimensions of social exclusion are part and parcel of wider, shifting spatial patterns (Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995; Madanipour, 1998), and exclusion is not confined to such localities — indeed, the experience of exclusion may be exacerbated where, for example, marginalization within work is an integral dimension of a ‘growth region’ like Southeast England (Allen et al., 1998), nonetheless, certain spatial dimensions of social exclusion are particularly prominent in the 1990s. These include those concentrations of the poor in large public (Fordist) housing estates (Power, 1997), but also in other urban locations frequently cheek by jowl with affluence, including neighbourhoods with large migrant and/or ethnic populations or ‘racial ghettos’ (Wacquant, 1993; Zukin, 1998), and remoter rural regions (Pugliese, 1995). In such areas, alienated young people, especially young males, are frequently portrayed as out of control, terrorizing ‘ordinary citizens’ (Danziger, 1995), while state agencies are accused of withdrawing and leaving beleaguered communities to their own devices (Campbell, 1992). Economic and social degeneration thus begets a crisis of local governance.

Local crisis and the rise of local partnership

It is within this context that local partnership arrangements have become a feature of policy for economic and social regeneration at the local level in many EU countries. This ‘new orthodoxy’ of local partnership which has emerged in the 1990s is part of a wider restructuring of patterns of European governance. Shifts in the relationships between supranational, national and subnational tiers of the state (away from the

1 In more radical usages (i.e. those which take the view that building an inclusive society will require structural social and economic change), a key concern has been to identify exclusion as an active process, driven by powerful actors and mechanisms in the three spheres of the market, the state and civil society (Gore et al., 1995).

2 Other strands of EU discourse focus more narrowly on integration into paid work as the main answer to social exclusion (Levitas, 1996; 1998).

3 While the focus of this article is on partnership at the local level, it should be recognized that the trend towards partnership is obviously much wider than this. Some partnership-based initiatives to combat social exclusion do not take the form of localized, spatially targeted programmes. Equally, partnership relationships are apparent in many policy domains, not only that concerned with social exclusion and poverty.

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nation-state, both upwards to European and other supranational institutions and downwards to the local or regional level) (Jessop, 1993; Marks et al., 1996) are intersecting with the crossing or blurring of old boundaries and demarcations between actors and institutions from the spheres of the state, the market and civil society (Le Galès, 1998). As one element of such trends, local partnership reflects the perceived limitations of both ‘statist’ forms of governance and of some of the more extreme market-led experiments of the 1980s as ways of addressing the ‘governance crisis’ and the growing demand for the more direct involvement of citizens and ‘communities’ — of place, of identity and of interest — in the political and policy process (Hirst, 1994). Partnerships are seen as a more flexible form of ‘networked governance’ (Rhodes, 1997; Benington and Harvey, 1998), capable of resolving some of the legitimation problems faced by the state, of finding new solutions to complex policy problems, of sharing risk, and of building trust between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors.

An important driving force behind the trend towards local partnership has been the EU itself. The European Community’s Observatory on National Policies to Combat Social Exclusion commented that ‘the debates about social exclusion are, as much as anything, debates about the new partnerships which must be forged within our European societies’ (Robbins, 1992), and partnership, especially at the local level, has become an increasingly important referent in major recent social and economic policy statements emanating from the Commission (CEC, 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1997). While there is a degree of rhetoric in this, partnership is being introduced not only into the language, but also into the structures, practices and processes of EU policy-making as a key part of the attempt to counterbalance fears of fragmentation with notions of integration, and as a means of mobilizing agencies and actors behind economic and social policy goals. A local partnership approach has become a standard feature of many EU programmes and initiatives, including the LEDA programme to promote local economic development, the URBAN initiative aimed at deprived neighbourhoods in cities, the LEADER I and II programmes for rural development, the Poverty 3 programme, aimed at the integration of the most excluded social groups, and the so-called Territorial Employment Pacts. The new arrangements for the Structural Funds post-2000 place increased emphasis on partnership. The OECD also identifies local partnership as one of the primary guiding principles in dealing with the problems of ‘distressed urban areas’ which threaten social cohesion (OECD, 1998).

At the same time, a number of national governments have also introduced policy programmes to promote local development and urban regeneration, and to tackle poverty and social exclusion, founded on local partnership principles. In the UK, successive programmes, such as City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund and the recent New Deal for Communities programme, have allocated funding to localities able to demonstrate a framework of partnership between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. In Ireland, where the influence of EU thinking and funding is very significant, a range of government programmes have funded local regeneration partnerships, including the Area Programme for Integrated Rural Development, the ABR Programme (Area Based Response to Long Term Unemployment), the Programme for Integrated Development and the Local Enterprise Programme. In France, major programmes, such as that for the Développement Social des Quartiers (DSQ) and the recent Contrat de Ville programme, operate through a local partnership framework. The Social Renewal programme in the Netherlands and the Social Development Fund in Denmark are further examples.

To what extent does local partnership offer answers to contemporary problems of social exclusion, and in particular to the ‘local crises’ where problems are most serious and entrenched? Do local partnerships live up to the rhetoric of cohesion, integration and solidarity characteristic of the policy discourse of the EU and its member states, or are
they better regarded as part of the apparatus of social control which is a major element of
the state’s response to the economic marginalization and social disintegration of many
localities?

