Over the past two decades Irish society has changed enormously. The power of the Catholic church has waned for example. The highly-educated population once destined for international labour forces is now making a valuable contribution to the domestic labour market and economy. In addition, Irish society has become more progressive and diverse. Emigration has been replaced by immigration, lesbian and gay marriage is being debated at parliamentary level, and family and community structures are changing. Alongside these positive changes are more negative ones such as individuals commuting long distances to work and a transport, health and education infrastructures that are creaking at the seams because they cannot cope with the extra demands of a growing and more mobile population. There is much discussion about the breakdown of local communities, as can be seen at the Government’s recent ‘think in’ which focused on community values and childcare issues and at which Robert Putnam addressed the government parties.

In the context of the above, research is underway to explore changing identity at county level and its association with social capital (Putnam 1995). Social capital, for example, can be generated through a notion of similarly or of belonging to an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991). County identity is of particular relevance in Ireland as, apart from the fact that for administrative purposes local government has been based along county lines since the late 19th century, the association between place and identity has a long history in Ireland. Accents are still quite local or peculiar to counties (Dolan 1998) and there is also a strong association between family names and counties. Up until recently rural communities were more subject to depopulation than inward migration but such communities are now experiencing vast changes in nature and structure.

The research question we posed ourselves when setting out into the field, therefore, was thus: is county identity an important component of social capital in Ireland, and if so, in a changing world where ‘community’ is less secure than before, are there particular issues arising for local third sector organisations in their efforts to maintain legitimacy within their local communities.

Fieldwork was undertaken in 2005 in Co. Cavan, a very rural county which stretches from within the Dublin commuter belt towards the northwest of the country. It comprised individual in-depth interviews with the managers of six voluntary organisations, six focus-group interviews with volunteers from those organisations and case studies of the six organisations. This paper will present data from those field studies.

It will argue that there are a number of converging identities at play – county identity, organisational identity and personal (individual) identity. As we will see, the ability of an organisation to use its county identity as part of its organisational identity helps establish its profile within a community. Furthermore, it can thereby contribute to
generating social capital, or the web (Simmel 1955) of interconnections, on which healthy communities thrive (Leonard and Onyx 2003).

References


