

Rural Conversations



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



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Overview

The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused on (1) Economic development, (2) Social cohesion and (3) Vibrant and sustainable communities. Three roundtable events elicited contributions from a cross-section of over 200 rural community stakeholders, government agencies, government support agencies and academics.

Participants discussed and fed back their views on and suggestions in response to questions posed at each of the three events. The suggestions, which are outlined in the reports below, represent the viewpoints of those stakeholders who were present and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy, the Department of Rural and Community Development or the institutions that hosted the events.

The stakeholders' feedback from these consultative events will help to inform the development of the next phase of government policy on rural development.

Foreword

Rural Ireland is home to 57% of our country's population, far in excess of the figure for the OECD's population, one-quarter of whom live in rural regions. The rural community is of significant value to the economic and social wellbeing of the country, accommodating a wide populous of indigenous and foreign business and a talented labour pool, exhibiting a greater capacity for subsuming population growth, and offering a high quality of life for rural dwellers. In addition, there is significant growth potential in key domestic sectors in rural Ireland (such as the food, tourism, marine, agriculture, small enterprise and sunrise sectors) and through encouraging multi-national corporations to locate in these communities—particularly for second-site locations in Ireland.

Based on Ireland's growth projections, an anticipated 500,000 new inhabitants will join our rural community by 2040. Strategic investment priorities under the National Planning Framework emphasise enhanced regional accessibility and strengthened rural economies and communities. Factors that will positively influence vibrant and sustainable rural communities include appropriate infrastructure, access to information and communication technology, access to health services, and support for social cohesion. In contrast, factors negatively impacting on the vibrancy of rural communities include the privileging of large urban centres, feelings of isolation, and fear of being disconnected and excluded.

The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused on (1) economic development, (2) social cohesion, and (3) vibrant and sustainable communities. These round-table events were held at NUI Galway, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology respectively and sought to elicit contributions from a cross-section of rural community stakeholders, government departments, government support agencies and academics.

One of the main points to emerge from these consultative events was that to fulfil the potential of rural Ireland, we need a flexible approach for defining the different types of 'rural', incorporating relative distance from urban centres, different types and sizes of towns and villages, proximity to commuting zones and sectors, and different types of rural enterprises. Adopting such an approach to understanding what is rural will help build awareness of what is valuable in, and beyond, each rural community in terms of the social and economic contribution such a community can make to Ireland.

An overarching theme throughout these events was the need for a holistic, multi-generational community approach to rural community development. Cohesion is needed both within and between local development groups, underpinned by simple, constant access to information on activities and available supports. Findings suggest enhanced investment in shared social and economic spaces that are available to all members of the community can offer an optimised support system to move the rural economy and rural communities towards vibrant and sustainable growth.

The conversations series' collective goal is to contribute to a coherent national rural policy framework to help optimise rural Ireland's regeneration and future development, promoted and supported through sustainable growth patterns. The pursuit of growth and revitalisation of our rural communities should also be in keeping with the aims of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in order to ensure a future-proofed and viable approach is taken.

The support of the Department of Rural and Community Development and regional higher education institutes in realising this conversation is greatly appreciated.

Áine Hyland, MRIA
Chair of the Social Sciences Committee
Royal Irish Academy

Introduction

This introduction offers an overview of the series findings, including insights into the current issues facing rural communities and the vision of rural stakeholders for the future. These insights represent the viewpoints of participating stakeholders and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy, the Department of Rural and Community Development, or the host higher-education institutes (NUI Galway, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology).

There is a need for a flexible definition of 'rural', which takes into account relative distance from urban centres; different types and sizes of towns and villages; proximity to commuting zones; and the existence of local industry and entrepreneurial activity.

People are at the heart of vibrant and sustainable rural communities, wherein a clear vision at community level can help build a sense of place and connection to all inhabitants. Factors that influence sustainable rural communities include access to infrastructure, information and communication technology and health services, and strong member cohesion within and across communities.

It is necessary to balance the rural eco-system, by recognising the need to care for rural culture and heritage infrastructure and surrounding nature while developing the economy.

A sustainable rural infrastructure needs to be built. While the benefit of rural living (quality of life, cost of living) was articulated, it was also recognised that isolation plays a significant role in rural living. Local communal transport can act as a social connector, while reliable high-speed broadband and enhanced digital access has a social as well as economic role to play in terms of rural cohesion. There are, however, differing needs for youth, single people, (young) families, the elderly, new citizens, disabled community members and disadvantaged community members. Infrastructural support is needed to facilitate core family services (such as child and elder care) and generational infrastructure requirements (for instance to develop age-friendly towns).

Where we meet is changing. Social spaces are evolving from a traditional nucleus, which encompassed churches, sports clubs, pubs, post offices, to non-denominational, multi-purpose social spaces (such as coffee shops, or schools/libraries, the use of which has been expanded beyond the initial purpose for which they were built). Restoration of derelict buildings within small towns and villages and in the countryside presents opportunities for rural dwellers to work and socialise in different ways.

Social and technological platforms can be harnessed as a catalyst for community cohesion. Social and traditional media platforms and technology should be mixed to enhance inclusion and cohesion of seniors, youth, lone dwellers, ethnic minority groups, carers, those with disabilities and migrants.

The value of local media should be recognised, not only as a news resource, but also as a communal link supporting inclusive rural engagement.

Current and future rural community leaders need to be supported. While community leaders are seen as the bedrock of rural communities, stakeholders acknowledged that succession planning is required to maintain a diverse rural population (including youth and working-age community dwellers)

and to cultivate a sense of purpose and belonging across the community. Careful consideration of a sustainable rural leader and volunteer model with targeted support is warranted. Community leader and volunteer development programmes are also of value.

The evolving volunteer infrastructure must be recognised. Rural volunteerism is challenged by a growing social and regulatory burden and escalating insurance costs.

Tradition can be passed through the generations. There is untapped potential for inter-generational community collaboration through master–apprentice knowledge transfer in the traditional Irish occupations and pastimes (including music, culture, instrument-making).

The co-creation of rural education and development initiatives should be encouraged. Apprenticeship and trade programmes can help embed valuable skills within the community and encourage an outreach education approach, delivered within the community. Specific eco-literacy training, civic-engagement programmes and practice-led student projects delivered at all levels of education can help embed sustainable continuous improvement within rural communities.

Rural health and safety services need to encompass on-call community healthcare and homecare support structures, although these may be able to accommodate cross-community care. An Garda Síochána and Neighbourhood Watch are also important social-safety support structures.

Tradition and technology need to be balanced in rural business development. Challenges include decreasing footfall in small towns and villages, the growth of on-line retail service providers and escalating insurance costs. Participants noted the need for specific small business supports, including technology access, micro-funding and grant aid.

New farm business models are producing linked avenues of development in bio-diversity, ecology and tourism. Other rural dwellers are entering niche sectors (such as renewable energy, elder care). However, there is a need to develop capacity to produce higher-value products, services and processes that offer a greater monetary contribution to the rural producer.

The changing nature of work is offering remote employment opportunities. Access to specialist skills could be enhanced through embedded use of co-working spaces (for example enterprise hubs), future cooperatives and social enterprises. The value of such initiatives is dependent on secure, robust online access to unlock co-working capacity and promote rural areas as ‘Smart Working’ locations.

A holistic government policy and inter-departmental coherence is needed among those who engage with rural communities. This must be coupled with flexible responses at local level.

The value of rural living and its contribution to society must be articulated. Notwithstanding current challenges (such as lack of reliable high-speed broadband, Brexit), much progress has been made. Examples include the Action Plan for Rural Development, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, and Blue Way and Greenway initiatives. Stakeholders called for rural policy infusion, investment, social and economic innovation, and education and training support, including capability development initiatives for local community leaders.

Suggestions—Preparing for Rural Ireland’s Future...