This article explores these issues by drawing on recent EU-wide research. This
examined local partnerships concerned with tackling problems of localized poverty,
depression and social exclusion in a number of ways, ranging from local economic
development to the provision of social facilities and services and broader, multi-
dimensional approaches to local development or regeneration. Most were focused on
defined geographical areas, but some were targeted at specific social groups. Many of the
partnerships were closely associated with funding from EU and/or national policy
programmes, but a number resulted from more local, sometimes grass-roots initiatives;
they were located in a range of urban and rural socioeconomic contexts, and varied from a
neighbourhood to a subregional scale of operation. Most of the partnerships operated
through formal organizational structures, but others were more informal, especially where
such arrangements were more characteristic of a particular country. All the partnerships
involved a range of social interests as partners, but, as will be seen, the specific interests
represented varied very considerably.

This article draws on this research evidence to discuss three broad sets of issues
which are identified in the recent literature: the capacity of local partnerships as
(inter)organizational forms and processes of governance; their inclusiveness and
accountability; and the extent of the outcomes attributable to partnership as a distinctive
element of new modes of local governance. Le Galès distinguishes two necessary
dimensions of the capacity of urban governance: internal integration, referring to the
‘capacity to integrate (local) organizations, actors, social groups and different interests’;
and external integration, referring to the capacity to represent local interests externally
(Le Galès, 1998: 496–7). Both dimensions are of relevance to partnerships. Healey, for
example, identifies a number of aspects of institutional capacity relevant to partnerships:
relational forms and processes (who is involved, the depth and stability of involvement
and interaction, which actors and nodes of interaction are privileged); and the ‘currencies’
of governance (material resources, skills, knowledge, social trust, political capabilities)
(Healey, 1998). A growing number of research studies of local partnerships in particular
localities (e.g. Bassett, 1996; Hastings, 1996), including some comparative cross-national
research (e.g. John and Cole, 1998), and of partnerships within particular policy
programmes, such as the EU LEDA programme (Humphreys, 1996), are now
documenting the questionable capacity of local partnerships to secure the effective
commitment of key actors, and to implement common strategies and action plans. Other
research points to the problems of fragmentation and coordination posed by a system of
governance composed of ‘nested tiers of partnerships’ (Peck and Tickell, 1995). Some of
the questions about partnerships are similar to those raised in recent debates concerning
urban regimes and growth coalitions. Partnership structures represent one of the
institutional forms through which urban (or rural) governance regimes may function
(Harding, 1997), and questions concerning interest representation in local regimes, and
their capacity to act effectively, are among the primary issues raised by urban regime and
growth coalition studies (Stone, 1993; Stoker and Mossberger, 1994). The focus of
growth coalitions is on local economic growth and competitiveness, and much of the

4 The research, for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions,
involved research studies in ten member states (Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Greece,
Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom) with supplementary research on the other five (see Table 1).
Up to ten local partnerships were initially identified in each country, giving a sample of 86 local
partnerships across the EU. Thirty detailed case studies were then undertaken (three in each of the above
ten member states), chosen to reflect key features of local partnership both within each nation-state and in
major EU programmes. The case studies involved a series of semi-structured interviews with key actors.
For further details of the research methodology and findings, see Geddes (1998).
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literature on local partnerships is concerned with local economic development issues. However, as Le Galès and Harding (1998) point out, localities with economic and social problems also need to build governance coalitions focused on social integration and social inclusion, and the evidence presented here attempts to contribute to an analysis of local partnerships as forms of ‘structured co-operation’ (Harding, 1997: 293) in the social sphere.

The inclusiveness and accountability of local partnerships is particularly relevant in the context of social exclusion. There is, again, a growing body of research which indicates the tendency in many local partnerships for excluded social groups, even when these are the ‘targets’ of the partnership’s activity, to be marginalized within partnership processes (e.g. Chanan, 1992; 1997; McArthur, 1995; Madanipour et al., 1998), raising serious questions as to the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms of partnership, and whether ‘partnership governance’ reinforces rather than reduces processes of exclusion. There is frequently an absence or inadequacy of mechanisms enabling/requiring the individuals ‘representing’ social interests in local partnerships to consult with, and act on behalf of, their ‘constituencies’ (Bassett, 1996).

Thirdly, many of the above studies raise questions about the outcomes of partnership-based projects and programmes. Again, some of the issues here about partnerships are similar to the concerns of regime/coalition theorists about ‘who achieves’ by involvement in local development regimes or coalitions (Stone, 1989). Analysis of not only which socioeconomic interests are involved in local initiatives, but also which interests benefit is obviously crucial. But this requires not just an identification of local development ‘outcomes’, but evidence that such outcomes are the result of the ‘structured cooperation’ taking place in partnerships or other arenas, and this evidence is often quite difficult to find. In the first place, there are serious difficulties in identifying the so-called ‘added value’ of partnership (Monnier, 1997), and the methodologies of many quantitative official evaluations (e.g. EU-sponsored evaluations of specific partnership-based programmes) are questionable. Some studies do make considerable claims about the impact of local partnerships (see, e.g., Sabel, 1996). However, a considerable amount of qualitative, case-study research — for example on the EU’s Poverty 3 programme (Estivill et al., 1994), as well as on many individual partnerships — tends to point to only limited identifiable outcomes, and emphasizes instead the time and resource-consuming processes of ‘building partnerships’ (see also Mackintosh, 1992).

