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Chapter 20

The road to sustainable transport? Rural transport programmes and policies in Ireland

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Introduction

Today many rural dwellers in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) depend on the private car to access services, employment, education, healthcare and recreation and thus shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden of insufficient public transport (see O'Shea above; Roberts *et al.* 1999; McDonagh 2006).¹ But car dependency does not only affect rural Ireland: those who live in Irish cities, towns and their sub-urbanised hinterlands also experience accessibility problems and reduced 'walkability' resulting from sprawl and a lack of transport alternatives (Leyden 2003; Wickham 2006). Recent census figures illustrate the geographical and demographic expansion of urban centres such as Dublin, Cork and Galway which are now extending well into their (semi-) rural hinterlands where public transport is often unavailable (CSO 2007; see also McDonald and Nix 2005). Car dependency thus represents a key challenge for national transport policy in general, and rural public transport provision in particular.

In Northern Ireland (NI), car dependency is less pronounced, partly because of the greater availability of public and community transport coinciding with planning and land use policies aimed at increasing population density (see Murray and Murtagh 2007). Nevertheless, rural dwellers in NI are also more likely than their urban counterparts to experience access problems and 'mobility deprivation' (see Nutley and Thomas 1992, 1995). This suggests that in the RoI and NI (rural) transport policy is inextricably linked to questions of equity and social inclusion. Transport policy thus needs to have regard for the social consequences of transport and mobility decisions

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as well as fiscal and technical concerns (see Lohan and Wickham 1999; Lucas, Grosvenor and Simpson 2001; Pickup and Guiliano 2005; Kenyon 2006; McDonagh 2006).

Local transport services provided by community and voluntary organisations have been the focus of recent rural transport strategies in Ireland north and south, resulting in two distinct approaches with regard to policy background and ‘degree of fit’ with policies targeting regional balance and sustainable rural development. On the one hand, the introduction of services under the Irish government’s Rural Transport Programme (RTP), formerly the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI), has significantly improved accessibility and reduced social and geographical isolation for target groups in some parts of rural Ireland. This initiative was a response to repeated calls by rural-based community and voluntary organisations for improved transport infrastructure and non-conventional, demand-based transport solutions as an essential prerequisite for their work. However, the lack of mainstream public transport in many other locations continues to pose serious challenges, in particular for vulnerable sections of the rural population such as women, older people, those in low-income households without access to a car, people with disabilities and children and young people (Pobal/Department of Transport 2006; Fitzpatrick Associates/DoT, 2006).

Since the late 1990s changes in transport policy, legislation and practice in Northern Ireland – in particular the establishment of the Rural Transport Fund (RTF) in 1998 - have led to improved rural bus services and better conditions for mostly demand-responsive community transport, though increasing demand means that further improvements are now necessary (DRDNI 2007; see also Nutley (2001) for a detailed account). Many parts of rural NI are now served by community transport initiatives which provide both stand-alone and feeder services that complement the existing public transport network. Overall, community transport services are now an important lifeline for many rural communities in NI and the RoI, in particular those experiencing decline.

Despite the growth in community transport (CT), the role of community and voluntary groups in providing inclusive and sustainable rural transport remains under-explored, particularly regarding their relationship with the state and statutory bodies and their (lack of) involvement in policy making. Historically community transport in the RoI has received little attention and even today its importance in tackling (rural) social exclusion is seldom recognised by policy makers and the public. The situation

in NI differs somewhat in that there is greater recognition of the CT sector, some of which is attributable to the PR and lobbying work of the Community Transport Association Northern Ireland (see CTANI 2005).

More importantly, however, the community and voluntary sector's (henceforth CVS) involvement in transport policy both in NI and the RoI has been very limited, though recently the CVS has been given a greater role in both the development *and* implementation of rural transport policy at a local level:

The RTI was introduced as a response to the growing level of community interest and involvement in finding local solutions to transport difficulties in rural Ireland. The lessons emerging from this action research programme will feed into the development of rural transport policy (Pobal/DoT 2006).

Nevertheless, the community transport sector in the RoI continues to play an 'execution only' role most of the time by offering transport services to vulnerable target groups such as people with disabilities, often without sound financial backup. This partly resembles experiences in Northern Ireland up until the late 1990s (see Nutley 2001).

