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The Evolution of a Collective Response to Rural Underdevelopment

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The Evolution of a Collective Response to Rural Underdevelopment

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Abstract

The downturn in the Irish economy coupled with high levels of unemployment has focused attention on the need to promote economic development throughout the economy. This paper provides case study evidence on one successful approach to rural economic development by outlining the evolution, outcomes and key capabilities involved in a collective action response to the challenge of rural underdevelopment in North West Connemara. Reviewing a fifty year period, the case study shows that collective action in the region has not only been a series of events, but more crucially from a development perspective, it is embedded as an institution and a process. Therefore, as a result of learning by this community over a fifty year period, a collective action response has evolved as a key strategy to overcome government and market failure in relation to rural development. This case provides a good example to other communities of how locality can be drawn upon and used as an advantage in an increasingly globalised environment and how a local community can seek to ameliorate the negative aspects of globalisation by harnessing its local resources. In broad policy terms, the implication is that there are public good benefits to be gained from assisting and encouraging local communities through the provision of finance and capability building support, to deliver collective action responses to their particular challenges.

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Introduction

The downturn in the Irish economy coupled with high levels of unemployment has focused attention on the need to promote economic development throughout the economy. However, given the global recession, the Irish banking and public finance difficulties, the weakened sectoral profile of the Irish economy in terms of its job creation capability and the credit squeeze that is impacting the enterprise sector, there is consternation about where impulses for economic development and employment creation might come from. Employment from foreign direct investment in sectors such as medical devices, ICT, financial services, food, travel, entertainment, and digital media is seen as part of the solution (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2010). However, many of those enterprises will be urban based as they seek to benefit from economies of agglomeration. In the rural economy, the enduring structural weakness of local economies that was masked by the ‘Celtic Tiger’ explosion in rural employment in construction, retail and services is once again exposed. In the medium term, these sectors are unlikely to be significant providers of jobs.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides evidence on one successful approach to economic development in a rural area. More specifically, it is a case study of the evolution and outcomes of a collective action response to the challenge of rural underdevelopment in North West Connemara. A key actor in this process is Connemara West Plc, a community owned and managed rural development organisation that was created in 1971 and is based in Letterfrack, Co. Galway. The rationale for focusing on this story is that it illustrates critical success factors and provides important insights that may be of use to other rural communities, and policy makers with a rural development remit.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, attention is drawn to some pertinent literature about the importance of locality, the sources of economic development in rural areas and the role of collective action. The case study region is also briefly outlined. In the third part, the evolution and outcomes of collective action in the case study region and its role in promoting economic development is presented. The fourth section discusses key insights from the case study and the final part contains concluding remarks.

Perspectives on Rural Economic Development

This section discusses three important perspectives on rural economic development. First, why is it that in an increasingly globalised world, locality is becoming more important for economic development? Second, what are the possible sources of economic development in rural areas? Third, what do we mean by collective action? In the final part the case study area is also described.

The increasing importance of locality

Globalisation refers to the shift towards a more integrated and interdependent world economy. Undoubtedly, there are both positive and negative aspects to globalisation and these impacts are experienced at the level of the individual, the household, the firm, the town, the region, the sector and the nation (Kaplinsky and Readman, 2005). On the positive side, growing global integration leads to increased incomes and greater product and service quality and choice for some of the world's population. On the negative side, there is also a tendency towards growing disparity within and between countries and, globally, a stubbornly large number of people living in absolute poverty (Kaplinsky and Readman, 2005).

Paradoxically, however, in a globalising world, locality is becoming more important in economic development processes (Porter, 1998). For example, in the rural economic development literature there is clear evidence that successful rural areas are those that have used community-led approaches to development that focus on leveraging local resources, institutions, capabilities and skills that do not exist elsewhere (e.g. Terluin, 2003; Heanue, 2002a). Elsewhere, in the industrial economics literature, it is argued that for firms critical learning processes which rest on local innovation systems characterised by inter-firm collaboration, good quality regional infrastructures, access to high-grade design resources, and highly skilled labour forces give some enterprises an advantage over competitors (Hirsch-Kreinsen et al, 2003). This advantage lies increasingly in local factors such as knowledge, relationships and motivation that distant rival firms cannot access (Porter, 1998). Moreover, especially for products like food and tourism, the ability to draw closely on the attributes of an area to deliver authentic local food and unique culturally-based tourism products is an important source of competitive advantage (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2010; Bessièrè, 1998).

