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The Changing Role of Third Sector Housing Organisations in Ireland's Two Jurisdictions: the application of the concept of 'organisational fields'.

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Introduction

This paper uses the concept of organisational field as a tool for comparative research exploring the role of non-profit organisations in the provision of housing to low income households in Ireland's two jurisdictions. Further comparison is provided between these two 'non-profit housing systems' and that found in England. The paper draws on preliminary research undertaken by the authors in each of these contexts (Mackay and Williamson, 2000 forthcoming, MacKechnie and Rhodes, 1999, Mullins and Riseborough, 2000, Mullins, 2000 forthcoming, Williamson 2000 forthcoming), and sets an agenda for further research. In this way the paper consolidates existing knowledge, interrogates data collected by the authors using a common theoretical framework, and provides a set of research questions to guide further collaborative research.

Housing associations are non-profit organisations specialising in building, renovating and managing housing for lower income groups in housing need. The role of non-profit or limited profit organisations is well established in the housing sectors of many developed societies. However, the precise institutional arrangements are extremely variable (Turner et al, 1987, Doling, 1997). There are considerable national, and to a lesser extent regional, differences in the relative importance of the independent non-profit housing sector, its underlying values and purposes and in the institutional framework for its funding and regulation. This creates differences in terminology and recording practices and makes meaningful comparisons difficult. Power (1997) compares the proportion of the housing stock managed by non-profit organisations in five north European countries in the early 1990s and finds a range from 0.5% in Ireland and 4% in the UK to 16% in France, 18% in Denmark and 25% in Germany. The relatively marginal role historically played by the non-profit housing sector in the UK and Ireland had been associated with an unusually high level of state provision through local authorities.

The non-profit housing sector is currently undergoing a significant change of role in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. For different reasons housing associations have been identified by the state as more central agents of policy delivery than in the past. In Northern Ireland housing associations have become the main agents for developing new social housing following the transfer of this role from the Northern Ireland Housing

Executive in 1997. This shift has been motivated by the ability of associations to borrow outside of public expenditure accounts. In the Republic of Ireland ambitious targets have been announced in the National Development Plan (1999) to expand voluntary sector housing output from just under 600 units in 1999 to 4,000 units a year by the end of the plan period in 2006. These targets are for publicly funded provision and are associated with the continued expansion of the much larger local authority sector. Recent motivations for expanding voluntary housing in the Republic appear to stem from a housing affordability crisis in the very large owner occupation market associated with economic boom, and the desire to move towards a European model.

Organisational fields

A key objective of organisational theory has been to explore the relationship between organisations and their environments. Formulations involving a single organisation seeking to navigate a turbulent environment, through careful analysis of opportunities and threats and formulation of strategic choices are still commonplace in the business studies field (Johnson and Scholes, 1999). However, from the 1980s onwards there was an increasing recognition that organisational environments are usually structured into smaller and more specific sub-sets of frequently interacting organisations (DiMaggio, 1986).

The concept of organisational field has been developed to identify groups of inter-acting organisations and some of the processes, which may reinforce connections between organisations within a field. The concept of an 'organisational field' as "a stable status order with acknowledged centres and peripheries" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) has provided a useful building block for analyses of inter-organisational relations for nearly two decades. Organisational fields are seen as aggregates of organisations which constitute recognisable areas of institutional life involving an interplay between suppliers, consumers, regulatory agencies and other organisations providing similar products or services (Powell and Friedkin, 1987, Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

Organisational fields are the arenas in which processes of structuration can occur through interaction and information exchange, the establishment of structures of prestige and domination by certain organisations and networks and the development of shared norms and practices. These processes may lead to institutional isomorphism whereby organisations operating within a field come to share common characteristics over time. However, where fields are weakly defined, or resource dependencies (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) are not exclusively associated with resources narrowly focused on the field, more varied patterns of organisational form and behaviour may be found. Particular issues arise for non-profit organisations competing in fields which are also occupied by state and profit distributing organisations. Are there observable differences in the norms, operating procedures and organisational style of the non-profit sector, or is the organisational field more widely constructed with fairly permeable boundaries between spaces occupied by non-profit and other organisations? Finally, if there are significant

and stable differences among organisations over time, what is the nature of these and how can we account for them?

The notion of structural equivalence is used by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) to refer to the fact that certain organisations may occupy equivalent positions to each other without ever interacting. This may be because of common funding and associated regulation. This idea, which might be equated with an organisational niche, seems to owe much to the ecological roots of some organisation theory. Later DiMaggio (1986) specified a methodology for mapping the structure or organisational fields known as blockmodelling. A number of pre-requisites for mapping were identified including the need to identify patterns of interaction, the emergence of identifiable sub-groups, structural equivalence and domination. It is not proposed to adopt the complex statistical analysis associated with a full block-modelling approach, largely due to the difficulties in collecting sufficiently robust data to do so. Nevertheless the underlying concepts of the approach can usefully be explored.

The Housing Association field in Northern Ireland

History

The early history of the voluntary housing field in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the eighteenth century when Alderman Gill established almshouses in Carrickfergus in 1761 for pensioners 'not given to idleness or drunkenness' (Holmes, 1995). Other almshouses at Seaforde and Annahilt, The Belfast Charitable Society and the model village built at Bessbrook by Quaker linen mill owners provide examples of a philanthropically based housing sector to parallel that found elsewhere in the eighteenth and in nineteenth century Britain prior to the involvement of the state in housing provision (NIFHA, 1997).