Using existing statistics, excerpts from official documents and agency reports and fieldnotes relating to research conducted in 2006/7 in County Galway, this chapter will compare the policy background and outcomes of CT provision in rural Ireland north and south, paying particular attention to the involvement of the CVS in rural transport policy design and implementation. We will argue that the provision of rural transport, while often positive for targeted rural service users, could potentially undermine the work of some CVS groups because of its resource-intensive nature and its ever-increasing remit. Using the RTP and recent CT initiatives in Northern Ireland as case studies, we will show how different dimensions of rural transport – social, economic and organisational – can mesh in novel and sometimes unpredictable ways, bringing both positive and negative consequences for the state, the CVS and its service users.

It will be shown that based on experiences in Northern Ireland, the success of CT initiatives depends on continuous state funding, strong local government, including the establishment of regional transport authorities, and most importantly, an adequate 'mainstream' rural transport system to tie in with demand-responsive community transport. Community transport tends to 'outsource' rural transport services to private

operators and the CVS while the responsibility for transport policy, legislation and the evaluation of transport programmes remains with government departments and state agencies. This both reflects and perpetuates the CVS's relative powerlessness vis-à-vis other interested parties (state, business, transport unions) and raises issues about its long-term sustainability, the risk of potential cooption by the state and the moderation of more radical approaches to rural development.

Sustainability, social inclusion and rural transport

International research has shown that public transport can play an important role in tackling social exclusion, in particular in remote rural areas (Lucas *et al.* 2001; Hine and Mitchell 2003; Cass, Shove and Urry 2005). More importantly, existing studies highlight the state's role as key transport policy maker and legislator and the importance of strong local government and regional planning bodies in improving accessibility and addressing unmet mobility needs. Experiences in NI indicate that a good bus network and a legislative framework and transport licensing system conducive to the introduction of community transport services can help address issues of (mobility) deprivation, especially in rural areas (Nutley 2001; Frawley 2007). This implies that a clearly defined regulatory framework and comprehensive transport policy provision by the state, in particular for rural transport, continue to be an important pre-condition for successful (demand-responsive) CT.

In the RoI the state remains largely responsible for transport policy and legislation but has gradually shifted responsibility for the provision of transport infrastructure and services to the private sector, for example through public-private partnerships (see Killen (2007) for an overview). This trend towards greater involvement of the private sector has transformed both transport infrastructure provision (as in the prioritisation of road construction) and policy priorities (seen in the focus on large-scale critical infrastructure and (inter-) urban transport under *Transport 21*). Rural transport, on the other hand, has not been given the same priority, and policy in this area remains patchy and partly reliant on outdated legislation, such as the 1932 Road Transport Act which regulates bus licensing arrangements. Moreover, the Irish government's reluctance to prioritise integrated public transport as a necessary infrastructural development and to allocate public funds accordingly has meant that problems regarding accessibility and social exclusion continue to impact on both urban and rural dwellers. The introduction of the

RTI/RTP, while welcome and important, must thus be seen as an initial step only in addressing the problem of rural transport which ultimately requires a coherent transport strategy as well as a detailed roadmap for implementation.

The RTI was launched in 2001 and started off in 2002 as a small-scale pilot project aimed at addressing the lack of public transport in rural Ireland:

The overall aim of the RTI has been 'to encourage innovative community-based initiatives to provide transport services in rural areas, with a view to addressing the issue of social exclusion in rural Ireland, which is caused by lack of access to transport (Fitzpatrick Associates/DoT 2006, p. iii).

A gradual shift towards a more permanent, large-scale roll-out of the programme followed which introduced public transport services in more remote rural areas. There are now 34 mostly demand-responsive projects (see Figure 15.1 at the end of this document) ranging from island minibus schemes to demand-based hackney services (see also Pobal's RTI information pack 2005 for some selected case studies at <http://www.pobal.ie/media/Publications/RTI/Casestudies.pdf>). Placing the pilot RTI on a permanent financial footing in 2006 as the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) signalled the Irish State's recognition of the role of transport services in tackling social exclusion in rural Ireland. That said, the relative marginality, in financial terms, of the RTP – €9m in 2007 and rising to about €18m in subsequent years (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006, p. i) – and its continued focus on target groups – older people and people with disabilities – suggests a certain reluctance to recognise the wider role of public transport for the sustainable development of the country as a whole. This contrasts with the situation in Northern Ireland, with its existing public transport links (e.g. Translink services) that are now being complemented with community-run services aimed at previously neglected, mobility-deprived areas.

