

LOOKING BACK TO GO FORWARD

A REVIEW OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDING PROCESSES AND DELIVERY

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REPORT COMMISSIONED BY RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORK AND
NORTHERN IRELAND RURAL WOMEN'S NETWORK. THE FULL REPORT CAN BE ACCESSED AT
[HTTPS://WWW.NIRWN.ORG](https://www.nirwn.org) AND [HTTPS://WWW.RURALCOMMUNITYNETWORK.ORG/](https://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thirty years on from the introduction of the LEADER^[1] in Europe, the programme has left a noteworthy footprint across rural communities in Northern Ireland, not least the legacy of a bottom-up, participatory approach to development. It has improved local services, nurtured knowledge exchanges and stimulated local groups to engage in a plethora of activities. Rural policy in Northern Ireland is at a genuine crossroads. As policymakers identify new initiatives to replace EU programmes and to recover from the pandemic, there is an unquestionable opportunity for bold moves in the policy domain. It is an opportunity to try something new, to build on existing partnerships while also developing new relationships and alliances and supporting new forms of engagement. As part of this process, policymakers should commit to be inclusive and wide reaching in involvement. The other option is to rebuild what has gone before; that does not seem to be a shrewd alternative – the programme has always been packaged as a community-led process, but in recent years it has become much led by government, local and central. There needs to be a realignment of expectations from all rural development actors and a re-building of relations.

This report is based on research that evaluated community led local development (CLLD) in Northern Ireland, including different versions of the LEADER programme. It presents a range of recommendations to inform the development of new rural policy.

For ease of reading LEADER is still referred to here in relation to Community Led Local Development (CLLD), even though the process was mainstreamed within the European Union's Rural Development Programme under Priority 6 measures within the Northern Ireland programme.

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There is great willingness among different rural development actors to achieve a new rural policy that is suitable for the needs of rural communities in the twenty-first century. Already there are sizeable assets within the community that could be used to anchor activities. Rather than reinventing what has become a government-led initiative, DAERA has an incredible opportunity to nurture an innovative and truly inclusive rural development process. Time is of the essence; already there are concerns around the loss of expertise given the unavoidable gap between the recent programme and its replacement. By engaging with rural networks, development trusts and the range of other partners that exist in the energetic rural development landscape, DAERA, as the policy lead, sits in a powerful position.

Relationship building lies at the core of successful rural development. Trusting relations will be important and this requires all actors recognising each other's constraints and trying to work through those limitations to achieve maximum impact. Transparent processes are a fundamental pre-requisite to building trust and achieving inclusion.

The LEADER approach has become ever more selective, that is to say, it is less expansive than previous generations of the programme, most recently funding only specific activities across four key themes. This has shrunk the programme and it has lessened its vibrancy. Three measures can be taken to reverse that trend:

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1

Firstly, barriers to entry should be lowered including taking proactive measures to widen inclusion, all of which needs to be carefully monitored. Over the years, barriers have increased and, in the most recent programme, they served to exclude many small-scale and grassroots initiatives, leaving little space for bottom-up development. Consequently, data from Local Action Groups (LAGs) shows how Section 75 groups, including women, young people and people with disabilities, benefit much less from the programme and are less involved in its governance. Proactive measures can be taken to address this longstanding gap. Additionally, measures should be taken to engage with minoritized communities, particularly relevant in certain geographic areas.

2

Secondly, exchanging good practice both within Northern Ireland and with rural development actors from beyond should be brought back into the programme. Slowly this has been deprioritised when in fact it sustains responsible innovation and risk taking. Exit from the EU should not result in withdrawal from wider knowledge exchange networks. Besides, the Good Friday Agreement supports learning across the island and this should be used to enhance the new programme.

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Thirdly, genuine partnership building is needed to bring in different partners with different interests, to recognise the value of voluntary effort, to shift the programme away from its council-centric focus and to achieve a strategic approach overall. For sure, councils have a role to play, but as an equal partner in a wider process. All partners need to be respectful of their particular positions and limitations. Social partners bring a range of resources that should be recognised accordingly and yet the extent of voluntary effort on previous programmes was not formally captured. Failure to capture this work is a major gap that should be addressed.

DAERA meanwhile, as the core government body, has a leadership role to play. That role includes encouraging a collaborative approach as well as assuming a strategic role that ensures attention is paid to important societal issues, such as those emerging from the climate crisis. This requires working across traditional departmental 'silos' and engaging with other government departments where appropriate and necessary.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Community wealth building and local development**

- Lower barriers to entry; multiple entry points
- Reinvigorate grassroots involvement
- Support responsive and flexible solutions
- Support territorial development
- Capture the extent of voluntary effort within a programme

- **Partnership building with equal power relations**

- Clear alignment of expectations
- Re-balance power relations
- Re-connect with capacity building (and process of CLLD)
- Accept innovative approaches to engagement and participation

- **Strategic programme oversight**

- Introduce robust monitoring and evaluation
- Ensure proactive inclusion of women, young people and minoritized communities and other S75 groups in programme governance and as applicants and beneficiaries
- Move away from focus on spend
- Achieve a balance between focus on rural development budget expenditure with need to animate grassroots rural communities and new rural development actors.
- Capture social value including the value and impact of voluntary effort

- **Good practice – within and beyond Northern Ireland**

- Addressing equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion
- Engagement with TRPSI, Peace+, Participatory Budgeting
- Engagement with actors and policymakers beyond Northern Ireland

PRACTICAL ACTIONS THAT CAN BE TAKEN

1. Proactively encourage participation, e.g. provision of (funding) support for caring responsibilities to enable wide participation.
2. Annual (light-touch) reviews to consider gaps in inclusion and how they can be proactively addressed (S75 groups), particularly in relation to women, young people and minoritized communities.
3. Availability of development and support expertise to work directly with local communities – capacity building and animation.
4. Oversight committee should include some representatives from outside the programme e.g. Lottery, PEACE and from outside Northern Ireland to lever in the widest expertise and good practice.
5. The use of different means to consult, including social events in community spaces, events organised through youth organisations, and virtual activities.
6. Testing new ways of capturing 'value' and shifting the narrative away from jobs and economy to recognise wider benefits from community cohesion and wellbeing. Tools to explore this include Social Value Engine and wellbeing indicators.
7. Testing new ways of distributing funding e.g. participatory budgeting.
8. Support territorial development to ensure action goes beyond departmental silos. This could be through delegated funds to respond to ideas emerging from within the community that do not fall within programme parameters.
9. Provide accessible training for those wishing to become involved in delivery mechanisms.
10. Making funds available up-front for those groups with few resources.



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