In the twentieth century, political and legal factors specific to Northern Ireland played a significant role in the development of the institutional framework. The partition of Ireland, 30 years of direct rule from Westminster, and continued conflict between the two religious communities in Northern Ireland led to the development of a distinctive institutional framework. The growth of state housing provision, initially through local authorities but after 1945 through other public bodies set up to address the political and religious context, left only limited space for a voluntary housing sector. The government-sponsored Northern Ireland Housing Trust (NIHT) set up in 1945 was vastly larger than other social housing providers, building over 48,000 homes in its 26 year life (Mackay and Williamson, forthcoming). It was modelled on the Scottish Special Housing Association and given a brief to build houses where local authority provision was inadequate. While a public body established by Act of Parliament, it had important linkages with the UK voluntary housing sector, adopting the Octavia Hill system of housing management and building a professionalised housing management culture (Murie and Birrell, 1971). In 1971 its housing stock, together with that of local authorities, was transferred to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) which was given a brief to secure fair treatment of the two communities. The NIHE dominated the social housing

field for the remainder of the century. In 1998 it was still providing 136,000 rented homes despite 75,000 sales since the 1970s (NIHE, 1998).

Alternative models of voluntary housing have operated in the shadows of these dominant players. Before the major changes to the institutional framework of the 1970s there were a number of different forms of provision. Some modern associations using the industrial and provident society model such as Dungannon and District and Derry (now North and West) and were set up in the early 1960s to provide housing for Catholics at a time of alleged discriminated by the local authorities (Mackay and Williamson, forthcoming).

There were other organisations that have influenced but not become part of the modern movement. The most dramatic example was Ulster Garden Villages, a housing society set up at the end of the War by a self-made builder using loan stock issues (with the intention of paying dividends) and borrowing from friendly societies and banks to build homes in garden villages for rent. Although the society built about 1500 dwellings on four main sites, it soon ran into severe financial difficulties. Its founder and chairman was forced to resign in 1952 and a receiver was appointed. Not until the 1980s when permission was finally secured for property sales and rent increases did the society move back into surplus. While the early experience of this society must have set back the idea of limited profit housing in Northern Ireland, it has since played an important role in the voluntary sector as a source of grants and loans to a wide range of charitable causes including homelessness charities such as Simon (McCreary, 1999). Other non-state funded housing institutions included Victoria Estates founded by a Belfast builder in the 1950s and the Bangor Provident Trust, which while it remains 'unregistered' for public subsidy, played a direct role in supporting the establishment of a new wave of housing associations through organising the Corrymeela conference (NIFHA, 1997).

The modern housing association movement in Northern Ireland was born at a conference at Corrymeela in Northern Ireland in 1974 convened jointly by the Department of Environment (DOE) and Bangor Provident Trust, and attended by local politicians and community activists from Belfast and Derry (McLachlan, 1997). The conference sought "an alternative to the centralised housing authority which had wiped out the diversity reflected in some sixty-five local government housing bodies and commissions" (Holmes, 1997). It built alliances with housing associations 'across the water' such as Liverpool Housing Trust which were already benefiting from a state funding regime introduced in England under the 1974 Housing Act which was to be extended to Northern Ireland under the Housing NI Order 1976.

State funding and links with English associations and institutions were critical both to the establishment of NIFHA in 1977 and over 40 new associations set up in Northern Ireland between 1975 and 1987. The new associations all used the Industrial and Provident Society model and registered with the Department of Environment to receive the public subsidy. After the Corrymeela conference there was support from the housing charity Shelter, who brought independent funding for association start-ups, the English National Federation of Housing Associations and the DOE. These bodies set to work in setting up

the NIFHA in 1977 and encouraging the formation of new associations. Support also came from associations active in Britain including Anchor, James Butcher, Habinteg and Abbeyfield Society which set up Northern Ireland associations that subsequently became independent. Holmes described this period as one in which “no dedicated group of individuals seeking to serve their community was ever prevented from meeting a genuine housing need. There was no attempt to self-consciously promote Catholic or Protestant associations or balance housing need against social mixing” (Holmes, 1995).

Structure of the field

The structure of the housing association field in Northern Ireland largely reflects the recent history described above. In many ways this can be seen as a state/professional project rather than an example of grass roots voluntary action. Most associations have similar origins, common legal structures and strong connections with the NIFHA. Most of the associations were set up after the Housing NI Order 1976 as part of a deliberate strategy to develop an ‘independent housing sector’ to offset the dominance of the NIHE. There are strong links between the associations and the NIFHA which was directly involved in the formation of many associations, whose Council and committees are well supported by associations, which organised an annual conference every year since 1976, and as recently as 1997 still acted as the registered office for four registered associations. Continuity of staffing at the NIFHA for a quarter of a century and similar long tenures of some senior association personnel have kept voluntary housing ‘a close family’.

There are currently 41 registered associations. Most are very small and 13 own less than 100 homes. There are nine associations with over 500 homes, together accounting for 69% of the stock. Three of these, Oaklee, Fold and BIH, each have over 2,000 homes, together accounting for 41% of the stock (Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland (1998). In March 1999 housing associations managed almost 20,000 rented homes (an increase of 6,000 since 1996) accounting for about 15% of the social housing stock (an increase from 2% in 1984 and 8% in 1996, (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 1999). By comparison, in England in 1999 housing associations accounted for 25% of the social housing stock.

The dominant institutions in the field are the largest associations themselves, the NIFHA, the Department of Social Development (formerly DOE) which funds and regulates associations, the NIHE which identifies need for schemes and manages the development programme and to a lesser extent the Chartered Institute of Housing, which maintains an office in Belfast, and educational institutions providing housing courses, such as the University of Ulster.

Links to other fields

Links ‘across the water’ with the English and Scottish sectors have traditionally been strong, reflecting the ways in which some associations were set up and the similar funding and regulatory regimes enabling easy exchange of practice. Some associations

have had long term links with the Republic of Ireland, such as North and West reflecting the geographical proximity to Donegal, and Fold which has extended its lifeline service to residents in border counties in the Irish Republic. Recently, more associations have built stronger links with the Irish voluntary housing sector, for example joining the Irish Council for Social Housing, and discussing opportunities for partnerships. One association, BIH, has established an office in the Republic.