Despite the proposed widening of the remits of the RTP, the programme still presents itself as a project-based solution to a systemic problem; funding is handled on a case-by-case basis. Community-level research suggests that both geographic and interest-based communities still have critical transport needs so it is unclear what criteria are used to fund and evaluate both individual projects and the RTP as a whole and how successful the programme is in addressing transport problems in rural Ireland. At present there is no actual data that shows the efficacy of the RTP in tackling 'mobility deprivation' nationally, though case study evidence suggests that

many RTP-sponsored services significantly improve the lives of users and their families (see <http://www.pobal.ie/media/Publications/RTI/Casestudies.pdf>). As part of the RTI review in 2006, transport consultants Fitzpatrick Associates analysed the survey material from each county's audit to predict the continued unmet national need for rural transport. Their work suggested that 380,000 rural dwellers had unmet rural transport needs in 2005 and that this figure could grow to over 450,000 by 2021. For the key target groups initially identified by the RTI (older people, people with disabilities, low income households and young people), the numbers with unmet needs could grow from 200,000 in 2005 to over 240,000 by 2021 (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006, p. 27). While it is unclear whether these unmet transport needs are unique to rural areas,ⁱⁱ these figures reveal that there is a large contingent of rural dwellers who would benefit from the mainstreaming of the RTP to include *all* potential users of rural transport services.

State funding and the role of local government

Public funding for transport services remains a contested issue both in NI and the RoI, leading to suggestions that 'the desire to operate public transport with minimal or no public subvention appears, in a European context at least, to be a distinctly UK and Irish phenomenon' (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006, p. 12).ⁱⁱⁱ The persistence of this 'slim state' transport policy paradigm in the RoI contrasts with social democratic policies elsewhere in Europe that link public transport to positive 'externalities' (e.g. better health, environmental protection, access to employment opportunities) that merit substantial state subvention. This said, many state-subsidised transport systems in Europe are also changing (for better or worse), partly as a result of EU efforts to increase competition in the transport sector.

Lack of funding remains a major barrier to public transport provision in the RoI. Up to the late 1990s under-investment also curbed public transport development in NI. In 2002, however, the then Minister for Regional Development in NI, Peter Robinson, indicated that the *Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012* (RTS) would mark a clear departure from 'decades of under-investment and an *ad hoc* approach to transport planning' (DRDNI 2002, p. iii). This new way of thinking was also reflected in the RTS document:

[...] Northern Ireland has suffered from decades of underinvestment in its roads and public transport. The United Kingdom generally has fallen behind best European practice in transportation investment and, in its turn, Northern Ireland compares unfavourably to levels of transportation investment per capita in England, Scotland and Wales. [...] There is now acceptance that investment in roads and transport is a high priority for public expenditure (DRDNI 2002, p. 1).

In fact, legislation passed prior to the RTS had already recognised the social inclusion benefits of public transportation. Two major reports published in 1998 by the then Department of Environment, Transport & Regions – *A New Deal for Transport* and *Moving Forward: The Northern Ireland Transport Policy Statement* – identified integrated and sustainable CT as a means of reducing social exclusion and resulted in the establishment of the Rural Transport Fund (RTF) in 1998. According to Nutley (2001), the RTF in NI was unprecedented because it positively discriminated in favour of rural areas and attempted to integrate CT operations with conventional public transport to improve accessibility and complement the work of other local development agencies.

Factors other than state subvention are also likely to influence public transport provision. According to Fitzpatrick Associates (2006), transport policy and planning in the RoI is shaped by centralisation and weak local government (McDonald and Nix 2005; McDonagh 2006; Rau and McDonagh 2008; see also O’Broin and Waters 2007). McDonagh (2006) argues that local government needs to be given greater responsibility for and involvement in transport provision and that the government’s top-down transport policy solutions undermine rural and community development policies and encourage car dependency. Over-reliance on the car is further exacerbated by serious deficiencies in the existing public transport network, including infrequent services in more remote rural areas and the comparatively poor quality and availability of public transport options (McDonagh 2006, pp. 361–3). This contrasts with the situation in Northern Ireland where recent moves towards a three-tier system – central government (policy, legislation and regulation), public transport authority (design and management of public transport services, development of local public transport policy) and transport operators (service delivery) – has meant that local authorities have now much greater input into transport planning and are able to buy in commercial transport services and/or fund CT to address accessibility and social exclusion issues (DRDNI 2007).

