



Statement of Strategy 2015-2017

Contact
Seamus Boland or James Claffey

1- Introduction

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities. IRL welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission on the Statement of Strategy 2015-2017. As an organisation, Irish Rural Link prioritises social inclusion as their main concern in any submission and an aspect that doesn't change in the Statement of Strategy 2015-2017.

1.2-Submission Structure

The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources has a broad remit which affords a problem in terms of developing a strategy. To provide organisation to this submission, it will be structured around the areas of priorities identified in the previous statement of strategy 2011-2014, these areas of priority include housing, water services, environment, local government & franchise, communities & rural development, planning and Met Éireann. IRL will provide their perspective on how these areas can be more socially inclusive to incorporate the most marginalised in Irish society. Before delving into these priority areas, this paper will offer some background on issues affecting rural residents such as social inclusion, poverty, unemployment etc.

1.3- Social Inclusion

Social Exclusion - Definition

The process whereby certain groups are pushed to the margins of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, low education or inadequate life skills. This distances them from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and little chance of influencing decisions or policies that affect them, or of bettering their standard of living.

What are the factors of social exclusion?

- Lack of money or other resources
- Discrimination against particular groups or categories of people
- "Physical" barriers such as a lack of transport or the absence of services/facilities in an area
- Lack of confidence to participate in society

- Lack of skills/qualifications which may be needed for social and economic participation

Other definition.

- “People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.” Government Definition 1997.

Applied to rural areas, social inclusion is characterised under the following headings

1.3.- Poverty:

Rural Poverty as has been stated by numerous studies is often invisible in comparison to obvious urban decay, which can demonstrate obvious signs of the effects of low income. The cost of living in rural households is generally €100 per week higher than their urban counterparts (Vincentian partnership and Irish Rural Link Study 2010). The Teagasc farm income survey continuously shows that average farm income which ranges from as low as €17k to €23 per annum, is a long way behind the average industrial income of €34k. It is obvious that many farms depend on outside income to subsidise the family farm. According to research done by Social Justice Ireland¹, there are twice as many people at risk of poverty in rural areas compared to their urban counterparts. This research is reinforced by the CEDRA report² which also states there is twice the number of rural residents at risk of poverty.

1.3.2- Unemployment:

Currently Ireland’s unemployment figure is at 12%, with unemployment in the regions up to as high as 14.3% in the Border, Midlands and Western Area³. All other economic data, which includes housing demand, emigration and migration figures demonstrates that there is a widening gap between large areas of population and the smaller towns and villages. Equally

¹ Social Justice Ireland (2014) National Social Monitor 2014, www.socialjustice.ie/content/publications/national-social-monitor-2014

² Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (2014) “Energising Ireland’s Rural Economy.

³ Border, Midlands and Western Assembly (2010) Socio Economic Data. Available on website-
<http://www.bmwassembly.ie/region/indicators.html>

data emanating from farm incomes is showing signs of dis-improvement. The need to generate employment along with the wider economic and social activity is now paramount given the threat to public investment in services.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy should acknowledge the characteristics of social exclusion as they apply to rural communities, with particular reference to rural isolation, and poverty indicators as published in the Trutz Hasse index on www.pobal.ie

2- Housing

It is well documented that Ireland is in the middle of a housing crisis with no end in sight. There is a common misconception that homelessness is isolated to the major urban centres but the simple fact is rural homelessness is invisible. Dublin accounts for 62% of the homeless population though the surrounding counties of Meath, Kildare and Wicklow recorded the lowest homeless population, it is clear that homeless people in rural areas are forced into the urban centres to avail of vital resources. Rural areas were and are not equipped to cater for the rising homeless population. Those who are lucky enough not to end up on the streets are forced to move in with friends and family. The main objective that this strategy should aim to achieve is to reduce the number of people sleeping roughing. Every citizen has the right to appropriate shelter.

It is estimated that the Irish economy spends 1 billion per year on housing supports⁴, the strain on the public resources cannot continue. Less than half a million households own their own homes outright, this portrays a clear message that the majority of Irish households are in a vulnerable position. The homeless crisis is only one aspect of the current housing problems, in rural Ireland especially there is a large number of sub standard housing. Rural houses are inadequate in terms building standards due to their age, insulation etc. Irish Rural Link calls for greater support to be offered to rural households who suffer from a lack of a good quality household. Elderly people especially live in poor quality housing and do not have the finances to bring them up to modern day building requirements.