Links between the housing association sector and the wider voluntary and community sector have been quite patchy, perhaps reflecting historically poor relationships between NIFHA and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). However, there have been many scheme based partnerships (for example in the homelessness field with specialist bodies such as Simon Community, and Saint Columb's Wells in Derry, and with housing charities such as Gill's Almshouses, and The Belfast Charitable Society). Non-registered associations, such as Lee Hestia, have also been involved in partnerships, to provide travellers' accommodation. Some housing associations such as Flax, based in North Belfast, are part of much wider community enterprises.

There is some evidence that the sector may be rediscovering a voluntary sector identity as it seeks to address the challenges of current restructuring associated with transfer of functions between DSD, NIHE and associations. While Chairman of the NIFHA, Brian Coulter, Chief Executive of Fold wrote "housing associations need to revisit our historical origins and to rediscover our original founding purpose if our future is not to become one of simply being agents for the delivery of official programmes. The prospect of becoming large multi-million pound companies may appeal to some but it should not be at the expense of our voluntary community distinctiveness" (NIFHA Annual Report, 1998-99). The role of voluntary boards in preserving this distinctiveness was examined in a research study by the University of Ulster (Mackay, Dawson and Williamson, 1998), which has since been followed up by seminars for board members.

Flows of Funding

Housing associations are the best funded and resourced sub-field in the Northern Ireland voluntary sector, while excluded from the first NICVA review of voluntary sector capacity. One commentator has estimated that they have a larger capital value, in excess of £500 million, more than the remainder of the sector combined (Fullerton, 1999)

While there were earlier examples of voluntary housing initiatives funded from charitable sources, and the issue of loan stocks and borrowing from friendly societies and banks, the growth of the voluntary housing sector since 1976 has been largely based on a state funding programme. This was the housing association grant programme administered by the Department of Social Development (formerly DOE), which provided almost 100% funding for new schemes developed between 1976 and 1992. Starting with an allocation of just over £500,000 in 1976/7, by the mid 1990s the budget had risen to around £50 million for a building programme of around 900 units per annum.

The scale of housing association activity in Northern Ireland was increased by two main changes in the 1990s. First the introduction of mixed funding in 1992, four years after housing associations in Britain were enabled to build more homes with a given amount of public funding by raising private loans. The second factor was the decision taken in the housing policy review, *Building on Success* (Department of Environment, 1996) to transfer the new build programme from NIHE to housing associations to take advantage of private finance. The 1999/2000 programme was for 1900 properties funded with the aid of a £58 M grant and £ 35M private loans. (NIFHA 1999). In the eight years since the introduction of private finance, housing associations had raised £125million (Chris Williamson, NIFHA, University of Ulster seminar June 2000).

Regulation

Entry to the housing association sector currently requires registration with, and regulation by, the Department of Social Development. Regulation is based on compliance with published performance standards and is assessed using an annual return and detailed monitoring visits to each association. To date no Northern Ireland associations have formally gone into supervision, but there have been a number of informal rescues, including some mergers encouraged by the Department of Social Development. While there have been predictions that the number of associations will reduce over the next ten years, there are no regulatory plans to impose mergers or group structures.

Building on Success, a review of housing policy in Northern Ireland (Department of the Environment 1996:89) recommended that the NIHE should enhance its strategic role by taking over responsibility for regulation of housing associations. There have been substantial delays in implementing the review, during which time plans have been developed to modernise the regulation function. Associations are currently being consulted on these plans which would involve a new set of standards, annual performance assessments and reports by the regulator linked to Best Value initiatives aimed at continuous improvements by associations themselves (Eileen Patterson, DSD, University of Ulster seminar June 2000). The possibility of an independent regulator to assess both the NIHE and housing associations may emerge as an alternative to NIHE taking on the regulation function in the future.

While the formal regulatory system is currently under review, it has been suggested that housing associations in Northern Ireland still have only very limited independence as a result of wider public policies. Mackay and Williamson (forthcoming) have commented that “Those concerned with the distinctiveness of the ‘voluntary’ housing movement might also find the conclusion of an NIHE policy document rather ominous”:

“The traditional distinction between the Executive and housing associations will gradually become blurred. The Executive will oversee the introduction of an overall housing programme with new social housing being built by housing associations in locations which reflect the priorities and housing need determined by the

Executive. Allocations to these schemes will be made on the basis of a Common Waiting list and a Common Selection Scheme.” (NIHE 1996:63)

In addition associations have been defined as public bodies for the purposes of Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) guidance and must actively promote fair and equal treatment and to combat perceptions of potential discrimination.

Professional Networks

Housing associations in Northern Ireland employ over 1500 staff, 760 of them in full time posts (Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland 1998). There is a considerable level of professionalisation, with many staff undertaking Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) or degree level qualifications. While staff in NIHE and associations would tend to be involved in the same CIH and educational networks, there is thought to be a considerable divide between the two sectors as a result of restricted flows of personnel due to paucity of job vacancies. There have been some staff movements from NIHE to associations but there have been very few moves in the opposite direction. Some association staff have experience of work in English and Scottish associations, but there is thought to have been very little staff movement to or from the Irish voluntary housing sector to date. There have also been quite limited staff movements between associations and the wider voluntary and community sectors. These factors, together with very low staff turnover, paint a picture of relatively self-contained professional networks. This impression is reinforced by the feeling that Northern Irish voluntary housing is a ‘small world’; for example a limited number of names occur in NIFHA publications.

There are also around 500 voluntary committee members. A survey by the University of Ulster has provided a useful profile of the composition and background of committee members. This provides a similar picture of continuity and stability to the staffing networks. Over 50% of board members had been on the board for between 5 and 20 years and no less than 15% had been on for more than 20 years. A number of members who had founded associations in the mid 1970s, were still active in 1999 (Mackay, Dawson, and Williamson, 1998). This has led to concerns about board renewal and identifying where the voluntary members of the future will be found. NIFHA keeps a register of people with an interest in becoming board members and larger associations have advertised for new members.

