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# The Irish Economic Resurgence and Small Nation Development

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*The success of the economy of the Republic of Ireland since the mid-1990s has prompted the characterization "The Celtic Tiger." This paper describes the elements of the success and examines the strategic basis for it. Ireland's development strategy focused on building a consensus on fiscal and economic policy; capitalizing on membership in the European Union; promoting direct foreign investments with aggressive incentives; and cultivating a young and educated work force. Far from being a "miracle," Ireland's success provides a model for economic development for small nations in a global economy. The authors examine and assess economic development efforts in Puerto Rico and Costa Rica in light of lessons learned from Ireland's experience.*

**KEY WORDS:** small nation development; education; human resources; public policy; strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Imprinted on the psyches of the people of Ireland are the constantly repeated images of political suppression, starvation on an epic scale, and the Diaspora of its young to distant lands. Its music, poetry, literature, and oral history attest to the power of those images. Since the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1923 and the subsequent founding of the republic, it was universally understood that key elements of Irish society needed to work together to reverse the migration of many of its most productive citizens to England, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

With continuing emigration well into the 1970s and 1980s, and halting attempts to fulfill the vision of a prosperous Ireland, significant actions taken by successive Irish governments included expansion of, and improvements in, free universal primary and secondary education. Accession to the European Economic Community (now the European Union) was approved by national referendum in 1972 with membership effective the following year (Mac Sharry & White, 2000).

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## BUILDING CONSENSUS ON FISCAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

In 1986, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) of Ireland published "A Strategy for Development 1986–1990," which identified major weaknesses in the Irish economy and in government fiscal policy (National Economic and Social Council [NESC], 1986). Deficit spending and the accumulated national debt (22 billion Irish pounds) were seen as major impediments to national economic growth. The level of Exchequer borrowing was 24% of GNP in 1986. The debt/GNP ratio peaked at 129% in 1986, one of the highest in the industrialized world. Unemployment in 1986 was a record 226,000, 17% of the labor force. Thus, Irish strategic thinking was clearly impacted by the existence of pervasive economic weaknesses and the threats these continued weaknesses might imply for the participation of Ireland in the European Union (Mac Sharry & White, 2000).

NESC prescribed a difficult remedy of stringent budget cuts as fiscal medicine. The prospects for success were greatly enhanced when the opposition Fine Gael party leadership pledged to support the newly elected Fianna Fail government in its attempt to resolve public-finance problems. Subsequently, the government won support from employers, unions, and agricultural interests for a "Programme for National Recovery" that called for gradual reduction in government expenditures tied to agreements on limiting pay increases and reducing individual income tax rates (Mac Sharry & White, 2000).

The initial "programme" and the three that followed set goals for maximum basic pay increases, tight controls on inflation, debt/GNP ratio reduction, government deficit as a percentage of GDP and unemployment rate (Mac Sharry & White, 2000). The results of the programmes are impressive:

- Debt/GNP ratio declined from 112.4 in 1987 to 57.8 in 1998 (Mac Sharry & White, 2000).
- General government deficit of 8.6% of GDP in 1987 became a surplus of 4.6% by 2000 (Ireland's euro-sins, 2001).
- The peak of 16.9% unemployment in 1987 declined to 4.3% in 2000 (Ireland's euro-sins, 2001).

## THE BENEFITS OF EUROPEAN UNION MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the European Union positioned Ireland as a low cost labor market for more prosperous EU members such as Germany where labor rates were spiraling. The tactical move for European Union members to deploy plants in Ireland was, primarily, a cost reduction effort. But, for others such as the United States and Japan, the movement of operations into Ireland was strategic and fulfilled a perceived need to get behind the potential tariff walls a European Union might, at some time, raise.

For the Republic of Ireland, membership in the European Union has had significant economic, political, and psychological benefits. The most obvious economic benefit was a cumulative net transfer to Ireland by the EU of 23 billion Irish pounds since 1973. Those funds helped upgrade the transportation infrastructure of the expanding economy. Since 1971, the Irish highway system has improved dramatically from a crazy quilt of country lanes and a few two-lane national roads to a modern, well-maintained highway system capable, in stark contrast to its past, of sustaining significant commercial transportation.

**Table I.** Employment Cost Indicators

| Country | Average hourly compensation US$ |
|---|---|
| Ireland | 13.33 |
| UK | 16.43 |
| Japan | 18.05 |
| USA | 18.56 |
| Germany | 27.05 |
| Spain | 12.14 |

*Source*: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001).

