Social Policy Formulation and Voluntarism: A Case Study from the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

In Ireland the contribution of the voluntary sector to the formulation of social policy is now explicitly recognised. Of particular importance is the fact that this sector now constitutes one of the four pillars of Social Partnership1 and has been party to the negotiations on Partnership 2000 and more recently the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness2.

In 1997 the Department of Social Studies was approached by the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul (SVP) to assist in a process aimed at formulating the views of the Society on a range of relevant issues in national social policy. In general terms the research commissioned by the SVP was aimed at devising a social policy document that would represent the concerns and the experiences of its local conference3 membership and enable the Society to reflect this information back to statutory and other agencies through its participation in various national policy making fora4.

The most important aspect of this project from the perspective of the SVP's National Council was to get a clear mandate from its grassroots membership to pursue a greater role in national social policy formulation. One of the more interesting findings was that while the general membership does aspire to an enhanced role in national social policy matters, there is little consensus on how best this can be achieved. The vast majority of membership juxtaposes their preference for a greater input to national social policy making with a firm adherence to the Society's traditional mode of working on a one-to-one basis with clients. This suggests that for the Society to develop a national social policy role with support from its members will require a difficult balancing act. It means on the one hand, engaging in more policy work, lobbying, advocacy and so on, while on the other not abandoning its commitment to confidential casework with individual clients.

This paper is based on fieldwork undertaken in two phases. First a series of twenty two focus group sessions were conducted in which the members and clients of some forty eight local conferences were consulted. The second phase involved a national postal survey of all local conferences covering areas such as membership, activities and opinions of conference presidents on a range of social policy topics. Five hundred and ninety useable questionnaires were received giving a highly satisfactory response rate of 70 per cent.

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1 A consultative process involving the government and interest groups in the negotiation and delivery of national policy agreements
2 The two most recent National Agreements negotiated by the Social Partners
3 Groups of area based SVP volunteers
4 Since 1996 the SVP has been a Social Partner and a member of the National Economic and Social Forum
Introduction

This paper reports some recent research from the Republic of Ireland on the role of voluntary organisations in the formulation and development of social policy. The research took the form of an intensive study of the activities and attitudes of the members of Ireland’s largest voluntary social service organisation, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Its significance resides in the context in which it took place, namely a lively debate on the extent, nature and potential role of voluntary social service organisations in Ireland. Specifically, a range of influences is currently impelling voluntary organisations to act in a policy and representative role, as distinct from a service provision role. The research reported here provides, for the first time in Ireland, some empirical data on the policy capacity of the voluntary social services sector.

Section one of the paper sets out briefly the theoretical concerns that have lead to the current interest internationally in voluntarism. Section two sketches the Irish context, firstly outlining the particularities of Ireland’s debate about voluntarism, and secondly describing the organisation in which the research took place. In section three the results of the research are reported and in the final section, section four, the implications of the findings for the potential of voluntary social services to play a fuller role in policy development are discussed. In brief, our findings suggest that the structures, practices and attitudes of voluntary organisations in the social services field may not be as conducive to the kind of enlarged role for voluntary associations that is now being increasingly held out for them.

1. Associationalism and the Mixed Economy of Welfare

Two inter-related developments have combined to bring voluntary organisations to the forefront of analysis and debate in social research and social policy. First, in the last decade or more in social and political theory there has been a renewed interest in the related topics of ‘social capital’ and ‘associational life’. The former owes its proximate origins to Coleman’s (1988) concept of ‘social capital’, referring to the features of social life – trust,
reciprocity, community organisation, and so on, that enhance a society’s economic and social performance. The latter of course is a resurrection of De Tocqueville’s characterisation of American social and political life in the nineteenth century. These ideas and their practical implications are now invoked and debated with renewed vigour. For example, Fukuyama (1995:355) in *Trust* asserts a strong and direct link between social capital and general economic performance: “Social capital is critical to prosperity and to what has come to be called competitiveness, but its more important consequences may not be felt in the economy so much as in social and political life”. Putnam’s study of modern Italy (Putnam, 1993) offers an empirical demonstration of the impact of social capital. He ascribes the lower level of economic development and less competent government of one part of Italy (the south) relative to another part (the north) to the historically higher level of social capital and associational life in Northern Italy.

The interest in social capital and associationalism has been intensified by the recent controversy about the trend in advanced societies in the extent of associationalism. Putnam (1995) argued in relation to the US that social capital is in decline there - an analysis that has been challenged by Skocpol (1997). The contentious aspect of Putnam’s argument is the link in his work between a relatively enlarged State and contracting social capital, a De Tocquevillian view in which ‘an absence of government and administration’ facilitates the emergence of associations, and conversely. An ideological interpretation of this line of reasoning would call for a reduced role for the state in order to facilitate the emergence and growth of voluntary associations. However, Skocpol (1997) has questioned both the empirical basis of Putnam’s argument and the implied zero/sum link between the size of the state and the extent of associationalism. To the contrary, Skocpol (1997:472) argues that in the case of America the federal government facilitated rather than displaced voluntary associations by creating an opportunity structure that “nourished, encouraged, and rewarded voluntary associations".
A further controversy has centred on the attempts by advocates of associationalism to translate the concept into an agenda of political and institutional reform. Notably, Paul Hirst (1994; 1995; 1998) has offered a critique of modern democracy at the heart of which is the “weakness of secondary associations in democratic governance” (1995:101). Hirst’s analysis leads him to prescribe a more regulatory role for the state, a more diffuse, decentralised form of public administration, and a considerably enhanced role for secondary associations such as voluntary organisations. In this model, the role of the State is to set general frameworks and standards and to offer collective funding, but to facilitate secondary associations, rather than the centralised State, to directly provide.

Hirst distinguishes his plea for voluntary associations from a neo-liberal strategy of simply ‘rolling back the welfare state’ and reducing state services. He suggests that new forms of democracy cannot be built “without ensuring a measure of social security” (1998: 15), and acknowledges that this can only be achieved by “maintaining public funding and common minimum entitlements” (1998:15). For Hirst, the link between associational democracy and the welfare state is as follows:

Public funding combined with decentralised provision is the essence of associational democracy. Representative institutions continue to provide the basic rules and to set the fiscal framework, but associations are responsible for the provision of services to their members. Decentralisation of governance through voluntary self-governing associations would place individuals under the subsidiary governments they have chosen for the specific purposes in question and in which they have some voice. Associations would compete to provide definite services and to obtain public funds proportionate to membership for public purposes.