**Partnership and local governance capacity: papering over the cracks?**

The claim that local partnership can increase the capacity of systems of governance to tackle problems of poverty and social exclusion more effectively rests, first, on the extent to which they do actually incorporate and orchestrate key interests, both local and supralocal. Figure 1 shows the representation of ‘partner’ interests in the local partnerships studied, distinguishing between six categories: local public agencies, national/regional public bodies, employers (in the private sector), trade unions, the voluntary sector, and community organizations and interests.

Figure 1 indicates, first, the dominant role of the public sector in local partnerships. Local government and other local public bodies are the most common category of ‘partner’ organization, closely followed by national and regional state agencies. In most local partnerships, public-sector agencies play a leading or dominant role, however much their agendas may be influenced by other interests. Even in programmes like City

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5 The data for this figure refer to the full sample of 86 local partnerships.
Challenge in the UK, where private-sector leadership was promoted by a neoliberal government, the reality has often been rather different. In this respect, the main contribution of local partnerships is often as a reintegrative force within an increasingly competitive and disjointed local public sector. In a similar way to which urban governance still confronts a ‘weakened but unavoidable state’ (Le Galès and Harding, 1998: 137), so other interests in local partnerships tend to revolve around a weakened but unavoidable public sector.

Alongside the state sector, voluntary organizations were represented in over half the local partnerships, reflecting both the emergence of a ‘mixed market’ in the provision of social services in some northern European countries, and the fact that in Southern Europe social welfare has traditionally depended heavily on the non-governmental sector. Private sector/employer participation in local partnerships is strongly promoted both by the EU’s commitment to the neocorporatist role of the ‘social partners’, and by member states such as Ireland and the UK (though according to rather different rationales), but far less actively in many other member states. There was, though, business/employer representation in less than half the partnerships identified in the research, and in some of these cases the involvement was formal rather than substantive. Trade union involvement was a feature of only about one-third of the partnerships in the research, despite the EU’s commitment to the involvement of both of the social partners. Trade unions were more actively involved in countries where EU influence is strong, such as Greece and Ireland, and when the emphasis is on unemployment and the regeneration of the local economy, as in some LEDA partnerships. But in countries such as the UK, for a combination of reasons, trade union involvement is very much the exception.

Community sector organizations and interests were directly represented in only about half the local partnerships analysed. In some cases, as, for example, in Porto, in the Beringen Poverty 3 partnership in Belgium (Carton et al., 1996) and in the Tallaght partnership in Ireland, excluded groups were represented through local community organizations and associations; in others, North Tyneside for example, by the election of representatives on a neighbourhood basis. In a third group, as in the Communales Forum in Wedding, Berlin, individual community leaders and activists represented local interests, while in the Okospeicher project in Wulkow, a small village in Brandenburg, a high proportion of the inhabitants are members of the partnership association (Birkholzer and Lorenz, 1996). In other partnerships, however, ‘community’ interests were deemed to
be represented by local politicians or public officials, or were consulted or represented in specific projects but not in the main partnership structure.

If the partnerships studied are at all representative of practice more generally, this evidence suggests that, while partnerships do introduce new actors into the local policy process to help to address the ‘governance crisis’, there are considerable limits to this, so opening to question the extent to which many partnerships are likely to be capable of ‘concerting all the key actors’ in mounting a comprehensive, cross-sectoral assault on the multidimensional facets and causes of social exclusion.

There are also, of course, very significant differences between countries and groups of countries in both the extent to which local partnerships have been developed, and in the typical pattern of interest representation (cf. Le Galès and Harding, 1998: 141). Local partnership is not — at any rate yet — an important feature of the system of governance in many parts of the EU. In much of Scandinavia, public and political support for the traditional role of the state and the public sector has, despite some strains, limited the impact of partnership, and where partnership-type initiatives have developed they involve mainly the public and voluntary sectors. The same is true, though in a very different way, in southern European countries where the legacy of authoritarian regimes lingers. In these latter countries, local partnership remains primarily associated with EU programmes. In Germany and Austria, traditional corporatist relationships between the state and the social partners, focused at the national level, seem to have restricted the development of local partnership and sometimes privileged the position of the ‘social partners’ where it has emerged. Partnerships are, in fact, a feature *par excellence* of the policy landscape in the UK and Ireland, and to a secondary extent in France and one or two other countries. This differentiation in the character of local partnerships is consistent with the way in which Silver (1995; 1996) and Paugam (1998) identify a number of ‘traditions’ in the understanding of, and response to, social exclusion, and suggests that it may be necessary to think in terms of various ‘partnership regimes’ rather than a single model, in somewhat the same way as Stone (1993) and Stoker and Mossberger (1994) identify a number of possible ‘urban regimes’.6

This suggests the need for some caution as regards the extent to which more traditional forms and practices of local governance are being superseded by partnership. Nonetheless, factors ranging from the pressures on welfare systems, such as those in Scandinavia, and the influence of EU funding programmes mean that the partnership approach is rapidly becoming more widespread across the EU. While local level collaboration between state institutions and between government, business and the voluntary and community sectors is, of course, a long-standing practice, local partnerships do appear to represent a contemporary modulation of such relationships: a significantly different local political and policy framework from the dirigiste statist or corporatist models of the Fordist period; or from the neoliberalism of the Thatcherite era in the UK, distinguished primarily by its emphasis on the *interaction between* organizations and social interests, from the three spheres of state, market and civil society, rather than the capacity of any unique actor, organization, interest or sphere.