By drawing on their unique local resources, communities and firms are able to exert some influence over their interaction with global forces: an interaction that is mediated through national policies and frameworks (Terluin, 2003). It is locality in the broad sense discussed here that is at the centre of ideas about the possibility of endogenous development for rural areas (Terluin, 2003). Unsurprisingly, it is also important for the case study in this paper.

Sources of rural economic development

Economic development is sustained progressive change to attain individual and group interests through expanded, intensified and adjusted use of resources (Shaffer et al, 2004). Rural economic development is no different. By way of a simplistic model, economic development in any rural area may arise from the activities of government, the private sector and the voluntary/community sector. However, it is clear that in some areas, or at different times in a single area, one or more of these actors may not be making a significant contribution to rural economic development: in other words, there may be government, private or community sector failure in terms of their contribution to economic development. Dissatisfaction with the contribution of government and the private sector to economic development has led some rural communities to try to stimulate development themselves. This usually involves the provision of services, enterprise, training or infrastructure. More narrowly, community economic development has taken three main forms (Curtin, 1996):

- 1) communities have sought to establish and manage enterprises themselves.
- 2) communities have sought, usually in negotiation or partnership with state agencies to bring jobs to their areas.
- 3) communities have, again typically in conjunction with state agencies, sought through such means as the provision of workspace and training and education supports, to promote indigenous enterprise.

At community level, any of these three activities is necessarily underpinned by collective action to initiate, plan, and manage any of these forms of economic development activities. How such collective action emerges, is harnessed, nurtured and what it can achieve is central to the remainder of this paper.

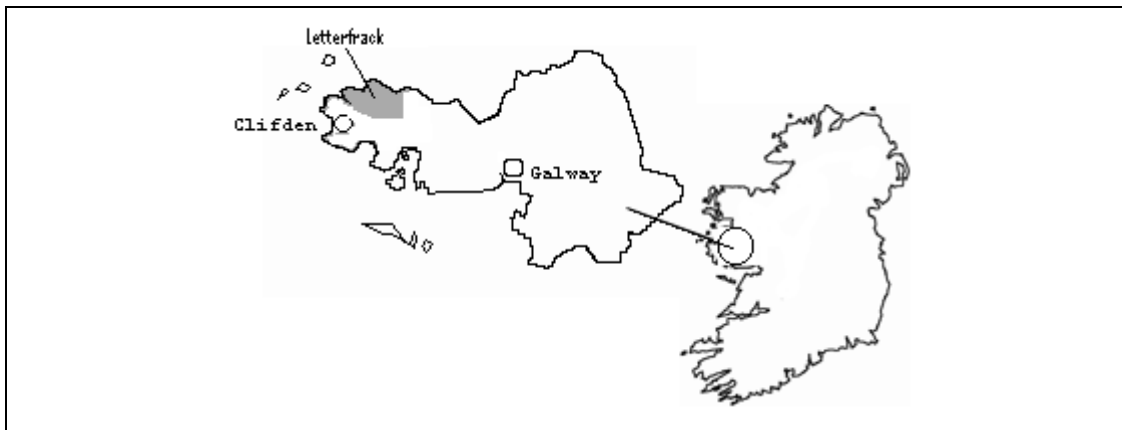
What is collective action and why is it useful?

Collective action is the *involvement of a group of people with a shared interest undertaking some kind of voluntary common action* in pursuit of that shared interest (Meinzen-Dick et al 2004). There is a large academic and policy literature on collective action and also empirical examples of its application to issues as diverse as natural resource management, rural development projects, neighbourhood watch, political action and social movements (see Meinzen-Dick et al, 2004). It is important to understand the notion of collective action as it implicitly, if not explicitly, underpins what are called the endogenous and mixed endogenous/exogenous approaches to rural development in advanced economies (Terluin, 2003).

Collective action can be understood as an event (a one-time occurrence), as an institution (rule of the game applied over and over again), or as a process (how it actually happens) (Meinzen-Dick et al 2004). Although it is often taken for granted that groups of individuals with common interests will attempt to further those common interests, Olson (1965) suggests that it is not always the case especially if the group is large. Ostrom (2000) argues that the world contains many types of individuals some more willing than others to initiate the type of reciprocity necessary for collective action to flourish. As a result, it is difficult to outline a single model of collective action although there are general principals. The following case study illustrates these principals.

