

Delivering economic development 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 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 1 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://npf.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"> - Hi-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 hi-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)

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

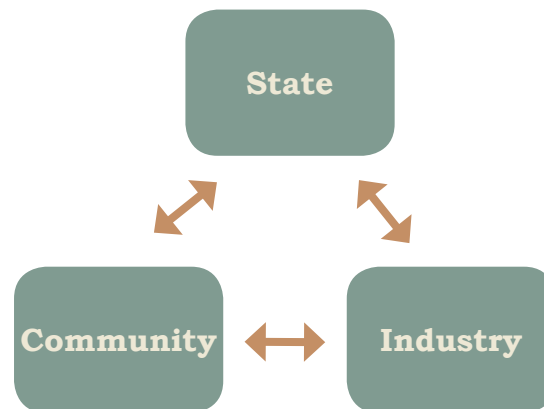
- Incentivise researchers to engage with rural-focused dissertations or group projects
- Incentivise regional HEIs to commercialise their research

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 hi-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



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