But does the more intensive interaction facilitated by local partnerships actually enhance the capacity of local governance to tackle problems of poverty and social exclusion? The literature tends to suggest that this happens through a series of steps which can be represented as follows:7

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6 I develop this line of analysis more fully elsewhere (Geddes, 1999; Geddes and Le Galès, 2001).
7 These steps have similarities with the processes of ‘regime formation and development’ discussed by urban regime theorists (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994).
First, a partnership framework may help to develop a common stock of knowledge and understanding of social exclusion. Such common understanding will enrich the local policy community (Bassett, 1996; Boix and Posner, 1996). In a number of the partnerships, local elites considered that engagement in partnership had improved their understanding of local problems and issues. Thus, partners in the ARCIL partnership, which supports people with disabilities in an area in central Portugal, reflected that ‘you come to understand that it is not (disabled) people who are deficient, it is the facilities available to them that are’ and ‘you realise that people with special needs are not marginal: it is society which marginalises them’ (Rodrigues and Stoer, 1996). This kind of thing was, however, far from universal — in many partnerships a common understanding, either of the nature of poverty and exclusion or of what to do about it, was generated only to a limited extent, while in some cases attempts to establish partnership relationships failed because of the difficulty of building common understanding. This was frequently the case in Greece, and also, for example, in the El Ribeiro partnership in rural Spain, where neither the public authorities nor local economic and social interests proved able to engage positively with each other, despite the stimulus of both European and other funds.

This has implications for the notion that a key feature of local partnerships is a capacity to build trust. A common framework of understanding may be regarded as the necessary ‘currency’ for the emergence of trust between ‘partners’. In some partnerships, and to varying extents, there was an increase in trust between partners. To return to the ARCIL partnership, not untypically of a number of others, partners felt that ‘there is better communication between individuals’ so that ‘with this dynamic, it is guaranteed that everyone will give each other feedback on what they are doing’. But this was not the case everywhere by any means. In the Poverty 3 partnership in Mantes, for example, while greater trust seems to have developed between professional workers from different organizations, the same cannot be said in respect of politicians and senior officials (Le Galès and Loncle, 1996). Partnerships also exclude as well as include, so that trust may be limited to a narrow circle of ‘insiders’. In the Western Isles and Skye and Lochalsh LEADER partnership in Scotland, a relatively narrow group of partner organizations developed relations of trust which were previously absent, but the ‘charmed circle’ excluded both other agencies and community interests. In North Tyneside, partnership appears to have promoted a selection process seeking out local politicians sympathetic to the partnership ethos and excluding other ‘unreconstructed’ individuals, as well as a gendered process described by one individual in terms of male bonding rituals which marginalize women. Partnerships, in fact, often function as arenas in which distrust can be managed and contained, rather than forums constituted by, and constitutive of, trust.

Shared understanding of exclusion, and greater trust (or management of distrust), are not ends in themselves but means towards securing further objectives. Central to partnership is the objective of improved policy coordination, either by ensuring that the activities of different organizations are oriented to a common purpose, even when they are still pursued separately, or, in a stronger model of partnership, by the pooling of resources in a common, integrated project or programme, ‘owned’ and controlled...
mutually by the partners through a formal institutional partnership framework. This is often seen as the primary contribution which partnership can make to a more holistic and multidimensional response to problems of local economic regeneration and social exclusion. Local partnerships funded both by national programmes — the Contrat de Ville in France, City Challenge and the SRB in the UK, the Programme of Integrated Development in Disadvantaged Areas in Ireland — and by EU programmes ranging from Poverty 3 to URBAN, reflect this search for holistic solutions achieved through local partnership. There are, however, several important constraints on the extent to which local partnerships can achieve such a multidimensional ‘response’. First among these is the limited presence of some of the key actors in many partnerships, as discussed above. Moreover, even when such key partners are formally present, the depth of their involvement is often very limited. This applies particularly to private-sector involvement. Even in countries such as Ireland, where local partnerships are a firmly established feature of local governance, employer involvement is often tokenistic, and it can be difficult for partnerships to find local employer ‘representatives’. There are seldom effective mechanisms for such representatives to consult with the wider ‘business community’. The depth of trade-union involvement in many partnerships exhibited similar limitations. Secondly, there are significant transaction costs involved in seeking to integrate the actions and policies of a range of actors and agencies in tackling social exclusion through a partnership framework — a particularly serious issue for less well-resourced ‘partners’, especially local voluntary and community organizations and their representatives. The flexibility which partnership requires also frequently poses problems for both individuals and organizations. In southern European countries, for example, public-sector organizations (still partially formed by their totalitarian pasts) often exhibited bureaucratic inflexibility to the extent that local partnerships remain a marginal feature in countries such as Greece (Robolis et al, 1996). The need for greater bureaucratic flexibility should not, however, be confused with pressures for political ‘flexibility’. Elected local politicians (and their political parties) are frequently exhorted to be more ‘flexible’ in partnership contexts. The consensual principles of partnership-working are very dissimilar to traditional local party politics, which emphasizes the incompatibility of political parties’ agendas, and especially to radical political agendas, which are founded on conceptions of conflicting or contradictory social interests. Partnership thus confronts many local politicians with the need to refocus their agendas, and provide ‘civic leadership’ within a more consensual framework. The research showed as many examples of failure to do this as of success. In Girona in Catalonia, the consensus-building leadership role played in a Poverty 3-funded partnership by a prominent local politician was a key factor in engaging other local interests (Estivill and Martinez, 1996). But in other instances, such as the Poverty 3 partnership in Mantes in France, the conflicting agendas of local politicians seriously inhibited the development of a coherent partnership strategy.

