

Death from Nostalgic Sentiment or A New Narrative for Rural Ireland?

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Table of Contents

4	List of Acronyms
5	Acknowledgements
6	Introduction
8	Death From Nostalgic Sentiment or a New Narrative for Rural Ireland? Mr Eugene Cummins – Chief Executive, Roscommon County Council
10	Looking Forward, Not Back; Nostalgia and the Rural Idyll vs Sustainable Futures Prof. Des McCafferty – Head of Geography, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick
14	The Rural Narrative: Stuck in Nostalgic Sentiment and Political Opportunism? Dr Karen Keaveney – Assistant Professor of Rural Development, School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin & Senior Research Associate, ICLRD
17	Thinking Rural: Reflecting on the Impact of Rural Proofing on Northern Ireland Policy Mr Colm McQuillan – Director of Housing Services, Northern Ireland Housing Executive
20	Perceiving Futures in the Present: Exploring the Future Creativity of Place Mr Kevin Murray – Director, Kevin Murray Associates & Honorary Professor of Planning, University of Dundee
23	Valuing Towns: People Make the Difference Ms Pippa Coutts – Policy and Development Manager, Carnegie UK Trust
28	Breaking ground: European Approaches to Changing Rural Narratives Ms Caroline Creamer – Director, International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD)
33	Rural Shrinkages: A New Narrative for Rural Ireland Dr David Meredith – Senior Research Officer, Teagasc
36	Concluding Remarks: A New Narrative for Rural Ireland Mr Conor Skehan – School of Spatial Planning, Technological University Dublin

List of Acronyms

AIRO	All-Island Research Observatory
ANRU	Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine - National Agency for Urban Renewal
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
ED	Electoral Division
ESPON	European Spatial Planning Observation Network
EU	European Union
ICLRD	International Centre for Local and Regional Development
MAUP	Modified Areal Unit Problem
NDP	National Development Plan
NDBP	Non-Departmental Public Body
NHS	National Health Service
NI	Northern Ireland
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NPF	National Planning Framework
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RoI	Republic of Ireland
SRUC	Scotland's Rural College
UK	United Kingdom



Acknowledgements

Co-operation Ireland and the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), in conjunction with the All-Island Local Authority Forum, wish to thank all those who contributed to our joint conference and to the publication of this report of the proceedings. We are most grateful to our funders: the Department for Communities (NI) and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (ROI), without whose support this event would not have been possible. Both Departments have consistently supported collaborative work among local authorities north and south and continue to make valuable contributions to the work of Co-operation Ireland and the ICLR. As this report attests, our conference speakers provided an extensive range of insightful, constructive and challenging papers, and we thank each of them for their contributions. This record of proceedings enables dissemination of the insights and expertise they shared during the conference, thus providing learning and direction for the future sustainable and vibrant development and growth of rural communities across the island of Ireland.

We wish to thank Eugene Cummins for his commitment to, and his passion for, rural areas and for working closely with Co-operation Ireland and the ICLR in the design and delivery of this conference. We also wish to thank Dr Brendan O’Keeffe, who compiled this report.

Introduction

“So let’s not wrap the death of rural Ireland in a shroud of nostalgia. Piety has never done the real ‘rural Ireland’ any good. Dying worlds attract romantics, and since ‘rural Ireland’ has been dying for 170 years, it has been romanticised up to its neck. The compensation for depopulation, underdevelopment and neglect has been reverence, homage and sentimental devotion”

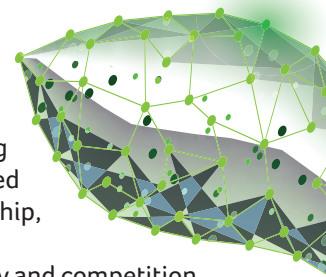
Fintan O’Toole,
Irish Times, 29 June, 2019

In his forthright analysis, O’Toole argues that rural communities deserve supportive national policies and consistent decision-making. Civil society organisations, generally with the support of their local authorities, are creating structures, delivering projects and forging networks. They are successfully promoting community development, social inclusion, the integration of newcomers, enhanced service delivery and environmental protection. Their ability to promote vibrant and sustainable communities is reliant on concerted action on the parts of all tiers of government and a shared vision among stakeholders.

Too often, governance has been disjointed, and the vision for rural Ireland has been blurred by the mists of nostalgia, and false perceptions. Despite its destructive and delimiting effects, much of the narrative about rural Ireland, in both jurisdictions, continues to be about the challenges and the problems, rather than about the realities, solutions and potential. Successive OECD reports, and indeed the ongoing work of the ICLRD, have demonstrated the merits of place-based strategies that recognise diversity, and focus on the potential of places. Yet, we continuously hear about what the village used to be like in the 1960s or about the ‘good old days’ when the dancehalls were full and the purchasing power of the so-called ‘strong farmer’ sustained local businesses. As Queen Elizabeth II remarked during her state visit to Ireland, in 2011, we should be ‘able to bow to the past, but not be bound by it’.