Sub-fields

From the start associations were steered by the state into complementary roles specified in a circular (DOE 1978) as:

1. sheltered housing for the elderly
2. community-based housing renewal
3. accommodation for single people

4. supported housing for people with special needs
5. new types of tenure and equity sharing

Thus many Northern Ireland associations had specialist niche roles from the outset. For example Fold, Oaklee and Clanmil specialised in older people's housing, Habinteg provided integrated housing for people with special needs, SHAC began by providing housing for students before widening its client base of single people, Open Door worked with single homeless people providing both housing and support, Ulidia worked with single parents, and a number of associations such as Ballymacarrett, Flax, Clonard and Grove worked in very specific geographical communities sometimes providing general needs housing as part of community renewal.

Slightly separate from the rented housing field is the specialist body, The Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association (NICHA), set up as a single province wide provider of low cost home ownership programmes. A total of nearly 15,000 households have passed through the scheme and the net stock in management is normally around 4,500 (Mackay and Williamson, forthcoming). There are also some unregistered associations.

Since 1996 there have been greater opportunities for associations to diversify into general needs housing as a result of the transfer of the new build programme from NIHE. This created dilemmas for some associations, whether to grow or retain a distinctive focus: "We have decided to retain our identity as an exclusively supported housing provider and not become just another mini Housing Executive. I believe those in most severe housing need require these concentrated commitments" (Association Director, *Scope Magazine* October 1999). However, it is interesting to note that, even before the new building programme was transferred in 1996, 44% of association stock was general needs housing, and some associations such as BIH were registered with the DOE to provide general needs housing (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 1999).

Despite the specialisation and associated niche markets the NI housing association sector does not appear to exhibit the degree of fragmentation found in the English sector. This is perhaps because Northern Ireland is a 'small world' and the extent of diversification away from state housing funding programmes appears to have been relatively limited. Ironically, the main recent threat to the equilibrium of the housing association movement in Northern Ireland arose from the introduction of a pilot for competition in relation to part of the mainstream housing programme transferred from the NIHE. The success of BIH in two rounds of competitive bidding appeared to some to have undermined the sense of unity. As one commentator put it, (this process of competition) "could pose a real threat to open communication and sharing between associations and our ability to act as a 'movement' (Fullerton, 1999)".

The Housing Association field in the Republic of Ireland

History

Voluntary housing in the Republic of Ireland emerged as a significant contributor to housing in the latter part of the 19th century. Moore (1986) discusses the work of nineteenth century philanthropic housing societies in Dublin including the Industrial Tenements Company (founded by Quaker industrialists in 1866), the Cork Improved Dwellings Company (founded 1873), the Dublin Artisans Dwellings Company (founded in 1876 by Sir Arthur Guinness and other leading Dublin industrialists) and the Guinness Trust (established by Sir E.C. Guinness in 1890, later renamed the Iveagh Trust). Of these, only the Iveagh Trust remains as one of Ireland's major philanthropic institutions and the oldest and largest non-governmental housing body in Ireland.

As in many western countries, the voluntary housing sector has its roots in the provision of 'working class' housing, usually located in urban environments that had attracted high concentrations of workers to feed the engines of industrial expansion. This function was taken over by the local authorities early in the 20th century, leaving the voluntary associations to focus almost exclusively on housing for the elderly¹ until very recently. In fact, the voluntary housing movement was effectively squeezed out by a government housing policy that had as one of its stated objectives "the encouragement of owner occupation as the widely preferred form of tenure" (Department of the Environment 1995). To the extent that the market was unable to support this objective, the Irish government was willing to build houses and either rent them out or, more often than not, sell them off at below-market prices. Since the foundation of the Irish state in 1922, local authorities have built approximately 330,000 houses and sold over 230,000, principally via generous tenant purchase schemes first introduced on a wide scale in the 1930s (Fahey, 1999). The combination of market supports and massive government building has resulted in one of the highest owner occupation percentages in the world (82% compared to an average of 56% in the rest of Europe). The voluntary sector manages some 12,000 dwellings, around 12% of the social housing stock (Drudy 1999), this may be compared to 15% in Northern Ireland and 25% in England.

Until the mid-80's there was little government funding available for housing associations, which relied on wealthy individuals and church-based charities for their support. With the introduction of the *Capital Assistance Scheme* in 1984 and the *Rental Subsidy Scheme* in 1991, housing associations became able to access government funding for capital and maintenance costs and several new associations were established. Newer associations have specifically targeted 'special purpose' housing, such as single-parent families and supported housing for people with special needs (Focus Ireland), victims of domestic violence (Sonas) and the homeless (Simon Community). With the recent shift in government policy, there is a growing movement to provide more general purpose housing, with Respond! and the St. Pancras Housing Association already managing as well as planning for the further development of large numbers of dwellings throughout Ireland.

¹ Prior to 1984, there were approximately 1,850 rental units provided by voluntary associations of which nearly two thirds were for the elderly (O'Sullivan 1998a)

Over the last 10 years there has been a lot of discussion in government documents (Department of the Environment, ROI 1995), academic studies (O'Sullivan 1998 a and b) and the press about the potential and/or appropriate role of the voluntary housing associations in the Republic. This discussion is largely supportive of an expanded voluntary housing sector. Recent announcements by the Minister for Housing, Mr. Robert Molloy, presented new policies laying what he claimed would be "the basis for the comprehensive development of the voluntary housing movement in Ireland towards the European model" (Molloy 1999). One of the key targets of the government is the increase of annual voluntary housing output from just under 600 in 1999 to 4,000 over the next five years (Ireland National Development Plan 2000-2006). Barriers to achieving this level of expansion have been identified (ICSH, 1999; Brooke, 2000) including:

1. dependence on local authorities for sites and funding
2. dual role of local authorities as developers as well as enablers hampers association access to better sites
3. bureaucratic funding approval system involving local authorities, the DoE and the Housing Finance Agency
4. short term and unpredictable funding
5. wide variation in practices followed by local authorities in relation to housing associations

Nevertheless, there is a rising tide of expectations that the Irish voluntary housing sector is poised to establish itself as a credible additional provider of general needs social housing in the near term.