In addition to the possibility that partnerships produce better integrated local strategies to tackle social exclusion, it is claimed that, by providing a forum in which policy-makers can escape from the mind sets and constraints entrenched in existing institutions, partnership can foster policy innovation and especially new approaches to so-called ‘cross-cutting’ or ‘wicked’ issues, such as social exclusion, which transcend the policy domains of individual agencies. The experience of newly emerging partnership relationships in countries such as Finland and Austria (Heikka and Kautto, 1996; Kain and Rosian, 1996), and southern European countries such as Portugal and Greece, confirms that many state officials do indeed see partnership as an escape from established

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8 It should be noted that the research does not include local partnerships set up under the EU’s programme of Territorial Employment Pacts, which emphasize social partner involvement. TEPs were not in existence when the case studies were chosen.
hierarchies and bureaucracies — although partnerships may also encourage highly individualistic behaviour by individuals as a result of the informality of partnerships’ working practices (Le Galés and Loncle, 1996). It is also claimed that innovation can emerge from the interaction between private and public sectors, if each is willing to recognize the characteristic strengths of the other. The research, though, shows little substantial evidence of this — it seems at least as frequent for public-sector ‘partners’ to criticize the private sector for its lack of real commitment to partnership, and the private sector to berate the public sector for its lack of urgency and entrepreneurialism. Moreover, set against the potential capacity of partnership frameworks for innovation is a potential for ‘policy loss’ associated with the relatively loose interorganizational forms, and consensus politics, of partnerships. In many of the partnerships, tackling poverty and social exclusion was only one among a number of policy objectives in a wider local development or ‘regeneration’ agenda, alongside others such as local economic competitiveness. Even where, formally, all partners may agree on the priority of tackling exclusion, partnerships often have restricted leverage over the actions of ‘partner’ organizations.

Finally — and for many practitioners most significantly — the pooling of financial (and other) resources by partnerships can produce added value, either by better coordination and application of given resources, and/or by ‘levering in’ further resources. Partnerships such as those supported by the EU LEADER programme in South West Kerry in Ireland and in the Western Isles and Skye and Lochalsh in Scotland suggest that this happens most effectively when the application of funding is not determined \textit{a-priori}, but is used to stimulate locally generated projects. But while partnership may facilitate resource leverage, at the same time the tendential fragmentation of policy associated with local partnership carries a danger of resource loss, especially if local partnerships become a substitute for mainstream expenditure rather than supplementing it.

As was noted above, many local partnerships include representation of supralocal interests, especially in the form of regional or national state agencies, reflecting the fact that an external integrative dimension, in Le Galés’ formulation, or ‘vertical partnership’, is an important dimension of many local partnerships, which need to represent local interests to, and secure resources from, regional and national authorities and the EU. In a number of countries — for example in some French, Irish, Spanish and Austrian partnerships — there was significant involvement at local level by regional authorities and national government agencies and ministries. In Finland, where partnership is generally less developed than in many other member states, partly because of its lack of exposure to EU programmes until recently, partnership-type arrangements in a number of urban areas appear to be creating new ‘policy spaces’ for municipal and national state officials to work together (as well as with other interests). For many partnerships supported by EU programmes, an important benefit is the opportunity to participate in transnational policy networks — although many take the view that the value of such experiments in transnational ‘networked governance’ is inhibited by the tight control exercised by the European Commission. But while national government agencies and departments may be represented in local partnership structures, they often prove very unwilling to adjust to local agendas. In the UK and some other countries, national government holds itself aloof from direct involvement at the local level, and local partnerships largely represent transmission belts for nationally determined programmes and priorities. The same is the case with the majority of partnerships supported by EU programmes.

The extent to which local partnerships do increase local capacities to tackle social exclusion is therefore decidedly ambiguous. Partnerships do bring a range of other actors into the process of local governance alongside public agencies, but this by no means implies that all the ‘key actors’ whose decisions will primarily shape local futures are ‘signed up’ to the partnership programme. While some features of partnerships may
facilitate ‘joined-up’ local governance, these are intimately bound up with problems of complexity, coordination, and individual and institutional capacities and competencies. While some partnerships have surmounted such problems to a greater or lesser extent, in other cases they have proved disabling or seriously limiting. In some instances, ‘local’ partnership may strengthen the ‘vertical’ integrative capacity of the nation-state and of supranational institutions rather than either the ‘horizontal’ networks of local governance or the ability of local interests to influence external actors. Local partnerships may be more a reflection of the wider weakening of governance capacity in an era of neoliberalism and globalization than of a strengthening of local governance.