Moving away from the shackles of nostalgic sentiment requires embracing realities and promoting new ways of ‘doing’ development, including:

- Geography matters – rural areas are diverse, and rather than having macro-level and top-down plans, we need bespoke and place-based strategies that are driven by local knowledge and civic leadership, including local government;
- Diversity and collaboration are strengths. Inter-community rivalry and competition need to give way to networking and collaboration. Just as in the private sector, collaboration enables a pooling of assets, promotes efficiencies and supports the generation of new synergies. National / regional policies and the actions of local authorities need to foster collaboration, including inter-jurisdictional and cross-border collaboration.



- The rural should not be equated with agriculture. The majority of people who live in rural Ireland, even in the most peripheral communities are not farmers. Therefore, rural economic development requires multi-sectoral investment. Indeed, agriculture is no longer just about food production; it is also about ecological services, and agricultural policy needs to catch-up with that reality; and
- Evidence is key. The term ‘evidence-based decision-making’ is often bandied about without really understanding or appreciating its meaning. If public bodies, including local authorities, are to be enabled to deliver for citizens, we need to continue to invest in systematic data collection, collation and dissemination, and to forge stronger links between academics, policy makers and service providers.

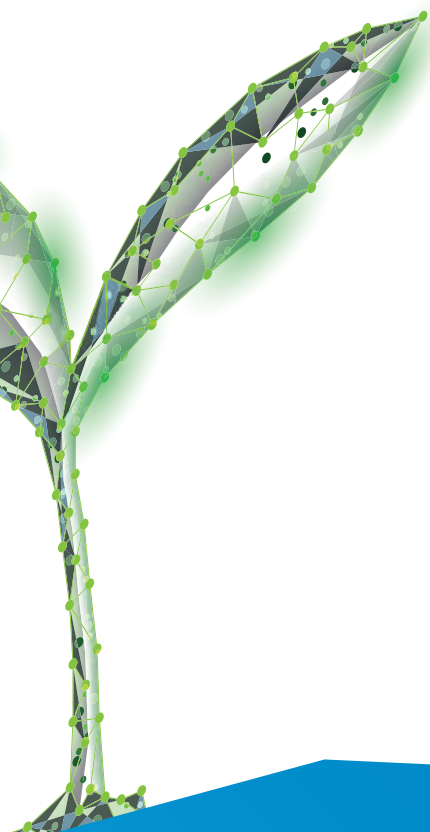
These realities and associated development trajectories are clearly articulated in this conference report. This report, along with the previous, Co-operation Ireland and ICLRD joint conference publications, offers clear, robust, insightful and constructive evidence, analysis, signposts and recommendations that are relevant to government and civil society. For local authorities, they demonstrate the pivotal role of civil leadership, consistent planning and collaborative governance – horizontally and vertically. Horizontal collaboration is about pooling the expertise across the local government sector, promoting best practice transfers, disseminating innovative solutions and undertaking joint projects. Vertical collaboration is about engaging meaningfully with local communities and with regional, national and EU authorities, so that local experiences shape policies and that investments are targeted and purposive.

Over the past decade, local authorities in both RoI and NI have undergone significant reforms. These reforms put us in a stronger position to positively effect change in rural areas. Through our various functional roles, we can ensure more effective service delivery and the pursuit of place-based interventions that map out clear, realistic and sustainable trajectories for places. Through our networking and collaborative engagements, we can collectively promote the mainstreaming of best practices, so that all tiers of government take a visionary approach to rural development that is rooted in realities and gives effect to the principles of sustainable development.

We commend this report to everybody with a stake in rural Ireland.

Eugene Cummins
Chief Executive,
Roscommon County Council

Mary MacIntyre OBE
Chair,
International Centre for Local and
Regional Development (ICLRD)





Death from Nostalgic Sentiment or A New Narrative for Rural Ireland?

Mr Eugene Cummins,
Chief Executive
Roscommon County Council

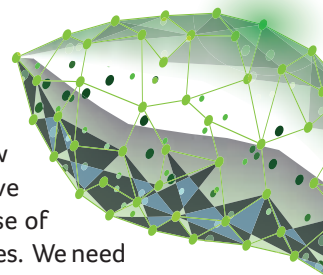
Nostalgic Sentiment is a concept that can be, both provocative and challenging. It has many aspects. These can include the ways in which we, as adults, long for our childhood days or perhaps our attempt to rekindle the fair days of old, when cattle were bought and sold on our towns' main streets. In this instance, nostalgic sentiment can represent a longing for the return of the horse-and-cart and the bicycle. In local government, nostalgic sentiment can see us harking back to a world without on-line shopping, as we try to justify commercial rates. Sentiment and pipe dreams can be seen in many large 'concrete boxes' – the five-bedroom homes for 1.4 children – that blight our countryside. Each of these are nails in the coffins of our town centres. In reality, we are looking at many buildings in our town centres that are 'dead', past their 'best-by' date, and whether we like it or not, when something is dead, it must be buried, or, in the case of town centres, should be demolished.