The Case Study Region

As shown in Figure 1, the case study area is located on the Western seaboard of county Galway approximately 100 kilometres from Galway city, and is focused on the parish of Ballinakill, especially the villages of Letterfrack, Tully, Tullycross, Moyard and Kylemore and their surrounding areas (c 1,900 inhabitants). The region is mountainous with relatively poor infrastructure.

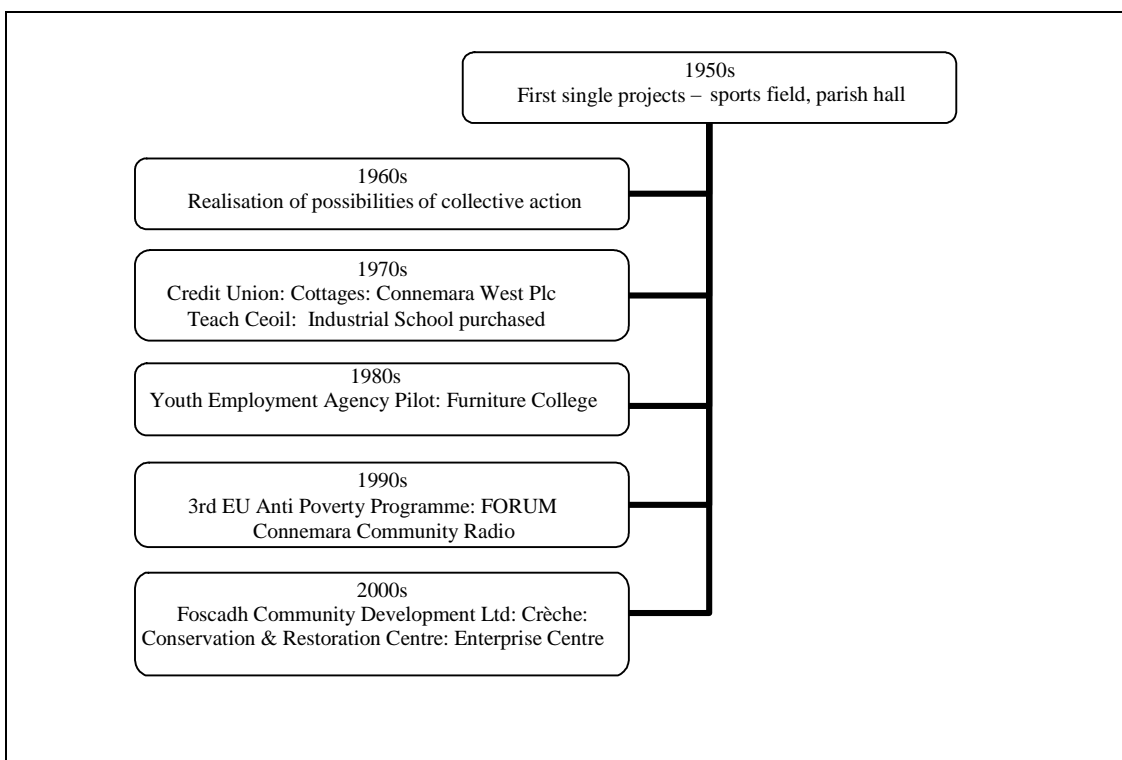
Figure 1: The Case Study Region

The locality is characterised by a dispersed and low density population with 11 persons per square kilometre compared with the national average of 60 and a European average of 143. Economically, the case study region is classified as severely disadvantaged. The residents of the area are heavily dependent on small-scale agriculture, construction sector employment and seasonal service sector jobs primarily in the tourist sector, with little industrial or permanent service sector work in the region. Dependency rates in the region are significantly above the national average. The locality has a long tradition of emigration with the population being reduced by half since 1926; a recent recognition of this structural problem was the inclusion of the area in the CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Ard-Riachtanais) programme for revitalising rural areas, an initiative that aimed to fast-track National Development Plan spending, particularly infrastructural investment, in selected rural areas. At the same time, however, the region is equally characterised by a vibrant community development sector that has participated in, and indeed pioneered, initiatives unique in Ireland: many of these are discussed later in the paper. There is also an energetic social and artistic community. In total, there are approximately 160 active community, sporting and social organisations in the area (Heanue, 2010).