An even greater benefit of EU membership was the full integration of Ireland into the wider European community, opening up continental European markets to Irish exports and allowing Ireland "to move away from the exclusive economic dependence on the United Kingdom that had marked the first half-century since Independence" (Mac Sharry & White, 2000, p. 149).

The establishment of the European Union in 1992, with a population in excess of 320 million, established the largest single internal marketplace in the world. The Republic of Ireland had one of the weakest national economies within the new union at the time.

The Irish market itself is small, hardly more than 1% of the European Union, and the presence there of European foreign subsidiaries is to serve the greater European market and markets throughout the world (OECD, 2000).

European Union membership, and, before that, European Economic Community membership, has had other payoffs for Ireland. Structural Fund support from the community imposed the discipline of a 5-year planning cycle, thus reinforcing the medium- and long-term fiscal recovery measures described above. Moreover, membership hastened the advent of equal-pay legislation and women's rights measures that increased female representation in postsecondary education and in the evolving workforce. Between 1997 and 1999, there was a 22% increase in the number of women working outside the home (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2000).

The comparative cost of labor is a significant internal factor of the attractiveness of Ireland as a base of operations for European Union and other foreign firms. Average hourly costs of Irish labor are relatively low (Table I).

## PROMOTING FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI)

Companies from many nations, including the United States, Japan, and other European Union members, especially Germany, have established themselves on Irish soil. More than 1500 foreign companies have located plants and other operations. Firms with facilities in Ireland are concentrated in electronics, computer technologies, pharmaceuticals, health and medical products, and chemicals (Table II). The destinations of these exports reflect the diversity of trade (Table III).

Foreign-based companies located in Ireland account for 65% of output of manufacturing, 47% of manufacturing employment, and 82% of manufactured exports. Ireland is no longer an agriculture-based economy dependent upon sheep, cattle, and dairy products (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2000).

**Table II.** Ireland Export Product Mix

| Product | % of all exports |
|---|---|
| Chemicals | 32.4 |
| Computer equipment | 22.2 |
| Machinery and equipment | 16.3 |
| Miscellaneous manufacturing | 13.7 |
| Food and animals | 9.4 |
| All others | 6.0 |

*Source*: Ireland Central Statistics Office (2001).

The Industrial Development Authority (IDA), headquartered in Dublin with offices around the world, was made an autonomous government agency in 1969. It was empowered by statute to promote investment and industrial development in Ireland. This non–civil service government agency is a one-stop source of information, advice, and assistance on virtually all aspects of establishment of a new business by potential foreign investors. The IDA is designed to facilitate locating plants or service facilities and operations in Ireland. It assists in identifying available plant and office locations, in negotiating favorable utility costs and in obtaining necessary local permits (Industrial Development Agency [IDA], 2000a).

The Shannon Free Trade Zone is located near the Shannon International Airport in the west of Ireland. Established in 1947, it is the world's oldest existing free trade zone. It serves as a distribution and warehousing center for European markets, providing customs-free access to air and surface transportation to the United Kingdom and Europe. Ireland has also established a new major enterprise zone expressly geared to financial industry opportunities. The Dublin Financial Center provides a variety of preferences and allowances for commercial activities.

Consistent with other efforts to attract investment, the Republic of Ireland has developed various tax and financial incentives aimed at encouraging foreign investors. While the usual corporate tax rate is 28%, eligible foreign manufacturing companies are taxed at a 10% corporate rate until December 31, 2002, rising to 12.5% thereafter. International financial services located in Dublin may be eligible for a similar reduced corporate tax rate, subject to individual review, as well as for exemption from local property taxes for 10 years. These financial service institutions can also be given the opportunity to write-off 100% of the cost of new facilities and equipment during the first year of operations (IDA, 2000b).

Additionally, IDA Ireland administers a variety of grants that subsidize start-up costs. Investment projects may be eligible for nonrepayable grants for fixed assets (capital grants), for job creation (employment grants), for start-up training costs and for research and

**Table III.** Destination of Irish Exports[a]

| Destination | % in 1999 | % in 2000 |
|---|---|---|
| Great Britain and Northern Ireland | 21.7 | 19.2 |
| Other EU countries | 42.5 | 40.1 |
| USA and Canada | 16.2 | 20.4 |
| Others | 19.6 | 20.3 |

*Source*: Ireland Central Statistics Office (2001).
[a]Total greater than 100% because of rounding.