Nostalgic sentiment can sometimes make us see the past through rose-tinted glasses, and to make us overlook the fact, that in the past, people were not allowed to think for themselves, the wealthy and privileged made sure that the poor were kept in their place. Instead of longing for the "old days" and urban utility with questionable functions that have long since disappeared (for the good), we need to, instead, embrace and create towns for the future. We need to think and plan in a far more strategic and joined-up way – for the future – to use reason and logic – to incorporate an awareness of today's world – to be aware of the provenance of a town – to maximise natural resources and beauty. We must think of, and envision, town centres that work for families and communities. As local authorities, we need to ensure that town centres become places where people can meet one another, socialise, and 'sit and relax'. Vibrant town centres can rekindle our sense of what living is really about – the chats, the smiles, the social gatherings, the breaths of fresh air and real quality of life.

As regards Nostalgic Sentiment:

- We need to get over it;
- We need to plan for the future;
- We need to get rid of its chains and shackles;
- We need a different mind-set;
- We need to do what is right for the future of the town; and
- We need to give, create and define a new way of thinking without the decay of dereliction.

As we plan for the future development of our rural towns, we can draw on previous ICLRD / Co-operation Ireland conferences that have examined this theme, and we need, above all, to deal with the curse of dereliction. Dereliction is a particular scourge across Irish town centres. We need to think of it as a 'hole', with many experts looking into it, scratching their heads, not knowing what to do, nothing being done for decade after decade, while all the time the "hole" gets bigger. Despite various policy initiatives, research papers and incentives, the problem / hole still exists. While there has been extensive analysis and there is a general commitment to resolving the problem, there has been a deficit in terms of concerted action. In order to illustrate the type of action that is required and in order to chart contrasting experiences, I want to examine two case studies – Roscommon Town and Boyle. The former is a good example of where nostalgic sentiment is alive and well, while the latter, is letting it go and embracing the future.



We cannot be constrained by the restraints of the past, some of which are imagined.

In Roscommon Town, the cattle mart is in the town centre, and the sentient sounds of bellowing cattle being loaded onto lorries can be heard as one enters the nearby Dunnes Stores, Tesco or other shops, where people can enter and buy the same animals chopped and processed into little pieces neatly packaged on the shelves – horrible. In Boyle, on the other hand, one of the most prominent derelict sites in the town is the former Royal Hotel. The site overlooks the Boyle River, and was lying there and falling into decay until Roscommon County Council stepped in and bought it. The County Council had already intervened before the advent of schemes such as the current Town and Village Renewal Scheme. The Council then consulted with the local community and the elected members to prepare an integrated plan for the town and environs, entitled ‘Boyle 2040’; it is a clear vision for the future development of the area. This plan focuses on turning the town towards the river and linking it with Lough Key Forest Park. The community really bought into the plan, and although we are in the early stages of its implementation, its outputs are already evident. Business people, such as a local auctioneer, who had been badly hit by the recession, report a significant upturn in activity.

The contrasting trajectories of Roscommon Town and Boyle illustrate the importance of planning and the positive intervention of the local authority that are so necessary to arrest decline and prevent the deaths of town centres. Towns are dying, and more will die, and while we know what the cure is, there continues to be this unfortunate and persistent hankering back to Nostalgic Sentiment. We have some landowners, with unreasonable expectations, who are holding communities to ransom, who for whatever reason will not sell or tidy up their derelict eyesores. On top of that, we have the persistent blight of one-off rural housing. To make matters worse, and when preparing Local Authority Development Plans, our definition of forward planning consists of pages of maps coloured-in, without vision, imagination, illustration or hope. We need visions and representations that set out what the towns will look like and how people will live and interact in them.

In moving away from destructive nostalgic sentiment, three strategic approaches are needed as follows:

- Direct and proactive local authority intervention – not just to acquire sites, but to do something about them, as demonstrated by work on the old hotel site in Boyle;
- An Integrated Plan; and
- Community buy-in.

In the case of Boyle, we have an Integrated Plan – Boyle 2040 – a plan that has community buy-in and acceptance. That buy-in grew from a local realisation that the local authority cares, and that we were going to do something about the town. When these three ingredients are in place, change happens, and it can occur quickly. In addition to, and complementary to these, we need to encourage imagination, innovation and freedom – across all sectors. We cannot be constrained by the restraints of the past, some of which are imagined. This implies losing our obsession with architectural conservation and perfection – not being bound by nostalgic sentiment. We need to have the imagination and freedom to do new things. Perfection is costing us dearly. Just as we built motorways across Ireland – because they were needed – without preserving all historical sites, we need to rejuvenate our town centres, without preserving and protecting everything of the past.



Looking forward, not back: nostalgia and the rural idyll versus sustainable futures

Prof. Des McCafferty,
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University of Limerick.

This paper begins by offering some reflections on what nostalgia means and how it relates to the rural idyll. It then examines long-term rural, and by implication urban, change in Ireland. The paper concludes by considering some implications for sustainable development.