Structure of the field

There are approximately 350 voluntary housing organisations registered with the Department of the Environment and Local Government, of which about two thirds are active (O'Sullivan 1998a). Of these, only a handful manage more than 50 units, with the majority managing less than 20 units. O'Sullivan states that "in practice, there are only 4-5 large-scale non-profit housing agencies in Ireland" (O'Sullivan 1998a: 17). Three of these; Respond!, St. Pancras and Focus Ireland, are recent entrants into the field, with different motivations and approaches to provision of housing. Respond! was founded in 1981 by Father Pat Cogan as an alternative to local authority housing for low income families in Waterford and has since expanded to provide nearly 2000 dwellings throughout Ireland. Respond! is noted for its distinctive approach of tenant-managed estates and it has worked with other housing associations and local authorities to explore how this approach could be implemented in their estates. Focus Ireland was established by Sister Stanislaus in the mid-1980's, originally as part of an array of measures to combat homelessness and the marginalisation of single mothers. Since then the organisation has branched into providing 'special needs' housing and various support services for tenants of their estates which comprise about 300 units. St. Pancras is an offshoot of an English association of the same name, one of the 'front-line societies'

formed in the early twentieth century to tackle slum housing that had been neglected by local authorities and the older housing trusts (Garside, 2000). It began to work in Ireland in the 1990s and is now rapidly growing its presence in the Republic to provide general needs housing and aims to create mixed communities of low and middle income residents. From a base of about 250 units in 1998, they plan to have over 1000 units by the end of 2000.

The remaining large scale associations are the old, established organisations such as the Iveagh Trust and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul which have relatively large stocks of housing under management, but which have not been actively growing in the recent past. With the government announcements regarding funding, however, even these more ‘settled’ organisations may be drawn into a closer relationship with the state as it seeks to expand voluntary housing provision. Finally, there are several significant north/south housing initiatives underway such as the North and West Housing Association with plans to develop on a significant scale in Donegal and the West of the Republic of Ireland, Fold with a lifeline scheme extending to border counties of the Republic and the establishment of a BIH office in the Republic. The rest of the players, while numerous, have very few units of accommodation and are generally once-off housing schemes for the elderly, handicapped, disadvantaged or homeless (O’Sullivan 1998).

The Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH)² was formed in 1982 and currently has approximately 120 affiliated members³. The ICSH is the focal point for interaction between housing associations and its main activities include research into social housing issues, lobbying government on behalf of its members, providing information and support to its members around registration and grant application procedures as well as providing courses on housing management and administration. In response to an invitation for proposals from government, the ICSH produced a comprehensive document, “Achieving a More Mainstream Role for Housing Associations: Building Output to 4,000 Dwellings a Year” (ICSH, 1999), which contained 9 key recommendations that appear to have been influential in shaping the recent proposals outlined by the Minister for Housing (Molloy, 1999).

In conclusion, the structure of the voluntary housing field is quite fragmented, with a few big players who appear to pursue different objectives with different strategies. However, this observation must be tempered with an understanding of the context in which the housing associations function. Nearly all of them are dependent upon government funding for the vast majority of their resources – both the financial and the staff resources, the latter of which are often hired through FAS⁴ schemes. Further, their ability to develop housing depends upon planning permission and often the allocation of

² which includes the National Association of Building Co-operatives (NABCO)

³ In a discussion with Bernard Thompson of ICSH, he explained that the difference between the number of DoE approved voluntary housing organisations and the ICSH membership was due to the preponderance of once-off grant applications made by various small charitable groups in the 70’s and 80’s that required approval from the DoE. The vast majority of these groups are no longer active in the provision of housing.

⁴ FAS is the government subsidised employment programme

development land from the local authorities. Additionally, it is the local authorities that administer the distribution the capital and maintenance funding described below. While the influence of the local authorities may be lessened in the future⁵, the fact remains that the dominant player in voluntary housing by a wide margin, is the Irish government, in both its national and local manifestations.

Funding

The funding for voluntary housing comes from 4 sources: 1) the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) – which provides capital funding for approved schemes, 2) the Rental Subsidy Scheme (RSS) which provides capital and ongoing maintenance subsidies, 3) private donations and 4) the rents that are collected from tenants. In reality, the first two sources are the primary source of funds for new development for all but a few of the associations and the total amount from these schemes was approximately £50 million in 1998 and £62 million in 1999⁶. To put these figures in perspective, the funding for local authority housing over the same period was estimated at £207 million and £242 million respectively and the rental subsidy for welfare recipients was £88 million and £103 million (1999 Revised Estimates for Public Services, Department of Finance).

Over the last few years, housing costs have increased tremendously and many associations have found it difficult to work within the funding limits imposed by the CAS and RSS schemes. An additional problem is that of start-ups as new associations cannot get funding to do the proposal / start-up work, nor can they reach a critical mass⁷ to be self-funding in short time-frame (i.e., survive on RSS, rents and donations). Recent announcements to increase the ceilings on the CAS/RSS capital funding schemes⁸ will help to address the first issue, but there is still no specific proposal to address the second. In the absence of any further changes, this strategy will likely result in further concentration and expansion of a few very large associations and stagnation of the number of small ones.

⁵ The government has said that voluntary housing associations will have direct access to both the DoE and the HFA as part of the proposed programme for supporting significant growth in this sector

⁶ For the CAS scheme the figures are £12 and £17 million in 1998 and 1999 respectively (Revised Estimates for Public Services 1999). For RRS the figures are ‘guess-timated’ at £38 million and £45 million in 1998 and 1999, based the number of completions in each of the 2 years and a total funding estimate for 1998 from the ICSH. The DoE does not publish the figures for RRS as it is a scheme funded via the HFA, which does not publish this information.

