

## INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT - A SOLUTION TO RURAL POVERTY?

JOINT NORTH SOUTH CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY  
THE COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY AND THE RURAL ACTION PROJECT

GALWAY, 8TH - 9TH APRIL 1988

### KEY POINTS ARISING

#### POVERTY AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The underlying concern expressed both by representatives of local community organisations and by Philip Lowe speaking from the perspective of the European Commission was the extent to which many of the more remote rural areas had missed out on the expansion of the national and overall EC economy and failed to benefit from the EC agricultural policies. The problem of underdevelopment was repeatedly highlighted as the main cause of poverty in rural areas with people feeling that such areas had become politically and economically marginalised. This manifests itself in the form of low household incomes, poor physical infrastructure, dependent population structures, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, emigration, high levels of dependence on social welfare, uneconomic small farms, the lack of basic services and amenities, weak community support mechanisms for those at risk and a general sense of remoteness and powerlessness.

In such areas it was widely accepted that conventional top-down development policies which have been primarily focussed on promoting capital-intensive production dominated agriculture and foreign-based industrial expansion had failed and that an alternative bottom-up approach to the development of such areas was needed. Thus there was a general welcome for the interest of the EC and the Government in developing an alternative comprehensive

programmatic (rather than sectoral) approach to the needs of such areas through promoting the concept of Integrated Rural Development.

It was stressed that if IRD programmes are to benefit the most marginalised and needy areas then there must be a mechanism established that will prioritise such areas when IRD programmes are being established.

#### ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR IRD PROGRAMMES

The point was repeatedly made that there is a significant history of rural community development projects in Ireland which have adopted an integrated approach. It was stressed that new IRD programmes in Ireland, or for that matter at EC level, should not reinvent the wheel but should build on the experiences and lessons available from this tradition and try and remove some of the institutional difficulties that such projects had experienced. Examples mentioned included the co-operative movement in the Gaeltacht, rural community councils, various EC poverty projects and the burgeoning community enterprise network. This tradition was well illustrated by the inputs from representatives of different rural projects from the North and South attending the conference.

Arising from discussions based on peoples past experience a range of points were repeatedly highlighted which delegates considered essential if IRD programmes are to be successful.

1. Planning: Successful rural development depends on a really effective planning phase which involves the whole community in identifying both the problems and resources available and drawing up a clear programme of action to develop all aspects of community life. In other words this means developing an overall framework for the development of an area to which the whole community is committed and prepared to act on. It is very important to spend time in this planning phase rather than move straight into action. The process is very important as it helps to mobilise the community. Undue dependence should not be placed on outside consultants rather necessary professional help should be given to local communities to produce their own

plans. Once plans are developed they should be treated as rolling plans that can be adapted and not as some rigid blue-print.

2. Community Involvement, Participation and Control: A key feature in successful rural development programmes in the past has been a very high degree of community involvement and awareness. Linked to this has been a very real sense of control over the development process by local people. This implies a bottom-up process of development building on existing networks on the ground, especially the work of local development organisations. In some areas there will already be a strong tradition of such an approach and in others this will have to be built.

3. Community Development: Integral to any IRD programme should be a community development process. This is vital if local groups are to be developed, if there is to be active participation and involvement in the programme and if there is to be a co-ordination of efforts locally. This means providing the necessary resources to employ community development staff, develop training opportunities for local people and organise meetings and activities. Funds should be made available for this.

4. Lessening Dependence: A key element in any approach to integrated rural development must be to look at ways of lessening dependence and encouraging a sense of initiative and a belief that change and progress is possible. Thus the primary emphasis should not be on providing a package of grants which often just encourages "farming" for grants and creates dependency. There needs to be much deeper planning based on the needs of the area and grants should be provided for specific projects arising from this planning process. An emphasis on community development and community involvement as outlined above will also contribute to lessening a sense of dependence. There should also be careful thought given to aspects of the social welfare system that may act as disincentives to unemployed people becoming involved in community activity or which may discourage people from developing alternative farm-based activities.