The Rural Idyll

Nostalgia is the longing that we all feel from time to time for things past. It can be a potent force, and it is evident in political discourse, not least in US President Trump's slogan 'Make America great again' or the catchphrase used by Brexiteers 'Get our country back'. Nostalgia is frequently linked to landscape and to place, as conveyed most powerfully through art. John Constable's 'The Hay Wain', which was painted in 1821 and George Vicat Cole's 'Harvest Time', which he painted in 1861, came at a time when England was industrialising and urbanising very rapidly. They depicted English landscapes and the associated ways of life, that, for many people, had been lost or were being lost. They were presenting an idealisation of rural areas, and thus contributing to the creation of the rural idyll. Novelists and poets of this period, including Thomas Hardy and John Clare, similarly sought to romanticise rural places and the ways of life that were associated with them. The development of the rural idyll was contemporaneous with a major transformation in the space economy. Large numbers of people were moving from working in rural areas to working in factories in the towns and cities.

In Ireland, the emergence of the rural idyll is associated with the Celtic Revival. We see this in landscape paintings, such as Paul Henry's 'Keel Village, Achill Island' (c. 1911) and his work, in the early 1940s, entitled 'The Turn of the Road', which romanticises the landscape of Connemara. Though coming much later than in Britain, the emergence of the rural idyll in Ireland also corresponds with urban growth. Indeed the writer and critic Declan Kiberd suggests that the whole notion of 'rural Ireland' only became possible when a sufficiently large number of people began to live in cities and major towns. The idealisation of rural Ireland is also evident in the political realm, as evidenced in the 1943 speech of then Taoiseach Éamonn de Valera, in which he referred to 'a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry'.

While the rural idyll has an artistic and political presence, in Ireland and beyond, it has been subject to critiques from both artists and academics. Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' and John McGahern's 'The Barracks' present a critical, if not harsh, image of rural Ireland. Interestingly, Kavanagh and McGahern were from rural Ireland, unlike many of the promoters of the Celtic Revival. Taking a more political approach, Shucksmith¹ has critiqued the promotion of the rural idyll as a middle-class imposition on rural areas and as a driver of rural poverty and disadvantage, sentiments that have been echoed in the Irish context by O'Toole². And as much as the artistic representation of rural Ireland has been contested, so also have the facts in relation to the dynamics of rural areas. It is to these that we turn next.

Rural Change in Long-Term Perspective

This section of the paper examines population change in the fifty years between 1966 and 2016. The comparatively long time span is designed to separate lasting and more significant changes from temporary or short-term trends. This particular period is of interest because it corresponds with Ireland's transition from a mainly rural society to

¹ Shucksmith, M. (2019) 'Re-imagining the rural: from rural idyll to good countryside', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 59, 163-172.

² O'Toole, F. (2019) "'Rural Ireland' has been romanticised up to its neck", *Irish Times*, 29th June.

In 1966, agricultural employment, which is predominantly rural based, accounted for almost one-third of all employment. By 2016, this figure had fallen to 5%.

a mainly urban one, and it is also the period in which planning becomes formalised, and acquires its legal underpinnings – beginning with the 1963 Local Government (Planning and Development) Act.

Taking the Central Statistics Office (CSO) definition of rural as ‘areas of open countryside and settlements with a population of under 1,500’, the total population of rural Ireland increased by 21%, from approximately 1.5 million in 1966 to 1.8 million in 2016. While there have been some dips at various points in time, the overall trend is upward, and the greatest increases occur during or after periods of economic expansion. Most of the population growth, in rural Ireland, has been in small settlements, rather than in the open countryside. Despite its upward trajectory over fifty years, rural population growth has not kept pace with national population growth. The result has been an urbanisation of the population – an increasing percentage living in urban areas and a decreasing percentage living in rural areas. However, when the trend in the rural population share is compared with countries that had similar (approximately 50 to 55%) levels of rurality in the mid-1960s – most of which are in Central and Eastern Europe – Ireland’s relative rate of rural decline is less marked. Consistent with this, across the EU-28 Ireland continues to have the sixth highest proportion of the population residing in rural areas – after Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Poland. (World Bank, 2019).³

In understanding rural population change, it is important to consider also the age structure. Ireland’s rural population has aged since 1966, with a decrease (-35%) in the youth dependency ratio and an increase (+5%) in the elderly dependency ratio. However, and perhaps surprisingly, these trends are even more marked among the urban population, which showed changes in the young and elderly dependency ratios of -44% and + 17% respectively. While the demographic vitality ratio in rural areas decreased by almost 6%, as compared to 2% in urban areas, there is no indication that rates of natural increase in rural areas are likely to show a sharp decline relative to those in urban areas.

If the level and structure of the population in rural Ireland have been comparatively stable, the same is certainly not true when we look at the economy. Between 1966 and 2016, Ireland experienced profound economic restructuring, marked by a considerable shift in employment from the primary (agriculture) sector to the tertiary (services) sector. In 1966, agricultural employment, which is predominantly rural based, accounted for almost one-third of all employment. By 2016, this figure had fallen to 5%. In 2016, the tertiary sector, which is mainly urban based, accounted for over-three quarters of all employment, as compared to two-fifths in 1966. Thus, economic change has massively out-stripped population change: while Ireland has experienced a very notable economic shift, this has not been accompanied by a warranted settlement system adjustment. Ireland’s experience contrasts with that of Britain, which, as noted earlier, experienced a major settlement adjustment – from rural to urban living – during its period of industrialisation.