(Hirst, 1998:17)
This alternative model of governance and the implications it might have for social policy has generated considerable debate.

The second development concerns the emergence of the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ as an analytical framework and a policy stance in modern welfare states. In social policy discourse in the welfare states that emerged in the post-war era, ‘welfare’ was inextricably associated with the State; the State was seen as the primary source of provision and finance. The centrality of the State was increasingly questioned from the late 1970s onwards. On the one hand, Marxists (O’Connor, 1973; Gough, 1979) pointed to the inherent contradiction in capitalist economies between the need for accumulation and the need for legitimacy. The former requires policy mechanisms (including taxes and subsidies) to facilitate capital accumulation and profitability, and the latter increasingly expensive State services to sustain the political legitimacy of the State in the eyes of the larger population. On the other hand, a neo-liberal critique also emerged in many advanced economies. This critique pointed to the deleterious effects of the expanded, universal welfare state; incentive effects in the labour market; ‘crowding out’ of private savings by State pension systems; and, costly, bureaucratic delivery of mass-provided services in health, housing and education. (Glennerster, 1990; Le Grand and Robinson, 1984). This latter critique of State welfare was popularised by Mrs Thatcher and other political leaders in the 1980s and 1990s and while not leading to outright, generalised abandonment of State social services it instigated the search for new ways of structuring welfare and social provision.

The ‘mixed economy of welfare’ emerged as the new paradigm. In essence, it emphasises the multiple sources of welfare in society - State, Market, Voluntary Sector and Informal Welfare in the family and community. Specifically, it envisages a potentially larger role for the voluntary sector. In this approach the State is urged to adopt the role of funder and regulator, while increasingly seeing ‘the non-State’ sectors as agents for the delivery of welfare. Here the voluntary sector may be delegated certain welfare services,

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5 For an exposition of the concept of the mixed economy of welfare in the context of the
or may compete in a ‘quasi market’ with other providers to obtain State funded contracts for service provision.

Advocates of this approach argue that users of services gain from the greater efficiency of providers who must compete to obtain State funding and that these efficiency gains are not at the cost of inadequate services. Welfare provided in this way, with the voluntary sector enabled by the State, may enhance choice and facilitate greater responsiveness to recipients’ varied needs. Public policy in many countries has increasingly reflected this general approach. For instance, in the UK the role of voluntary and social housing has grown (Spencer et al, 1995); in Continental European countries and in the UK the provision of social care services to the elderly and the disabled operates increasingly within a mixed economy of welfare framework (Evers, 1993; Ascoli, 1999). In the USA, state and local governments increasingly look to contract human services, including welfare-to-work casework services, to non-profit and for-profit providers (Frumkin and Andre-Clark, 2000; Smith and Lipsky, 1993).

The adoption of this pluralistic form of social provision and its implications for the voluntary sector has generated a new policy and research agenda (O’Sullivan, 1998). In particular, the impact of this model on the voluntary social services sector is beginning to be addressed. At the core of this research agenda is a concern that the nature of the voluntary sector is being transformed – and perhaps undermined - by this new context. For example, Taylor (1997) has documented the challenges to voluntary organisations in the UK in developing appropriate new forms of accountability; in Ireland O’Sullivan (1999) has pointed to the growing reliance of the voluntary sector on State funding and on paid employees in the increasingly contractual relationship between the state and the voluntary sector: in the US, Frumkin and Andre-Clark (2000) have noted the growing pressure on non-profit organisations to adopt commercial and managerial approaches to efficiency. Underlying these specific questions is a fear that voluntarism is losing its

Republic Of Ireland see Fanning (1999)
political autonomy and its capacity to act as an independent critic of public policy and an advocate for social change.

In summary, the scale of voluntarism and the relationship between voluntarism and the State has been driven to the top of third sector research and policy debate by the growing aspiration to strengthen associational life and to implement a mixed economy of welfare. The specific impact of these influences in Ireland provides the context in which the case study research was undertaken. The next section gives a brief overview of the context for voluntarism in Ireland.

2. Voluntarism and Social Services in Ireland
At political independence (in 1922) the new State had inherited a bloated, highly centralised, colonial State (Breen et al, 1990) and a relatively impoverished civil society focused largely on the struggle for national identity and political independence. In the decades after independence the pace of economic and social development was slow. Until the 1960s the population continued to decline; rural areas were socially and demographically depleted and urban areas grew slowly, reflecting the slow pace of economic development generally.

During these decades civil society was dominated by the Catholic Church, which had historically constructed, and continued to control, a very expansive network of ‘non-profit’ services in health, education, and social services. The low level of industrialisation and the consequently small urban working class population was reflected in the absence of a widespread working class movement of collective self-help so important to the shaping of civil society in the UK and the rest of industrialised Europe.

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6 James (1989) in his standard work points to the significant role that organised religion has played in the development of welfare services in many countries, suggesting that these services are “defensive mechanisms”. In Ireland, however, the hegemony of the Catholic Church was such as to invite the description Moral Monopoly by Inglis (1987) in his study of Catholicism and Irish society.
The first phase of industrialisation and economic development in the 1960s and 70s heralded two developments that reshaped the State – Civil society mix. First, the role of the State in both the provision and finance of welfare greatly expanded, leading to a re-balance of State/non-profit influences in health and education in particular. Second, the secularisation that accompanied economic development helped to sustain the growth of a new generation of voluntary associations, giving expression to the emergent issues in civil rights, women’s rights, disability, homelessness, and so on. The overall size of the voluntary social services sector grew during this period and its composition became more diverse. In their study of voluntary sector applicants to a central funding source, Faughnan and Kelleher (1992) reported that 72% of their sample organisations had been founded since 1970. While it is not possible with the available data to document the growth of voluntary associations in detail, it is clear from aggregate data incorporating voluntary social services that the non-profit sector has developed a significant presence. The John Hopkins/National College of Ireland study (Donoghue et al, 1999) estimated that in 1985 the non-profit sector’s income comprised 8.2% of GDP, and that paid employment in the sector accounted for 12% of all non-agricultural employment.

