



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link
Submission to the Citizens Assembly
“How the State can make Ireland a leader
in tackling climate change”

August 2017

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Overview

As Ireland has set out its targets for climate change under the Paris Agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals, there are measures that now need to be taken to ensure that these targets are achieved. However, all measures taken on climate change must be poverty proofed. Those who are most vulnerable and living on fixed or low income are often more at risk of being pushed into or further into poverty. Measures, such as carbon taxes taken must ensure that this group are protected.

Fuel Poverty

Fuel Poverty can be a result of many factors, such as cost low income, expenditure priorities, cost of fuel and energy efficiency of housing. Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas or take advantage of bundle deals offered by gas and electricity suppliers. The SILC¹ report 2015² showed that 13.6% of the population went without heat at some stage during 2015 and 9% were unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm. For individuals at risk of poverty; 27.9% went without heating at some stage during 2015, while 19.6% were unable to afford to keep home adequately warm. For those living in consistent poverty 53.3% went without heating at some stage in the year. Carbon tax costs rural households ten times more than some urban households. Analysis in 2010 from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that the annual carbon tax likely to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin will be €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.50.³

Retrofitting

Retrofitting of homes is widely acknowledged by all as a simple measure that can greatly reduce our energy usage. It remains in the Government's interest to provide capital funding to invest in retrofitting of homes and businesses to reach climate change targets with the long term benefits far outweighing initial investment. We welcome initiatives and grants that are available to people and communities for retrofitting their homes/community buildings.

¹ SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

² CSO (2017) – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2015

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2015/>

³ “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection” EPA and ESRI 2010

However, Irish Rural Link are aware that there is still a low uptake of such grants and initiatives, especially among people who need them most; older people, those on low income and those living in rented accommodation. This is often as a result of the initial cost of the retrofitting and that it can be still expensive for many people, the application process and for those living in rented accommodation, landlords may not be willing to retrofit the property.

There needs to be continued awareness made about the benefits of retrofitting and assistance for people who may need it for applying for grants. Incentives for landlords to upgrade energy efficiency of their property are also needed. Landlords who participate in Housing Assistant Payment scheme must have minimum standard of energy efficiency rating, this should be extended to all rented property.

Community Energy Projects

As a nation Ireland is rich of untapped renewable energy sources that cannot only help the environment but can also drive the national economy as well as provide cheaper energy to homes and businesses. One method of achieving our renewable energy target set is by community owned energy projects. In particular the opportunities offered by Ireland's wind energy is unrivalled by many other countries. For centuries the west of Ireland has been considered a marginalised region but wind energy is one of the few sectors in which the west of Ireland in particular has a major competitive advantage over almost every other region in Europe. In recent times there has been huge contestation to the construction of large energy projects such as windfarms and pylons. Some aspects that caused objection from the public were unfamiliarity with planning regulations and mistrust of the large energy companies. A method of addressing these issues is to incentivise community led renewable energy projects. These projects would give the communities control eliminating mistrust between communities and the energy companies.

Consultations with communities must continue prior to the construction of energy sources.

Transport

A lack of a public transport options in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Census 2016 showed that 91% of rural households had at least one car, highlighting the high dependency rate people in rural areas have on a car. Many people in rural areas have Diesel cars because it is more economical and were led to believe that emissions were lower. Electric vehicles are still not reliable enough for long-distance driving. A lot of proposals have been made to increase the price of diesel, however, this will impact those on low or fixed income, dependent on their car in rural

areas, whether to get to work or make appointments. Irish Rural Link argue that until electric cars are more reliable or proper public transport system is in place Diesel must remain affordable for people, especially for those on low or fixed income.

Eco-driving

In the short term, until there are alternatives, car transport will continue to dominate. Irish Rural Link believes that eco-driving training should be included as part of driver training and testing. Upon completing training, drivers tend to reduce their fuel consumption by 25% (Convery, 2008). Advancements in alternatives to fossil fuels for transport will also require commitment.

Community Wetlands Forum and Conservation of Peatlands/Wetlands

Peatlands and wetlands have many benefits for the climate and water quality. If these are used and managed properly, they have the potential of playing a major role in tackling climate change.

Carbon Storage

Peatlands and wetlands store twice as much carbon than forestry, making them a viable means of removing carbon from the atmosphere. However, when they are burned or drained for agriculture, they go from being a carbon sink to a carbon source. CO₂ emissions from peatland fires, drainage and extraction equate to 10% of all annual fossil fuel emissions.

Water Purification

Peatlands and wetlands can also assist in water purification by filtering contaminants. They purify and filter harmful waste from water. Some of the pollutants from pesticides, industry and mining, including heavy metals and toxins are absorbed by wetland sediments, plants and marine life⁴. They can also regulate flooding by acting as a natural reservoir, absorbing, storing and slowly releasing water in a catchment area.

⁴ RAMSAR “Wetlands Why Should I Care?”

http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/factsheet1_why_should_i_care_0.pdf

Community Wetlands Forum

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The initiative came from community groups involved in wetland conservation who were developing the idea of wetlands as assets for their communities, as well as work undertaken by Irish Rural Link on behalf of communities affected by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). Since its inception, the CWF has held a number of meetings and visits to member sites, and in April 2016, the Forum agreed a constitution and launched its Strategic Plan in May 2017. Membership of CWF is open to community groups involved in wetland conservation, as well as other organisations and individual stakeholders who support the aims and objectives of CWF. The main aim of the CWF is to provide a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups based on the principles of community development namely empowerment; participation; inclusion; self-determination; and partnership. Community Engagement model is used by CWF which gives communities a greater sense of ownership of their local peatland/wetland placing a higher value on it and more of a willingness to protect it.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector has an important role to play in climate change mitigation. Supports for farmers already in place must continue and more awareness must be made in reduction of greenhouse gases among the agricultural sector.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'