Further insights can be gained by examining settlement patterns in Ireland over recent decades. This reveals one of the most important facts about Ireland’s settlement geography, which is that urban growth has been driven in large measure, not by urban areas, but by rural areas. In 1966, there were 1.47 million people residing in rural settlements with under 1,500 people. By 2016, the combined populations of these

³ World Bank (2019) Rural population (% of total population), indicator code SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS, updated 10/7/2019. Available online from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>

same settlements had increased to 2.14 million; this represents a net increase of 671,000, and it accounts for over one-third (34%) of total population growth in the State. In contrast, over the same period (1966 to 2016), the combined populations of the second-tier cities of Cork and Limerick accounted for just six percent of population growth in the State, and Dublin for a quarter (26%) of total population growth.

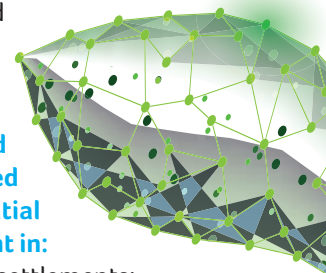
Crucially, this growth in rural settlements meant that they transitioned into urban settlements. Thus, between 1966 and 2016, the number of urban places in Ireland doubled, with an additional 103 'new' urban centres in the State. These centres have a combined population of almost 360,000. Five of them now have populations of over 10,000 (e.g., Ashbourne, Co. Meath), while a further eleven have populations of between 5,000 and 10,000. Most (69 of the 103), and all of the larger settlements among them can be classified as 'commuter towns'; the ratio of outbound to inbound commuting exceeds one. Indeed, in thirty-four of these new urban places, the ratio of outbound to inbound commuters exceeds three. The scale of outbound commuting from these settlements leads one to question if they can be considered as towns at all. Most of the new urban settlements, and in particular those with high levels of outbound commuting, are located in the commuter belts that have grown up around our cities. In the case of Limerick, they include Meelick, Sixmilebridge and Annacotty. In the case of Cork, they include Carrigtwohill, Castlemartyr, Cloyne and Rathcormac. Those around Galway include Bearna, Maigh Cuilinn and Oranmore. Similarly, and to a much greater extent, the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) has come to be ringed by several such settlements – extending across Counties Kildare and Meath in particular, but also evident in Wicklow and Laois. Thus, there is a distinctive geography associated with these new urban settlements.

The burgeoning in both size and population of the new urban settlements in the commuter belts is associated with, and partly responsible for, the underperformance of Ireland's second-tier cities in terms of population growth. All of Ireland's main cities have fallen short of the population targets envisaged in the 1968 Buchanan Report.⁴ By 1986, the State had attained 97% of the population level Buchanan had projected. Yet, the corresponding figures for Ireland's second-tier cities were: Cork 85%; Limerick-Shannon 65%; Galway 72%; and Waterford 43%, and their relative stagnation has persisted. Indeed, they have lost their distinctive niche in Ireland's settlement pattern.

In summary, in the fifty years during which we have had formalised and legally underpinned planning, in Ireland, we have experienced what can be termed 'hierarchical de-concentration with spatial decentralisation' (McCafferty, 2019).⁵ These patterns are evident in:

- The strong growth performance of many smaller settlements;
- A doubling in the number of urban places; and
- An urbanisation that has taken place in rural Ireland, rather than in pre-existing urban settlements.

Ireland's urbanisation patterns, over the past fifty years, are associated with commuting, and most of the urban settlements that have emerged are dormitory towns.



⁴ Buchanan, C. and Partners (1968) Regional Studies in Ireland. Dublin: An Foras Forbartha.

⁵ McCafferty, D. (2019) 'Fifty years of urbanisation in Ireland: Structural and spatial evolution of the urban hierarchy since Buchanan', Administration, 67(3), 65-89.

⁶ Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland 'CO₂ Emissions: Energy-related CO₂ by sector'. Available online at <https://www.seai.ie/data-and-insights/seai-statistics/key-statistics/co2>

Implications for Sustainable Development

There is a wide range of factors at play in Ireland's population geography over the last fifty years. One of these is the strength of the preference for rural living, in turn perhaps reflecting the persistence of a rural idyll. An arguable case can be made that the attachment to rural areas in Ireland, whether based on a rural idyll or not, has slowed the necessary rate of adjustment of population distribution to spatial economic change. In any case, we have developed a settlement pattern that raises serious questions about the key issue of sustainability which is increasingly front and centre of policy debates, both here and internationally. There are many implications for sustainable development arising from the rise of commuter settlements. Prominent among these is the growth in carbon dioxide emissions, associated especially with transport, which generates almost two-fifths of CO₂ emissions⁶. There are also lifestyle, health and community development implications associated with our spatial development model.

How has this model emerged? I believe that the dynamics of investment and spatial planning in Ireland have had parallels with Aesop's fable 'The Dog in the Manger', the moral of which is 'People often begrudge others what they cannot enjoy themselves.' We have a rural lobby (represented by the dog, sitting on the hay). The hay (symbolising large-scale investment in housing and associated infrastructure) is of little benefit to rural Ireland. Yet, the rural lobby has been determined not to allow the cities to attract this investment and population growth. The result has been our highly problematic pattern of rural-based urbanisation. Yet what rural Ireland requires is not more or bigger commuter settlements but a strong network of vibrant small and medium size towns, which in turn requires rational spatial planning. Now that we have a National Planning Framework (NPF) in place, we have an opportunity to ameliorate some of the ills and deficits that have been created. Yet, we have suggestions from some quarters that the NPF is forgetting rural Ireland. Unlike the Buchanan report, the NPF is on a statutory footing, and hopefully, it will not go the way of Buchanan.