Ireland, like other advanced economies began to experience fiscal crisis in the late 1970s. After a policy restructuring was effected in the late 1980s and early 1990s the economy grew at a historically exceptional rate leading to a rapid increase in personal incomes and the eventual attainment of full employment. In the restructuring of the welfare state in Britain, Europe, the USA and Canada the voluntary social services sector has been affected in a variety of ways. The greater attention to fiscal control has lead to a general stance of ‘no growth’ in many areas of social expenditure, thus widening the potential scope for voluntary and charitable effort. In addition, in varying

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7 There is no definitive study that offers an account of the changing scale and nature of voluntarism in Ireland in recent decades. The point about the growth of new voluntary organisations is easily illustrated, however; during the two decades 1960-1980 the following well-known voluntary social service organisations were established: FLAC (legal aid); Women’s Aid (hostels for women subject to domestic violence); Threshold (housing advice for low-income tenants); Cherish (housing, legal and social support for lone mothers)
degrees, States are resorting to non-state provision though a number of mechanisms including privatisation of services to the market, contracting services to private sector, commercial providers, and contracting services to voluntary associations (Pierson, 1994; Ascoli and Ranci, 1999). In this ‘post welfare state’ scenario the voluntary social services sector is now placed in a qualitatively different relationship with the State (and with other welfare sectors), with a greater emphasis on financial and management accountability in an emerging contract culture.

Some of the general economic changes identified in other countries can also be discerned in Ireland (adherence to European macro-economic and fiscal targets; deregulation in key sectors of the economy, liberalisation of financial markets). However, there are important features of the voluntary sector’s evolving role in society and the economy that should be noted that make Ireland’s experience somewhat distinctive. First, Ireland did not experience the ideological shift to neo-liberal policies that was so influential in re-shaping the context for State/voluntary sector relationships elsewhere. Consequently, the debate about the enhanced role of the voluntary sector has not been imbued with the fear that the voluntary sector is replacing the State as part of a political agenda. Second, the direction of change in state-voluntary sector links is mixed in Ireland. While it is possible to identify examples of where the State is following international trends in ‘contracting’ to the non-profit sector, an equally common pattern in Ireland is of the State replacing voluntary organisations. In primary and secondary education, for example, management and funding and provision is increasingly a function of the State, reflecting the numerical decline in the number of clerics and the increasingly secular preferences of the population. In child care and related services the historical domination by the Churches has given way to a much more interventionist role for the State in regulation, funding and management.

Third, the share of cash revenue from the State in the income of the non-profit sector as a whole in Ireland is the highest (74.5%) in a selection of fifteen countries, as Donoghue (1999) has recorded. In the voluntary and
community sub-sector (a broad sub-sector comprising health, social services advocacy, housing and other ‘social’ areas) almost 53% of cash income is from state sources and the proportion is higher again in parts of this sub-sector. The voluntary social services sector in Ireland is now substantially penetrated by the State.

Fourth, against the background of Ireland’s unusual adherence to centralised, corporatist forms of social and economic policy formulation, the voluntary sector has become more formally involved in both local and national policy mechanisms (O’Donnell, 2000; O’Donnell, 1998). Briefly, successive Irish governments have adopted a centralised system of income determination as one of the key elements in economic policy since 1987. The ‘national agreements’ that have arisen in this framework have commanded broad public support and are associated with the dramatic change in Ireland’s economic fortunes in the last decade.8

In the period since this form of corporatism emerged, the voluntary sector became increasingly more strategic and assertive in its dealings with the state. The sector gained access to a range of policy oriented bodies such as the National Economic and Social Forum and the National Economic and Social Council. Of particular importance, however, is the fact that this sector also gained access to the negotiation process leading to the national agreements. The sector now constitutes one of the four ‘pillars’ (State, Unions, Employers/Business and the Community and Voluntary Sector) of social partnership and has been party to the negotiations on the two most recent national plans: Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness (1997) and Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000).

Finally, the induction of the voluntary sector into the policy arena is taking place in a context where the State has actively and explicitly articulated a policy role for the voluntary social services sector in an official policy

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document, *Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its Relationship with the State* (Ireland, 1998). This document adverts to the need for “a more participatory democracy” and to the fundamental importance of the sector in providing channels for “the involvement and participation of citizens” (Ireland, 1998:24). A central argument throughout the paper is the need for voluntary organisations to facilitate “active citizenship”, firstly by developing mechanisms in their own services and activities for accountability to service users and participation of service users in the policies and services that affect them. Secondly, the Green Paper aspires to the inclusion of the poor and disadvantaged in the formulation of social policy. It refers to the need for “an enabling and open state which is engaged in dialogue and partnership and which allows bottom-up responses to emerge from voluntary organisations and community groups” (Ireland, 1998: 24), and to the need for actions to facilitate the “most marginalised” to “participate in developing and implementing solutions to social and economic issues” (Ireland, 1998: 25-26).

Against the background of a call for voluntary organisations in Ireland to be more participatory and to ‘represent’ the poor at national policy level, this research set out to examine the empirical situation in one very large voluntary social service organisation. The research was undertaken in the *Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP)* the largest voluntary social services organisation in Ireland. The SVP was founded in France in 1833 by Frederick Ozanam, and the first conference in Ireland was formed in 1844. During the latter half of the 19th century the network of local conferences grew and by 1919 there were 258 conferences in Ireland as a whole. By 1945 the size of the conference network had increased to 485; and at the time of writing there are some 1,000 conferences on the island of Ireland as a whole with approximately 11,000 members.

The core of the SVP’s activities is ‘visitation’ of the poor. Conferences are organised in Catholic parishes and each parish engages in visitation of the
poor. The SVP is a faith-based organisation, founded on an ethos of attending to the spiritual as well as material needs of the poor, and emphasising the spiritual and emotional value of one-to-one contact between members and poor persons and families (Casey, 1997). The SVP is therefore a traditional charitable organisation, giving to those in need. Since the 1970s the organisation has had a national office with a fundraising, developmental and policy role.