⁷ critical mass is estimated to be about 300 units (Brooke 2000)

⁸ In an announcement at the biennial conference of the Irish Council for Social Housing on October 21, 1999 Mr Robert Molloy, the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment and Local Government, announced that the ordinary level of assistance for one and two person units would be increased from £37,000 to £53,000 and for family the housing from £47,000 to £63,000. Furthermore, for schemes in Dublin and in Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford County Boroughs where there is a higher rate of subsidy, the rate for one and two person units would be raised from £44,000 to £75,000 and the rate for family type housing would be increased from £55,000 to £90,000. Parallel rises in relation to the Rental Subsidy Scheme and to subsidise site costs were also announced. The maximum amount of subsidy available under the Capital Assistance Scheme was raised to £110,000 (Molloy, 1999)

Regulation

The voluntary sector in the Republic of Ireland is “loosely defined and lightly regulated” (Donnelly-Cox 1998: 1). In spite of decades of discussion and debate on the role of the voluntary sector and the state’s relationship to it, the Government’s long-promised White (policy) Paper to address these issues has yet to appear.⁹ The most recent government document on this topic does call for the development of “a cohesive framework of statutory support, both in policy and administrative terms” (DSCFA, 2000: 27) however there are few specifics and no timeframe established for this objective. This uncertainty around the state’s relationship to the sector as a whole serves as the backdrop to the regulatory environment for voluntary housing.

Most voluntary housing organisations are incorporated as limited companies under the Companies Act, and have applied for, and received, ‘approved’ status from the Department of the Environment in order to qualify for state funding. Further, the applications for the funding schemes require detailed information regarding business plans, staffing, sites, letting policy, etc. The associations must comply with the general building regulations and compliance is monitored by the local authorities on an ad hoc basis.

In conclusion, there are a number of ways in which the voluntary housing associations are ‘regulated’, however most of these are relevant only at the start-up of the organisation and the initial phase of each scheme. In practice there is very little ongoing regulation, although the provisions of the funding schemes do require that specific letting policies are followed. Overall, the voluntary housing sector appears to be slightly more regulated than the voluntary sector as a whole, but it is still a fairly ‘loose rein’ approach compared to Northern Ireland and Britain.

Professional networks and trade bodies

Statistics on the number of people working in the voluntary sector in the Republic are notoriously hard to come by. This type of information is not regularly collected by any government, regulatory or academic entity, nor is it a part of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) database. Unofficial estimates put the number of paid workers in the voluntary housing sector at around 200, with between 1000 and 1500 volunteers. The figure for voluntary staff includes board members who may, or may not be actively involved in the running of the organisations on whose boards they sit.

The Housing Institute of Ireland (HII) is an association for ‘practitioners’ and its requirement for membership is either a recognised qualification in housing studies¹⁰ or 5

⁹ A Green (discussion) Paper was published in 1997 and a seminar on proposals for the White Paper was held in March of this year

¹⁰ e.g., Chartered Institute of Housing membership; degree in housing studies from a university in Britain or Northern Ireland; a certificate/diploma in Housing Studies from the Institute of Public Administration

or more years of experience in the field. Members of the HII are from both the voluntary and local authority housing fields, although most of the local authority managers are members of the Institute for Public Administration (IPA). There are approximately 40 members of the HII.

There is a general acceptance among voluntary housing managers in the Republic of the value of the various housing qualifications available to them, however there is a reluctance to move to the model of professionalisation prevalent in the North and Britain. For many in the field there is a concern that further professionalisation – tellingly referred to as the ‘British disease’ – will lead to an undermining of the traditional values of voluntarism in Ireland, e.g., the desire to humanely care for others, the concern for long-term well-being of society, the willingness to work for little or no remuneration, etc. Whether or not these values are actually at risk with increased professional training and qualifications for individuals working in the field may not be the main issue. The perception that a desire to professionalise is inimical to the voluntary tradition is likely to act as a brake on any rapid movement towards the British model.

Sub-fields

Provision of housing and shelter for the elderly continues to be a large, if not the largest, sub-field in voluntary housing in Ireland. This is due to the historical development of the voluntary sector that was steered into those areas of housing that were not sufficiently catered for by local authorities. Homeless shelters and transition housing (from homeless to permanent accommodation) is another large sub-field with several organisations focussing only on this type of service (e.g., Simon Community and The Salvation Army). Again, this was due to the identification by voluntary organisations of a gap in the services provided by local authorities and health boards. The 1988 Housing Act established the local authorities as having ultimate responsibility for homeless people in their areas. Up until that point there was some confusion about whether the health boards or the local authorities had the primary responsibility. In spite of this legislation, the voluntary organisations continue to be the primary providers of services for homeless people. The local authorities appear to be reluctant to assume this responsibility, preferring to ‘outsource’ provision of services either to the relevant health boards or to voluntary organisations. Dublin Corporation has gone so far as to contract with a private company to pay a ‘per bed’ rate for the provision of homeless accommodation (MacKechnie & Rhodes 1999).

Supported care seems to be perceived as a ‘distinct competency’ of the voluntary sector in the view of the government; for example Robert Molloy, Minister of State commented that “voluntary bodies, because of their base in the local community, are particularly well qualified to respond to the special needs of the elderly, the homeless and the disabled but also have a vital role to play in meeting general social housing needs” (speech to ICSH, October, 1999). This includes the provision of housing and services for people with

(IPA) in the Republic of Ireland; a certificate in Housing Management from the Irish Council for Social Housing.

disabilities, including mentally handicapped people who do not need to be institutionalised and victims of domestic violence, as well as individuals in the sub-fields described above. At the same time, local authorities do see their role as including ‘community development’ which is targeted at supporting the development of ‘good citizens’ and discouraging/eliminating anti-social behaviour on local authority estates and in the wider community. Many local authorities are looking at Respond!’s model of tenant management as a way of supporting community development in what appears to be a cross-over of best practice from the voluntary sector to the public sector. Opportunities for this kind of exchange of knowledge and experience will increase as the voluntary sector moves to expand its provision of general purpose housing and begins to offer a credible alternative to families and individuals who had only the local authority option in the past.