Rural policy evolution

- Integrated high-speed broadband policy and implementation strategy.
- Integrated water (fisheries) and land (agriculture decarbonisation) environmental policy.
- Environmental plan for flooding, land/coastal erosion.
- Rural corporate social responsibility guidelines to ensure contributions to the community in which companies reside.
- Specific social enterprise policy required as a catalyst for sustainable economic activity.
- Communication policy to enhance ‘ground-up’ contributions to policy development/evolution.
- Insurance support system for rural community leaders, volunteers, social spaces, transport providers and social enterprise.
- Strategic planning that maps EU policy/funding to rural Ireland.
- Additional cohesion support required for border regions.
- JI-type and Erasmus placements for rural Ireland as specific schemes.
- Align national strategy with short-, medium- and long-term goals by county and region. Promote communication and engagement, facilitated by a technology-enabled strategy to enable in- and cross-community knowledge transfer.

Rural community social and economic support infrastructure: proposing a community-led approach

- Map rural resources via value-chain analysis.
- Establish critical mass needs (for example the minimum population and level of diversity required to ensure sustainable communities).
- Embed a regional-level rural forum—with a learning community emphasis.
- Build a repository of qualitative ‘vibrant and sustainable rural community’ success stories.
- ‘Animation not information’—Provide clear, step-by-step information regarding opportunities and support structures, with pathways for local participation and development.
- Offer rural-specific guidance on regulation.
- Provide local social-safety infrastructure and housing policy that meets diverse community needs.
- Incentivise educators and researchers to engage with rural-focused dissertations or group projects, or to commercialise their research.
- Create a rural socio-economic contribution table, social support measurement tools, rural mental health/well-being matrix, inter-generational volunteer matrix and gender impact assessment measures that provide inclusive success criteria for funded projects and bottom-up community development initiatives, encompassing all members of the community.
- Enhance volunteer support infrastructures to include targeted schemes for rural youth, commuters, retired people, distinct communities and new citizens.

Building local cohesion

- Develop a communication strategy to establish/enhance shared values.
- Embed tradition in rural identity (for instance the Irish wake).
- Focus on renewal versus development (for example, consider alternative use for derelict buildings and infrastructure).
- Facilitate enhanced/multi-use of social spaces (such as libraries, schools, community halls).
- Promote integrated/diverse use of land to optimise community resources.
- Enhance youth facilities (diverse pastimes facilities, young rural entrepreneur schemes).
- Develop a funding model for both capital investment and expansion projects.
- Create a system of innovation vouchers for small-town renewal.
- Offer a platform for cross-community shared knowledge and rural renewal success stories.

Promoting alternative rural enterprise models

- A 'New ideas' forum is required to capture future rural community potential.
- Focus on the emerging economies (green, blue ocean, renewables, tech, bi-product development, co-created tourism experience, etc.).
- Promote diverse use of enterprise spaces to encourage physical and intellectual clustering (for example, enterprise and digital hubs, co-working spaces).
- Create a National Smart Working Map using Smart Working platforms.
- Develop a future skills-gap analysis toolkit (making use of artificial intelligence, big data, etc.).
- Provide economic support structures for rural micro- and small firms and social enterprise.
- Propose a two-phase funding application process; (a) eligibility application, (b) full application.
- Recommend a rural rates structure.

Rural community leader capability development

- Recommend a national strategy for a community leader and volunteer support infrastructure, including mentor links with other community leaders and youth.
- Facilitate greater recognition, promotion and support of women, youth, ethnic minority groups, carers, those with disabilities and migrants in a range of rural leader roles.

Rural Conversations rapporteurs:

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Delivering economic development in rural Ireland

National University of Ireland, Galway - 8 November 2018



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OÉ Gaillimh



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The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused on (1) Economic development, (2) Social cohesion and (3) Sustainable communities.

The first roundtable event, hosted by NUI Galway, sought to elicit contributions from a cross-section of rural community stakeholders, government agencies, government support agencies and academics. Attendees were welcomed by Pauline McNamara, Programme Manager for Humanities and Social Sciences at the Royal Irish Academy, and the session was opened by Nicholas Canny, MRIA, FBA, former president of the Royal Irish Academy and former vice-president of research at NUI Galway, and by William Parnell, Assistant Secretary-General of the Rural Development and Regional Affairs Division at the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Building upon a contextual summary of the rural policy landscape in advance of the implementation of the *Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework*, the guest speakers noted that:

- five years after the publication of the report by the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), *Energising Ireland's rural economy*, the rural conversations series is a timely opportunity to capitalise on the investment and intent in Ireland 2040, to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing rural Ireland, and to determine how to realise rural Ireland's future potential; and that
- there is a need to change the narrative about and increase awareness of the contribution and value of rural Ireland—while there is much anecdote about rural Ireland, there is relatively little dissemination of knowledge, especially in the media.

Professor Cathal O'Donoghue, Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, NUI Galway, provided some context to the series.

- It is a key challenge to restructure the rural economy to benefit from growth sectors (See Table I below). One point of concern is that about 60% of the employment in rural areas is focused on agriculture and construction, which are areas of the economy that have not grown since the previous crisis.
- Since the economic crash and start of the recovery we have seen continued divergence in rural household incomes relative to incomes of householders in Dublin—this is in contrast to previous recoveries and is a substantial challenge for rural development.
- In addition, there is a time lag in the economic data available about rural Ireland. At present, it is only in Dublin that we see higher levels in household income per person and higher gross value added per capita.
- The most recent census figures show higher unemployment and poverty rates in rural towns. The risk of inter-generational unemployment is also higher (CEDRA report, 2014).

References

Government of Ireland, *Project Ireland 2014. National planning framework* (Dublin, 2018); available at: <http://npi.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>.

Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), *Energising Ireland's rural economy* (Dublin, 2014); available at: <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/3377/2014-04-14-cedrareport.pdf>.

This event was attended by a wide range of stakeholders involved in rural economic development. Over 70 stakeholders from academia, community development, government departments and state agencies discussed and fed back their views on and suggestions in response to the three questions posed on the day. The suggestions, which are outlined in this report, represent the viewpoints of those stakeholders who were present and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy, the Department of Rural and Community Development, or NUI Galway.

The stakeholders' feedback from this event, summarised below, will help to inform the development of the next phase of government policy on rural development.

Need for a flexible definition of 'rural'

- An audit of the definition of the concept 'rural' is suggested, to take account of the fact that is a heterogeneous concept. The definition should take into account relative distance from urban centres; different types and sizes of towns and villages; location; proximity to commuting zones and sectors.
- Rural enterprise includes the following providers of commercial services: start-ups, lifestyle entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, rural family firms, small and medium sized enterprises (SME), and multinational corporations.
- The benefit/comparative advantage of rural living (quality of life, cost of living) needs to be articulated.
- Awareness of what is valuable in and from a rural community (e.g. economic contribution) needs to be raised.

High-speed national broadband roll-out and rural development goals

Concerns are high in relation to the competitive disadvantage associated with the lack of capacity in the current rural broadband infrastructure to support communities and enterprise. Specific concerns relate to the need for:

- early completion of the high-speed national broadband roll-out. An interim solution could be to explore low-cost solutions other than fibre broadband, combined with technology-enabled community and business hubs. This could alleviate pressure on small businesses in light of prevalence of online shopping and other business activities.
- enhanced investment in shared community, enterprise and remote-worker facilities and technology. Digital hubs work well when the location is attractive, but they require an integrated policy to facilitate the goals of digital smart town, smart village proposals (the Mayo scheme* was discussed as an example).

Economic growth potential

Table 1 provides a summary of identified growth sectors for the rural economy and outlines sector-specific suggestions in relation to positioning for success in these sectors.

*The Western Development Commission will establish Rural Digital Hubs in Swinford, Tubbercurry, Tulsk and Stranorlar under the auspices of the Rural Regeneration Fund.