Historically, the SVP was not formally committed to any form of advocacy for improved State policies. In fact, the move to establish non-denominational social services by the Irish Free State Government in the early years of independence met with strong opposition from the SVP. The exclusively Catholic and charitable character of the organisation at that time is evidenced in the following quote on the subject of expanding State services from an SVP Bulletin (1929):

*The practice of doing social work has become a fashionable and humanitarian activity of many. Those who put forward this all-embracing, non-sectarian argument forget that to a Catholic, such work is part of his active life as a Catholic and to be of any merit must be done for a spiritual motive and for a spiritual end. When therefore we find ourselves criticised for our exclusiveness in matters such as I have mentioned, we must not worry, but remember that the Catholic Church is exclusive and refuses to abate one jot.*

*(SVP Bulletin, 1929: 253-4)*

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9 Home visitation is the most important element of SVP’s work. However, the SVP engages in a diverse range of other activities such as the provision of accommodation for the homeless, voluntary social housing schemes, stores for the distribution of food, fuel and clothing and holidays breaks for poor families.

10 SVP Bulletin, (1929) Vol. LXXXIV, No. 8
A much later Bulletin article ‘The Society in Perspective’ from (1982) refers to the work of the SVP in the 1940s and discusses the issue of 'self sanctification', which it is thought, may have led to ‘an excessive missionary zeal amongst members’ (1982: 4-9). On the subject of spiritual welfare the author, a member of the SVP, states that:

…the in general, recipients of our help were made to feel that it was not enough to be poor, one also had to be good.

(SVP Bulletin 1982: p4)

In a Bulletin in 1963 the President of the Council of Ireland discussed the changing nature of the Society. He addressed the apparent disquiet amongst members about having to deal not only with material relief but a whole range of ‘social ills’ such as ‘loneliness, working with the young, the elderly the sick and the maladjusted’.

A growing tension between traditional charitable work and an emerging advocacy role came to the fore again in 1975 when the then President of the National Council in interview with the Editor of the Bulletin indicates that he himself had experienced criticism for downplaying the spiritual side of the SVP’s work. He countered that as the Society becomes more involved with the wider aspects of social work it was inevitable that matters of structure, professionalism and finance would have an increased significance and that devoted members may be misled into thinking that the spiritual and more personalised aspects of their work would be neglected.

The New Rule of the Society marked a significant turning point in the history of the SVP. It reflects a shift in emphasis and a willingness to evolve and develop new strategies for working within the Society. It recognised the need for the SVP to address issues of social justice and to become the voice of the

11 SVP Bulletin (1982) Vol. 126, No. 4
poor and the underprivileged. In 1989 the SVP published a document entitled *Towards a National Social Policy*, which set out in general terms the views of the SVP on a range of issues in national social policy. However, significant socio-economic and institutional changes since then have dramatically altered the context in which the SVP undertakes its work. Two issues stand out. The first is a very rapid increase in economic growth in the 1990s accompanied by a significant fall in unemployment and a cumulatively large rise in average incomes and living standards (OECD, 1999). However, the net effect of rapidly rising average incomes, combined with the trend of Budgetary policies in social welfare and taxation has been to widen the gap between those with the highest and the lowest incomes and to leave a significant proportion of the population poor despite the general prosperity (Nolan *et al*, 1999A). Second, the SVP national office became increasingly involved in policy advocacy during the 1990s. It developed a routine of making submissions to the Government on budgetary policy and of commenting publicly and critically on matters of public policy.

Against this changing background, the National Office of the SVP initiated a project that would strengthen its emerging policy role and generate a reformulated national social policy ‘representative’ of the SVP as a whole. In general terms the research reported here (commissioned by the SVP), was aimed at producing a social policy document that would:

1. Describe the actual activities, membership and policy related experiences of local branches of the SVP.
2. Reflect the views and attitudes of members on a wide range of social policy issues.
3. Analyse the preferences of the membership in relation to the possible involvement of the SVP in influencing national social policy.

The National President of the Society referred to the project as the development of a “social policy manifesto” that could be used by members,

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*New Rule of the Society became effective in Ireland in 1976.*
but would also enable the Society to reflect the concerns of their membership and clients to statutory agencies.

The research was undertaken in two phases. First, during the autumn and winter of 1997-98 a member of the research team conducted twenty two focus groups in which the members and clients of forty-eight local conferences were consulted. The SVP was most anxious that its formulation of ‘policy’ be firmly based on the realities of its work and the opinions of its members. It was therefore decided - as the second phase of the research - to undertake a census of presidents of local conferences through a national postal questionnaire.

The focus groups research sought to elicit the participants’ views on a range of social policy issues. In practice, despite efforts to direct the discussion towards social policy issues, participants tended to resist and appeared more interested in pursuing matters of organisational concern. The postal questionnaire elicited factual data on conference activities and membership and on conference presidents’ views on substantial policy issues, as well as the policy and advocacy role of the organisation. The next section reports on some of the key findings of the research.

3. Research Findings
In this section the main findings of the research are presented, with the focus group material and the postal questionnaire data presented separately.

Focus Groups
A total of twenty two focus groups were conducted countrywide - twelve in large urban settings and the remaining ten in provincial towns and villages. In all 155 SVP members, 35 clients and two paid workers were included. Only three client groups were assembled and two of these were Dublin based. The organisation of the client groups was left to the discretion of the local conferences and many resisted the idea on the basis that it constituted a breach of client confidentiality. A number of members, particularly those
operating in rural settings stressed that client confidentiality was essential to their work. Many members felt it was intrusive and unethical to ask clients about their experience of the Society. Others felt it would jeopardise the trust and confidence of clients that local conferences build up over long periods.

A minority of members suggested that the conferences unwilling to procure client groups were fearful of becoming the target of criticism and that their claims about client confidentiality were unfounded. One member remarked that “clients are much less concerned with confidentiality than some conferences would lead us to think”.

However, some conference presidents did allow the researcher to conduct one-to-one interviews with clients while others insisted that the clients be interviewed in the presence of their assigned visitation worker. On only one occasion were clients invited to participate with SVP members in a group session. Client perspectives on the SVP are explored further on in this section of the paper.