The first national study on rural transport needs in the RoI – *Rural Transport: A National Study from a Community Perspective* (2000) – was commissioned by the Area Development Management (ADM; now Pobal) and resulted from strategic plans submitted by partnership and community groups. Following this study, the Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural Transport directed the County Development Boards to conduct rural transport audits and needs assessments in each county to inform the Board’s ten-year-strategy and the development of national strategies, including the RTI. Given that local government in the RoI has normally no authority to plan, fund or regulate public transport, its input into the RTP represents an important, yet somewhat uncertain, step towards greater involvement in national transport policy and planning.

Public transport and social exclusion – perceptions, policy and practice

The relationship between sustainable public transport and social inclusion in the RoI remains poorly understood and existing research has largely concentrated on Dublin and other (sub) urban areas (Lohan and Wickham 1999; Wickham 2006). To-date information and data about rural transport needs have mostly been gathered by communities themselves to document development needs and lobby for resources. The ADM study highlighted the urgent need for a long-term strategy in the rural transport sector and identified the lack of transport as ‘a major barrier to social and economic development’ (ADM 2000, Preface). The ensuing consultation process confirmed that all parties recognised the ‘cost-benefit problem’ inherent to rural transport and the need for state funding for projects that could not finance themselves. However, the report also acknowledged the need for equal access for rural and urban dwellers and all groups in society as a valuable (yet difficult to quantify) trade-off to financial cost because equal access to opportunities is seen as a pre-requisite to social inclusion (p. 77). A similar perspective is reflected in the concept of ‘rural proofing’, that is, attempts at reducing accessibility gaps between urban and rural areas, which has informed recent transport strategy in Northern Ireland (DRDNI 2002, p. 2).

At this stage it is important to note that Irish public transport planning in general and the RTP in particular tend to connect public transport to socially and economically disadvantaged areas and groups. This clearly affects user profiles and shapes public perceptions of more sustainable transport alternatives. For example, the majority of organisations and limited companies managing the RTP originally

provided social services for specific target groups, such as the elderly and people with disabilities. Their involvement in rural transport services thus appears to have attached a 'charity connotation' which stigmatises public transport users, at least in the minds of some, with the labelling of RTI services as the 'old persons bus' being just one example of this (Fitzpatrick Associates 2004, p. 41). Moreover, transport is seen as an additional service for the CVS's specific target groups which 'naturally' falls within the remit of their work, which partly explains why the consequences for groups and organisations involved in the RTP have hitherto remained under-explored.

As a result, CT projects in rural areas are often viewed as marginal rather than mainstream, thereby consolidating the distinction between the socially included and excluded and exacerbating perceptions of peripherality and neglect (Frawley 2007). This runs contrary to Preston and Raje's (2007) recommendation that 'problems of the immobile socially excluded should not be analysed in isolation from the mobile included. Accessibility planning should not be limited to analysing social exclusion' (p.10). Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that in many locations outside Dublin, public transport is mostly used by people who do not have access to a car (low-income families, immigrants, students, occasionally tourists) and that this has impacted significantly on public perceptions of the status of public transport vis-à-vis the car. As a result, the growing demand for rural (and urban) public transport which cuts across all sections of the community and which puts considerable pressure on community transport providers to expand their services is largely ignored.

The apparent need for additional rural transport services to tackle social exclusion has resulted in calls for increased RTP funding. Groups that represent transport-poor areas such as the North Galway Rural Transport Steering Group (NGRTSG) have lobbied Pobal for additional RTP projects. NGRTSG, with the assistance of Galway Rural Development and Clare Accessible Transport, commissioned a North Galway Transport Feasibility Study to inform its planning process. The study was completed in 2006 and demonstrated that the lack of public transport in the area presented itself as an obstacle to 'a reasonable quality of life for many people' (Grimes 2006, p. 20). The lack of transport services in North Galway contributed to social exclusion in the following ways:

- Isolation within the home reinforces social isolation for those in disadvantaged areas;

- Difficulties in accessing services, many of which are located outside the area;
- Excessive cost in availing of employment opportunities which can lead to forsaking skilled careers;
- Inhibiting business and enterprise development and the location of new businesses and subsequently the potential creation of employment and
- Forsaking formative sporting, leisure and educational opportunities.

(Grimes 2006, p. 20)

It is important to note here that this level of research, although encouraged and required by Pobal, seems to actually compound the short-term, disjointed nature of RTP project planning that occurs all over Ireland.