**Table IV.** IMD World Competitiveness Scores 2001

| Country | Rank | Rating |
|---|---|---|
| Ireland | 7 | 79.20 |
| France | 25 | 59.56 |
| Germany | 12 | 74.04 |
| Spain | 23 | 60.14 |
| UK | 19 | 64.78 |
| USA | 1 | 100.00 |

*Source*: IMD (2001).

development costs. Total grant expenditures were 129.3 million Irish pounds in 1999. IDA Ireland reports that 124,664 jobs associated with its programs cost an average of 10,260 Irish pounds per "sustained" job in 1999 (IDA, 2000b).

## A YOUNG AND WELL-EDUCATED WORKFORCE

According to the estimates from Ireland's Central Statistics Office, the Republic of Ireland's population is 3.74 million. It has the youngest population in Europe with 40% under the age of 25 and a median age of around 30. The latter is closer to 40 years in most other European countries. Demographic trends indicate that relative advantage will continue: Those under 15 years are a larger proportion of the population in Ireland (22%) than in any other European Union member state (Ireland Central Statistics Office, 2001). More than 1 million are enrolled in full-time education. Forty to 50% of those leaving the educational system have pursued postsecondary education, with more than 50% of postsecondary ("third level") students studying business, engineering, or computer science (Norton, 1999). The 2001 World Competitiveness Yearbook (International Institute for Management Development [IMD], 2001) rates Ireland as one of the most competitive economies in the world (Table IV).

The educational fitness of the workforce has its origins in the policy decisions of successive Irish governments of the last 30 years that provided universal free secondary education and expanded postsecondary opportunities, particularly in technical fields. Over that time there has been a shift in emphasis from classical education for an elite to more practical, vocationally oriented, education suited to the demands of a knowledge-based, internationally competitive economy. Since the 1960s, spending on education, as a proportion of national income, has doubled (Mac Sharry & White, 2000). According to one observer, "Ireland carved out its niche in the global market for mobile investment by offering location that was highly profitable, where labour was plentiful, educated and technologically adept" (Tansey, 1998, p. 14).

## THE FUTURE

Ireland is a land of beauty with social and political stability. It has close proximity and easy access to the large and expanding European Union. Its young and educated workforce and diverse industry mix bode well for continued growth.

**Table V.** Percent of Population Under 25 Years of Age

| Country | % under 25 |
|---|---|
| Ireland | 35.5 |
| UK | 31.0 |
| France | 30.1 |
| Japan | 25.3 |
| Germany | 24.4 |
| Spain | 24.3 |
| USA | 34.2 |

*Source*: United Nations (1999).

Ireland has traveled far from its struggles against poverty and political and economic dependence, all of which prompted the Irish Diaspora. A weaving of educational efforts, political stability, and economic clarity of purpose are the main elements comprising the current healthy economic structure. The Celtic Tiger is a product of sound planning and policy. As such, it is not a "miracle," and is likely to persist in the long run.

As Irish prosperity continues some social changes may require adjustments in national strategy. For example, for the first time in nearly 200 years, Ireland has experienced a net immigration gain and the presence of foreign workers is now commonplace. Nevertheless, the availability of an educated Irish workforce under the age of 25 is expected to continue through the year 2010, as Table V indicates.

Thus, the kind of human capital that has helped fuel the Irish "miracle" will continue to be available for some time to come. Future external political and economic environments are, of course, problematic to predict. The continuation of the cohesive national strategic approach of recent years will help position the republic to cope with those uncertainties.

## INSIGHTS FROM THE IRISH EXPERIENCE: PUERTO RICO

### Background

The islands of Puerto Rico and Ireland have numerous historical, economic, and political similarities. Both are island political entities. Their populations are approximately the same. Both are situated close to large consumer markets. Historically, both have had difficulties with powerful neighbors and both have a major need for exports to maintain their economies. Even though Puerto Rico's economy is stronger than Ireland's was 10 years ago, it has not been able to approach the success of the Irish in attracting new investment, lowering unemployment and inflation, and raising per capita income (Table VI).

**Table VI.** Comparative Statistics: Ireland and Puerto Rico

| | Ireland | Puerto Rico |
|---|---|---|
| GDP per capita 2000 (US$) | 20,000 | 10,000 |
| GDP growth 1999–2000 | 16% | 3.6% |
| Export growth 1999–2000 | 25% | 10.2% |
| Unemployment 2000 | 4.3% | 11% |

*Sources*: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001) and Ireland Central Statistics Office (2001).

Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States is reminiscent of Ireland's pre-Republic status vis-a-vis the United Kingdom. Puerto Ricans have been citizens of the United States since 1917. A Puerto Rican Diaspora occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s when many began to search for work and a better life on the U.S. mainland. Unrestricted U.S. migration has made New York City home to more than 1 million emigrants from the Commonwealth. In December 1998 voters rejected the possibility of statehood in the United States and opted instead to continue Commonwealth status, which makes it a self-governing U.S. territory.