The Evolution and outcomes of collective action in North West Connemara¹

To fully understand the evolution of a collective action response to the challenge of underdevelopment in the case study region, it is necessary to begin at the 1950s. Clearly, it is impossible to outline all the activities that have taken place since then. What are described below, and outlined for convenience in Figure 2, are those key activities that were pivotal in terms of either their size, shaping the direction of collective action in the locality, or addressing specific challenges identified by the community at a particular time, and that is why they are reported here.

Figure 2: Overview of Collective Action 1950 to 2000+



The 1950s and 1960s

A sports field and parish hall were built in Tullycross using voluntary labour and opened in 1957 and 1959 respectively. Enthused by these successes and the realisation that collective action could produce positive results for the area, a guild of Muintir na Tire² was established in the 1960s. However, little else of note was

¹ This section draws extensively on O'Donohue, (1992) and O'Neill, (2008). For a full overview of the activities of Connemara West Plc since its establishment, and development activities more generally in the locality, these two sources are invaluable.

² Muintir na Tire, established in 1931 initially as a agricultural producers co-operative, was Ireland's premier community development organisation for over 50 years. It was instrumental in establishing all-embracing parish councils (Curtin, 1996, 257).

achieved in the 1960s and the earlier enthusiasm of the 1950s waned. Nonetheless, these first attempts at community development laid the foundations for a learning process that bore fruit in later decades.

The 1970s

In 1971, Tullycross Credit Union was formed. This was regarded as a pivotal breakthrough in that, for the first time, people realised they had financial resources that they could trust to be locally managed and used for development purposes. In the same year, the Ballinakill Parish Development Committee was established to undertake a range of economic, social and cultural development activities, and a year later it was formally constituted as a community council affiliated to Muintir na Tire. Throughout the 1970s, the committee was instrumental in promoting shellfish farming in Killary Fjord and the establishment of Connemara National Park in Letterfrack.

Also in the early 1970s, the decision was made to build a scheme of nine thatched self-catering cottages in the village of Tullycross. A separate company was formed to build and manage the cottage scheme and hence, Connemara West Plc was created in 1971. It is a company limited by guarantee, with a share capital. It has over 500 local shareholders. Finance was raised locally for the cottages project and contributions were also received from Galway County Council and the Western Regional Tourism Organisation. The cottages were viewed as a catalyst for future development with the decision that any profits earned should be retained, rather than distributed to shareholders, and invested by Connemara West Plc in new projects. Subsequently, the commercial success of the cottage scheme gave Connemara West Plc the financial and organisational base from which to develop other activities.

In the late 1970s, Connemara West Plc undertook its next two major projects. The first was the construction in 1977 of 'Teach Ceoil', a performance and training centre for social and cultural activities in the village of Tully. The second was the purchase of the former industrial school in Letterfrack in 1978³. Local finance was raised (made of up a second issue of shares in the company and a loan from three local families) and a donation received from the Guinness Workers Educational fund. The

³ The Industrial Schools Act of 1868 established industrial schools to care for neglected, orphaned and abandoned children.

building was purchased and named the Connemara West Centre. This large building of 28,000 sq ft (2,601 m²) needed extensive repairs which were carried out incrementally over several years: with the exception of a grant from Galway County Development and some Youth Employment Agency funded projects, all the money spent renovations was generated by Connemara West Plc. Since its purchase, a large number of new buildings housing various activities were constructed around the Connemara West Centre, so that the location is now better described as a campus.

It was envisaged that at least part of this large building would be used as the location for micro craft enterprises to provide employment and training for local people. Various craft workshops were established including wood turning, ceramics, sculpting, weaving, leatherwork, pewter ware, fireplaces, wrought iron and soft toys, as well as a craft co-op and a patchwork venture. The building was also the location for a farmer's co-op, fisherman's co-op and the first EU Anti Poverty Project. This EU funded Project, called the West Connemara Community Action Project, provided finance for Connemara West Plc to employ its first full-time office secretary and also facilitated the opening of the Connemara West office in 1980 to provide office services such as typing, photocopying and faxing. Funding from the Department of Education supported the employment of a Development Officer. Early renovation work on the former industrial school, including the installation of a new heating system and electrical rewiring, continued during this project.