**Partnership and inclusive local governance: empowering excluded communities?**

‘Community involvement’ or even ‘empowerment’ is a dominant theme in the discourse of local partnership in the EU and in many member states. ‘Partnership for social inclusion’ means engaging the excluded within the structures and processes of partnership as active, if not necessarily equal, partners in ‘community governance’. Local partnerships, it is claimed, are intended to function as institutional arenas for networks of civic engagement and social capital (cf. Putnam, 1993) linking ‘communities’ and community organizations with the formal organizations of the public and private sectors. However, as Figure 1 showed, by no means all partnerships offer direct representation to local community interests; and the effectiveness of ‘community’ involvement in local partnerships is, at best, extremely variable. On the one hand, the evaluation of some of the partnerships analysed shows that, whatever its limitations, poor communities may take the view that a (problematic) engagement in local partnerships offers them more voice than no engagement, or than the voice offered through local representative democratic processes if local councillors appear to lack understanding of, or sympathy with, their perspectives. This must guard against any tendency to dismiss ‘community participation’ out of hand as no more than tokenism or window-dressing. However, in the first place, ‘community’ involvement in local partnerships normally draws on a layer of local activists, such as those involved in local community or residents organizations, and fails to engage to any significant degree with the wider ‘local community’ or, more particularly, with the ‘most excluded’, such as alienated young people. A frequent complaint of those involved in local partnerships is about the difficulties of engaging such ‘hard to reach’ groups. Secondly, a pervasive finding, consistent with other recent research (Hastings et al., 1996), concerns the difficulties and obstacles experienced by community organizations and representatives within local partnership frameworks. Community ‘partners’ lack the resources of formal partners and they are often unused to operating effectively within bureaucratic processes. They frequently encounter condescension, ignorance or hostility from other partners. Thus, one leading actor in the North Tyneside partnership in the UK could say that: ‘The community hasn’t got many skills so they don’t bring very much to the table. They are here to be consulted, negotiated with, but they don’t help much’ (Geddes, 1997: 63). The experiential knowledge of poverty and exclusion which the excluded can offer is often not valued by partners who recognize only the ‘expert’ codified knowledge of formal organizations. A particularly contentious issue is often the relationship between elected local politicians and ‘community’ representatives, while the latter may not themselves be

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9 This discourse of inclusion and community engagement frequently glosses over an uneasy mixture of diverse strands — from traditional ‘community development’ and community power (Harding, 1997) to the new communitarianism (Etzioni, 1995), and from liberal, individualized conceptions of community, democracy and citizenship to much more solidaristic and collective principles.
particularly representative, even if the complaints typically made about ‘professional activists’ are by no means always justified. These issues reflect the divisions and tensions within poor communities, which the rhetoric of ‘community’ neatly glosses over. Such tensions are not infrequently exacerbated by the strains of ‘community’ involvement in the partnership process. Those acting as representatives of local community interests within partnerships can find themselves at odds not just with other interests within the partnership, but also with their own ‘constituencies’, as differences of view within ‘the community’ become focused around actions of the partnership. In some cases, such tensions are manipulated by other interests in the partnership who may find it convenient to be able to point to and exploit ‘community’ disarray.

Some of the most evident tensions within excluded communities are along gender lines. Many of the European localities analysed in the research reflect the fact that in poor communities women often play key roles in trying to voice community interests and promote community solidarity (see, e.g., Rodrigues and Stoer, 1996), often in the face of male disinterest and (sometimes violent) obstruction (cf. Campbell, 1992). But in contrast to the role played by women in the community sphere, in most partnerships most of the powerful positions were occupied by men (although women typically made key contributions as project workers), and few partnerships operate either formal or informal equal opportunity policies.

What conclusions should be drawn from this? Can we, drawing on urban regime theory, think of these local partnerships as ‘inclusion coalitions’: arenas for structured coordination of interests at the local level but with a focus on social inclusion rather than economic growth? The possibilities of ‘inclusion’ which local partnerships can offer to the disadvantaged must not be discounted. However, the limits to the inclusionary practice and potential of many of the partnerships are equally obvious. Partners have widely differing resources and power, even when there is formal parity of representation among different social interests. The construction of local partnerships on neocorporatist or neopluralist principles of ‘stakeholder’ representation, with ‘the community’ identified as merely one among a number of ‘interests’, tends to entrench elitist rather than inclusionary principles, along with a problematic notion of a common ‘community’ interest. The research does indicate, in a small number of cases, the potential for inclusivity and even solidarity with excluded groups that can be built around partnership structures, especially where these are generated ‘from below’ rather than ‘from above’. But these partnerships — such as that in Wulkow in former East Germany, or the ARCIL project for those with disabilities in Portugal, are in a small minority, and tend to be the least well-resourced, partly because of their unwillingness to make the compromises which ‘mainstream’ government or EU funding typically requires. At the other extreme are partnerships — including many of the best resource — which are primarily constructed around the participation and interests of local political, administrative and economic elites and, implicitly if not explicitly, on the principle that the reintegration of deprived areas into the mainstream of the capitalist economy will also reintegrate the excluded. In between are a range of compromises between these poles.

