Disadvantage has informed and led the work of the third sector in Ireland for a long time. Historically, however, there have been some changes in the way that poverty has been dealt with and the perspective that third sector organisations have taken on poverty and disadvantage. In the last century, and through more than half of the present century, charity was a defining feature; in other words, a duty to help the 'poor' or 'needy' was fundamental to non profit activity. During the past thirty or so years, however, there has been a sea change in attitudes to and perspectives informing work with the disadvantaged and this, as far as this paper is concerned, marks what could be called the 'politicisation of disadvantage', that is the entry of disadvantage onto the political agenda as a very real issue that needs to be addressed in a systematic and structured way.

Central to this more recent perspective on disadvantage has been the role of the community-based third sector which has become increasingly important and vocal over the past decade. Its significance can be measured in its presence 'at the table' for discussions on the government's latest programme, Partnership 2000, for consultation and negotiation as part of the National and Economic Social Forum (NESF), and also in the role that community-based organisations played in bringing the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) to fruition in 1997. An important part, too, has been played by the area-based partnerships, now part of the third sector, which combine statutory and voluntary organisations at local level in the struggle against social and economic exclusion and in the creation of enterprise and employment. These partnerships, like community-based organisations, are important for social empowerment and they are now a powerful voice for community interests.

This paper examines the impact of non-profit organisations working at community level on Irish politics, in particular on the politicisation of disadvantage and the growing importance of this on the wider political agenda. Drawing on literature and policy sources, the paper also present results from some primary research on the
community sector in Ireland.

**Poverty and Disadvantage: Its Background in Charity**

A history of abject poverty in the nineteenth century in Ireland prompted and generated a culture of private philanthropy which was very strongly influenced by religious bodies and principles. Up until the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829 non-profit organisations were mainly run by Protestants, Quakers and some non-religious philanthropists (IPA 1996). Catholic religious orders only began to make a significant contribution from the early 1830s. The religious-based organisations tended to emphasise charitable principles (Faughnan and Kelleher 1993) and the duty of the rich to help the 'poor' and 'needy'.

Towards the end of the last century another type of voluntary activity began to emerge. This focused on the importance of self-help and was very much based at local community level. The co-operative movement which was rural-based was designed to counteract exploitation of poor people in the community and started to generate enterprise through voluntary and co-operative endeavour. This was followed in the 1930s by Muintir na Tire which became an important mobilising force for local communities at the time spurring them on to greater voluntary activity and constantly emphasising the theme of growth through self-reliance. The organisation still operates at the basic unit of the local parish and encourages local enterprise and the development of a community identity.

The 1930s to the 1950s marked the heyday of Muintir na Tire, as a community development organisation, but it has been overtaken, in some respects, by more recent developments. Muintir na Tire provides an interesting example of the way in which community development and different perspectives on disadvantage have developed. Muintir emphasised participation but charity was still a guiding principle and one from which self-help was to spring. Furthermore not only was charity still present on Muintir's agenda, but Muintir, itself, was excluded from the wider political agenda. Contemporary observers have recognised the importance of Muintir's contribution but have noted that there were explicit attempts made to leave Muintir out of the political process (Crickley 1996). Furthermore, Muintir dissociated itself from the politics of the day by stating that it did not align itself with the major political parties. An elitism, however, was evident in the organisation as the basic parish units tended to be controlled by property owners, professionals and the Catholic clergy. Despite its claim, therefore, Muintir na Tire, was, in practice, political in a particular guise but this was not guaranteed to put disadvantage to the fore as a politically viable and
legitimate issue.

Not only, then, was Muintir distancing itself from explicit political action but there seemed also to be a perception that according to policy makers charity belonged in the community and was a method of dealing with disadvantage. As far as the politicians were concerned, therefore, the link between charity and subsidiarity, as Catholic principles, meant their exclusion from the political agenda. Things were to change from the early 1970s onwards, however.