In general the proportion of women in attendance at the focus groups was greater than that of men. Although the age profile of members ranged from the mid thirties to well over eighty years, the great majority were over age fifty-five. Duration of service with the SVP ranged from three months to forty plus years. All of the members appeared committed to some kind of regular work for the Society. Some were flexible about the kind of work undertaken while others chose to work within well-defined boundaries.

The focus group discussions were largely exploratory with participants free to voice their opinions and talk about their experiences. Krueger (1994: 6) has described the focus group as ‘a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’. The aim, therefore, was not to impose an agenda, but to keep the discussion open ended. However, a topic guide was drawn up and consulted in order to maintain a clear focus on specific areas of
investigation. Some participants were overly dominant and others overly reticent and, as much as possible, attempts were made to manage this situation. Krueger states that the ideal focus group should compose of between seven and ten members (1994: 6). The average number of participants in the focus groups was seven.

Activities
The participating members were engaged in a very wide range of activities, which could broadly be categorised under two headings: home visitation work and special works. For most conferences, home visitation, an activity traditionally associated with the SVP continues to constitute the cornerstone of their work. However, a number of conferences have branched out into other areas broadly termed ‘special works’. These include: sheltered housing and hostels; shops with budget priced clothing; furniture recycling; budgeting and money management; hospital and prison visitation work; children and youth activities; various education programs to cater for primary secondary and third level students; job creation schemes; home management and self development courses; arts and crafts groups; family and teen holidays.

Material support remains important in the work of the Society, but, increasingly, members are called upon to provide information, advice and counselling as well. In specific areas of work, certain conferences have chosen to be more adventurous than others. The result has been some very ambitious work in housing, education and job creation, all areas perhaps not traditionally associated with the work of the Society.

Members generally regard the role of the SVP as one of dealing with what one member described as “statutory failure”. A number of members see the Society as having a capacity to innovate, experiment and test new ideas unlike statutory agencies whose response is slowed by bureaucracy. One member expressed pride in the SVP’s “bottom up approach” a term she felt had become “very fashionable of late, but something the Society had practised for a long time”. Whereas statutory agencies are perceived as
distant and bureaucratic, members regard the work of the SVP as more personalised and closer to those experiencing disadvantage. Members take pride in the absence of excessive bureaucratisation within the Society and the assurance that funds raised are redistributed directly to those experiencing disadvantage.

Structure, Communication and Recruitment

Organisational structure, communication and recruitment were recurrent themes in almost all of the focus groups. A majority of the members placed a strong emphasis and value on local conference autonomy. For one member this extended to outright hostility toward the idea of National Council “imposing any new work practices or interfering in our work”. Such members perceive National Council as remote and largely irrelevant to their ongoing work. They do not identify with the SVP and therefore seem disinclined to get involved with any discussion on future policy for the organisation as a whole. A number of members accused their National Council of being “unrepresentative of the overall membership” and “too Dublin oriented”. Other remarks suggested that the organisational structure was too rigid with “the same groups of people calling the shots for far too long”. Those putting forward “radical ideas”, it was felt, were gradually “ostracised”.

One member referred to a lack of communication as “devastating to the effective functioning of the Society”, and called for the establishment of a “national committee” to facilitate the sharing of information on what is happening in various areas of work. This it was felt might help to counteract the “fragmented” nature of the work undertaken by the SVP. However, this was a minority viewpoint since the majority of members did not express any concern about an absence of communication or shared information. A number of members were quite averse to the idea of improving linkages between conferences: according to one member this resistance could be attributed to the level of competition and secrecy that exists around fund raising effort.
Concerns were also raised about the ageing profile of the SVP membership and the dearth of new young recruits in recent years. The attrition rate of new membership was said to be very high. This was attributed, in part, to what one member called the “dictatorial” and “cliquish” nature of some SVP conferences. It was remarked on more than one occasion that not all conferences have sufficiently participatory structures. One discussion revealed how some conferences become “closed shops” and new recruits are treated with suspicion because members have a tendency to become “smug and complacent about doing a certain level of work and generally suiting themselves”. Some members noted a tendency for existing members to “hand-pick new recruits and disregard recruitment guidelines as set down by the National Council”. A member who felt that “it was necessary to check the credentials of new recruits” countered this view.

For a majority of members the idea of recruiting more paid staff in the SVP raises considerable opposition. Voluntarism, however imperfect, is seen as the basic ethos of the Society. Generally it was felt that attempts to professionalise the Society would cause volunteers to withdraw and that in time “the voluntary element would become over shadowed and wither away”. Fears were also expressed about paid staff assuming control of the SVP. The objective of professionals it was felt might simply become one of “feathering their own nests rather than being focused on the work to be done” and it was feared this would ultimately be damaging of fund raising efforts.

A minority of members expressed concern that operational procedures and administrative backup are largely absent in the SVP. They worried about the standard of accounting and auditing in relation to funds raised. One member remarked that “not enough information is documented and that often a dependence on key members who retire from or leave the SVP results in a void”. Other members felt it “important to remember that the Society is first and foremost a voluntary organisation, not a professional company”. Any attempt to professionalise the Society in their view is not practical since “volunteers cannot be coerced, only encouraged and coaxed along”. These
members also spoke of a need to be realistic and note the limitations of voluntary organisations where insecure funding must act as a constraint on activities.

The issue of ‘public perception’ and the question of whether the SVP should reconstruct its public image also came up for discussion. Some Conferences felt that National Council should “engage a public relations specialist to highlight in the media the progressive work undertaken by the SVP”. Others felt that “it was not necessary to shout about the work they do and that it was not in keeping with the ethos of the SVP to engage in self promotion”. For them the biggest tribute paid to members comes through the expressions of appreciation by people assisted.

A minority of members expressed concern that the changing nature of society and the voluntary sector were not being adequately addressed by the SVP. They noted “an apathy and resistance to change” among the membership which they considered “off-putting to new members”. One member commented on the SVP’s “consistent disregard for drug related problems which members come up against on a daily basis” and spoke of “an urgent need for the SVP to up-skill its membership through contracting in expertise on a range of policy issues”. Others expressed a contrary view that the SVP is increasingly “falling into the trap of thinking that members must be expert in a whole range of areas when in fact the SVP is really a befriending organisation and, when necessary, members know that expert advice is only at the end of a phone line”. In a similar vein one person remarked: “we don't all need to be counsellors, we need to be good listeners, and learn how to refer people on”.