The social and economic impact of local partnerships

The third issue to be considered concerns the impact attributable to the new approach to policies to tackle social exclusion associated with local partnerships. What are the actual outcomes of partnership in tackling poverty and social exclusion in poor areas? The

10 Stone’s concept of ‘lower class opportunity expansion’ regime is also pertinent here (Stone, 1993).
11 It is worth noting that, contra the emphasis of regime theory on local socioeconomic circumstances, in most partnerships the ‘coalitions’ assembled are primarily dictated by the criteria of national and EU funding regimes.
difficulty of evaluating the ‘value added’ by partnership-working (let alone the wider set of problems associated with the attribution of specific outcomes to policy measures) must be noted again at this point. There was often relatively little evidence of the outcomes of local partnership initiatives, and that collected by partnerships themselves, or by governments, is often questionable. Nonetheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

The claim for partnership is that it can combine the contribution of different actors to achieve comprehensive change, combining physical, social and economic regeneration. Many of the local partnerships have invested heavily in physical renewal and in local social and cultural facilities and services. In urban areas, some of the larger local regeneration partnerships (e.g. See S Nicolau in Porto, Lille Contrat de Ville, North Tyneside City Challenge) have undertaken the comprehensive renewal of rundown housing estates and local urban centres. While much of this activity would not seem to have been particularly dependent on a partnership framework, some outcomes did apparently stem in whole or in part from the specific interorganizational, and interpersonal, relations formed in and around the partnerships. Thus, the Paul Partnership in Limerick or the Poverty 3 partnerships in Porto and Beringen were able to improve service delivery through more effective collaboration between partner organizations (and, sometimes, different parts of the same organization) and as a result of the ‘voice’ given to users and local communities, as did the partnerships in Tyrol in Austria and Hanko in Finland on a smaller scale. Such ‘positive outcomes’ were, however, seldom sufficient to reverse long-term trends of disinvestment, decay and social disintegration in deprived areas. Where local social networks have become degraded and antagonistic, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ investment in social services or in housing and other infrastructure is easily engulfed by the scale and depth of ‘exclusion’ as when, for example, new facilities are targeted by alienated young people. Alternatively, processes of ‘renewal’ may involve the displacement of existing residents, merely shifting the location of exclusion from one neighbourhood to another.

The remits of many of the partnerships recognized that investment in social facilities and services needs to be a complement to, not a substitute for, addressing questions of income poverty and work. As Byrne (1999) has recently argued, for example (contra Levitas, 1998), accepting the fundamental association of social exclusion with unemployment, and the radical nature of the demand for work, is not to lend support to the contention that tackling social exclusion can be equated exclusively with the insertion of the excluded into the wage relation, particularly its manifestation in the contemporary labour market. Nor is it to deny the importance of arguments, such as those of Bauman, that exclusion may be experienced primarily as exclusion from consumption rather than production, or to fail to recognize the current explosion of ‘working poverty’. But it is to acknowledge that a central factor in the success or failure of local partnerships in contributing to tackling social exclusion is their ability to improve the incomes of the excluded through their leverage in the local economy and local labour market.

In principle, local partnerships should be able to influence the local economy to the advantage of the disadvantaged by making the networks which link individuals who are disadvantaged in the labour market to schools, training institutions and, crucially, employers function more effectively, as those associated with the concept of ‘network poverty’ and ‘welfare to network’ policies argue (6, 1997; Schneider, 1997). The experience of the partnerships analysed in the research does offer some examples of such effects. The partnership framework in Wedding in Berlin, for example, enabled a series of small projects to be developed, resourced and implemented, resulting in 90 jobs in this disadvantaged urban area. ARCIL in Portugal had created 200 jobs in a wide range of small projects set up for those with disabilities. In Carinthia in Austria, the collaboration of public authorities, trade unions and employers has established targeted packages of training and labour-market support in towns and economic sectors where industrial restructuring has created major employment problems. Some EU LEADER partnerships in rural areas claim
that the partnership framework has had a major impact in stimulating a local culture of entrepreneurship in remote rural areas with a previous culture of dependence on state welfare. The BRUTEC partnership in Brussels between training organizations and employers has identified new job opportunities associated with new technology and helped to make some of them accessible to the young unemployed, especially from ethnic minorities, with low qualifications. But in other partnerships little had been achieved in terms of improving incomes and job opportunities. Thus, for example, the Poverty 3 partnership in Girona, and the Paul and Tallaght partnerships in Ireland, acknowledged — as others might also have done if pressed — that they had little leverage in the local labour market. Many of the supply-side local labour market measures implemented by local partnerships do little to address either the problems of labour demand deficiency in many areas, or the poor quality of many of the jobs on offer — indeed, they may serve to institutionalize low pay (Byrne, 1999). As is the case with social investment, investment in the local economy is also susceptible to being overwhelmed by factors beyond the influence of local partnerships. The large-scale investments in training and economic development made by the North Tyneside City Challenge partnership were claimed to have created 900 jobs and to have sustained 1500 more, but, despite this, local unemployment continued to rise as a result of closures and redundancies among key local employers. While local employers may be ‘partners’ in local partnerships, this does not normally mean that, except at the margins, their investment and employment strategies are part of the partnership’s agenda (in some contrast to other categories of partner, including public authorities and community interests, who commit key interests to the partnership framework). Moreover, local partnerships generally exercise very little influence over two key types of decisions by external actors which impact critically on the local economy: either decisions by externally based employers to restructure local activities, or mainstream government economic and fiscal policies.