Travelling North and South: (Missed) Opportunities in developing cross-border initiatives

Community transport initiatives in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland differ significantly in terms of prevalence, quality and connectivity, all of which raises concerns for cross-border community development programmes that depend on these transport services. NI community transport legislation introduced during the 1990s improved opportunities for setting up transport initiatives, reduced bureaucracy (e.g. by simplifying the licensing process) and was intended to bring community transport efforts in NI into line with those in other parts of the UK (Nutley 2001, p. 52). Previously there was no provision of minibus permits (and associated CT funding) and local authorities had no power to subsidise transport services. The Transport (Amendment) (NI) Order 1990 added a section to the Transport Act (NI) 1967 which enabled district councils, education agencies and health boards to grant 'Section B' permits to local groups for the running of minibus services. Nutley (2001) points out that prior to 1990, the biggest barrier (outside of funding) for CT in NI was the complicated PSV license which increased costs and deterred volunteer drivers. 'Section B' permits solved most of these problems.

The Republic of Ireland, on the other hand, has currently no coherent legislative framework for community and non-conventional transport schemes, and licensing is both centralised and cumbersome. Navigating the fragmented and often confusing transport regulation system takes a huge amount of time and makes it difficult to determine authority and responsibility in relation to public transport provision. This is

highlighted by local attempts to plan for and put in place auxiliary services for the RTP, such as bus shelters. The Community & Enterprise Unit in Galway County Council is the lead agent on the Rural Bus Shelter Scheme, as determined in the County Development Strategy, and has repeatedly tried to pilot the scheme in Portumna, Co. Galway (the location of the SE Galway Local Bus RTI). However, despite much work locally, progress has been slow because there are neither a commercial or statutory body nor relevant policy measures that cover the installation and maintenance of vital auxiliary facilities such as good-quality bus shelters, adequate lighting, ticket vending machines and display units for timetables (Frawley 2007). Again, this suggests that a coherent national policy for community and non-conventional transport services is most critical for the sustainability of community transport in the RoI.

Finally, the potential for North-South collaboration appears to be of relevance here. Some collaboration has occurred in relation to the integration of transport services. In 2005 an EU-funded cross-border advice and information project (CTAIS) was established by Community Transport Northern Ireland (CTANI) and the Community Transport Association of Ireland (CTAI) to provide support, guidance and training for local transport operators. Nutley (2001) acknowledges the key role played by cross-border umbrella group Community Connections in the successful coordination of projects. However, differences in legislation such as the absence of an equivalent to the 'Section B' permits in the RoI has hampered cross-border integration of services (CTAIS 2006). Even today a NI minibus under permit is technically not allowed to operate south of the border which suggests that very little work has taken place to ensure legislative consistency (e.g. with regard to permits) and facilitate cross-border policy learning. This is regrettable considering that the shift towards community-run rural transport occurred approximately around the same time and would have offered ample opportunity for an all-island policy debate. Moreover, a cross-border approach to addressing issues of rural isolation and social exclusion would have benefited vulnerable groups in both NI and the RoI. The mid-term report for the EU-funded *Positive Ageing Cross Border Project*, published in October 2007, revealed that poor transport networks continue to be a significant barrier to positive ageing both north and south of the border and called for immediate NI/RoI cooperation to tackle rural isolation (*RTE News at 6 o'clock*, Monday, 1 October 2007).

Rural transport and development: The changing relationship between state and community and voluntary sector (CVS)

The relationship between the Irish state and the community and voluntary sector has been subject to considerable debate in Ireland in relation to both rural governance in general (Taylor 2005; Ó Riain 2006; The Wheel 2007) and local area partnerships in particular (Sabel 1995; Varley and Curtin 2006). Interestingly, public transport provision – an area traditionally associated with (sub-) urban settings – now constitutes a key arena for multi-level rural governance. Community involvement in rural transport in the RoI is also a response to the serious crisis arising from (unintended) inconsistencies in Irish transport policy, including tensions between the need for stricter traffic law enforcement to improve road safety (as with the clampdown on drink driving) and the persistent lack of alternatives to the car (as with demand-responsive night busses to and from rural pubs). More importantly, the growing involvement of non-governmental actors in local transport-related partnership agreements raises important questions about the implications for both the State and non-state actors such as community and voluntary groups.