Among the islands of the Caribbean, Puerto Rico has already developed into one of the strongest economies in an otherwise depressed and tourism-dependent region. Similar to the former Irish dependency on agriculture for economic life, Puerto Rico's economy was dominated until the 1940s by sugar plantation production. Primarily spurred by regulations permitting duty-free access to U.S. markets, some limited tax incentives, and a low hourly wage cost, Puerto Rico dramatically increased both its employment levels and its exports post–World War II (Puerto Rico 2001, 2001).

## Consensus on Fiscal and Economic Policy?

Puerto Rican politics is characterized by alignments following various preferences about relationships with the United States, much as the politics of Ireland were driven by the Anglo–Irish relationship. Puerto Rico's electorate overwhelmingly prefers a continuing relationship with the United States, with only 4% voting for the Independence Party (PIP), which advocates a sovereign nation. There is little agreement between the two major parties about what form that relationship should take so it is still too early to predict a definite trend toward the possibility of statehood. The Popular Democratic Party (PPD) prefers Commonwealth status, rejects the closer affiliation of statehood, and still has a significant constituency, as evidenced by the recent defeat of a statehood referendum (Energy Information Administration, 2001).

The disparate positions of the political parties are a problem in achieving consensus on the direction of the economy. The controversy over the use of the island of Vieques as a target range for the U.S. Navy exacerbates the uncertainty. In contrast, interparty cooperation in Ireland (as described earlier in this paper) is credited with a continuity of fiscal and monetary policies that still prevails in 2001 (Mac Sharry & White, 2000).

## Quality of the Workforce

In modern Puerto Rico, education has become a strong component of social and economic development. Puerto Rico claims to have one of the world's highest postsecondary enrollment percentages with students attending 29 private and 6 public institutions. Additionally, there are 16 vocational and technological training institutes. This educational structure can provide a sound foundation upon which to build economic growth (Puerto Rico 2001, 2001).

With 85% of postsecondary students speaking both Spanish and English, the educational structure seems to be in place for continued growth of workforce fluency in both languages. Since 1898, however, Spanish has gradually become the basic language of education with English taught as a special subject. Consequently, half of today's island population speaks no English despite the recognition that knowledge of English is an important economic and political advantage (Rosa, 2001). Ireland has experienced a similar kind of language nationalism with the revival of Gaelic instruction in its schools. English, however, is the common language of Ireland and a significant factor in its being a prime location for investment by firms from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and other English-speaking nations (Cimadevilla, 2001).

### Foreign Direct Investment

Like Ireland, Puerto Rico has few natural resources of it own. Its economic health relies heavily on federal aid from the United States and the industrialization programs growing out of tax incentives. The economy is heavily dependent upon tax incentives given to mainland U.S. companies with much of the manufacturing investment in Puerto Rico stimulated by the tax advantages of Section 936 of the U.S. Tax Code. This tax provision provided tax credits linked to profits. There are approximately 100,000 employees working directly for companies operating under Section 936 and another 200,000 indirectly employed in related product and service activities (Puerto Rico 2001, 2001).

Under legislation passed during the Clinton administration, however, a phase out of Section 936 has commenced (Cimadevilla, 2001). Section 30A of the U.S. tax code now allows companies locating there to claim 60% of wages and capital investment as allowances for tax calculation (Roman, 2001). Recently, Governor Sila M. Calderon (the first woman governor of Puerto Rico) has called for an amendment to Section 956 of the U.S. tax code, which is designed to reverse the loss of manufacturing jobs attributable to the 10-year phase-out of Section 936 (Public lives, 2001).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) carries potential negative implications for Puerto Rico in its competition for investment and job creation. Wage rates, in general, are lower in Mexico, especially as they affect the low skilled labor-intensive sectors of manufacturing. This is especially the case in the clothing and footwear industry where Mexican cost advantages are readily accessible to manufacturing companies. Puerto Rico currently has 30,000 of its citizens employed in this relatively easy to redeploy industry. With the U.S. federal minimum wage requirements in effect in Puerto Rico, lower Mexican wage rates probably pose a long-term threat (Energy Information Administration, 2001).

Puerto Rico regards the Free Trade Area of the Americas, proposed for creation in 2005, as both a challenge and an opportunity. The island would face competition for markets in the mainland United States from other nations in the free trade area, many of which could be more competitive because of lower production costs. Membership in the Free Trade Area may provide opportunities for diversification of export destinations, which is now dominated by 89% of exports to the United States (Energy Information Administration, 2001).