Comparison- Similarities and Differences

The previous sections have provided preliminary accounts of the history and structure of housing association fields in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We now proceed to identify some similarities and differences drawing on the idea of organisational fields and a mapping methodology based on that proposed by DiMaggio (1986). After considering the historical development of the two fields we turn to four key dimensions; patterns of inter-action, the emergence of identifiable sub-groups, structural equivalence and patterns of domination.

History.

Our preliminary analysis suggests that it is possible to identify four distinct phases in the development of the non-profit housing sector and that these are common to both jurisdictions. These phases are also similar to those found in an analysis of the English housing association field (Mullins, 2000 forthcoming), and can be understood with reference to Salmon and Anheier’s (1998) social origins theory

1. Early philanthropy – A number of almshouses and housing charities emerged in Northern Ireland from the eighteenth century. There was a more significant development of endowed trusts in the south in the nineteenth century. These developments were largely independent of the state and, of course, occurred prior to partition.
2. Crowding out - From the early twentieth century onwards the development of a housing role by the welfare state in both jurisdictions largely crowded out the non-profit sector. However a few alternative models did survive and develop in shadow of the state, particularly in Northern Ireland.
3. Complementary role - In the last quarter of the twentieth century the state began to fund the development of non-profit organisations, largely to undertake complementary roles outside of mainstream general needs housing. This phase began in 1976 in Northern Ireland and in 1984 in the Republic.

4. Mainstream role - Very recently the state has looked to the non-profit housing sector to provide general needs as well as specialist housing and on a much larger scale than hitherto. In Northern Ireland this has been associated with the ability of non-profit organisations to borrow 'off balance sheet' and thereby prevent increased public expenditure. In the Republic the transfer of new development activity from the state has been less extensive and appears to be a response to a crisis in the private housing market and a desire to be seen as moving closer to European models.

Despite these broad similarities reflecting similar trajectories in development of the welfare state's housing role there are important differences in institutional structures between the two jurisdictions. Northern Ireland is unusual in having a large scale public body (NIHE), established by the Government to discharge the state's housing provision role, displacing the local authorities altogether in 1971. The Republic resembles Britain more closely than Northern Ireland in that, for most of the twentieth century, the lead role of housing provision was with local authorities, although there was a much greater emphasis in Irish local government on development and sales than on housing management.

Organisational Fields

Perhaps the major difference between the two fields at present is the larger numbers of smaller associations in the Republic. These organisations appear to be more locally and voluntary rooted and loosely inter-connected than are most Northern Ireland associations. Do these organisations represent genuine 'first force' voluntary action (Knight 1993)? In Northern Ireland the field is more tightly structured and regulated and is more clearly the product of a state and professional project. Despite this basic difference the similarity is that both jurisdictions now have a small core of larger developing associations with close connections to rapidly expanding state funding programmes.

Turning to the four dimensions of organisational fields we now clarify these similarities and differences.

Patterns of Interaction

The less structured nature of the field in the Republic is demonstrated through lower levels of interaction between associations, for example nearly two thirds of 'approved' associations are not members of the ICSH. In contrast NIFHA has 100% membership from the 41 registered associations and high levels of participation through its council, committees and conferences.

Professionalisation is one of the key interactions that structure tight organisational fields, by excluding non-qualified people from key positions. Housing has historically been more professionalised in Northern Ireland. For example in the 1940s the Octavia Hill model was introduced through the old Northern Ireland Housing Trust. In the 1980s

professional programmes were established at the University of Ulster and the Chartered Institute of Housing established a branch office in Belfast. Professionalisation is not a significant feature of the housing association movement in the Republic of Ireland, and experience in the field is viewed as equivalent to a formal qualification for membership in the Housing Institute of Ireland.

Another apparent contrast is the high level of interaction between Northern Ireland associations and those ‘across the water’ in England and Scotland. This reflects the foundation of a number of the associations in partnership with English associations and strong similarities in funding, regulation and management models enabling easy exchange of practice. The field in the Republic appears less connected, although ICSH like NIFHA has membership of the European social landlords’ organisation (CECODHAS) and there are growing interconnections with some Northern Ireland and English based associations now in membership of ICSH and operating in the Republic. These connections are likely to grow as the sector expands “towards the European model”(Molloy, 1999).

Identifiable sub-groups

Because the development of modern housing associations in both jurisdictions was based initially on steering by the state into specialist niche roles such as homelessness, older people and supported housing, there are clearly identifiable sub-groups of associations. These sub-groups appear more connected to the wider housing association field in both jurisdictions than in England where the field has fragmented through specialisation and diversification (Mullins and Riseborough, 2000). This may be because in Ireland the scale of operations in any sub-field has been too small for a specialist lobbying and representation role to develop. Another explanation may be that in both jurisdictions formerly specialist associations have recently been diversifying into general needs housing in response to new state funding opportunities and this has strengthening field identity.

Structural equivalence

Resource dependency on state funding programmes is now high in both jurisdictions. Virtually no new development would occur without the programmes of social housing grant (matched by private finance) in the North or the capital assistance and rental subsidy schemes in the Republic. This means that in both jurisdictions associations must comply with funding requirements; (e.g. concerning the criteria for letting of properties); and a degree of conformity can be expected between the operation of organisations even if they have no interaction with one another.