The Irish Government's decision to hand over some of the responsibility for rural transport to community and voluntary organisations added a labour-intensive and costly task to their already extensive range of services. This proved particularly difficult for CVS groups with little or no prior experience and with few local connections to agencies and other development groups:

The development of the RTI has not been without its challenges and difficulties. [...it] has placed a considerable burden of management, administration and governance on RTI groups, with the people involved having little prior experience of such matters in most cases...the burden of governance has been especially onerous for groups with no links to existing development groups (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006, p. 63).

More importantly, the introduction of project-based funding under the RTP to encourage CT initiatives indicated a 'paradigm shift' in transport policy (Vigar 2002) and signalled the Irish state's partial withdrawal from the *provision* of rural transport. At the same time, responsibility for (rural) transport policy remained with the state (Department of Transport) and various national transport agencies (NRA, RPA). Despite (or perhaps because of) this 'division of labour', a clearly articulated policy framework for (rural) public transport is proving elusive and, as a result, community

transport in the RoI continues to operate in a policy environment characterised by serious gaps and outdated legislation.^{iv} This makes it extremely difficult for many CVS groups to coordinate their efforts so as to complement existing rural transport, thereby preventing wider integration that could potentially alleviate some of the pressure on both commercial and voluntary rural transport providers (see Fitzpatrick Associates 2004). Most crucially, however, current partnership arrangements in relation to rural transport both maintain and reflect the *uneven distribution of policy making powers* among different parties, including the CVS. This partly reflects the situation in other transport-related policy arenas, such as centralised planning for the provision of road infrastructure, but also suggests some unique patterns attributable to the specific structures of decision-making and knowledge transfer in the context of rural transport policy in Ireland.

The development agency, Pobal, plays a particular role here in that it functions as intermediary between the Department of Transport and individual community groups and organisations, entrusted with the administration and management of the RTP. Undoubtedly, Pobal's past involvement in rural transport has proved vital for the success of RTI/RTP measures to date, even though resources and skills will need to be extended for Pobal to meet the demands of any future RTP expansion (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006). This is crucial as two of the four key recommendations made in the Farrell Grant Sparks report (2000) commissioned by Pobal – the development of a national rural public transport policy and the prioritisation of Government funding for rural transport services – remain largely unmet. This contrasts with Northern Ireland's more integrated approach to public transport which places CT initiatives within a comparatively coherent policy framework aimed at tackling rural isolation, inaccessibility and exclusion. And while there are some parallels between NI and the RoI regarding limited funds and the uncertainty of funding in the long term, community and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland (such as CTANI) have achieved a considerable amount of influence in transport decision-making.

Despite delays in devising a coherent rural transport policy framework to underpin the RTI/RTP, many participating CVS groups availed of funding to provide much-needed transport for their target groups. Existing case studies show that many (though not all) CVS groups in receipt of RTI/RTP funding were able to make their services more accessible and feed back their experiences and recommendations to Pobal and to the Department of Transport, thereby strengthening their position as

community representatives (Fitzpatrick Associates 2004; Pobal/DoT 2005, 2006). Nevertheless, the impacts of transport provision on the *development principles and practices* of these groups remain poorly understood. For example, participation in the RTP partnership process has occasionally highlighted the lack of political influence and lobbying power of the CVS (see Meade (2005) and Lee (2006) for a general discussion).

There is also some evidence that reliance on funding from the Department of Transport has partly re-shaped the work of some CVS groups by softening more critical approaches to rural transport and community development and increasing the likelihood of co-option, at least to some extent (see Lee 2003, Daly 2007 for a general discussion). Certainly some groups have found themselves in the role of sole transport provider which added to their already extensive list of commitments, increased their dependency on continuous state funding and limited their capacity to plan strategically. Moreover, small groups in particular have found the level of administration required to participate in the RTI/RTP a major source of frustration that has restricted their capacity to develop services, thereby endangering their long-term sustainability (Fitzpatrick Associates 2004, pp. 42–3). These experiences partly resemble observations by community development practitioners in Northern Ireland:

There is some concern that government services are being ‘downloaded’ onto small organisations that do not have adequate resources to cope...Moreover, unstable policy environments, fierce competition with private and statutory providers, and the burden of administrating...service[s...] are problematic. Perhaps most importantly for the future of community development in Northern Ireland, public service delivery may compromise the independence of community and voluntary organisations, damage their campaigning and lobbying role, and enable government to withdraw from providing services they should provide (Lewis 2006, p. 12).