The 1980s

In the early 1980s, youth unemployment, early school leaving and emigration were identified as particular problems for North West Connemara. To improve the employment chances of local youngsters, a Craft Training course was established in 1982 and ran until 1985 in the Connemara West Centre. The course, structured towards providing comprehensive woodskills training for 15 local young people, was designed and managed by Connemara West Plc under contract from the Youth Employment Agency. Connemara West Plc had sole responsibility for the development and management of the course. The 15 young people obtained City and Guilds Certificates in Furniture Craft. However, this course was a once-off arrangement.

In 1985, Connemara West Plc successfully applied to the Combat Poverty Agency for project funding under the Second EU Anti Poverty Programme. As a result, a four year project called the Community Resource and Education Project was established. This project facilitated specific activities such as the compilation of a community information directory, the hosting of a Wood Sculpture Symposium, the drawing up of development plans for the villages of Letterfrack, Tullycross and Tully and the establishment of Connemara Community Radio (for more on the radio, see below). This project, by financing the employment of two project staff, also enabled development and planning work to be carried out on future education courses (see below), and laid the foundation for much of the activities that were to develop in the Connemara West Centre over the following decade and a half.

After the successful once-off woodskills course, Connemara West Plc carried out a programme of strategic research focused on the training and skills requirements of the furniture industry, that could possibly be serviced from Letterfrack. A proposal for an Education Programme in Fine Woodworking and Design was developed and circulated to various agencies that were considered possible collaborators and funding sources (e.g. Kilkenny Design, Crafts Council of Ireland, Industrial Development Authority, ANCO⁴, Youth Employment Agency and Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)⁵). In 1987, Connemara West Plc and GMIT jointly initiated a two year National Certificate in Furniture Design and Manufacture. This was, and still is, a unique model of education provision. The initiative has developed to the stage that in 2010 there are 260 students pursuing a choice of 6 BSc degree level courses in furniture design, manufacturing, technology, management or teaching at the GMIT facility in Letterfrack⁶. The expansion in student numbers and course options was facilitated by an ambitious €6m building programme at the Connemara West campus, completed in 2000, that was funded by resources from four government departments but primarily through the Operational Programme for Agriculture, Rural Development

⁴ANCO was a forerunner of FÁS

⁵ Although GMIT was known as The Regional Technical College Galway at the time, its current name is used here.

⁶ Bachelor of Science in Furniture Design and Manufacture; Bachelor of Science in Furniture Production and Technology; Bachelor of Science in Furniture Conservation and Restoration; Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Product Design (Furniture); Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Manufacturing Technology (Furniture); Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Design and Technology Education. For more information see <http://www.gmit.ie/letterfrack-campus.html>

and Forestry. This is not the only education initiative on the campus. In the late 1980s, a programme for early school leavers, which later evolved into the Youthreach inter-agency education programme, was established. Youthreach caters for young people, who opt out of the formal education system without adequate training, qualifications or skills. In 2010, the Youthreach programme had 45 participants.

Drawing on further findings from the strategic research exercise mentioned previously, other initiatives targeted at the furniture industry were developed by Connemara West Plc. A commercial unit specialising in furniture restoration and conservation was established in 2000. The main objective of the unit, now called Conservation|Letterfrack⁷ is to provide to the highest international standards a complete conservation and restoration service for furniture, wooden artefacts and architectural woodwork. This enterprise, although a division of Connemara West Plc, is a commercial operation. In 2010, Conservation|Letterfrack employs 2 full-time conservators and management staff and 1 part-time conservator.

The 1990s to date

In 1989, Connemara West Plc invited five statutory agencies (FÁS, Co. Galway VEC, City of Galway VEC, Galway County Council and the Western Health Board) to join with the local community to submit a proposal for a large rural project under the Third EU Anti-Poverty Programme. The project, which was called FORUM and was based in the village of Letterfrack commenced activities in 1990. FORUM Connemara Ltd as the organisation is now called, delivers not only the LEADER programme for non-gaeltacht Connemara but also the Local Community Development Programme, three FÁS schemes (social care, essential housing repairs and Youth in Action), the Rural Social Scheme and an Adolescent Support Programme.⁸ Since it began its work in 1990, FORUM Connemara Ltd has had an incalculable impact on the social and economic well-being of the residents of North West Connemara.