Newer Perspectives on Disadvantage  the Entry of Empowerment

While self help and a tradition of co-operation can be seen to influence contemporary community action, developments in the 1970s and 1980s have been far more crucial. The Women's and Trade Union Movements in the 1970s, for example, played a significant part in the development of citizen involvement and community activism. What now became important guiding principles were the right to consultation and direct democratic participation (Kelleher and Whelan 1992). The ideology of empowerment, participation, social inclusion and voluntary action helped shift the emphasis from charity as the basis of self help towards a focus on the rights of disadvantaged people. From this time, campaigning and advocacy were to become increasingly important.

Self help, as consequence, was now combined with the concepts of social justice, solidarity and empowerment. Solidarity rather than charity began to become important and the paternalistic notion of duty towards the poor was jettisoned in favour of being in solidarity with them. Instrumental in these more recent developments were the EU Poverty Programmes because they placed an emphasis on the structural causes of poverty and the promotion of community empowerment. The Poverty Programmes were aimed at greater participation of the disadvantaged; Poverty II and III in particular focused on tackling poverty in partnership with state agencies, while still being informed by the principles of empowerment and participation (Curtin 1996).

Welfare provision had begun to shift from the early 1960s too from the third sector to the state and there was increasing incorporation of voluntary activity into state policy. The issue of disadvantage, however, was to become more politicised as demands grew. Towards the end of the 1980s imbued by principles of empowerment and the increasing culture of rights, community action took to the streets. Fed up with the lack
of a structured response from the state and the failure to tackle the needs of those who were socially disadvantaged and marginalised voluntary community action became very vocal and proactive. Issues such as drugs, unemployment and lone parenthood, etc, now entered common parlance and soon began to make inroads on the wider political agenda.

The Catholic Church too, in recent years, was also beginning to change its tune somewhat. The Church, as noted earlier, had been an important provider of social services for a long time in Ireland. It has been suggested, however, that the primary purpose of social service provision was not to combat social inequality or reform society (Fahey 1998). In the 1960s the number of vocations in the Catholic Church began to decline which led to a gradual knock-on effect in the provision of social services. The Church, as a consequence, has decreased its role as a provider of social services. Meanwhile Catholic social thinking began to change, particularly after Vatican II, which became obvious in Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s. Elements within the Church gradually began to be known for their struggle for social justice. A prime example of this development would be the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI), a voluntary umbrella group for religious organisations that is actively involved in socio-economic critique and commentary (Fahey 1998).

**The State's Response**

Up to the 1960s, the state appeared quite content to operate almost at arm's length with regard to many social services, leaving them in the hands of the third sector. The 1953 Health Act, however, marked the beginning of a change in the relationship between statutory and voluntary sectors with the introduction of Section 65 grants for not-for-profit organisations. These Section 65 grants are still a very important source of funding for many non profit organisations in the field of social services (Mulvihill 1993, Ruddle and Donoghue 1995).

From the late 1960s the government's position began to be more explicit. Voluntary social service councils, for example, were formed, following the establishment by the government of the National Social Service Council in 1971, to provide an advisory and information service to voluntary bodies. Government cutbacks in 1988, however, were to have a detrimental effect on its operations which indicates that in certain areas, in any case, the government's approach has been somewhat ambivalent. In other areas, though, the Government was beginning to sit up and take notice. Taking the lead from the EU Poverty Programmes the government established the Combat
Poverty Agency, under the Combat Poverty Agency Act in 1986, during the life of EU Poverty II. This Agency acts in an advisory capacity to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs and develops and supports initiatives that are aimed at combating poverty in Ireland. To this end, it is an important support for the third sector, almost to the extent that it regards itself as part of that third sector aligning itself quite closely with community organisations and interests.