Table 1

Positioning for success in growth sectors

| Growth sector | Positioning |
|---|--|
| Marine/Blue ocean economy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop capacity to produce higher value products, services and processes that offer a greater monetary contribution to the rural producer • Invest in R&D • Capitalise on under-developed spaces • Explore the potential of fisheries and fresh water to produce energy, hydro-services |
| Agri-farming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decarbonise agriculture (tax?) • Promote local specialisations (e.g. sunset industry providers, including homes for the elderly, senior tourism provision) |
| Food, including production | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorten the food chain (e.g. field-to-fork) • Focus on sustainable development |
| Information Communication Technology (ICT) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green tech • Fintech |
| Renewable energy | <p>Renewable (green) energy: rural-centric climate change response activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale from business/farm to community level • Origin Green programme (https://www.origingreen.ie/) as a support to leverage potential (e.g. vulnerable sectors) • Accurate knowledge relating to climate change/renewable energy • Waste potential (e.g. better use of waste systems) • Leverage the green approach as a rural revenue generator |
| Retail, service provision (primarily micro-enterprises) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional services (small = resilient) provide for the domestic economy • Niche potential (e.g. cookery/food school, micro-breweries, etc.) • Cooperative/shared spaces for small enterprise (e.g. pop-up shops) • Micro-firm service innovation—leverage firms’ flexible approach to business and closeness to market |
| Tourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Niche tourism; food, outdoor activity, rural experience - Enhance year-round offering - Reduce competition between regions - Address the challenge of over-tourism |
| Culture and creative sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support people and social capital for sector expansion - Leverage cultural and/or curated experience (e.g. hidden Ireland) |
| Child- and elder-care sector | |
| Social enterprise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High potential to leverage social enterprise |

Cross-cutting positioning for rural economic growth potential

In addition to the sector specific suggestions above, a number of cross-cutting suggestions were made to support the development of self-sufficient rural communities able to lever growth potential (Table 2).

Table 2

Cross-cutting suggestions

| Suggestion | Positioning |
|---|--|
| Rural resource mapping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine resource supply (e.g. marine, fishing, forestry, agriculture) • Identify added-value potential to enhance rural Ireland's position on the value chain • Identify efficiencies of scale • Increase capacity of rural communities • Identify and leverage vacant property and under-utilised space |
| Skill development initiatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate self-ownership and professionalise the approach to rural development |
| Enhance innovation through collaborative approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit current roles and skills (e.g. skills-gap analysis) • Identify innovation brokers within rural communities • Develop a career path for support agents/brokers (including mentoring) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Identify technical and digital skill shortfalls – Develop capacity to innovate – Develop capacity to collaborate (in-community, inter-community, cross-community) |
| Provision of hubs and rural incubation spaces | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Link rural enterprise supports, further and higher education and rural communities to leverage social capital |
| Strategic collaborative town/village planning for renewal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate community, local authority and business engagement - Create a system of innovation vouchers for small-town renewal |
| Place-based branding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish/enhance identity of small towns - Leverage international connections (e.g. diaspora) - Foster collaborative opportunity with HEIs to develop branding concepts |
| Remote working | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve community infrastructure: communal/shared office space (hubs) - Enhance quality of life through multi-use of rural space |
| Enhance technology and service availability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop the potential to capture the intellectual and social capital of retired professionals |

Rural policy framework

A perceived policy deficit for the rural context was noted, and calls were made for positive discrimination measures to address challenges articulated. Suggestions in relation to government policy included:

- Ensuring the coherence of national rural policy to counteract a silo approach
- Aligning national strategy with short-, medium- and long-term goals (by county, region) of rural community strategies, and to address inter-country, inter-region competitive behaviour and overcome potential for a silo approach:
 - Conversation should be focused on ‘renaissance’ dialogue
 - Promote economic value of rural industry and location: lower rents, availability of remote workers
- Regenerating communities from within and outside to maximise potential
- Enhancing ‘ground-up’ contributions to policy development/evolution;
 - Planning, collaboration, capacity building, social capital, social enterprise
- Investing in rural infrastructure (secondary roads)
- Pursuing an integrated broadband policy
- Providing rural-specific guidance on regulation
- Enhancing the capacity of rural communities to successfully access domestic and foreign direct investment funding opportunities
- Supporting strategically linked hubs and rural incubation spaces by
 - Fostering alternative enterprise models (e.g. cooperative spaces)
 - Enhancing linkages between centres of further- and higher-level education and rural communities
 - Creating a policy structure suited to rural employees (e.g. one that facilitates part-time, seasonal work)

Opportunities and challenges facing rural Ireland

A key suggestion from this first rural conversation event is that a strategic technology-enabled hub be established in each county, positioned in a shared community space and linked to higher-education institutes (HEIs) and other support providers. A number of challenges and opportunities associated with this suggestion are framed below, under the theme of sustaining rural communities. Achieving this will require ‘an ambitious vision for rural Ireland’ and both capital support and support for knowledge access and enhancement.

Table 3

Opportunities and challenges facing rural Ireland

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Sell the rural story using progressive dialogue</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote good-news stories in the media - Demonstrate the value of innovation and creativity in rural areas—make this visible to the existing and potential talent pool |
| <p>Address population size and balance, including the issue of youth migration</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the rural social landscape (age, demographic distribution) and be aware of critical mass needs (e.g. the minimum population and level of diversity required to ensure sustainable communities) - Sell the quality of life that rural living offers - Balance quality of life and services sought - Enhance youth facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse pastime facilities (e.g. sports, CoderDojo, gaming, etc.) • Rural young entrepreneur schemes • Sports capital grant scheme (e.g. support all sports) • Access to rural community role models (children, young adults, entrepreneurs, migrants) - Address social isolation of peripheral regions (to be addressed in Conversation 2: Social Inclusion) - Optimise use of existing housing opportunities (e.g. dormant dwellings) |
| <p>Infrastructure</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High-Speed Broadband rollout - Transport plan: road and rail access - Training facilities with rural outreach capacity - Optimise support structures of the ‘Leader’ programme - Enhance access to micro-funding, credit lines - Leverage HEIs through student or staff research projects (micro, small-to-large projects) - Link to rural communities through regional assemblies, councils and chambers of commerce - Day–evening multi-usage of public buildings |
| <p>New technologies (Dependent on high-speed broadband)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide technical infrastructure - Disrupt current thinking around technology/infrastructure - Develop local digital strategies based on future requirements - Identify skills required to adopt new technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence) - Apply new technology to rural problems (e.g. overcoming distance) to exploit on-line commerce potential (e.g. where’s the market?) - Balance technical skills with interpersonal and soft skill development |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>New ways of working</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disrupt current employer/employee thinking around working day/ location - Build employer and employee openness to new ways of working (home/hub e-working) - Develop community hubs (e.g. local libraries as a communal space) - Support shared retail space, business clusters to optimise the use of resources - Exploit potential for a self-employment model - Skilled staff availability and turnover is a challenge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on career pathways for rural employees |
| <p>Changing skills/reskilling requirements</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assess the knowledge deficit in traditional, emerging and specialist areas - Build training provision to match needs—must be evidence based (EU rural skill development case studies) - Develop future-oriented skills map for modern rural community roles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support agent/broker capability development • Facilitate access to community role models • Incorporate needs, values and resources of migrants, including new citizens - Identify skill requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology and new technologies: social media, online marketing skills, online booking, Artificial Intelligence (Are skills transferrable?) • Idea generation and innovation • Community-led critical thinking skills (e.g. the Mayo Community Futures programme*) • Specialist traditional skill apprenticeship model (e.g. storytelling, thatch, etc.) • Professional elder-/child-care skill development • Language skills - Balance technical skills with interpersonal and soft skill development - Build innovative models through education and training (Lifelong Learning) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JI and/or Erasmus programmes for rural Ireland • Entrepreneurial apprenticeship model • Enhanced links/collaboration between HEI and industry • Cross-EU rural network engagement - Overcoming barriers to learning/diversification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change the approach to learning, to decrease the fear of learning • Promote lifelong learning: people want careers, not just jobs • Ensure greater access to training facilities • Enhance capacity of outreach education programmes • Provide multi-media learning supports (e.g. not only written word but animation, video, games, online learning tools) |