As mentioned earlier, the Connemara Community Radio Group was established in 1987 as part of the Community Resource and Education Project. The project found

⁷ See <http://www.conservationletterfrack.ie/index.html>

⁸ For more information see www.forumconnemara.ie

that a credible, accessible, and local forum was needed to provide information, allow debate and permit questioning of developments and issues that impact on the area. In 1988, the radio service went on air for three months. Then following a long interval off air, the station was eventually licensed for 30 months as part of the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC)⁹ Community Radio Pilot project, and began broadcasting on July 1st 1995. Connemara Community Radio (CCR), as it is now known, has broadcast consistently since 1995, moving into a purpose built studio facility on the Connemara West campus in 2001. This building was funded by resources from Connemara West Plc and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. CCR also opened a studio on the island of Inishbofin in September 2000. In 2007, a 10 year licence was granted to CCR by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland. Evaluations of CCR have consistently confirmed its contribution to social capital building and as a key source of locally relevant information and advice (see Macken-Walsh and Heanue, 2008; Heanue, 2002b)

In 1999, Foscadh Community Development Ltd, a partnership between Connemara West Plc, FORUM Connemara Ltd and Tullycross Credit Union was established with a view to undertaking an ambitious project that includes building 30 social houses to cater for the elderly, families in need of housing and returning emigrants, a community services centre, a community sportsfield and a sports and leisure centre, on a site adjacent to the Connemara West campus. Following a decade of protracted negotiations over land transfers, design, development work and securing funding, the main portion of this project still has some obstacles to overcome before it can begin. The sportsfield, however, is completed.

In 2007, a community crèche costing €1m was built on the Connemara West campus. Looking ahead, there are several projects being investigated for the near future as a response to contemporary community needs of employment, training for employment and local service provision. For example, there are vacant premises available in the Connemara West campus that would be suitable for conversion to use as an Enterprise Incubation Centre, where, in conjunction with other agencies, business start up

⁹ The IRTC is now known as the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI)

support and mentoring could be provided to local entrepreneurs, including graduates of GMIT Letterfrack, wishing to start a furniture related business.

Discussion

The activities of Connemara West Plc have had a significant impact on the locality. In visible terms, the Connemara West campus in Letterfrack hosts an impressive physical infrastructure including the buildings that host the Connemara West Centre, GMIT Letterfrack, FORUM Connemara Ltd., Connemara Community Radio, Youthreach, crèche and Conservation|Letterfrack. Other infrastructure, such as the nine thatched cottages and Teach Ceoil are located in the nearby villages of Tullycross and Tully, two and three miles away, respectively.

There are 134 people employed in organisations headquartered at the campus, making it one of the largest sources of employment in the region. Connemara West Plc directly employs 19 staff in the five activity centres that run its various projects. In addition, approximately another 115 people are employed in organisations that were established by, or in partnership with, Connemara West Plc and are based on the campus in Letterfrack (GMIT Letterfrack 25 employees; FORUM 16 employees; FÁS 45 employees; Rural Social Scheme 14 employees; Youthreach 15 employees). There is a significant euro injection into the local economy although the total impact has never been formally evaluated. Focusing on just one aspect, Heanue (2007) estimates that the direct expenditure in the area from the students of GMIT Letterfrack alone is €891,872.¹⁰ More broadly, Kelly (1992) and Rosenfeld (2001) conclude that the impact of the students' residency for nine months each year on community, cultural and social vitality is positive.

There are other less visible, but equally important, impacts from the activities of Connemara West Plc. These impacts take three forms. First, the local community has developed the confidence that it has the capability to address what it determines as key challenges and to find a way of providing locally appropriate solutions to these challenges based on a collective response. Second, there is an understanding that

¹⁰ The direct expenditure of students occurs mostly in the off-peak tourist season and therefore significantly bolsters other locally generated income. Obviously, such an estimate gives no indication of the indirect expenditure generated by the student's presence and is therefore only a partial measure of their economic impact.

critical local resources in terms of people, finances and skills exist and can be harnessed in partnership with external agencies, to address local needs. Third, the contribution of Connemara West Plc's activities to the social, community and cultural fabric of the area is incalculable. Although it is impossible to construct a counterfactual (what would the situation be in the locality if Connemara West Plc never existed) it is reasonable to conclude that most socio-economic indicators are more positive than they would have been in the absence of the activities of Connemara West Plc.

In trying to identify insights that might be of use for other communities trying to grapple with rural underdevelopment, it is important to try to distil key factors that contributed to Connemara West Plc's success. Based on a series of case studies, O'Hara (1998) identified 12 factors associated with a range of successful Irish rural development organisations.¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, these may be usefully collapsed into four and reinterpreted as capabilities: leadership and personnel; planning and strategy; accessing funding and effective partnerships.