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The Rural Narrative: Stuck in Nostalgic Sentiment and Political Opportunism?

Dr Karen Keaveney,
UCD School of Agriculture and
Food Science

Introduction

Much has been written and spoken about 'the rural' in Ireland. There is a tendency, in many media, to present rural as problematic – as something in need of solving. The challenges of living and working in rural places dominate political discourse and representation, while in many media outlets, a simplifying of the message around 'rural decline' seems to be the obvious approach. While there are definite challenges for rural areas, with some places and sectors in decline and /or struggling, the negative narrative does not fully represent the true picture of rurality – the realities of which are far too complex to represent so simply. This paper attempts to disentangle representations of the rural by examining three key areas in which we approach the rural, and the impact that approach has on politics, decision-making, and investment. The paper focuses on the three key areas of:

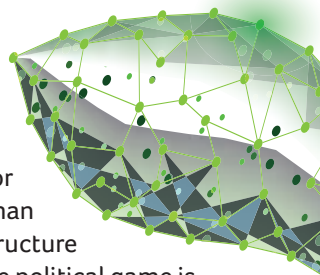
- (i) Narratives of decline;
- (ii) Subjectivity/Object(ivity); and
- (iii) The Value of Nostalgia.

Narratives of Decline

It is important to state, from the outset, that there are clear challenges in rural areas. However, two aspects of these challenges must be highlighted: firstly, where and when there are challenges, they are complex ones; and secondly, all rural places are also places of opportunity. Complexity is not often associated with rural areas, the lack of association between the two arising from an 'idyllisation' and myth-building of the countryside, which is not unique to Ireland. Furthermore, to develop a clear narrative is to stick to a simple story that is easily understood and communicated. And, herein lies the problem: no place is simple; no geography is a monoculture.

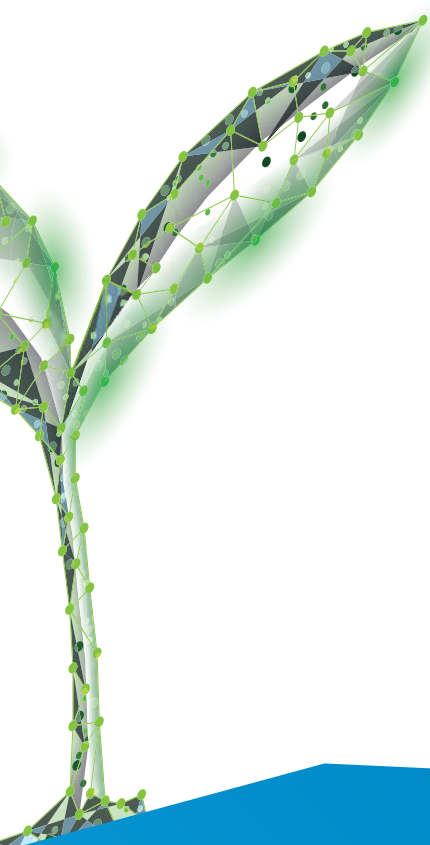
The first questions usually asked in the teaching of rural studies are along the lines of 'What is rural(s)?'; 'What it means to be rural?'; and 'What is the role of contemporary and future rurals?'. When examining the decline narrative, these very simple questions have very complex and often intangible answers. These are the questions with which we struggle, as academics, policy-makers, and elected representatives, in our everyday lives. For some of those representing the rural, it has been easier to follow the decline perspective, which has been driven, to a large extent, by the funding model of public investment. 'Whoever shouts the loudest' may be the philosophy behind the approach, but what damage has this caused in reality? An over-reliance on emotional and provocative stances may make for easy headlines, but it belies the complexity of the many rurals in existence. The funding model for regional development has relied increasingly on competition rather than on strategic collaboration. Add to this neo-liberalisation of infrastructure and service provision, and it would seem that the only way to play the political game is to, as we would say in Ireland, play 'the poor mouth', and argue that the rural is dying.

This paper argues that the predominant decline narrative is, in reality, doing a disservice to rural areas. It argues that, just as urban places deal in socio-economic complexity, so too does the rural. For example, if rural politicians were to align themselves with their urban counterparts, with whom they have much in common, they may be fearful that the rural will get lost within broader sectoral issues. Hence, by packaging 'a rural problem', we have set ourselves up to rely on emotive language, with weak evidence.





If we were to look at the world coldly and completely objectively, we might have a world of functional places without interest or variety.