However, differences in the institutional structure of the two systems still appear to produce considerable variations in the extent of conformity. In Northern Ireland scheme based regulation is supplemented by ‘whole organisation’ regulation involving an annual return and monitoring visits, currently by the Department of Social Development, to ensure compliance with specified performance standards. In the Republic there does not

appear to be an equivalent of ‘whole organisation’ regulation, with the Department of Environment and local authorities focusing instead on scheme development approvals. Meanwhile in the Republic of Ireland ICSH has a key role in disseminating good practice. Because many of the 350 voluntary housing organisations in the Republic are not developing and do not belong to ICSH these processes are not likely to have a widespread impact in establishing structural equivalence or isomorphism among organisations.

Patterns of domination – overall field structures

Summing up our analysis indicates that the Northern Ireland field is tightly structured with the NIFHA and a small core of leading associations exerting a degree of dominance achieved over a long period of interaction involving a relatively limited number of players.

However, it must be recognised that to date housing associations have played a relatively minor role and have operated in the shadow of the NIHE which has dominated the wider social housing field in Northern Ireland since its establishment in 1971. However, by maintaining a separate and direct link to the DOE (now DSD) as funder and regulator and because of limited exchange of personnel with the NIHE, the sector has enjoyed a degree of separateness and autonomy, albeit confined to activities that were seen as outside the core business of NIHE. The transfer of the new build programme to associations in 1996, the development of a common register for access to social housing managed by NIHE and the pending future transfer of the regulatory role to NIHE is fundamentally shifting this boundary. The housing association field will become larger, but may become more internally fragmented and less differentiated from NIHE. Ironically this may result in less independence for the organisations at the same time as their resources and scale of operations increase.

In the Republic the housing association field displays much less clear patterns of dominance. This reflects: larger numbers of small organisations; lower membership levels of the trade body and diffusion of responsibility for funding and development between DOE and local authorities, with the latter’s role in facilitating access to land supply a critical constraint (McManus, 1999). Until recently the absence of a dedicated unit within DOE to support the development of voluntary housing has been a further obstacle to the development of clear structures of domination. Nevertheless the expansion of the sector in recent years has seen the emergence of a small number of significant associations, including three (Respond!, Focus Ireland and St Pancras) which are relatively recent entrants to the sector.

The future expansion of the Irish voluntary housing sector ‘towards a European model’ is likely to lead to further increases in scale among the larger providers and perhaps to further market entry by associations from other jurisdictions, e.g. NI and Britain.

Consolidation of state responsibilities for voluntary housing within a single unit of the DOE and a possible reduction in the role of local authorities in funding and site acquisition would provide further scope for larger players to consolidate. The role of grass roots organisations may appear to be threatened by these developments that could lead to professionalisation and the development of alliances between professional groups and the state in a similar form to Northern Ireland. The ICSH advocates an alternative approach involving the development of ‘regional coalitions’ with a small number of regionally based developing associations working with larger numbers of local community partners. They suggest an alternative scenario preserving a greater voluntary identity for ‘voluntary sector housing’. This configuration has some parallels to the emerging structure of English housing ‘groups’.

Conclusion

Applying the concept of organisational fields provides a useful way of organising an exploration of existing data on the voluntary housing sector in Ireland’s two jurisdictions. It has generated a series of research questions that will be investigated in a forthcoming empirical study.

It has allowed us to consider the development of important sets of non-profit housing organisations in their social, political and economic environment. It has enabled us to compare the scale and relative importance of non-profit organisations in comparison to the state and the private sector in meeting housing demand, and the institutional structure for low-income housing provision. It has indicated the extent and permeability, or otherwise, of boundaries between state, non-profit and private systems, the pattern of resource opportunities and dependencies faced by non-profit organisations. An interesting set of interactions revealed by the study, and requiring further research, are the developing cross-border links between the two sectors and the broader European context for collaboration in the non-profit housing sector. Finally it has enabled us to consider the recent and potential future changes in the operating environment and institutional structure from a broader perspective than is common in policy related studies.

In particular, our study to date has led to some preliminary observations on the likely nature of the future expansion of housing associations in both jurisdictions. In the north, there appears to be an inexorable movement towards high volume general-purpose housing associations, funded by the NIHE and supported by a cadre of professional housing managers. In the south, government plans to expand the sector have several barriers to overcome, not least of which is the ‘right-to-buy’ expectation of social housing tenants built up over decades of local authority tenant-purchase programmes. In both jurisdictions questions are being raised about the effect of rapid expansion on the traditional relationships and values within the sector. Increases in the employment of paid and professional staff will be an interesting area of change to observe. Future research should seek to define and test hypotheses regarding the trajectory of these changes and their implications for the voluntary housing sector and its stakeholders.

The paper has also revealed some important gaps in existing knowledge about the two sectors, including empirical questions such as the level of employment in the sector in the Republic and the role played by the two thirds of associations that are not currently developing and are not members of ICSH. More importantly it has provided only a limited indication of the extent to which there is isomorphism or heterogeneity in the values and purposes of these organisations and therefore the real extent of independence from, and dependence on, the state. These gaps prevent us from drawing definitive conclusions about the particular contribution, both qualitative and quantitative, which is brought to the housing field by voluntary action and by Third Sector housing bodies in Ireland, North and South.

Many of these questions cannot be addressed by using the secondary sources that this account has largely relied upon. We therefore intend to undertake an in depth study using qualitative methods including the development of the Delphi panel technique which was recently successfully used on a study of non-profit housing in England (Mullins and Riseborough, 2000). This methodology will provide an ‘inside’ perspective on key influences affecting decisions which shape the future role of the sector. It will enable consideration of ‘softer’ qualitative influences on decisions such as values and social purposes and will thus enable us to complement the more quantitative performance indicators approach (such as stock and personnel numbers) often used to categorise different organisations. It will enable a truly longitudinal perspective and go much further than providing a series of snapshots typical of case-study methodologies. Finally it will involve a more genuine partnership between researchers and the organisations and agencies currently involved in building new roles of non-profit housing in Ireland.

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