While the Combat Poverty Agency has proved to be a very important statutory support for the third sector, there is some feeling among those working in the area of disadvantage that this importance does not extend outside of Dublin, where it is based. It has been suggested in interview that community organisations based outside the capital rely more on other sources (such as LEADER, an EU programme) and that there is a need to have an agency like Combat Poverty based in our second city, Cork. Be that as it may, such feedback bears some testament to the success of the Agency. Furthermore, the Agency acts as an advocate for the sector, and provides a research resource and a forum for feedback so that issues can be identified, responded to and acted upon.

Possibly one of the most visible manifestations of community action this decade, however, has been the development of the area-based partnerships. Set up under the Government's Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) in 1991, the aim was to combine statutory, voluntary and other social partners in an effort to combat social and economic exclusion and to create enterprise and employment. The focus, as stated in the PESP, was on 'area-based response to long-term unemployment' and the interest was on an integrated approach. The PESP acknowledges that the 'prime movers' in the whole process are local communities. In other words, the PESP provides an example at policy-making and political level of the recognition of community endeavour and of moves to capitalise on this. The area-based partnerships were envisaged as locally-based companies consisting of 'community interests, state development agency executives, health board and local authority officials and social partner representatives' (PESP 1991: 77). The partnership approach had been heralded by the Poverty III programme which took the view that poverty was multi-dimensional, and was implemented during its lifetime (1990-1994).

Four years after the piloting of the 12 original area-based partnership companies, their success led to a further 26 being approved by the Government and these were subsequently established by 1996. The partnership companies are funded by the EU and the Irish government, the vast majority of the funding being provided under the EU Local Urban and Regional Development Programme, which is one of the
What is interesting now to note is that, not only was the state becoming more active in its approach, taking its lessons from both EU initiatives and from campaigning and advocacy at community level, but it was now beginning to drive community development itself (Curtin 1996). It could be said, therefore, that the politicisation of disadvantage was happening in two ways. On the one hand, efforts by the third sector and support from the EU, had led to the voice of the third sector being heard at political level. On the other hand, the government was strengthening the hand of the third sector in the field of disadvantage by facilitating and establishing partnership arrangements. Yet it is interesting too to note that several observers have remarked on the lack of clarity surrounding the way in which communities should be represented in the policy-making process (see Curtin, Haase and Tovey 1996). It is to this policy level that our attention now turns.

The Policy Arena the Entry of Disadvantage

By the early 1990s, then, there was a vibrant and burgeoning community sector, fuelled by the needs and interests of the communities these organisations represented. Representation was along geographical and interests lines and sometimes both. Not only was disadvantage seen to lie in a particular geographical area such as, for example, inner city areas known for their high unemployment levels and social exclusion - but was also seen to be relevant for many marginalised communities. These were becoming increasingly vocal and increasingly angry. Issues like drug use, unemployment, disability, lesbian and gay rights and women's equality were mobilising communities and were issues that the third sector, in particular, had made its own. While the state was responding and corporatist alliances were therefore beginning to form around certain issues of disadvantage, a lot more were not being addressed and these communities of interest were now seeking representation at policy-making level.

To this end they were helped in some way by EU funding, by the state in its support of the Combat Poverty Agency and also through grants from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (or Social Welfare as it was up until 1997) which has emerged as of increasing importance for the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. EU initiatives, later programmes, like NOW and Horizon were important not only in providing what was for many groups the first structured funding, but also in emphasising dissemination and mainstreaming. The introduction of these
concepts mirrored what many groups themselves felt was part of their agenda (although mainstreaming can, itself, bring many problems for the organisations concerned, not least of which is their own future viability and legitimacy). Campaigning and advocacy were being recognised through financial support and were also being strengthened which led to wider recognition in the public arena.