Leadership and personnel

Effective leadership and management is critical. Leadership includes having a vision and a willingness to take calculated risks. At pivotal junctures in the development of Connemara West Plc, key individuals both inside the organisation and in external state and other institutions were instrumental in ensuring that projects and initiatives went ahead, even though risky. There are four good examples. First, when the cottages were being built, Connemara West Plc was advised that the work should not be carried out by locals as they would not deliver it on time and within budget. As a matter of principle, Connemara West's Board of Directors was adamant that the work should go to local people: it did, and the project was completed on time and within budget. The cottages project gave the community a huge psychological boost and the finances to fund other projects. Second, a similar situation arose in relation to the

¹¹ 1) Effective leadership and management; 2) a good Board; 3) quality and commitment of professional staff; 4) commitment to ongoing training and capacity building; 5) importance of sound planning; 6) commitment to evaluation; 7) creation of appropriate structures at each stage of development; 8) a local and ongoing source of revenue; 9) ability to access and successfully utilise funding sources and schemes; 10) early success and visibility through a 'flagship project'; 11) effective partnership arrangements; 12) capacity to learn from others and commitment to innovation

purchase of the former Industrial School, where the Board of Directors was advised that it was not a good decision to buy the building and that they would never be able to make maximum use of it.¹² Today, the building is utilised to capacity, and in fact as outlined previously, a significant amount of additional capacity was added to the campus in the past two decades. Without the physical resources provided by the former Industrial School, most of the activities described above might not have emerged. Third, the cooperation of a key individual within the Youth Employment Agency in establishing the first three year woodskills training programme in the early 1980's was critical. Fourth, GMIT's partnership, again promoted by a foresighted individual, to develop a facility in Letterfrack placed the activities on the Connemara West campus onto a different trajectory (for a fuller discussion of this see Heanue, 2007) and contributed to the ongoing financial security of Connemara West Plc.

Planning and strategy

Like any venture, it is important to devise plans based on sound research and analysis. Connemara West Plc has consistently approached its activities in this way. For example, as part of its involvement in the first, second and third EU Anti Poverty Programmes, extensive research was carried out on the socio-economic situation in the community and the identification of possible projects and structures to address the identified challenges. The development of education provision targeted at the furniture industry which culminated in the GMIT facility in Letterfrack, arose from extensive research undertaken by national and international experts with the industry and other stakeholders from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s. More recently, research was undertaken to identify the need for social housing and sports facilities provision in North West Connemara (see Heanue, 2006). This particular research informed the work of Foscaadh Community Development Ltd.

The need to evaluate activities and use the learning from evaluations for future planning is critical. Connemara West Plc has always tried to critically evaluate and reflect on its activities. Unsurprisingly, over the decades, the organisation has been involved in projects that for one reason or another did not turn out as expected, and

¹² It later emerged that the plans for the former Industrial School by other bidders included stripping it, demolishing the building and selling the land as sites (O'Donohue, 1992, 18).

the learning from these experiences also informs future project design, development and planning.

Strategically, Connemara West Plc closely aligned itself with the EU Anti Poverty Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, such that many of the activities on the campus today emerged directly from those programmes, e.g. FORUM Connemara Ltd and Connemara Community Radio. More recently, developing part of the campus to be a Centre of Excellence in relation to furniture manufacturing education and research in partnership with GMIT was the focus¹³. At various stages, the creation of appropriate structures (e.g. FORUM, The GMIT/Connemara West partnership, Foscadh Community Development Ltd) was critical to ensuring that the momentum generated was maintained and that Connemara West Plc could keep focused on its core activity of identifying local needs, devising initiatives to address those needs and creating the appropriate structures to progress those activities.

Irrespective of the amount of planning, strategising and evaluation that is undertaken one of the key features of local rural development work is the long amount of time it takes for projects to come to fruition: the Foscadh Community Development Ltd experience mentioned previously is just one example. Therefore, patience and perseverance to bring projects to completion are two of the most desirable attributes that need to be fostered by any community embarking on a collective action response. More generally, the commitment of staff and volunteers to implement projects once decided upon, no matter what the setbacks, is fundamental.