The CVS’s reluctance to threaten to withdraw capital investment or labour power, together with its status as a group without electoral mandate to make policy, has been shown to further weaken its bargaining power.^v Transport is a very expensive and technical sector and the CVS offers neither finance nor technical expertise to the Irish government and hence has no real power in determining how transport policy is made in relation to the RTP, especially if a change in strategy or investment is required. If the CVS is going to be involved in the rolling out of rural transport services on a wider scale – a possibility mooted in the Fitzpatrick report (2006) – will it

be able to significantly influence national transport policy or plan for the services it is asked to provide?

Given the current lack of central transport planning, CVS groups frequently need to deal with different state agencies - including the Departments of Social and Family Affairs, Education and Transport, An Garda Síochána, HSE and local authorities - on a case-by-case basis in order to plan and run the RTP. For this reason, route licensing presents itself as a significant barrier for many groups (including local authorities who are in the same position as the CVS in this regard) and hampers their efforts to respond to unmet rural transport needs. Problems also arise for CVS groups trying to establish schemes in areas not covered by the RTP, such as in towns over 5,000 people which do not qualify for rural transport funding (see Frawley 2007).

Finally, the CVS's relationship with the state is also critical on a *local level*, and current plans to reform local government in Ireland are also very likely to change the way (public) transport services are planned and delivered. International experiences show that such transformative processes can both assist and prevent collaboration between CVS groups and local authorities. Banks and Orton's (2005) study of community development workers in local authorities in England suggests that local government reform poses challenges for both the local authorities themselves, which are often the nexus between communities and the state, as well as the community development sector. Their work highlights five high-tension areas in the relationship between CVS and local authorities that include a) complex accountabilities, b) the visibility of work, c) working to both national and local priorities, d) locally based community development work versus strategic policy-level work and e) tensions between the desire to improve representative democracy by supporting councillors and the need to develop participatory democracy by engaging local people in decision-making processes (pp. 102–5). All this suggests that the transformation of local government structures can also bring about very significant changes in the relationship between local authorities and the CVS, and that community transport in rural Ireland is likely to be affected by future reforms.

Overall, it can be shown that the RTP has increased the capacity of many (though not all) CVS groups to deliver vital transport services for their target groups. Evaluation studies (Fitzpatrick Associates 2004, 2006) highlight the many successes of the RTP but also identify a number of obstacles, including the burden of

administration, the persistence of unmet transport needs and the need for a coherent rural transport policy.

Towards greater sustainability? Arguments for and against the CVS's involvement in transport policy-making

Should then the CVS continue or even extend its involvement in the planning and provision of rural transport? And what would this mean for the long-term sustainability of community and voluntary organisations in rural Ireland? So far this chapter has shown that while there are many positives arising from improved public transport for rural dwellers in Ireland, the decision to do so could also pose problems, in particular with regard to the long-term sustainability of the CVS's skill and resource base. More importantly, the relationship between the CVS and the Irish state must be the focal point of any debate in favour or against the continued participation of community groups in the running of the RTP. With (rural) service users with unmet transport needs pitted against the interests of the state, the CVS finds itself hemmed in and faces a conflict between community development principles and practice. Community development is by nature a process aimed at supporting communities to build their capacity to influence their own opportunities through local solutions. National initiatives and top-down policy making, both of which are evident in the context of the RTP, leave little room for these capacity-building processes to flourish, thereby not only compromising community development principles but also threatening the effectiveness of local services.

Given the existing commitment of many community and voluntary organisations to provide transport for their own members as well as their service users, many of which now depend on the continuation of the RTP, it seems almost impossible for the CVS to review its decision at this stage. Moreover, the CVS's weak position in the context of the social partnership talks mentioned previously implies that challenging the *status quo* or arguing for greater involvement of the state in the provision of regular rural transport could prove difficult. The experiences of RTI groups so far point to a real risk of 'programme analysis' (Lee 2006), where the primary focus is the challenge of sustaining programme *structures*, not reviewing and reshaping programme *actions* to tackle poverty and social exclusion where necessary. To put the RTP on a sustainable footing in the long term, it thus seems necessary for the Irish state to devolve decision-making powers regarding (rural) transport to the local level

and provide additional resources. The latter seems particularly important to avoid unsustainable competition for resources among community and voluntary groups that could potentially undermine the role of the CVS as a champion of community development.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that the farming out of rural transport to the CVS and private operators represents an (almost uniquely) Irish approach to service provision based on minimal involvement of the state in delivering and maintaining public goods. Undoubtedly, the RTP has provided real opportunities for learning and capacity building for those involved in the management and operation of rural transport services and has (in-) directly contributed to local employment in rural areas affected by economic and demographic decline. However, focusing on rural transport provision has also clearly reduced the ability of some CVS groups, especially those without prior knowledge in the area of rural transport, to attend to wider community development issues such as more balanced regional development and the policy influence of local groups. A long-term assessment of the future viability and sustainability of rural community transport strategies such as the RTP that have the potential to undermine the capacity of community and voluntary organisations to pursue their development goals thus seems to be of paramount importance.