5. Comprehensive Approach: In developing a rural area it is very important to look at all the needs of the area and to co-ordinate plans

across a range of issues. Thus plans must be concerned with improving the quality of life for everyone in the area, the old and the sick as well as the economically active. The aim should be to try and develop an environment which will keep people in the area and which will help to build a balanced population structure. Experience shows that economic development is closely connected with the development of all other aspects of community life. This is even more important with the decline in the importance of agriculture. It means that it is vital to adopt a wide-ranging but integrated approach to development. Plans should include as many as possible of the following areas:

Industrial Development (based on development of natural resources, small industry, local ownership)

Alternative Farm Enterprises

Forestry

Fishing and Mariculture

Tourism (especially farm-based tourism and special interest tourism)

Improvement of Infrastructure (especially roads and tele-communications)

Development of Services (health, education, pre-school, personal social services etc)

Provision of Amenities (halls, sports facilities etc)

Environmental Improvements

Cultural, Arts and Local Historical Activity

6. Personal Development: People are the main resource in any rural area thus it is important to develop as many opportunities as possible to increase people's skills and awareness of opportunities. This can range from literacy programmes through personal development courses for women's groups to training in co-operative development to programmes on alternative farming or mariculture or forestry and youth training schemes. As part of developing people's capacities at a local level there also needs to be an emphasis on fostering leadership skills.

7. Sustained Input: Developing communities takes time and experience suggests that a moderate sustained input of resources is more likely to succeed rather than a large but short-term input. On-going and sustained development is most likely to be maintained if sufficient attention has been given in the early stages to involving and developing the whole community.

8. Community Benefit: Effective rural development programmes should be concerned to reduce inequalities and avoid just benefitting those who are already well off in the area. To facilitate this priority should be given to developing locally owned enterprises rather than concentrating exclusively on inward development. There need to be special incentives and encouragement for community owned enterprises and a much more positive attitude by state agencies and financial institutions to co-operatives and other forms of community economic development.

#### STRUCTURES TO FACILITATE IRD PROGRAMMES

There was a fairly widespread experience that existing structures need to be adapted to facilitate rural development programmes. Changes were suggested at national, regional and local level which would foster a much more integrated approach. The main emphasis was on how local community involvement and participation can be ensured but it was generally recognised that this has to be linked into favourable national and regional structures.

1. A National Policy for Regional Development It was repeatedly stressed that the National Government must have a commitment to the development of strong regions. It was felt that in the past Government had become too centralised and too much control rested in Dublin with very centralised Departments. This tends to stifle initiative and the structures are too remote and insensitive for local communities to relate to or to encourage community participation. It was stressed that strong regional economies are essential for a strong national economy and as a counterforce to the continued spread of Dublin.

2. Inter-Departmental Co-ordination: There is a need to co-ordinate the policies of government departments so that they can respond to the needs of rural areas in a co-ordinated and efficient manner. This will be especially important if issues arising from pilot IRD programmes are going to be responded to in an effective manner. The principle of integration needs to be applied at national as much as at local level. In relation to IRD the Departments of Agriculture and Finance have key roles to play in such co-ordination.

3. Regional Authorities: The establishment of regional authorities as recommended in John Hume's report to the European Parliament was seen as a very important element in developing effective policies for rural areas. The example of SFADCO and Udaras na Gaeltachta was highlighted to emphasise how the resources and commitment of local people can be better harnessed for development if there is some strong regional body.

The Government's move to establish three regional steering committees, while not going as far as many delegates would have liked, was generally welcomed as an important step in the necessary direction. However it was stressed that it will be essential that these Steering Committees should include at least one person on each one who can articulate the concerns and the experience of local communities and encourage the bringing forward of plans from them. This will have the twin advantages of tying the energy, commitment and idealism of local groups into the process and demonstrating to the EC that their concern for community involvement and the most marginal areas has been taken on board in the preparation of regional plans.

As far as possible any move towards developing stronger regional structures should be built on the existing democratic base.

4. Rural Planning Groups: Great emphasis was placed on developing strong local community organisations and then on encouraging local groups and statutory agencies to come together as a co-ordinated rural planning group to develop a framework for development in their locality. This could then be used as a basis for discussion and negotiation with the regional

authority. By starting from the bottom-up a much more realistic assessment of needs is likely and also a much greater commitment to the process of development. As far as possible the onus for implementing plans and allocating available resources should be delegated to local co-ordinating groups, perhaps somewhat similar to the COMTEC model, but with careful monitoring by regional authorities. Implicit in the emphasis on local planning is much closer co-ordination between the various statutory bodies operating in rural areas and less competition between them.

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5th May 1988