Ireland now entered an era of social partnership which has had a significant influence on government programmes and agreement over the past decade beginning with an advisory function in the National Economic and Social Council to which employers, trade unions, farmers and senior civil servants belong. From 1987 and the Programme for National Recovery these social partners have been involved in negotiating government agreements, through the PESP (1991-1993), the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (1994-1996) and the most recent Partnership 2000 (1997-2000). Most significantly, in terms of the politicisation of disadvantage, has been the widening of the social partnership to include the community and voluntary sector or, as one participant has put it, 'the disadvantaged constituency' (Crowley 1996:161). The establishment of the National Economic and Social Forum in 1993 included this third sector voice comprising different non profit interests that had not been included to date. Prior to this third sector representation had been mainly composed of the trade unions. Now organisations representing other issues such as women, youth, travellers, disability, unemployment, the environment and rural development were included all with a focus on disadvantage and social exclusion. The NESF's function is to develop economic and social policy initiatives, particularly initiatives to combat unemployment and to provide commentary on social and economic policy.

This recognition of and participation by community 'voices' was enhanced several years later in Partnership 2000, which is the present national agreement published by the last government in late 1996. Third sector submissions to this agreement came from the traditional social partners, from community organisations (most notably the Community Platform which is a network comprising women's groups, the unemployed, lesbian and gay groups, rural organisations, travellers, disabilities and lone parents), and from CORI. Partnership 2000 takes issue with the concept of social inclusion and acknowledges that it is a major challenge for Irish society. It notes the importance of the role that the third sector plays in the struggle against disadvantage (by referring to both the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Green Paper on Voluntary Activity which it preceded by several months). The role of the third sector was further highlighted in that several recommendations made by both NESC and NESF on the need to include an action programme for greater social inclusion were
The government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy published four months later in April 1997, represents possibly the most potent form of the third sector's role in putting disadvantage on the political map, however. While the PESP had provided for a role for the third sector in tackling disadvantage through the area-based partnerships, Partnership 2000 and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy have presented further evidence of the role that the third sector can play in this whole area. By themselves, the last two, in particular, stand testament to the input of the third sector in putting disadvantage on the agenda.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy focuses on disadvantage in the forms of education, unemployment, income inadequacy, urban disadvantage and rural poverty and it sets down targets and strategies for each of these over the next five years. The community and voluntary sectors are explicitly acknowledged as having a role to play in combating this disadvantage and are envisaged as being involved in a consultative and participatory fashion.

Again, what can be seen is that non profit organisations are working in several ways, on the one hand to put the issue on the table, and on the other to play a role in maintaining that issue by being strategically involved in combating it with state support. Poverty has therefore come a long way from being regarded as a charitable issue. Solidarity with the poor or disadvantaged has entered the agenda and solidarity now includes, not only the non profit sector working with the constituency of the disadvantaged, but the government also entering in some kind of solidarity with the issue and its constituents. The gaining of full social partner status for the 'social pillar' has thus been likened by one participant to 'pushing at an open door' (quoted in O'Donnell and Thomas 1998: 127). In other words, political will to facilitate this inclusion appears to be greater now than previously.

Where to Now?

Recent figures from the Revenue Commissioners on organisations that have been granted charitable exemption for tax purposes provide further evidence of the importance of organisations involved in combating disadvantage in a multidimensional way. Of organisations granted charitable exemption during the last two years those that are involved in activities beneficial to the community made up
just over half. Organisations involved in the relief of poverty made up just over one in ten of all exemptions granted (Revenue Commissioners personal communication 1998). Clearly, the politicisation of disadvantage has also meant that a wider view of poverty is now taken as the National Anti-Poverty Strategy bears witness - and that social marginalisation and exclusion are foremost.

Indeed, such is the potency of community organisations that the Green Paper on Voluntary Activity released in May 1997 has been seen by some observers as laying too great an emphasis on their activity to the detriment of other voluntary organisations. Furthermore, the explicit links made by the Green Paper with the National Anti-Poverty Strategy have been taken by commentators as further evidence of the predominance of community organisations over other voluntary organisations. It is not known, at this stage, whether this focus will be maintained in the White Paper promised in 1999. The Green Paper does, however, provide a further indication of the process that has put disadvantage on the political map.