*For more information on this programme, see: <http://www.mayococo.ie/en/Services/CommunityEngagement/CommunityandIntegratedDevelopment/MayoCommunityFutures/>

Brexit

- Need for communication to alleviate uncertainty
- Acknowledge the impact of decreased farming income on the community and value chain
- Identify challenges for agricultural value chains
- Likelihood of price pressure at local producer level, due to size (e.g. unequal power dynamic in the market)
- Increased imports
- Ireland's advantage as EU member with English as a first language/and because of having a transparent tax system;
 - Opportunity for non-EU investment/new market potential
 - Potential as a landing point for goods/services from outside the EU (e.g. deep-sea ports)
 - Potential for UK organisations to base a branch/hub in Ireland as EU member
- Isolation and spatial impact of Brexit
- 'New ideas' forum required to capture future rural community potential

Monitoring flora and fauna invasive species at import sites

Actions to assist rural entrepreneurs and business to diversity into new sectors

Embed support for local enterprise

- Assess capacity for and value of diversification (e.g. not all businesses will need to diversify or expand)
- Reduce the amount of governance and scheme administration
- Offer animation not just information (e.g. provide step-by-step accessible guidance to alleviate confusion in terms of what support is available)
- Identify and address enterprise support gaps (e.g. businesses of 10+ people and the domestic sector)
- Consider language and methods of communication used to reach entrepreneurs

Greater coordination of support structures with an online presence to communicate local product and service offerings

- Offer strategic planning that maps EU policy/funding: this requires inter-agency working
- Optimise the approach: balance centralised and local decision-making processes for policy and support agencies (e.g. assemblies). Ensure the existence of:
 - Focused versus aspirational approach to business-led rural development
 - Mentored service provision (by local support agents)
 - A pathway through supports via cross-agency support model:
 - ~ Simplify funding application processes through a ‘one-stop’ shop approach
 - ~ Simplify licencing requirements (e.g. aqua-culture)
 - A rural rates structure
 - A funding model for both capital investment and expansion projects

Enhance rural community leader development and entrepreneurial activity

- Assess entrepreneurial capacity at local level
 - Provide assistance for those entrepreneurs who wish to diversify
- Allow the higher-risk appetite that is needed in the support system to emerge
- Promote diversification opportunities through local role models and champions
- Educate leaders and policy makers in the region as a priority
 - Social entrepreneur programme
- Allow sectoral fixation to change (e.g. policy level)
- Develop specific support requirements for micro-, small with growth aspirations, and medium-sized businesses
- Support part-time/flexible working
- Develop language skills

New sector potential

- Identify and develop the social as well as economic value of commercial activity
 - Non-commercial development via local area group engagement
 - Bio diversity opportunities (e.g. bio mass heat/fuel generation)
 - Access to charging stations for electric cars
- Seek out opportunities in market diversification and innovation
 - Specialised experience-based retail hubs (e.g. pop-up shop potential)

- Availability of reasonably priced and flexible space
- Expand innovation voucher scheme
- Encourage agricultural diversification/Evolution
 - European plans regarding bio-diversity
 - Response to climate change
- Develop the Green Economy
 - Green tech
- Develop the Blue Ocean Economy
 - 1.5 m potential jobs; preparation required now to avail of this opportunity
 - Aqua-culture
 - Marine potential
- Foster Renewables
 - Renewable energy (e.g. gas network)
 - Carbon support (e.g. optimised use of bogs)
- Promote/develop the elder-care sector
- Promote/develop the child-care sector
- Promote/develop the wellness, complementary health sector (e.g. alternative uses for hemp)

Enhance HEI-Industry collaboration

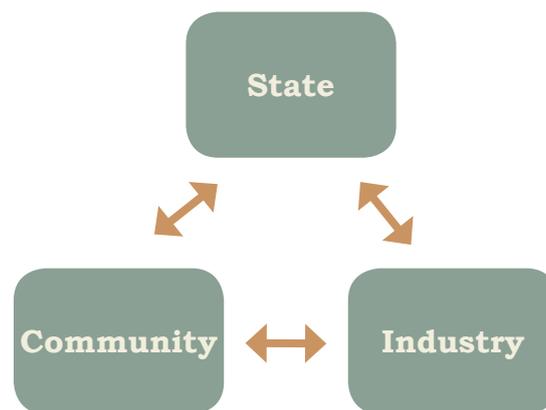
- Incentivise researchers to engage with rural-focused dissertations or group projects
- Incentivise regional HEIs to commercialise their research

Actions to develop traditional rural sectors

- Loosen centralised state mind-set to enhance input for energised communities:
 - Facilitate a community role for NGOs, unions, employers, employees
 - Balance industry influence (see Fig. 1)

Fig. 1

A collaborative development approach



- Recognise the value of incremental innovation from traditional industry
- Identify products that can add higher value (e.g. greater contribution to rural provider)
 - Encourage incentives and flexibility to try new ideas
- Agriculture: sustainable actions
 - Leverage European Innovation partnerships (EIPs)
 - Recognise opportunities for commercial and non-commercial benefits (e.g. Burren)
 - Support succession planning in family firms/farms
 - Contemplate tax implications of partnered or cluster succession
 - Plan for flooding, land/coastal erosion
 - Educate operators re: clean environment
 - Educate consumers on the benefits of short food-supply-chains (e.g. value of a short field-to-fork distance ‘terroir’ approach)
- Food
 - Foraging trails
 - Farmers’ markets
 - Micro-production (e.g. breweries, cheese, chocolate, etc.)
 - Investment in food-production facilities
 - Use of bi-products (e.g. waste from food production)
- Culture and creative industries
 - Foster knowledge of the local culture
 - Provide local level supports for artists and craft producers
 - Explore the potential for amphitheatre(s)

- Tourism as a sustainable offering
 - Innovative tourism—experience products and services
 - Software (technology)-enabled tourist experience
 - ‘Slow’ tourism
 - Adventure tourism
 - Food tourism (linked to agricultural diversification)
 - Greenways as a catalyst for hospitality development (e.g. package deals)
 - Leverage new hospitality models (e.g. glamping, airBnB, online booking, etc.)
 - Responsible (eco) tourism
 - Manage potential damage to our countryside, coast (manage erosion)
 - Focused funding (e.g. leverage the credit union infrastructure)
- Forestry

Strategies to position rural communities in Ireland’s future development plans

- Foster integrated policies to make rural locations attractive for development
 - Consider positive discrimination towards rural communities in strategic planning and development
 - Educate/develop community leaders’ strategy skills to help lead rural community development plans
- Support collaboration
 - Encourage physical and intellectual clustering: to encourage sharing of information and ideas and to foster the building of trust
 - Leverage regional, national, international connections
- Develop Infrastructure/connectivity
 - Complete roll-out of high-speed broadband and other digital infrastructure
 - Encourage the growth of hubs—low-cost, technology-enabled, remote-working business and community facilities
- Enhance the rural innovation culture
 - Support research and innovation
 - Identify and develop innovation brokers
- Provide enterprise development support
 - Support rural enterprise leaders
 - Facilitate succession planning for businesses
 - Provide continued and enhanced (micro) funding
 - Foster simplified approaches for funding, licensing, regulatory and certification applications