Subjectivity/Object(ivity)

The idea that there has been a tendency to oversimplify the rural message in politics and the media, has meant that instead of relying on strong evidence bases for decision-making, there has been much more weight thrown behind anecdote and vignettes. The reasons behind that lack of strong evidence vary. Structurally, since the 2008/09 crash, far fewer resources have been invested in research and evaluation on topics related to rural Ireland, and this has meant that it has been challenging to have deep and rich analysis of change at a national, and internationally comparative, levels. Concurrently, however, we have much greater access to data such as the mapping and analysis carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), but again with little resources being invested in in-depth national and all-island investigation it is challenging to delve deep into those numbers. When this kind of situation arises, a more subjective approach follows, and this research deficit is feeding the decline narrative.

Representation is another reason behind lack of evidence. Prof. Michael Woods identifies that “the media ... (are) complicit in reproducing the interpretative frames of the countryside lobby, and in so doing they helped to reshape popular and political discourses of rurality” (Woods, 2010: 217)¹. For many representatives and representations of the rural, the nostalgic or decline perspective comes from a sense of being unable to come to terms with, a changing or changed countryside. The idea that farming is not the dominant employment activity in rural areas, for example, has been very apparent when one looks at census statistics, but, yet it dominates in policy making for rural populations that are, for the most part, well removed from the farm gate. The strong productivist agricultural lobby in Ireland has perhaps instead muted the other rural voices that represent 'anything other than farming'. That tension between the agricultural rural and another rural(s) will have to be more fully explored in order to create a holistic territorial policy for the countryside. Indeed, if we are to move away from subjective approaches to the rural, we must take a spatial justice² perspective where there will be an alignment of different rurals with different urbans to deeply understand the nature of decline, change, and opportunity.

The Value of Nostalgia?

“Nostalgia for some real or imagined state of harmony and centeredness once experienced in rural settings haunts the victim of mobile and fragmented urban milieux” (Buttimer, 1980: 166)³. If we were to look at the world coldly and completely objectively, we might have a world of functional places without interest or variety. When we adapt to our environment and recognise its distinctiveness without fetishizing its features, we find the place in between subjectivity and objectivity - the everyday and the special.

Nostalgia plays into the aforementioned decline narrative, but rarely is it asked: ‘decline from what?’ Sometimes, change is difficult to measure, but change such as demographics, unemployment, and employment bases can easily be monitored. However, if we break down these data we start to see that rural areas have more in common with many urban areas than we sometimes want to admit. These include ageing populations, youth out-migration, unemployment / underemployment, hidden poverty, disadvantage, low incomes, poor planning, weak infrastructure, and so on.

It is the nuance that varies - the geography of spatial phenomena that must be understood to fully understand what is happening and / or is likely to happen in rural places.

In the everyday geographies of peoples' lives, the reality of the lived experience is a complex mix. To represent the rural as a singular is to diminish it; belittle it; and misunderstand it - to ultimately let it down by not truly representing the complex rural that exists. The decline perspective at least acknowledges there is a problem; but relying on that approach does not come near a solution and does not recognise the positive actions taking place. This narrative allows for a misguided ideological approach to take hold, and does not give space for an evidence-based approach.

Concluding Remarks

Positively, in rural policy-making we are seeing movement towards opportunity approaches, and a concurrent move away from official decline narratives. For example, the OECD Rural 3.0 Policy (2018)⁴ explicitly identifies rural potential, coupled with strong investment and regional understanding to develop rural areas - in partnership with the urban. In Ireland, north and south, rural policies are changing to identify the potentials of rural places that can co-exist with agriculture, and that may address climate justice. In the Republic of Ireland's Action Plan for Rural Development, there is recognition that "... the perception that "rural" is synonymous with "decline" is wrong. Ireland's economy and heritage are heavily dependent on the contribution of rural areas" (Government of Ireland, 2017: 7)⁵.

In conclusion, we need strong evidence bases to inform, guide and support decision-making and policy formulation. These would also help to counteract the historical trend towards ideological decision-making. In engaging with the evidence, there is a need for bottom-up participation to understand the complexities and nuances of the rural. This acknowledges that there is no one rural nor does its narrative belong to one group or experience. There is a necessity to work towards strengthening the rural potential by delving deeper to build on what already exists in our countryside, villages and rural towns. Only through this, collaborative and evidence-based approaches will we recognise rural places as places of opportunity.

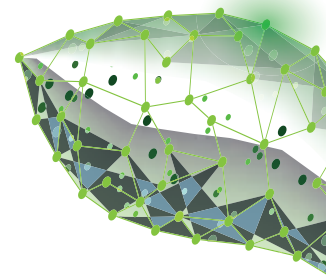
¹ Woods, M. (2010). Reporting an unsettled countryside: the news media and rural protests in Britain. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 2(2): 215-239.

² Kearns, G.; Meredith, D. & Morrissey, J. (eds) (2014). *Spatial justice and the Irish crisis*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

³ Buttner, A. (1980). Home, Reach and the Sense of Place. In A. Buttner & D. Seamon (Eds.), *The Human Experience of Space and Place*. London: Croom Helm.

⁴ OECD (2018). 3.0. A Framework for Rural Development. Policy Note OECD. Paris: OECD Publications.

