

Building vibrant and sustainable communities in rural Ireland

Waterford Institute of Technology, 4 April 2019



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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) 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 People¹) - 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 |

¹ See: <http://www.mayococo.ie/en/Services/Housing/Grants/>.

| 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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