⁴ Department of Expenditure and Reform, *Social Housing Supports*, Comprehensive Review of Expenditure (2012).

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

While housing is largely a function of the Department of Environment; it is also a concern of DCENR, mainly because of the issue of fuel poverty and the proposed changes affecting domestic fuel supply as a result of the Peatlands directive.

It is the belief of IRL that there is a need for a comprehensive retro fitting of houses in rural Ireland; beginning with the targeting of houses inhabited by older people and people affected by social disadvantage.

The availability of social housing in rural areas needs to be examined.

3-Water Services

3.1- Water

It is fair to say that the handling of water charges has been a public relations disaster. Irish Rural Link understand that water charges are needed to reserve and invest in Ireland's water infrastructure but Irish Rural Link cannot accept is that there is households that are on constant boil water notices. It is unfair and morally wrong to expect these households to pay for undrinkable and in some cases dangerous water supplies. Irish Rural Link believes that ability to pay is the key consideration. Water charges must not place undue pressure on households that are on low incomes. IRL would ask that appropriate water affordability measures be developed in consultation with all the relevant stakeholders, and regularly reviewed. Water affordability measures must be introduced to those in receipt of social welfare payments; those who are in work on a low income and those who face very high water charges by reason of age, disability, illness or household size.

An area of concern for Irish Rural Link is the impact water charges will have on young people over the age of 18 living at home who are unemployed. Students living away from home are an area of confusion. Questions such as which address do they pay their water charges at? Their home address or their college address? Where is their allowance going to be assigned? Rural students especially are under significant financial strain due to the increase in the student contribution and accommodation. In the case of an apartment block will each apartment have a meter or will there be one meter for the entire building? If the latter how would the apartments be separated? What remains clear is that there is a clear lack of information being presented to the public? Public education is needed immediately on how

water charges can benefit Ireland as a society and how the charges will apply to all individual households. There is a requirement for customer awareness about how to apply, how to pay, and how to best manage domestic water use.

Irish Rural Link must state categorically that Irish Water has to remain a public service allowing the company to benefit the Irish people in contrast to the private sector where its focus would be on profit over service.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy should reflect the need to engage with the public in a comprehensive information and education process. There is a clear cost in terms of water provision, security of supply and quality of supply. The strategy must seek to explore all options in terms of the financing of water in the long term.

3.2 Septic Tanks

Early this year, inspection of septic tanks began around the country by the local authorities and for many rural residents this sparked fear. Many septic tanks have been left in decline since their construction due to a lack of education on maintenance. Many people are living in fear of inspections due to the cost of bringing their tank up to standard. From the initial round of inspections up to 75% of septic tanks failed in some counties. The majority of these were down to minor problems such as sludging or lack of maintenance. The tanks with larger structural damage will cost a great deal more to fix for which there is a maximum grant of 4000 euro available. Irish Rural Link is calling for an increase in the level of the grant available aimed at low income families and elderly people. The staging of the grants is also an issue that needs to be addressed. There is currently an 80% grant to a maximum of 4,000 euro for incomes under 50,000 while there is 50% available to a maximum of 2,500 euro for incomes between 50,001 and 75,000. IRL is calling for the grants available to be increasingly staged as families earning just over 50,000 euro could lose up to 30% of the grant available for being relevantly over the limit.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy will need to acknowledge that septic tanks, mainly in rural areas, are the main system for sewage disposal from households. Again the management of regulation in this area is with the Department of Environment. However the affects of septic tanks in terms of

the pollution of underground water systems may come into the ambit of a number of departments. DCENR will need to examine the issue in terms of issues that affect the department.

3.3- Rainwater harvesting

As part of our submission to the EU rural development programme, we have proposed a rain-water collection system should be installed in every farm.

Water is an increasing cost to farmers and obligations under the Water Framework Directive reinforce the need for farms to make the most efficient use of water possible. Farming’s intensive use of water has implications for the water reserves of the wider community. Farms have large areas of roofed sheds and concrete yards and there is significant scope to harvest, collect and recycle the water from these, enabling it to be used in farm activities or - if suitably treated - as high quality drinking water. In light of this Irish Rural Link propose a supports scheme.

The objectives of such a scheme are:

- To conserve water.
- To make farms more self sufficient in terms of water usage.
- To create employment in rural areas.