As was remarked in interviews with community representatives and statutory organisations, 'community action is the fundamental first step in extreme forms of disadvantage' and clearly community action has played a significant role in politicising the issue. Statutory representatives and respondents from community-based organisations alike pointed over and over again to the same examples of the way in which myriad forms of disadvantage have been put on the political agenda. Yet although the issue has been politicised far more than in the past, government funding could be increased, or so the sector argues. While government spokespersons and policy makers have said in interview that organisations that are involved in self help are more likely than other organisations to get funding, there is obviously a limited cake to be shared. Furthermore, funding problems are not likely to disappear as Ireland will probably change in status from being a net beneficiary of EU funds from the year 2000 on.

Growing politicisation, according to community action practitioners, occurred in the communities and marches against drugs, unemployment, for travellers' rights etc, which all became part of the wider fabric of disadvantage. This politicisation has formed the background to the vocalisation of community interests, not only in geographical communities but also in communities of interest. Networks and coalitions of different groups have developed around issues such as rural development, lesbian and gay rights, etc. The politicisation process will undoubtedly continue and the third sector is recognised, quite rightly, as playing an important part in politics (with a small 'p') and as having an important influence on Politics (with a
Although it has been said that non profit organisations do not have a wider policy-influencing role (Ruddle and Donoghue 1995), this may now be starting to change. With the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, Partnership 2000 and the courting of the community sector by elected politicians, the place at the political table of community-based third sector organisations has only just begun to be taken; perhaps they would argue that it is now time for a piece of the action. Indeed, it is only really in the past few years, despite all of the efforts beforehand and the increasingly politicisation of disadvantage as an issue, that participation has begun to happen (O'Donnell and Thomas 1998).

What is increasingly apparent now is the recognition that disadvantage needs to be tackled for competitiveness and growth to occur and that disadvantage, therefore, is a political issue. What may have been personalised before, that is the perception of poverty as an individualised thing, or the notion that it is inevitable (which would have found expression in the saying that 'the poor are always with us'), has changed. Political action is now seen as necessary to tackle disadvantage and that has been the role that non profit organisations have played.

Despite the progress that has been made and the symbiotic relationship that appears to be emerging between the non profit sector and the state there are still problematic areas and ones that have developed out of this changing relationship between the third sector and state. O'Donnell and Thomas (1998) note the hybrid forms of governance within and between policy spheres that are emerging. Also although the three options postulated for social partnerships by the NESF consultation, participation and negotiation have been almost attained (O'Donnell and Thomas 1998), the representation of certain bodies in the social pillar is itself not unproblematic as there may well be voices of disadvantage that are still going unheard. In interviews with representatives of community and statutory organisations this perception was confirmed, for whereas some were full of praise for the success that had been achieved and were quick to recognise it, others still felt that the road ahead was very long and tortuous. Indeed, although several of these holding the latter view are members of the social pillar, they still feel that participation has not led to policy but only to procedures.

Clearly, as with any sector, a jockeying of power within organisations and between organisations is to be expected. These conflicts can also have repercussions on the client base where struggles can ensue to see who is going to represent those interests, whether this is done effectively or not. This, in turn, raises another important question for who is going to measure effectiveness and how, indeed, is this effectiveness to be
measured? It can also lead to the emergence of elites (see Fahey 1998) who can be examples of the exercise of 'power without responsibility'. That is, they can emulate within their own organisations bad practice found elsewhere, without recognising that community organisations also need to examine their own organisational behaviour in order to acknowledge and address potential or existing power struggles. The effect of this on the political agenda can be to highlight some areas of interest over others or the interests of some elements of the community over others. One respondent in interview felt that this could be 'dangerous' particularly in the debate about participation and representation.

The road is still long and disadvantage, although it has been politicised to a certain extent, needs to be maintained on that political map. Furthermore there needs to be cognisance of its breadth and nature and the fact that it is not static. This will be a challenge for the third sector as we head into the next millenium.

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