Enhancing social cohesion among communities in rural Ireland

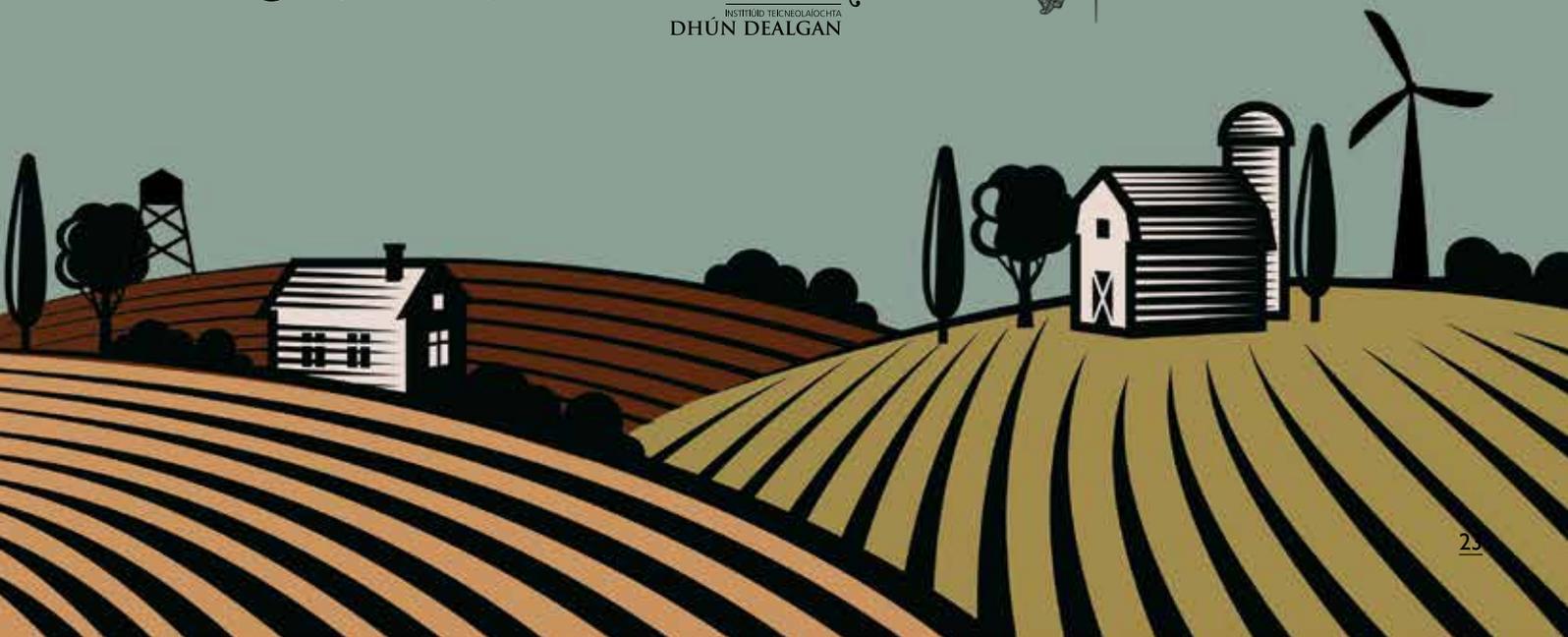
Dundalk Institute of Technology, 28 February 2019



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Royal Irish Academy



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused on (1) Economic development, (2) Social cohesion and (3) Sustainable communities.

The second roundtable event, hosted by Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), sought to elicit contributions from a cross-section of rural community stakeholders, government agencies, government support agencies and academics. Attendees were welcomed by Ms Pauline McNamara, Programme Manager for Humanities and Social Sciences at the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), and the session was opened by Dr Michael Mulvey, president of DkIT, Professor Áine Hyland, chair of the RIA's Social Sciences Committee and former vice-president of University College Cork, and Mr William Parnell, Assistant Secretary-General of the Rural Development and Regional Affairs Division at the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Building on the OECD's 2018 report on rural communities, the guest speakers noted that:

- whereas one-quarter of the OECD's population live in rural regions, 57% of Ireland's inhabitants reside in rural communities, a finding that reinforces the existing and potential value of rural social cohesion for the well-being of our citizens;
- factors that influence rural social cohesion include infrastructure, access to information and communication technology, access to health services, the privileging of large urban centres, feelings of isolation, and a fear of being disconnected and excluded.

Professor Colette Henry, head of the School of Business and Humanities, DkIT, provided some context to the series:

- Key concepts relating to rural social cohesion include shared values and identity, common goals, trust among community members, equity and that 'invisible bond' that unites the community.
- Recognising the need for a clear understanding of the term 'social cohesion', she defined it as the bonds that link rural dwellers to one another and to the community as a whole. It includes all community members (irrespective of age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, family size, ethnicity, income, education etc.). A highly cohesive community exhibits equitable member inclusion and community collaboration in pursuit of collective social and economic prosperity. Barriers to social cohesion include member isolation, mistrust and fear of crime, insufficient support structures and a lack of communal spaces.
- Access to and engagement with education has a role to play in enhancing social cohesion, through education pathways, rural community engagement with gateway research groups and the potential for research-informed programmes of rural development.

References

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), Rural policy 3.0: a framework for rural development (Paris, 2018); available at: <http://www.oecd.org/regional/understanding-rural-economies.htm>.

A rural stakeholder feedback event attended by academics, practitioners, community leaders, government agencies and support agencies

This event was attended by a wide range of stakeholders involved in rural social cohesion. More than 50 attendees from academia, community development, government departments and state agencies discussed and fed back their views on and suggestions in response to the questions posed. The suggestions, which are outlined in this report, represent the viewpoints of those stakeholders who were present and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy, the Department of Rural and Community Development or Dundalk Institute of Technology.

The stakeholders' feedback from this event, summarised below, will help to inform the development of the next phase of government policy on rural development.

Factors affecting social cohesion in rural communities

Participants believe that positive and negative factors are interrelated and operate in a cyclical manner; each positive factor has a negative element to it and vice versa, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Key positive and negative factors affecting social cohesion in rural communities

| Positive factors | Negative factors |
|---|---|
| <p>Sense of community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spirit of togetherness - Strong sense of identity - Female leadership roles - Historical links to the area - Community traditions (e.g. the Irish wake) - Tidy Towns - Generational pride - Neighbourhood Watch | <p>Sense of community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong sense of identity can be a challenge for those with non-traditional lifestyles/perspectives - Commuter impact on community engagement (e.g. time poverty) - Little incorporation of youth as community leaders/ key decision-makers - Perspective that newness may erode existing community cohesion |
| <p>Dominant social structures and routines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong sense of community identity - Traditional activities: sports/GAA, clubs, cultural heritage, networks - Traditional events: religion/church/ Mass | <p>Dominant social structures and routines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clubs are not necessarily vehicles for full cohesion - Are dominant traditional structures (e.g. sports/GAA, church) losing relevance and creating barriers to inclusion? - Narrow view of sporting activities (exclusion of those with disabilities and with interests beyond GAA) |

| Positive factors | Negative factors |
|--|--|
| <p>Pattern of inward migration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influx of new community members promotes diversity - Value of new insights and ideas - Enhanced use of local resources | <p>Pattern of inward migration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived layers (e.g. between native and new citizen) can hamper integration - Integration difficulties amplified for certain cohorts (e.g. LGBT, Traveller, refugee, non-Irish communities) - Pressure on local resources - Value of new citizens as potential employees/contributors not fully understood |
| <p>Volunteer culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Baseline as a lever for cohesion - Role in creating and running social networks, events - Aging reservoir of experience of value to business, tourism, community | <p>Volunteer culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pressure on a small number of core volunteers - Insider perspective as a barrier to new citizen integration - Assumption that the young are recipients of rather than potential contributors to volunteer activities - Value of new citizens as potential volunteers not fully realised - Aging reservoir perceived as a cost rather than a resource |
| <p>Local entrepreneurs/farmers/industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visionaries provide employment - Farming infrastructure as a linchpin of the rural economy - Tourism/location branding (e.g. Ancient East, Wild Atlantic Way) | <p>Local entrepreneurs/farmers/industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low income levels - Need for greater realisation of the potential of new citizens as employees/customers - Sense of infrastructural decay around rural towns and villages - Depopulation/imbalance across demographics (e.g. age) - Need for sustainable planning - Costs (e.g. rates and charges) |
| <p>Local employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quality-of-life benefits (lower housing and living costs) - Local initiatives (e.g. farmers'/craft markets) | <p>Local employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of access to employment - Distance to work - Lack of future-proofing for critical mass |
| <p>Role of local media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informs community of events, deaths, marriages, etc. - Acts as a social connection for isolated community members | <p>Role of local media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative press coverage and a lack of positive stories and examples lead to decreased rural self-esteem |