A number of members spoke of the requirement for additional staff who can facilitate members in their work. For them a lack of paid staff to attend to operational and strategic management requirements within the organisation prevents the SVP from developing its policy-making capacity within the voluntary sector. The Society's failure to participate in the Third Strand of the National Economic and Social Forum was mentioned as an example of one
such missed opportunity.

**Client Feedback**
The widely held view of members that the SVP provides more flexible and responsive services than the statutory sector is strongly challenged by the feedback from clients and calls into question the advocacy role which the SVP is currently seeking to adopt.

Overall, the client group discussions were open and frank. However, where the visitation worker was present in individual client interviews client perspectives on the work of the SVP became noticeably partisan.

All of the clients described in some detail how they first made contact with the SVP. For many it was a painful decision clearly etched in the memory. Most clients agreed that their experience of the Saint Vincent De Paul very much depended on the relationship they had with their visitation worker. It was generally felt that some SVP members do not have adequate interpersonal skills for the work involved and require training about how to approach their clients with sensitivity. Older members were generally felt to be capable of showing greater understanding and empathy.

Some clients accused SVP members of being “too judgmental”. One woman remarked that “once they get a grip, they think they have the right to run your life”. Clients also spoke of the need for continuity with the visitation worker. Some resented the idea of new members being brought along without prior notice. One woman remarked how on occasion she “felt like a fish in a bowl”. Most clients agreed that the SVP “are great in a time of crisis”. However, this view was quickly countered by the remark that “as soon as they think you’re on your feet again, they walk away…they may take the wolf from the door, but they only leave him to the gate”.

A commonly expressed view was that the decision to provide assistance is not necessarily dictated by actual ‘need’ but rather by what the visitation worker perceives as ‘need’ and this may be clouded by individual prejudices.
Lone parents were particularly conscious of their vulnerability in this regard. According to one lone parent interviewed a visitation worker asked her “whether all her four children had the same father?”. In her situation of need the woman felt powerless to respond to such a comment. This raises the issue of accountability in SVP service provision.

The focus groups highlighted a number of additional concerns. Foremost among these is the reluctance displayed by local conferences to allow the researchers access to clients. Those clients consulted were broadly articulate and well informed citizens who were not uniform in their praise of the SVP. Members were variously charged with being judgmental, lacking in interpersonal skills, lacking accountability and sometimes prejudiced. Above all, the client group material suggests that the services of the SVP may be unevenly distributed, reflecting an *ad hoc* distribution of assistance and services corresponding to notions of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

Overall, the focus groups indicated the existence of different categories of membership in the SVP. The first and largest category perceives voluntarism as representing the ethos and the defining role of the SVP. These members refer to a deep personal satisfaction from their work. They consistently refer to themselves as ‘just volunteers’ who choose to work on their own initiative. When seeking to identify limitations on the scope of their responsibilities these members refer to the Rule of the Society. They dismiss any need for guidance from National Council on policy or practice and, in general, are resistant to change. The limited social policy concerns they express are confined to local needs. These members stress the importance of local autonomy and they display no sense of attachment to the wider SVP organisation or acceptance of a policy role for the SVP.

A second and much smaller category of members expressed a wish to see the SVP undergo structural change to ensure its relevance into the 21st century. They call on the SVP to respond to changing needs and ‘professionalise’ the services provided through bringing in outside expertise and through greater
investment in training. They see an urgent need for the employment of more
paid staff to provide administrative back up at both a regional and national
level. They are concerned about the age profile and the dearth of new
members in the SVP and call for more strenuous efforts to bring in and retain
new membership. Overall these members feel that opportunities for advocacy
work should be pursued and exploited to the full by the SVP. They argue for
the development of new skills within the organisation and the need to bring in
expertise to manage this proposed shift in emphasis.

Postal Survey Findings
After a pilot survey of 30 conference presidents was successfully undertaken
in Spring 1998 a questionnaire was distributed to all 859 conferences in the
Republic of Ireland in June. Five hundred and ninety useable questionnaires
were returned giving a highly satisfactory response rate of nearly 70%. The
questionnaire covered a range of topics including the nature and extent of
conference activities and local conference presidents' views on policy issues
and on the policy role of the SVP.

Activities and Services in Income Support
This is perhaps the most critical area of involvement for the Society. A central
aim of the Society is to ensure that its clients have an adequate income and a
reasonable degree of security to enable them exercise crucial life chances.
With persistent levels of long-term unemployment in some areas and local
and regional variations in levels of economic development, pockets of social
disadvantage and poverty have become entrenched in all parts of Ireland. In
these areas social welfare benefits and income support from voluntary
sources such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are critical to many
families' living standards. Far from the role of the Society of St. Vincent de
Paul in the area of income support declining with Ireland's growing economy
and enhanced welfare state it has, in fact, increased. In 1998 total
expenditure by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reached a figure of £16m -
as the Society's Annual Report pointed out. Notably, the figure for direct cash
payments grew by 12% in the same year.
The background to the continuing income support role of SVP is that relative income poverty and income inequalities are continuing to increase (Nolan, 1999A). For example, the ratio of the top tenth of earners to the bottom tenth rose from 3.67 to 4.06 over the period 1987 to 1994 – a very marked rise in inequality by international standards. Furthermore, the proportion of households below a 50% of average income poverty line rose from 18.8% to 21.9% in the three year period from 1994 to 1997 (Nolan, 1999B).

The extent to which financial issues loom large in the Society’s work is very clear from the survey. First, conference presidents were asked to record (Yes/No) whether their conference engaged in particular forms of work with clients and families. In relation to Home Visitation the responses showed that 81% of conferences do this work. Second, and equally revealing, are the assessments of conference presidents about how important certain aspects of their work are. Aspects of the Society's work were listed in the survey and respondents were invited to rate their importance. Table 1.1A gives the results for some of these items.