Cost per farm unit ⁵

Fittings	€2,028
Precast Reinforced Concrete Tank	€1,500
Installation Costs	€800
Total	€4,328
Grant 12.5%	€516
Total cost to farm	€3,814
At an average saving in water	

⁵ This study and report were undertaken under the auspices of the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee by a project team from the School of Civil and Structural Engineering at Dublin Institute of Technology.

charges of €1,000 per year the farmer could expect to pay the capital cost in just over three years	
---	--

Based on an estimate that there are 135,000 farms in Ireland and that such a proposal would be targeted at 100,000 farms; the overall cost to the EU rural development programme would be 50 million.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The collection of water and its treatment will be necessary so that Ireland achieves maximum efficiencies. DCENR's role will be to assist Departments who are responsible for this area to develop technical solutions as well as advise in terms of climate change policy.

4 -Environment

Ireland's environment is globally known for its natural green landscape which due to increased industry has come under threat. The protection of Ireland's nature resources is not only vital to the national economy/recovery but our environment conservation and health.

Indeed the recognition by all institutions that the protection of the environment is now of paramount importance, is evidence that supports for all job creation opportunities in rural areas are properly organised and that skills essential to the promotion of environmental measures are retained in rural areas and are such that the complement develops in the wider agricultural arena.

The new Rural Development Programme (RDP) must emphasise how to address the issue of climate change. Irish Rural Link would be critical of the RDP in terms of its lack of commitment to environmental concerns.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

Irish Rural Link believes that supporting rural communities to develop energy cooperatives is an example of how this can be achieved while harnessing local assets. It is also believed for environmental protection to be achieved; environmental education needs to become a priority. It is only through education that environmental protection can be understood at a larger scale.

4.1 Carbon Tax

A lack of a public transport options in rural areas necessitates car ownership in order to access employment, basic services and amenities. Irish Rural Link believes the introduction of the carbon tax is an unfair tax on rural communities. Carbon tax cost 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 to be paid by someone living in inner-city Dublin is €25 but people living in the countryside could face bills of up to €275.⁶

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy should acknowledge that carbon tax measures should be accompanied by initiatives that assist communities to have access to alternative options

4.1.1-Fuel Costs

Increased fuel costs will increase the cost of living in rural areas, compounding the effects of a carbon tax with relatively little return to the exchequer and should not be introduced.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

Again the strategy must assist the process of exploring alternative fuel sources for domestic supply and encourage a programme for retro fitting houses.

4.1.2- 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.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy must reflect the above.

4.1.3- Commuting Patterns

Regional and Sub-regional employment stimuli represent one of the key ways in which commuting patterns, fuel consumption and carbon emissions can be addressed in a manner that supports local communities.

⁶ “STRIVE- Science and Sustainability- Research based knowledge for Environmental Protection” EPA and ESRI 2010

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

The strategy must commit to examining work patterns and manage studies which explore alternative ways of work. Clearly the failure to establish broadband must be addressed and should inform strategy as a matter of urgency.

5- Local Government & Franchise

The local government sector has a major impact on the political, social, economic and environmental well being of the country. The effect of local government on rural communities cannot be underestimated. The cost saving recommendations around cross cutting and shared services contained in the Local Government efficiency review must be implemented instead of further cuts to the Local Government Fund. Cuts to the Local Government Fund lead to Local Authorities cutting services and refusing to reduce rates and charges which drastically increase the cost of doing business.

6- Communities & Rural Development

Central to community & rural development is the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. The Department of Environment, Community and local Government is to be allocated 153 million (7% of Pillar 2) for the delivery of the LEADER mechanism which will come under priority 6 of promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas set out in the framework for design. Rural Development is of imperative importance when it comes to rural sustainability. The importance of the LEADER mechanism for rural sustainability is illustrated by the National Rural Network who stated that “LEADER encourages population retention by assisting local communities to undertake a range of social, cultural and economic intervention”. In this report, it can be seen that the LEADER mechanism goes a long way towards repairing the imbalance caused by regional funding of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

Communities and Rural Development measures are heavily influenced by the EU rural development programme. In addition to that it is essential for local government agencies to engage with the wider rural community, not just the beneficiaries of the RDP. Clearly such engagement must target people who are most vulnerable.