Given the problems associated with meeting the needs of the excluded via the mainstream economy, it is increasingly suggested that the so-called ‘social economy’ (Birkholzer, 1996) should play an important role in the economic regeneration of poor areas (CEC, 1995a). Some argue, for example, for a ‘complementary economic development strategy’ of support for community enterprise, credit unions, voluntary activity, local exchange and trading systems, paralleling ‘mainstream’ investment in small business, inward investment, training and industrial property (MacFarlane, 1997), although it needs to be noted that third-sector employment may often itself be low paid and insecure. One or two of the partnerships illustrate the potential significance of such a ‘third sector’. The ARCIL partnership in Portugal, for example, has promoted partnership between public and voluntary formal providers of services, and informal provision in the community and domestic spheres. The Okospeicher project in former East Germany is an example of a grass-roots partnership which has stimulated community based economic development across the divide between the formal and informal economic sectors by combining the commitment of local inhabitants with the expertise of external experts and, in due course, securing external funding. Elsewhere, however, the strategies of local partnerships are more limited.

12 However, a condition of access to LEADER funding is a principle of matching funding. If access to existing capital is a condition of benefit, the result may be economic growth in the local economy, but a form of growth which widens social disparities.

13 Sabel (1996), in a study of Irish local partnerships for the OECD, argues that local partnerships are promoting innovative approaches to economic development which can shake up the traditionalist and ineffective approaches of mainstream state agencies. He claims that some local partnerships are adopting the organizational model of the ‘workteam’ characteristic of the leading edge of the contemporary economy, and that networking, learning and emulation between local partnership ‘workteams’ can transfer the benefits of economic advance to vulnerable groups and communities. Our own research, however, offers little support to this view, either elsewhere or in respect to local partnerships in Ireland itself (Walsh et al., 1997).
partnerships often paid little explicit attention to the informal or social economy. There tends to be an inverse relationship between the size of the resource base of local partnerships (which in turn is linked to whether the partnership is the result of national/EU funding or local grass-roots initiative), and the emphasis and priority given to the social economy. The big money goes to mainstream economic regeneration: only in the smaller and less well-resourced local partnerships is a social economy approach significant. Despite the fact that in many deindustrialized urban areas the informal economy has become central to many people’s local survival strategies, most partnership strategies ignored this crucial component of the local economy, in favour of a presumption that inward investment and redevelopment would reintegrate the areas (if not the individuals) into the formal economy.

Conclusions

Local partnership is fast becoming a new orthodoxy across the EU in policies to combat social exclusion. The concept of partnership suggests that ‘through collaborative, inclusionary, consensus-building practices … the stakeholders … can discuss their common concerns, get to know each other across their divisions and conflicts, and develop strategies that most can ‘own’ and abide by’ (Healey, 1996: 207). However, while the discourse of ‘local partnership against social exclusion’ is one of a holistic response to a multidimensional problem, this is a discourse based on weak rather than strong conceptions of exclusion. With a few exceptions, local partnerships studiously avoid engagement with the question of ‘who are the excluders?’, and with the structural, social, economic and political implications of a thoroughgoing assault on social exclusion, preferring easy assumptions about the possibility of an inclusive society. The dominant practice of local partnership — as opposed to some of its rhetoric — enshrines elitist, neocorporatist or neopluralist principles, and excludes or marginalizes more radical egalitarian and solidaristic possibilities.

The research evidence discussed here does show that in certain ways and in some places local partnerships may offer greater recognition to excluded groups, and may on occasion be able to exploit the contribution of diverse social interests (drawn from the spheres of state, market or civil society) to bring ‘added value’ to local policy initiatives concerned with poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. But the available evidence also suggests strongly that the positive impacts of local partnerships are marginal. They bear no relationship to the scale of contemporary problems of poverty and social exclusion across the EU. This reflects the fact that most partnerships are not constructed as ‘inclusion coalitions’ in a way which allows a truly comprehensive and ‘multi-dimensional’ attack on social exclusion. Local partnerships frequently fail to involve ‘key actors’ at both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, an inability to involve the excluded themselves to a significant degree compromises their ‘social’ interventions. On the other, the absence or limited commitment of key economic actors undermines their investments in the local economy and labour market. Local partnerships are not, as Sabel (1996: 10) would have it, ‘at the core of a new localism’, a privileged local level of social action, but a form of fragmented local crisis management. The interesting question is whether we should regard this current model of local partnership as part of a phase of policy experimentation and ‘search for a fix’ (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Harding, 1997), or whether this is actually the extent of the ‘fix’ which is in prospect for Europe’s excluded communities.

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