Table 1.1A How important conference presidents consider the freedom to offer financial assistance as an aspect of conference work with clients? N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of freedom to offer financial assistance</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly important</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that financial assistance is considered to be very important: when the categories 'very important' and 'fairly important' are aggregated the total is over 88%.
Table 1.1B How important conference presidents consider budgeting advice as an aspect of conference work with clients? N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of budgeting advice</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly important</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This pattern of results is confirmed in the data (Table 1.1B) on the role of budgeting advice in conference work. About 85% of presidents consider this form of work important – 40.8% very important and a further 44.4% fairly important. A further indication of the importance attached to financial assistance is the emphasis the SVP places on clients' social welfare entitlements. Presidents were asked to indicate how important seeking out information on social welfare entitlements is to their work (Table 1.1C). This activity too is considered central: over 94% regard it as very important or important.

Table 1.1C How important conference presidents consider seeking out information on social welfare entitlements as an aspect of their work with clients? N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of seeking information on social welfare entitlements</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly important</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceptions of Income Trends and Attitudes to Income Inequalities

The conference presidents were invited to give their views about poverty, income inequality and social policy generally. These views are of particular relevance to policy. Unlike the generality of the public, conference presidents - as long standing members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul with considerable experience of the circumstances of the poorer members of society - view these issues from a distinct vantage point. Their opinions are unlikely to be just general dispositions and will have been formed on the basis of practical experience.

Table 1.2 Conference presidents' views about trends in the income gap between rich and poor. N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income gaps are....</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reducing</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying the same</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked for their views about the income gap between rich and poor (Table 1.2) a very large majority (79%) agreed that the gap is widening. This general tendency is supported by responses to another question asking if they agreed that there is "an onus on Government to reduce the income gap between high and low incomes". Over 59% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement and a further 32% agreed. (Table 1.3). Conference presidents identify social and structural reasons rather than personal or individual circumstances as the reasons why people live in need (Table1.4).

The conference presidents were also asked to give their opinions on some income maintenance issues. First, they were asked to assess particular categories of persons or families in relation to their risk of experiencing poverty. A number of family "types" were set out in the questionnaire and for each one the conference presidents judged whether this type is greatly at risk, quite a lot at risk and so on. Selected results for this question are given
in Table 1.5, which shows the proportion of respondents considering the various categories most at risk

**Table 1.3 The onus is on government to reduce the income gap between those on high and low incomes. N = 590**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ views</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.4 Conference presidents’ perceptions of the reasons why people live in need. N = 590**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why people live in need</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRUCTURAL REASONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of injustice in society</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s an inevitable part of modern life</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONAL REASONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laziness</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlucky</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 1.5 are interesting in that conference presidents' perceptions are broadly consistent with current Irish research on the patterns of relative income poverty. It is very clear, for example, that in conformity with the objective patterns of relative incomes showing families headed by unemployed persons as high risk, conference presidents see such households as facing a great risk of living in poverty. Over two thirds perceive them as being greatly at risk. Likewise, lone parent household heads are deemed to be greatly at risk and this too conforms to the documented pattern of relative income poverty.
Table 1.5 Percentage of respondents considering certain categories greatly at risk of experiencing poverty. N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Household</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low income household head of household with dependants</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed household head of household with dependants</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent household head</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with older employed children in residence</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons past retirement age</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the most central question facing the Society of St. Vincent de Paul at both the level of national policy and of one-to-one work with families is the adequacy of social welfare payments. In the questionnaire the conference presidents were shown the actual level of social welfare payments (pre-1999 budget) for eight categories of recipient and asked to consider whether these payments should remain the same, increase by £5, by £10, or by more than £10.

The most striking aspect of the presidents' views (Table 1.6) is the emphasis they place on families with children. In relation to the categories referring to Unemployment Assistance/children and Supplementary Welfare/children about half suggest an increase of more than £10. Taking the results as a whole it is clear that the conference presidents regard such circumstances - families dependent on social welfare - as requiring significant increases in their social welfare payments. For example, in the case of a family with two children receiving long term UA almost 30% suggest an increase of £10 and a further 55% an increase of more than £10. The categories relating to the elderly and widows are in an intermediate position with very small proportions supporting 'no change' and about one third suggesting a £10 increase.
Table 1.6 Percentage distribution of conference presidents’ views on the amount by which specific social welfare payments should increase. N =590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rate £ p.w.</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Plus £5</th>
<th>Plus £10</th>
<th>Plus more than £10</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent 1 child</td>
<td>85.70</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single adult on long-term UA</td>
<td>70.50</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of 2 adults and 2 kids on long-term UA</td>
<td>138.10</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of 2 adults and 2 kids on SWA</td>
<td>136.00</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributory Widows Pension 66-80</td>
<td>76.50</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old age non-contributory pension for 1 person under 80</td>
<td>72.50</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child benefit for first and second child</td>
<td>31.50</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child benefit for third and subsequent child</td>
<td>42.00</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus on families is highlighted again by the Child Benefit categories. While there is some tendency towards selectivity with about one quarter suggesting no change, there is still broad support for significant increases in Child Benefit.
The issue of incentives may also affect the conference presidents’ views. In the case of the single unemployed person and the lone parent categories there is a lower proportion of responses favouring increases of more than £10 and a significantly higher proportion (about 19% in both cases) supporting a 'no change' position. A level of ambiguity in the attitude to the lone parent category corresponds to the focus group findings in which a number of members expressed a concern that the benefit system undermines the family based on marriage by providing too much support to lone parents.

The conference presidents were also questioned about that aspect of State income maintenance services which impinges most directly, not only on the most vulnerable households and families, but also on the local services of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul - the local Supplementary Welfare Allowance service (Table1.7). Conference presidents were asked to record their degree of overlap and collaboration with SWA and to offer their opinions about their local SWA service.

Table 1.7 Percentage of conference presidents who report that they work with the Local SWA service. N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference work with local SWA service</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making joint decisions on a case</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressing a client’s case</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying the Health Board about overall SWA policy</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The local conferences are substantially involved in working on SWA related cases - actually sharing information about cases in well over three quarters of the conferences, and pressing clients’ cases in almost 80% of conferences.

The analysis above has documented the significant role that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul plays in supporting the incomes of very poor families and households. The incomes of the SVP’s clients are perceived as increasingly diverging from those that prevail in the society at large. Conference
presidents support government intervention to address these issues and they are sympathetic to a policy of improved social spending underpinned by greater taxation. In particular, they are strongly supportive of significant increases in social welfare.