There is now considerable debate in Ireland about the role of community development, as the Irish state contracts out more and more essential social services to this sector 'on the cheap'. This contract points to an inherent conflict, often identified within the voluntary sector, where the state provides resources to organisations whose stated (or original) aim is to change the state or provide support to communities in this process (Lee 2006, p. 17). This type of cooption can be problematic and funding lines can come under threat because of conflict between activists and funding bodies over the way resources are used, including research necessary for the development and articulation of social change proposals (Lee 2006). There is also a (perceived) shift from traditional government structures towards (local) participatory governance networks. While this does not necessarily reduce the influence of the state, it essentially moves responsibility for the delivery of essential public services such as transport to non-state actors, including private businesses and the CVS (Larragy and Bartley 2007, Rau and McDonagh 2008). As a result, the relationship between the

CVS and the Irish state has undergone fundamental changes, producing both positive and negative outcomes for those involved.

The recent rejuvenation of community transport in Northern Ireland suggests that adequate funding and a strategic rural transport policy framework are necessary prerequisites for successful community-run schemes (Nutley, 2001). Rural transport policy in the Republic of Ireland, however, remains ambiguous, in particular with regard to the future role of the CVS in the provision of rural transport. This chapter has shown that the lack of an adequate rural transport and mobility policy framework that integrates the views of the CVS and other interested parties remains a major barrier to sustainable transport provision. Subsequently the government's commitment to financing the RTP must also coincide with joined-up, long-term policy provision to ensure sustainability and promote integration.

Overall, the Irish government's renewed financial commitment to the RTP recognises that access and mobility are critical factors in promoting social inclusion in rural Ireland. This said, it also raises serious questions about the state's commitment to an integrated public transport system that presents an accessible alternative to the private vehicle. The community and voluntary sector has proven useful for connecting the most excluded populations to mainstream transport links in isolated areas and for providing targeted services for their members. However, recent figures suggest that the number of people with unmet transport needs remains high and that measures for improving public transport in (rural) Ireland must go beyond the current 'target group approach' which has hitherto characterised the RTP. Recent proposals to widen the coverage of the RTP to include *all* potential rural transport service users (Fitzpatrick Associates 2006, esp. pp. v–xi) would thus necessitate a detailed review of the role of the CVS in providing rural transport services that takes into account the issues raised in this chapter.

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Figure 15.1: Location of RTI Projects

Source: Department of Transport (2005) *Transport 21: Connecting Communities, Promoting Prosperity*.^{vi}

ⁱ Note that UK towns with populations under 10,000 are classed as rural in relation to transport policy while Irish towns/villages with populations under 5,000 are considered rural and therefore eligible to avail of the Rural Transport Programme.

ⁱⁱ National evidence suggests that 'transport poverty' also exists in sub-urban and disadvantaged areas of cities where more and more Irish people are residing (Lohan and Wickham 1999; Wickham, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, greater CVS involvement and the farming out of public services to the community or private sector appear to be particularly pronounced in the UK and Ireland compared to other countries. Fitzpatrick Associates argue that 'the desire to operate public transport with minimal or no subvention appears, in a European context at least, to be a distinctly UK and Irish phenomenon. In many other European countries, good public transport is perceived to deliver "positive externalities", and this is seen as meriting considerable levels of Government subvention' (2006: 12).

^{iv} For example, the Fitzpatrick report (2006) *Progressing Rural Public Transport in Ireland* compared conditions in the RoI with international practice and identified key problems related to Ireland's approach to transport policy, particularly public transport and rural transport strategy.

^v It is important to note that other groups are equally affected by the uneven power distribution in Irish partnership agreements, such as Environmental NGOs which hitherto have not even been part of the social partnership process.

^{vi} http://www.transport21.ie/WHAT_IS_TRANSPORT_21/upload/Image/RTIMap-big.jpg (accessed 15/06/2007).