Puerto Rico has many of the factors to facilitate significant growth in its economy. Yet, its economic growth does not approach that experienced by the Irish since the middle of the last decade. Some differences between the two may account for the disparity in economic performance. The Irish government, operating within the constraints of European Union rules, is free to tailor national tax policy to attract foreign direct investment. In Puerto Rico, tax policy for attracting foreign direct investment is made by the U.S. Congress, in which the citizens of the Commonwealth do not have voting representatives. Not surprisingly, the

**Table VII.** Comparative Statistics: Ireland and Costa Rica

| | Republic of Ireland | Costa Rica |
|---|---|---|
| Population 2000 (estimated) | 3,797,257 | 3,710,558 |
| Square miles | 27,155 | 19,130 |
| GDP per capita 1999 | $20,300 | $7,100 |
| Inflation rate 1999 (CPI) | 2.2% | 10.8% |
| Unemployment rate | 5.5% (1999) | 5.6% (1998) |
| Exports 1999 | $66 billion | $6.4 billion |
| Imports 1999 | $44 billion | $6.5 billion |
| Adult literacy rate | 98% | 94.8% |

*Source*: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (2000).

Irish government has crafted a more attractive package of incentives for investors (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 2000).

## INSIGHTS FROM THE IRISH EXPERIENCE: COSTA RICA

### Background

Costa Rica is similar to the Republic of Ireland in its great natural beauty, in its population size (3.7 million), in its commitment to democratic institutions, and in the relative homogeneity of its population. Like Ireland, poor economic performance of the 1980s was followed by relative prosperity in the 1990s. Also like Ireland, Costa Rica stands out in its region for its economic and political stability, its peaceful tradition, its high adult literacy rate, and the availability of its postsecondary education.

Table VII provides comparative statistics for the Republic of Ireland and Costa Rica.

Given the similarities between the two nations, is Costa Rica poised for its own economic resurgence?

### Consensus on Fiscal and Economic Policy?

The internal factor most critical to the Irish success story was the consensus among political, social, and economic powers that national recovery required a unified commitment to fiscal austerity in government spending, coupled with binding multiyear "programmes" limiting wage and price increases. Recent inflationary pressures in the Irish economy have strained the consensus, particularly among public sector workers whose wages have not kept pace with their counterparts in the booming private sector (Ireland's euro-sins, 2001). Nevertheless, successive Irish governments have shown impressive bipartisanship in crafting and adhering to "programmes," which provide feedback on strategy and tactics and prompt periodic adjustments in targeted areas of economic performance and fiscal policy (FitzPatrick & Huggins, 2001).

Such consensus does not appear evident in Costa Rica. The construction of a national health, welfare, and social-welfare safety net has reduced poverty in the last two decades while constructing a substantial government infrastructure. Our investigation into Costa Rican politics did not identify political consensus on reducing the role of the public sector in favor of fiscal austerity, increased privatization of the economy, and a strategy designed to promote foreign investment (Baker, 1999).

### Foreign Direct Investment and Competitive Advantage

In terms of its external environment, Ireland has been able to capitalize on its membership in the European Union by attracting substantial EU aid for upgrading its transportation and communications infrastructures and easing the transition to a competitive economy for vulnerable industries such as agriculture. Moreover, its position as a relatively low wage, English-speaking workforce within the EU has been a major determinant of its success in attracting foreign investment.

Costa Rica doesn't have a comparative advantage either in its ability to attract economy-building foreign aid, or in its position within a trade zone akin to the EU. It does, however, have a young and relatively well-educated work force, as well as a stable political and social environment. Its economy compares favorably with its neighbors in Central America.

## CONCLUSION

We believe that the lesson to be learned from the resurgence of the Irish economy in the 1990s is its emergence from a deliberate strategy arrived through consensus. It was (and is) a strategy accounting for internal strengths and external exigencies. In our interviews with Irish officials, they acknowledge that the "miracle" was attributable to good fortune as well as to good planning and decision-making. Yet they were quick to correct the impression that EU membership and aid were the causes of the "miracle"—they were but two important factors favoring a strategy born out of shared risk and consensus.[3]

This commitment to shared risk and consensus is difficult to achieve for any nation. It was decades in the making in Ireland. Yet Costa Rica with its small size, stability, effective educational system, and commitment to democratic institutions is well suited to move into that strategic position. Puerto Rico has similar qualities, yet its political and economic dependence on the United States impairs its ability to craft its own strategy.

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