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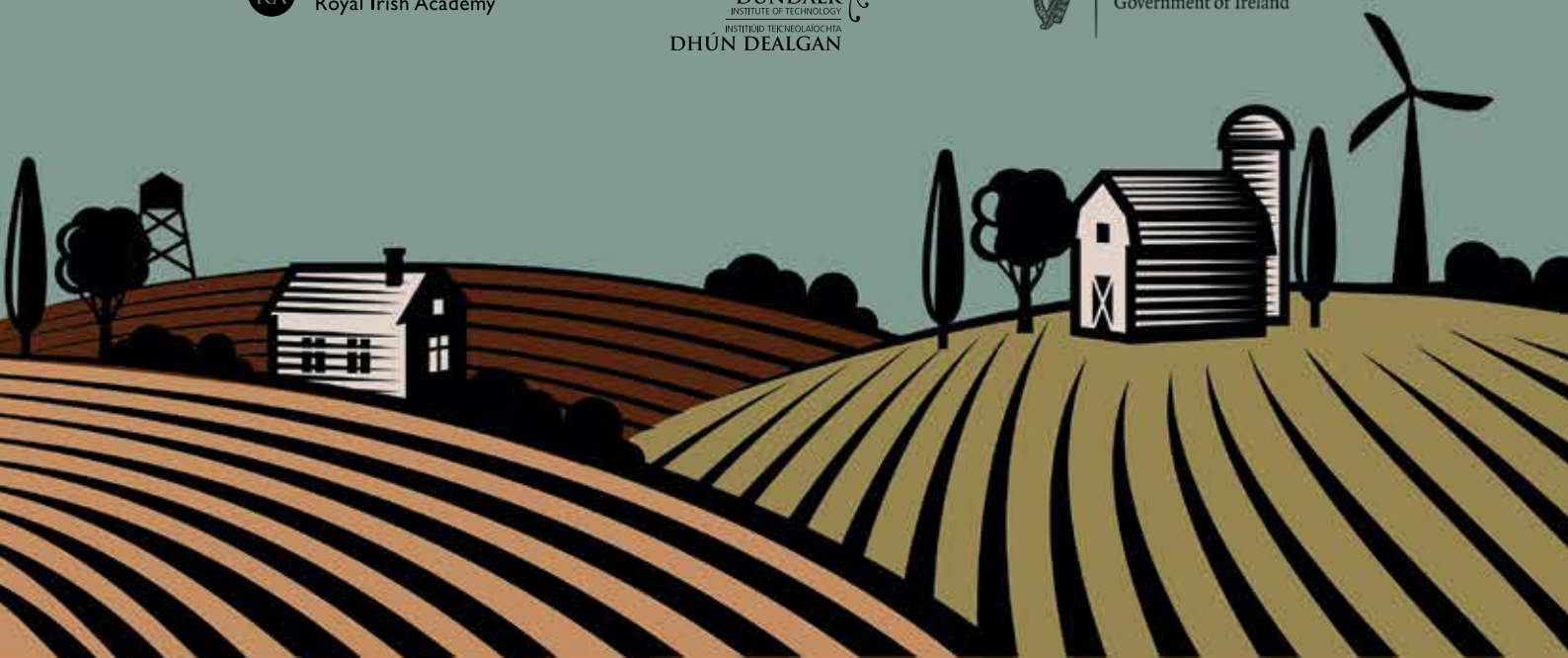
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Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
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The Royal Irish Academy's 2018–19 series of rural stakeholders' consultative events, organised in association with the Department of Rural and Community Development, focused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

The 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
Sense of community - 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	**Sense of community** - 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
Dominant social structures and routines - Strong sense of community identity - Traditional activities: sports/GAA, clubs, cultural heritage, networks - Traditional events: religion/church/ Mass	**Dominant social structures and routines** - 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
Pattern of inward migration - Influx of new community members promotes diversity - Value of new insights and ideas - Enhanced use of local resources	**Pattern of inward migration** - 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
Volunteer culture - Baseline as a lever for cohesion - Role in creating and running social networks, events - Aging reservoir of experience of value to business, tourism, community	**Volunteer culture** - 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
Local entrepreneurs/farmers/industry - Visionaries provide employment - Farming infrastructure as a linchpin of the rural economy - Tourism/locational branding (e.g. Ancient East, Wild Atlantic Way)	**Local entrepreneurs/farmers/industry** - 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)
Local employment - Quality-of-life benefits (lower housing and living costs) - Local initiatives (e.g. farmers'/craft markets)	**Local employment** - Lack of access to employment - Distance to work - Lack of future-proofing for critical mass
Role of local media - Informs community of events, deaths, marriages, etc. - Acts as a social connection for isolated community members	**Role of local media** - Negative press coverage and a lack of positive stories and examples lead to decreased rural self-esteem

Positive factors	Negative factors
Cross-border community cohesion - Value of the peace process	**Cross-border community cohesion** - Uncertainty around Brexit - Additional cohesion support required for border regions
Care for the environment - Campaigns that unify communities	**Care for the environment** - Abandoned/unused land/buildings - Restrictive environmental legislation affects small farmers/businesses
Infrastructure improvements - Easier access to urban centres - Improved housing	**Infrastructure improvements** - 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
Technological advancement/ automation - 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	**Technological advancement/automation** - 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
Social integration - Community buildings as a focal point/ meeting place (e.g. library, post office, school, shop)	**Social integration** - 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

- 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 Ages[1])
- 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 development[4] 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 initiative[5])

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 Fora[6] 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 profession[7]
- 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

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[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.