**Commitment to Welfare**

A further question attempted to assess the respondents’ perception of the welfare state using six statements on this theme that cover a range of attitudes on welfare policy and are almost identical to the welfare scale used in British Social Attitudes surveys. The aim was to focus on the level of sympathy amongst Local Conference Presidents for the welfare state in general. The following are the six items:

1. The welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves
2. People receiving social welfare are made to feel like second class citizens
3. The government should spend more on welfare benefits even if this leads to higher taxes
4. Most people could find a job if they really wanted one
5. Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another
6. It is the government’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one.

**Table 1.8 Commitment to welfare scale (using 4 scale items)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment to welfare</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (0-9)</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (10-15)</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (16-20)</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maximum possible score: 20 points
Mean: 12.3
Std. Deviation: 3.0367
Alpha: 0.6229

Briefly, to bring the Alpha measure of scale reliability close to the conventional threshold of 0.7 it was necessary to delete items two and six, leaving a four- item scale with an Alpha measure of 0.62 - marginally below
the threshold of reliability. The results are summarised in Table 1.8, which classifies the respondents into low, medium and high supporters of the welfare state. One fifth are in the low category and almost one quarter in the high. This suggests that there is a great deal of variation in the general social and political attitudes of SVP local conference presidents in regard to the welfare state.

National Social Policy Role
One of the most important aspects of this survey from the perspective of the SVP was to get a clear mandate from the grassroots membership to pursue a greater role in national social policy. The conference presidents were asked if the SVP should have a role in national social policy or confine itself to working with the disadvantaged at local level. Table 1.9 below shows that in general terms there is majority support for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul having a national policy role. Almost 67% of respondents believe in the organisation having such a role. Table 2.0 presents summary data for the question, which asked respondents if they agreed with three specific forms of policy activity. As can be seen each of the possible methods suggested receive a fairly equal endorsement by respondents.

Table 1.9 Should the Society have a greater role in framing national policy or work only at local level? N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SVP role in Social Policy</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater role nationally</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local role only</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further question invited the conference presidents to state their agreement/disagreement with a number of summary statements about "How the Society of St. Vincent de Paul should work in the future". There is a clear
Table 2.0 Suggested methods of influencing national social policy. Percent agreeing with specific types of policy work. N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Policy Work</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact Government Department</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare a Budget Submission</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate with like-minded voluntary groups</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pattern in the results, as Table 2.1 shows. High proportions of conference president’s support or strongly support policy-related activity: 86% agree with enhanced lobbying, and almost 80% want a greater input to policy making. These results offer strong support to the Society’s growing involvement in national social policy debate.

However, when a series of statements were outlined about the future strategy of the SVP the results are less conclusive. While respondents do aspire to a role in national social policy, there is little consensus on how best this can be achieved. Respondents juxtapose their preference for a greater input to national policy making with a firm adherence to the traditional mode of one-to-one work with clients. Over 92 per cent of respondents wish to maintain this as a defining principle of the SVP’s work (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Percent of respondents who strongly agree/agree with certain changes to the future work of the Society. N = 590

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT - The Society should…</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen lobbying</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have greater input to policy formulation</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate with voluntary and statutory organisations</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ more paid workers</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase training for members</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek increased time commitment from members</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have increased accountability to clients</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek equity</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain defining principle of work on a one-to-one basis</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusions and Implications

The research reported in this paper raises important issues about the potential policy and advocacy role of voluntary social services organisations. It is clear, in the first instance that SVP presidents are broadly supportive of the organisation having a policy profile and the rationale for their support is based on the increasing salience of income poverty and inequality in an increasingly prosperous society. However, there is also evidence of considerable diversity of opinion on quite specific issues of public policy - just as there are diverse opinions among the public at large. Which views and experiences, therefore, should the SVP offer to the policy makers as ‘representing’ the organisation and the poor people with which it is engaged?

This question is partly one of organisational structure. SVP like many other voluntary social service organisations has a loose, decentralised structure. Each local conference has considerable autonomy in terms of the services it offers and the ethos with which it offers its services. It is not clear how such decentralised organisations can offer definitive, uniform approaches to service provision and policy advocacy. Ironically, it may well be, as Jenkins’ (1987) review of non-profit advocacy suggests, that effective non-profit advocacy arises, not in highly participatory structures, but in centralised, oligarchic organisations that confine policy advocacy to a small central core. It is important to note in this context that the recent acquisition by SVP of a national policy role has been largely at the initiative of the national office.

A more general theme in the findings is the co-existence within the organisation of views and preferences that run for and against the new mixed economy of welfare and policy representation roles now being held out for the voluntary sector. There is a strong adherence to one-to-one work with individual clients and a distinct element of differentiation between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ categories of client. Also, there is less than strong support for ‘professionalising’ SVP. The evidence from the focus groups suggests a suspicion among the respondents about accountability to clients and about the prospect of client participation in the organisation. Overall, the picture
conveyed in these findings is that this large-scale, charitable organisation is quite a distance from the dynamic, participatory, accountable organisations idealised in the voluntary sector literature.

The study reported here is not representative and arguably should not be used as the basis for more general claims. However, SVP is a very typical example of one very clear tradition in voluntary associationalism in Ireland and internationally. As such, its organisational structure, recruitment patterns, and ethos are likely to be widely shared in other voluntary organisations and the findings of this research may be more widely applicable.

On a more general note this research may suggest that the official policy literature on voluntarism and the more general work on associationalism such as Hirst’s may offer an uncritically benign and overly generalised view of voluntary associations. If governments are to increasingly involve voluntary organisations as contracted service providers and as policy representatives, then further research is required to identify the specific conditions in which this is likely to achieve its proclaimed benefits.

Finally, the research did not attempt to resolve the Skocpol/Putnam controversy about State/civil society relationships. However, it is clear from the account offered here that Ireland’s voluntary associations have a close and somewhat dependent relationship with the State. Ireland’s evolving experience seems to offer support for Skocpol’s view of the State as facilitating voluntary association and civil society development.

References


Skocpol, T. 1997. “The Tocqueville Problem; Civic Engagement in American Democracy” *Social Science History vol. 21, no. 4*