| Positive factors | Negative factors |
|---|---|
| <p>Cross-border community cohesion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value of the peace process | <p>Cross-border community cohesion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncertainty around Brexit - Additional cohesion support required for border regions |
| <p>Care for the environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Campaigns that unify communities | <p>Care for the environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abandoned/unused land/buildings - Restrictive environmental legislation affects small farmers/businesses |
| <p>Infrastructure improvements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easier access to urban centres - Improved housing | <p>Infrastructure improvements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of integrated public transport - Over-reliance on private transport - Remote access routes in disrepair - Public buildings in disrepair - Public transport timing and availability issues (e.g. evening/night access to community events) - Distance to work - Pressure on infrastructure in commuter belt rural communities due to accelerated population growth (e.g. roads, schools, utilities) - Zoning restrictions around rural towns and villages - Impact on elder-care facilities of decline in inter-generational living |
| <p>Technological advancement/automation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online services (e.g. banking) - Remote working facilitated - Social media provides local community connectivity - Internet as a reservoir of information, e.g. parish bulletin - 'Ride share' options e.g. carpoolworld.com | <p>Technological advancement/automation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of high-speed broadband - Can cause isolation as people are no longer meeting to carry out service work/use services - Lack of digital/IT skills, and many without access to technology |
| <p>Social integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community buildings as a focal point/meeting place (e.g. library, post office, school, shop) | <p>Social integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restrictions on driving create a barrier to community involvement (e.g. novice-driver rules, drink-driving laws) |

Cohorts most affected by a lack of cohesion

Overarching themes include:

- There is a need for a holistic community approach rather than targeting specific group cohesion activities/supports.
- Labelling cohorts may be counter-productive: are we drawing distinctions between individual community members to the detriment of cohesion?
- Cohesion is needed both within and between local development groups.
- A catalyst is required to engage individuals in community activities. This must be underpinned by simple, constant access to information on activities and available supports.
- A unified policy on the mental health and well-being of rural communities is required.
- Shared social spaces should be planned for, moving away from the assumption that commercial entities (e.g. the local post office) will provide these services.
- Cultural liaison officers can act as a pivot for cohesion among these cohorts.

Specific cohorts affected by a lack of cohesion and the challenges they face include:

- **Youth and young adults (aged 6–21)**
 - Lack of visibility of youth in leadership roles
 - Perceived lack of opportunities to access higher education
 - Low variety and availability of leisure activities, particularly those beyond sport
 - Fewer opportunities for human social interaction; social media is not a replacement
 - Lack of policy around youth volunteerism and youth leader development
- **Young families**
 - Lack of access to child care and after-school care
- **Disadvantaged families**
 - Stigma around disadvantage, cultural difficulty in requesting help
- **Distinct communities (Irish migrants, new citizens, LGBT community, refugees)**
 - Distance between minority citizens and the wider community can be magnified in smaller rural communities
 - Stigmatisation by certain communities with closed attitudes of these community members and lack of appreciation of what they can contribute
 - Lack of facilities and activities for those in rural direct provision (e.g. the refugee community)
 - Language and cultural barriers for new citizens
 - Awareness of and access to services and infrastructure can be low
 - Challenge of access and isolation among these communities
 - Lack of consultation in terms of future planning
 - Lack of integration in terms of policy and support structures
 - Future planning should incorporate a dispersed and/or concentrated model of integration for new citizens in these communities (e.g. refugees)

- **The unemployed/under-employed**
 - Challenge of isolation, particularly for the long-term unemployed
 - Lack of resources to engage in community activities (e.g. transport, cost of entry)

- **Senior citizens (over 65 years old)**
 - Sense of worth and value to society diminished

- **Women**
 - Need for adequate acknowledgement of the contribution to and role of women in business/farming
 - Requirement for gendered supports taking account of rural female roles and responsibilities (e.g. caring)
 - Gender equality measures should be embedded in rural development policy

- **Carers (those who care for the young/elderly or those with disabilities)**
 - Isolation from the wider community
 - Restricted access to support facilities and professional/medical personnel

- **Those with disabilities**
 - Lack of awareness of and access to services and infrastructure
 - Restricted public transport/public building access
 - Specific support structures need to be put in place for those with mental, as well as physical, health challenges

- **The Traveller community**
 - Need a distinct identity as Ireland's indigenous community without segregation

- **Farming community**
 - Aging farming population, can be isolated due to anti-social hours and workload

- **Lone dwellers (those living alone and not included in the above cohorts)**
 - Diverse cohort not easily identified
 - Isolation may be amplified due to lack of awareness of/access to community activities and support structures

Actions to enhance cohesion and strengthen social support structures

Cross-cohort participative planning activities

- Solicit community-based insights into the current and future needs of rural communities from all cohorts (e.g. youth, elderly, distinct groups, Traveller community, those with disabilities)
- Develop a holistic approach to encompass the needs of a range of groups and community cohorts among the support agencies (e.g. LEADER programme, county councils)
- Take an inclusive approach to planning local infrastructure, including housing, roads and community support structures
- Mobilise local communities to drive planning and delivery

Enhance social support structures

- Develop measurement tools
- Take an expanded view of future planning for accommodation provision, incorporating specialist access, elderly and disabled use, etc.
- Optimise rural transport infrastructure, with extended use and hours of availability, to enhance access to community activities, including day/evening youth activities
- Harness technology/high-speed broadband as a catalyst for cohesion
- Move beyond sport as a basis for community-based youth activity

Adopt a holistic, multi-generational perspective on community cohesion

- Enhance multi-generational social interactions and activities (e.g. Tidy Towns, Choir of Ages¹)
- Promote multi-generational engagement with the elderly to help alleviate safety/isolation concerns among this cohort
- Develop community-based child-care initiatives, which may involve other cohorts (unemployed, senior population etc.)
- Use the Neighbourhood Watch initiative as a catalyst for cross-generational engagement

Innovative and creative use of local facilities

- Make multi-functional community facilities available for extended hours and a greater variety of uses (e.g. libraries, community buildings, schools)
- Provide innovative social-enterprise finance structures to promote community service provision (e.g. community coffee shops/restaurants, local country markets for artisan food and locally produced crafts)

Define the genres of community leadership

- Acknowledge/measure the role of formal community leaders, including the police force, medical practitioners (GPs, community nurses), local education and religious leaders, postmasters and -mistresses
- Promote a cohesive approach to leader strategies and health-and-safety deliverables
- Promote champions from various community cohorts
- Promote indigenous entrepreneurs and industry leaders as community leaders
- Improve the visibility of youth in leadership roles (e.g. using peer-mentor potential, which could be linked to Transition Year activities)

Enhance Department of Rural and Community Development remit

- Retain a ministerial portfolio in rural development as a specific focus
- Increase SICAP (Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme)² resources
- Ensure that gender is adequately recognised as a factor in rural social cohesion, in line with other national policy commitments;³ concerns were raised that the Action plan for rural development⁴ does not incorporate gender as a criterion

Expand the volunteer infrastructure

- Promote and recognise volunteers' role in and value to the rural community
- Enhance the development of volunteers among the various community cohorts (youth, elderly, LGBT, new citizen, migrant and Traveller communities)
- Reposition elderly and youth as key contributors in the volunteer space
- Extend the Men's Sheds and Community Gardens initiatives
- Use potential avenues for employment opportunities (e.g. Tús initiative⁵)

Education and enterprise as a catalyst for community cohesion

- Recognise the value of education/higher-education pathway programmes as a means of access to employment opportunities for the various cohorts in the rural community
- Extend distance- and blended-learning opportunities for rural inhabitants
- Embed Regional Skills Fora⁶ in a local approach to skills development
- Share good practice of social entrepreneurship
- Develop enterprise-/social enterprise-led local cohesion initiatives (e.g. rural music festivals)

Research-led customised initiatives

- Research community-specific needs to inform customised initiatives – funded on the basis of researchers embedded in the community

Rural health services

- Invest in on-call community healthcare services
- Provide homecare support services

Sustainable farming community

- Use existing agriculture extension and innovation programmes to promote farming as a profession⁷
- Continue funding for off-farm diversification projects

Cross-community networking and connecting services

- Promote cohesion within and between neighbouring rural communities

Promote rural community cohesion activities

- Promote local success stories and cohesion case studies nationally
- Provide guidance on how to embed rural community cohesion initiatives

¹ Choir of Ages is made up of older people, children and young people from all walks of life; see: www.rte.ie/news/ulster/2018/0723/980610-donegal-choir-of-ages/.