6.1 Social Inclusion Monitoring

In the previous programme, there was not such an indicator allowing us the opportunity to gauge the impact it had on those who are often excluded. It is suggested that an independent organisation like Irish Rural Link is asked to conduct the desk based evaluation as they can form an independent evaluation of the success or failure of the RDP to incorporate social inclusion measures. It is not the case that only some of the measures in the RDP could be monitored but all the measures could and should be evaluated with a social inclusion aspect. In the case of the LEADER mechanism the evaluation should include that the funding has benefited the larger community and have a lasting effect.

Irish Rural Link would like to put forward the recommendation that the following measures should be monitored and evaluated in terms of social inclusion. We would suggest that this monitoring could be conducted through desk research as to not incur further administration costs that would take away funds from other measures. Without this monitoring and evaluation there will be no method of gauging the success or failure of the Rural Development Programme 2014- 2020. In terms of the agricultural measures, it is recommended that the success of the measures is evaluated in terms of its uptake among low income farmers and farmers who are involved in farm assist, rural social scheme, small farmer assistance etc. Through this process it can be seen that the marginalized members of people in rural areas are not being excluded from the RDP. It is only through research like this that conveys a high uptake of low income farmers to the scheme that will deem the RDP 2014-2020 an overall success.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

Similar to above recommendation

6.2 Sector Bias

Irish Rural Link is frustrated by the new rural development programme 2014-2020, believing that the programme does not sufficiently focus on rural and community development. All future rural development funding programmes need to be much more sector neutral and focus on job creation and the long-term sustainability of the rural economy instead of subsidising declining sectors. It is recognised that agriculture represents a large proportion of the rural community but the rural residents not directly involved within agriculture need to be considered and have their views voiced for rural areas to reach their full potential. It is the

view of Irish Rural Link that rural residents that are not directly involved within agriculture are unfairly been excluded from support aimed at rural areas and communities. The significances of rural areas has never been so evident but its significance does not solely rely on agriculture. Rural communities have an important role to play when it comes to environmental sustainability, renewable energy, tourism etc. The most isolated of rural areas are being forgotten about leaving its residents marginalized in terms of support and funding.

A background note circulated to the Department's Consultative Committee on CAP post 2013 states "Ireland's view is that the core purpose of rural development policy is to support farmers in developing their productive capacity while securing the environment and ensuring the well-being of the wider rural society." While we accept the core thrust of this, we are strongly of the view, that the future rural development policy must take on board the diverse nature of rural areas (both economically and socially) and the fact that support for agriculture alone is not in the best long term interest of rural communities.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

Future rural development policy must offer an opportunity to build a truly resilient rural economy.

6.3 Bureaucracy

Through consultation with our members nationally the application for LEADER funding was identified as a drawback of the last Rural Development Programme. Members argued that there was too much administration involved in the process. Members are appealing for a standard application form nationally that will allow the applications to be largely understood as well as making the process more socially inclusive allowing more communities to draw up an application. Another suggestion that was proposed was to stage the application process, allowing the organisations more time to complete the application as well as continuing their general duties.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

In general DCENR should minimise bureaucracy when designing systems which liaise with the public.

7- Planning

The main issues relevant to planning in rural areas are the concentration of laws which prevent businesses from setting up. Many farm businesses are frustrated by the planning laws and as a result fail to establish.

In overall terms the lack of a rural development strategy, similar to the 1998 rural white paper is stifling macro type planning in rural areas. This has specific effects on the well being of small towns and villages.

Recommendation for inclusion in strategy

DCENR should reflect the need for a proper and comprehensive rural and regional planning mechanism to address weaknesses in rural regions.

8- Conclusion

The Department of Environment, Community and Local Government are facing huge challenges in this strategy such as the changes to local reform, distribution of LEADER funding, housing, water charges etc. The implementation of this strategy is going to be crucial to the development of rural Ireland. Now that the national recovery has started it is time to reintroduce the services that were reduced during the economic crisis. There is a clear lack of education and information available around water charges and septic tanks. IRL deem that some of the controversy surrounding water charges and septic tank inspections could have been prevented if the relevant information was conveyed through community groups instead of drip fed through the media. LEADER funding is the single greatest source of funding for rural areas to develop, the maintenance of a “bottom up” approach is crucial to develop projects that best advance rural communities as communities know themselves what is needed in their area.

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 300 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.'