Accessing funding

Given the short term nature and diversity of many funding sources available to local groups, establishing an ongoing source of revenue is important. Allied to this are the benefits that are gained in terms of building community confidence and ‘demonstration effects’ to partners and funders from securing an early success and visibility through a ‘flagship project’. In the case of Connemara West Plc, two

¹³ In 2009, GMIT Letterfrack signed agreements with two US third level institutions, Virginia Tech University and Southern Virginia Higher Education Centre that will bring US students to Letterfrack and also lead to research collaboration. The agreements are a testament to GMIT Letterfrack’s growing international reputation as a furniture education Centre of Excellence.

example of this are the Renvyle Thatched Cottages scheme in the early days, and more recently the the GMIT partnership, each of which at different times became emblematic of the activities of the organisation and a secure source of finance. In time, the Foscadh social housing and community services project might serve a similar function. However, just as important as the generation of a secure source of local funding, is the ability to use that funding together with contacts, partners and through various networks, to access and successfully leverage external funding sources. As much of Connemara West Plc's income is not programme driven, it gives the organisation a certain amount of autonomy about the activities it is able to become involved with.

Effective partnership arrangements

Networking and collaborating with government departments, statutory agencies, funding bodies, other local development groups and the private sector is important to both the design, delivery and resourcing of activities. Such partnerships are also an important opportunity for learning. Connemara West Plc through the promotion of, and involvement in especially the third EU Anti Poverty Programmes was influential in, nationally, piloting the partnership model as an approach to addressing rural underdevelopment. This capacity for partnership working is a key strength of the organisation, as exemplified in the successful GMIT and Foscadh Community Development Ltd partnerships in particular. The importance of particular networks will wax and wane over time, therefore, it is the capability to network rather than any specific linkages that is important over the longer term.

Concluding Remarks

In addressing the problem of rural underdevelopment communities have a possible role to play through engaging in collective action responses to the problem. As shown by the case study outlined in this paper, the experience of collective action in the parish of Ballinakill in Connemara was clearly a series of events, but more crucially

from a development perspective, it is embedded as an institution and a process. Therefore, as a result of a process of learning by this community over a fifty year period, a collective action response has evolved as a key strategy to overcome the local manifestations of government and market failure in relation to rural development. In doing so, the community has developed a unique set of capabilities, institutions, resources and skills that help it address its underdevelopment challenges. This case provides a good example of how 'locality' can be drawn upon and used as an advantage in an increasingly globalised environment and how a local community can seek to ameliorate the negative aspects of globalisation by harnessing its local resources.

It is clear that over time, and with varying degrees of success, Connemara West Plc on behalf of the community has engaged with each of the three narrow forms of community economic development outlined by Curtin (1996) and continues to do so. The provision of workshop space (in the early days and possibly again in the near future), establishing partnerships to deliver training and education locally (e.g. GMIT, Youthreach) and the direct establishment of commercial enterprises (e.g. Conservation[Letterfrack]) are just some of the examples. As one of the largest sources of employment in the region, the Connemara West campus makes a significant contribution to economic activity in the area in a narrow sense. More broadly, it is clear that the activities of Connemara West Plc have led to economic development as described by Shaffer et al, (2004): sustained change in the locality through the expanded, intensified and adjusted use of resources.

In facing the challenges of the 21st century, the appropriateness of a collective response to problems in the locality is unquestioned. As collective responses are derived in a bottom up way, the resulting solutions are usually by their nature innovative. The very essence of innovation as a non-linear phenomenon means that it is difficult if not impossible to determine where a particular course of action may lead longer term. In the parish of Ballinakill, the journey from the provision of a sportsfield and community hall in the 1950s to the establishment of the diverse set of economic development activities that exist today at the Connemara West campus, could not have been predicted or planned. This is clearly endogenous development in action.

In broad policy terms, the implication is that there are public good benefits to be gained from assisting and encouraging local communities through the provision of finance and capability building support, to deliver collective action responses to their particular challenges. The economic development impact of Connemara West Plc on its region is one example of such benefits. There are many publicly funded programmes that seek to do this already; the Local Community Development Programme and the LEADER programme are just two examples. As the activities of Connemara West Plc are not programme driven per se, it has more freedom in the types of activities it can engage in. This allows the organisation to concentrate on a key capability that it has developed over the past fifty years; identifying a local problem that needs to be addressed, developing a solution and appropriate organisational structure to address the problem, secure a source of finance for the project (either publicly or market-derived) and, if appropriate, spin off that activity either as a partnership or a stand alone entity.

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