² See: <https://drcd.gov.ie/community/sicap/>.

³ See, e.g., the National Women's Council of Ireland paper on women in rural communities; available at: https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/amplifying_the_voices_of_women_in_rural_communities

⁴ Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Realising our rural potential: action plan for rural development (Dublin, 2017); available at: <https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2017/01/162404-rural-ireland-action-plan-web-2-1.pdf>.

⁵ Tús: community work placement initiative; see: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Tus-Community-work-placement-OG.aspx>.

⁶ Regional Skills Fora provide an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions; see: www.regionalskills.ie/.

⁷ These programmes build competencies in agricultural advisory and educational services and systems that can support and enable learning and behaviour change at farm level, so that farm households can innovate and build sustainable livelihoods.

Building vibrant and sustainable communities in rural Ireland

Waterford Institute of Technology, 4 April 2019



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Waterford Institute of Technology
INSTITIÚID TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA PHORT LAIRGE



The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused on (1) Economic development, (2) Social cohesion and (3) Vibrant and sustainable communities.

The third roundtable event, hosted by Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), sought to elicit contributions from a cross-section of rural community stakeholders, government agencies, government support agencies and academics on the topic of building vibrant and sustainable rural communities. Attendees were welcomed by Ms Pauline McNamara, Programme Manager for Humanities and Social Sciences at the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), and the session was opened by Professor Willie Donnelly, President of WIT, Professor Áine Hyland, Chair of the RIA's Social Sciences Committee and former Vice-President of University College Cork, and Mr William Parnell, Assistant Secretary-General of the Rural Development and Regional Affairs Division at the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Building on the OECD's 2018 report on rural communities, the guest speakers noted that:

- whereas one-quarter of the OECD's population live in rural regions, 57% of Ireland's inhabitants reside in rural communities, a finding that reinforces the importance and potential value of vibrant and sustainable rural communities for the well-being of our citizens;
- factors that influence the creation and maintenance of vibrant and sustainable rural communities include infrastructure, access to information and communication technology, access to health services, the privileging of large urban centres, feelings of isolation, and a fear of being disconnected and excluded.

Dr Felicity Kelliher, co-founder and senior researcher of the RIKON research group, WIT, and RIA Social Sciences Committee member, provided some context to the series:

- Ireland has the highest proportion of people living in rural areas among EU states. Of the country's 1m population growth forecasted for 2040, 50% will occur in regional centres, towns, villages and rural areas.
- Notwithstanding current challenges (e.g. high-speed broadband access, Brexit), much progress has been made. Examples include the Regional Action Plan for Jobs, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, Blueway and Greenway initiatives and a €60m budget in the competitive Regional Enterprise Development Fund.
- Strategic investment priorities under the National Planning Framework emphasise enhanced regional accessibility and strengthened rural economies and communities. This regeneration of rural Ireland will be promoted and supported through environmentally sustainable growth patterns.

References

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *Rural policy 3.0: a framework for rural development* (Paris, 2018); available at: <http://www.oecd.org/regional/understanding-rural-economies.htm>.

A rural stakeholder feedback event attended by academics, practitioners, community leaders, government agencies and support agencies

This event was attended by a wide range of stakeholders involved in rural communities. More than 80 attendees from academia, community development, government departments and state agencies discussed and fed back their views on, and suggestions in response to, the questions posed. The suggestions, which are outlined in this report, represent the viewpoints of those stakeholders who were present and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy, the Department of Rural and Community Development or Waterford Institute of Technology.

The stakeholders' feedback from this event, summarised below, will help to inform the development of the next phase of government policy on rural development.

Characteristics of vibrant and sustainable rural communities

Participants were unified in their view that people are at the heart of vibrant and sustainable rural communities. A strong mixed economy coupled with a sense of community was reported as being key to sustainable rural communities. There was some debate regarding the definition of rural, and agreement that it is not a homogeneous term. Although resilience was conveyed as being a key characteristic of sustainable rural communities, there were specific calls for policy, investment, education and training support (including networked local leaders). It was felt that social enterprise and social innovation were also vital in this context. Table 1 outlines the main factors and key enablers identified by participants that characterise or can support vibrant and sustainable rural communities.

Table 1

Factors affecting and key enablers of vibrant and sustainable rural communities

| Factors | Key enablers |
|---|--|
| Building cultural cohesion through future vision and goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Need a clear vision at community level- Pride in and of the community- Build a sense of place and connection for all inhabitants- Holistic planning approach to community development- Equal opportunity at the core of development plans (e.g. to include women and other marginalised community voices)- Identity linked to surrounding nature (e.g. river catchment areas, mountain ranges, wetlands)- Care for culture and heritage infrastructure |

| Factors | Key enablers |
|--|---|
| Social engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A strong community centre: social spaces are evolving from traditional (e.g. churches, pubs, post offices) to new/future social spaces (e.g. coffee shops, expanded use of schools/ libraries) - Opportunities to socialise in different ways (e.g. sports, surfing, non-sporting activities) - Need for intergenerational demographic diversity and interconnection (e.g. youth, elderly, families) - Housing to facilitate specific generational requirements (e.g. Mayo County Council's Scheme of Housing Aid for Older People') - Intergenerational community contributions (e.g. potential for volunteer infrastructure to be expanded to include youth/elderly/new citizens) - Local action plans supported by multi-level community stakeholders, including local community leaders - Cross-community communication and engagement (e.g. knowing what other communities are doing) - Case studies of 'best in practice' in the rural context |
| Education as a vibrant community catalyst | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building apprenticeship and trade programmes to help embed skills within the community - Outreach education programmes delivered within the community (satellite university spaces) balanced with external university experience - Eco-literacy training at all levels of education (primary, second level, further and higher education) - Civic engagement as an assessable component of education curricula - Encourage small and large student projects embedded in rural communities - Appreciation that expertise comes from both experience and education sources |
| Social support infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Cycle of life' support structures – differing needs of youth, single people, (young) families, the elderly, new citizens, the disabled, the disadvantaged - Gardaí as a social-safety support structure - Availability of core family services – child care, elder care |

| Factors | Key enablers |
|---|--|
| Sustainable economic and enterprise infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not all business entities are equal (e.g. micro- vs small vs large enterprises) - Specific supports for small and micro-firms include technology access and micro-business grant aid - Sector-specific support for tourism development connected to national-level initiatives - Embedded use of co-working spaces (e.g. enterprise hubs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – dependent on secure, robust online access to unlock co-working capacity and promote rural areas as ‘smart working’² locations |
| Multi-media as a catalyst for intergenerational engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mix social and traditional media platforms to enhance inclusion (e.g. community [electronic] newsletter) |
| Farming community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key contributor to the wider rural economy and community (e.g. CAP³ contributes €1.7bn to Ireland’s rural economy) - Same amount of land being farmed but fewer people involved: - Farm families are in decline - Greater recognition of women’s role in and contribution to farming required – female access challenges - Not all farms are the same (e.g. small vs large farms) |
| Flexible work arrangements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changing nature of work – automation and specialisation facilitate emergent work roles that can be fulfilled anywhere - Flexible working opportunities – location and hours worked - Work–life balance ethos |
| Local infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transport as a social connector (e.g. Local Link⁴) - High-speed broadband and enhanced digital access - Sector-specific technology/broadband requirements (e.g. pharma sector) - Ensured supply of vital services (e.g. water, electricity, schools) |
| Community leader and volunteer support structures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active volunteer bedrock in rural communities is underpinned by an assumption that volunteers will continue to be active; this is not a sustainable model without targeted support - Support of the LEADER programme |

²‘Smart working’ is empowering employees to work a percentage or all of their time from home, at a co-working hub or in a hybrid model.

³ CAP: Common Agricultural Policy.

⁴ Local Link provides door-to-door and scheduled bus services in towns, villages and rural areas; see: <https://locallink.ie/>.

A number of challenges were also identified during the dialogue:

- Succession planning is required to maintain a diverse rural population (including youth and working-age community dwellers) and to cultivate a sense of purpose and belonging.
- The vibrancy and sustainability of the volunteer network are challenged by social and regulatory burdens (e.g. health and safety requirements, GDPR).
- Increasing insurance costs are placing undue pressure on small rural businesses and volunteer groups.
- There is difficulty in sustaining a local economy in commuter-belt towns and villages, which empty during the day.
- Dereliction of buildings is an issue in small towns and villages and in the countryside.

Policy actions to prepare for the future

In relation to future-based policy actions, participants agreed on the need to emphasise a ‘whole of life-cycle’ focus. Concerns were expressed about the daily commuter drain from rural areas, an ageing population and migrating youth, which all contribute to declining rural communities. This decline requires special consideration in pursuit of sustainable contemporary rural communities. Key criteria for people returning to rural communities include the cost of living and local support networks, but the availability of work appropriate to their skills and experience is paramount. The evolution of work (nature and type) and the role of ‘future cooperatives’ and partnership groups are also essential to sustainable rural communities.

Overarching suggestions include:

- Develop government policies to represent a vision for rural development (agriculture, as a core component, requires specific supports).
- Achieve inter-departmental coherence: a holistic planning approach to rural community development, including communication between and within all government departments that engage with rural communities, coupled with flexible responses at local level.
- Develop a collaborative approach by support agencies, building trust and mutual respect with rural communities.
- Create a regional-level rural forum – with a learning community emphasis.
- Leverage existing schemes that apply/support community-led local development approaches, e.g. REDZ⁵ and PPNs.⁶
- Recognise, promote and support women in a range of rural roles (including in local government, work, farms, homes and community).
- Acknowledge a changing rural population by assuring rights and equality for ethnic minority groups and migrants, and their inclusion and involvement in policies and programmes.

⁵ ‘Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) are an innovative idea that emerged from the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA); see: <https://drcd.gov.ie/about/rural/rural-economic-development-zone-redz/>.

⁶ Public Participation Networks (PPNs) facilitate input by citizens into the decision-making processes at local government level; see: <https://drcd.gov.ie/community/public-participation-networks/ppn-advisory-group/>.

- Leverage examples of social innovation (e.g. the Integration and Support Unit,⁷ Men's Sheds,⁸ AgeWell,⁹ GIY¹⁰).
- Enhance local community social-safety infrastructure – Gardaí.
- Develop local community housing policy (taking account of diverse community needs – young, elderly, families).
- Promote the diverse use of land.
- Develop integrated land use strategies to optimise community resources.
- Consider renewal versus development policy (e.g. alternative use for dormant/derelict buildings and infrastructure).
- Promote diverse use of enterprise spaces (e.g. enhanced use of enterprise and digital hubs, hot desks, co-working spaces).
- Incentivise usage of co-working spaces among rural workers and companies.
- Encourage policies regarding corporate responsibility and companies' contribution to their communities.
- Create a National Smart Working Map (including talent, connectivity and co-working hub data) using 'smart working' platforms (e.g. Abodoo¹¹).
- Develop an insurance policy support system for rural community leaders, volunteers, social spaces, rural transport and social enterprise.

Embed and enhance cultural cohesion

- Cross-community support scheme
- Technology-enabled in-community and cross-community communications strategy
- Women's groups play a key role in challenging inequality and bringing about positive social change¹²
- Leverage the Gaeltacht community

Environmental policy as a catalyst for vibrant and sustainable rural community development

- Rural-specific environmental policy
- Water and land as an integrated policy (rivers, lakes and seas, as well as land)

Investment in people

- National strategy for volunteer support in rural communities
- Community leader support infrastructure, including mentor links with other community leaders and youth (e.g. those experienced in rural community activities encouraged/enticed to share experience and learning with others)
- Education supports for community leader and volunteer development

⁷ Waterford's Integration and Support Unit is an NGO that provides services and support to refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants trying to integrate into the south-east region.

⁸ The Irish Men's Shed Association is a member-based organisation that exists to maintain links and share information among the network of Men's Sheds in Ireland; see: <http://menssheds.ie/about-us/>.

⁹ AgeWell is dedicated to supporting people as they age, improving well-being and health, and creating nurturing communities for older adults; see: <http://www.thirdageireland.ie/agewell>.

¹⁰ GIY is a not-for-profit social enterprise helping people to grow some of their own food at home, at work, at school and in the community; see: <https://giy.ie/>.

¹¹ Abodoo, an Irish company based in Gorey, Co. Wexford, created a 'smart working' platform where workers and companies embracing flexibility can register and be matched using smart technology.

¹² Eileen Finan and Bernadine Brady, 'They pulled me through the darkest times: exploring the social benefits of a women's group in rural Ireland', *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*, vol. 19(1) (2019): 2; available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol19/iss1/2>.

Enhance social and economic support structures – communication strategy

- Clear information regarding opportunities and support structures, with pathways for local participation and development (e.g. online booklets are a valuable resource, but the pace at which information becomes outdated is a challenge)
- Case studies of rural renewal success stories (e.g. Mayo; Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford; Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Co. Tipperary; Girvan Scotland)
- Enhance awareness of economic support structures for micro-firms and social enterprises
- Specific social enterprise policy required

Vibrant and sustainable farming community

- Embed agricultural sector policy in rural community policy
- Greater recognition of women's role in and contribution to farms. A number of suggestions were put forward by the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi):¹³
- targets to incentivise the transfer of family farms to women, increase joint partnerships and the number of women with herd numbers – routes into farming are still difficult for women outside of marriage
 - greater visibility of women in generational renewal plans in CAP after 2020
 - greater recognition of older women's contribution through the retrospective farming/partnership scheme to facilitate their direct access to a state pension

Invest in rural communities' social and economic infrastructure

- Pre-funding application eligibility check would alleviate the onerous process of a full capital funding application (e.g. a two-phase application process – an eligibility application and, if deemed eligible, a full application)
- Enhanced use of social spaces (e.g. libraries, schools, community halls)
- Social enterprise¹⁴ as a catalyst for sustainable economic activity

Building metrics to measure progress

- Build a well-being matrix to measure well-being within communities (e.g. Healthy Ireland,¹⁵ Public Participation Network Handbook¹⁶)
- Auditing of funded projects should emphasise economic and social outputs – social metrics
- Build a repository of qualitative 'vibrant and sustainable rural community' success stories to draw learning from for use in other rural contexts (e.g. The enterprising community¹⁷)
- Intergenerational volunteer infrastructural support
- Gender impact assessments required for National Planning Frameworks such as Project Ireland 2040 and the Action Plan for Rural Development

¹³ The NWCi is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups and seeks to achieve equality for women.

¹⁴ A social enterprise is a commercial organisation that has specific social objectives as its primary purpose.

¹⁵ Healthy Ireland is a government-led initiative aimed at improving the health and well-being of everyone living in Ireland; see: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/healthy-ireland/?referrer=/>.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/civil-society-policy/type/public-participation-networks>.

¹⁷ Senan Cooke, *The enterprising community: a bottom up perspective on the capacity within communities to regenerate* (Dublin, 2018).



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