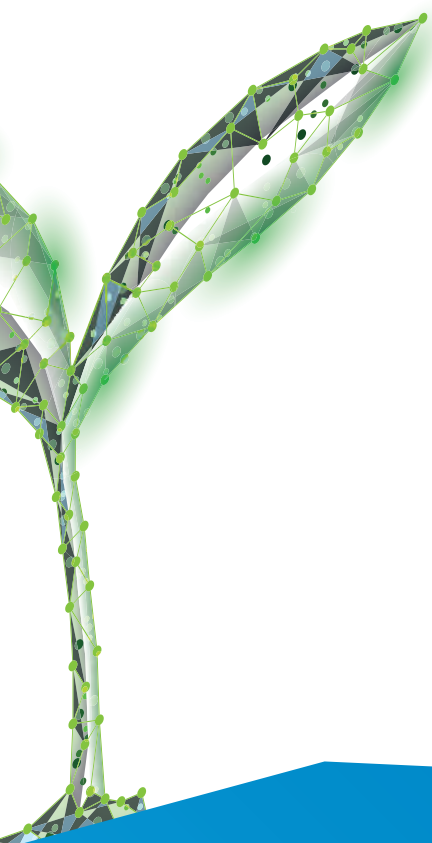
⁵ Government of Ireland (2017) *Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.





Thinking Rural – Reflecting on the impact of rural proofing on NI policy

Colm McQuillan,
Director of Housing Services,
Northern Ireland Housing Executive



Having grown up during the Troubles, in Northern Ireland, I am less inclined to succumb to nostalgic sentiment than are most people. Those times were terrible, not just politically, but also socially. In my own field, I recall that housing conditions were deplorable. The one positive that has come about from the realisation that those were difficult times was that the Northern Ireland State was obliged to look at things in relation to equality. Society began to think about the needs of different groups. This included taking into consideration the views and needs of the rural population of Northern Ireland. Thus, the equality agenda came to be reflected in ‘equality for individuals, equality for communities and equality for Northern Ireland’.

In Northern Ireland, rural areas are generally considered to be those settlements with populations of under 5,000. Therefore, rural includes areas of open countryside, hamlets, villages and small towns. Using this metric, thirty-seven percent of Northern Ireland’s population live in rural areas, and ninety-five percent of the landmass is ‘rural’. The spatial pattern is largely similar to that in the Republic of Ireland.

The work of the NI Housing Executive

The NI Housing Executive currently has a total housing stock of approximately 87,500, of which about 15,000 are in rural areas. While I do not want to succumb to nostalgic sentiment, I recall that when I joined the Housing Executive, we had a housing stock of over 180,000; we have since sold off about half of those homes. The rate of tenant purchase was higher in rural areas than in urban areas. While that was beneficial for the individuals / families who bought their own homes, it has left the Housing Executive with some challenges, not least, replacing housing stock. Organisationally, the NI Housing Executive is a hybrid – a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), established under the 1971 Housing Executive (NI) Act. Although housing is not within the remit of NI’s local authorities, we work closely with local government.

From the outset, the Housing Executive recognised the need for a differentiated approach in rural areas. This has been subsequently recognised in legislation. Since 2002, the Northern Ireland Executive has noted the need for rural proofing, and, over time, a momentum has built up for formalised approaches in that regard. The Rural Needs (Northern Ireland) Act, 2016 obliges public bodies (including government departments and local authorities) to “have due regard to rural areas in the development of all policy and public service delivery decisions”. Bodies are also required to monitor rural proofing activity, and to report, on this, to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in their annual reports. From our perspective, this statutory obligation is enabling, as it ensures that we, among others, deliver better outcomes for those who live in rural areas.

The Housing Executive has always had a positive focus on rural areas. In terms of housing conditions, in Northern Ireland, in the 1970s and 1980s, we were starting from a very low base – a lower base than in the RoI. In the mid-1980s, almost a quarter (24%) of all housing, in NI, was statutorily unfit, and the situation was more serious in rural areas. For us, and given our statutory duties to provide for people’s housing needs, it was important to undertake systematic research to quantify those needs and what ought to be done. We have been doing this consistently, since the 1970s, in respect of both private and public housing stock. One of our most seminal pieces of research was the 1987 study of housing in Roslea, Co. Fermanagh, which described some of the housing conditions there as ‘medieval’. Almost a quarter (23%) of homes lacked a bath / shower or internal water¹.

Delivering on rural proofing

While we were working from a low base, we succeeded in leveraging considerable investment and in transforming housing conditions. Our ability to do so was not unduly hampered by the political climate at the time. Regeneration involved widespread demolition and rebuilding. At one point in the 1980s, we were building 9,000 houses a year. Our housing stock is of good quality; it is among the best in Northern Europe. In terms of rural areas specifically, there was considerable uptake of our 'care and repair' grants. Above all, our experience indicates the importance of having a rural strategy in place. In practice, we have done so since the early 1990s – pre-dating the (2016) legislation. Another key for us has been securing community buy-in. We have a Rural Residents Forum, which meets on a regular basis, and ensures the Housing Executive delivers for rural areas. This mechanism adds to our level of accountability. We also focus on policy issues and the dissemination of best practices, and our publication, 'Rural Matters', is an important tool and platform in those regards. In terms of rural proofing, it is important to ask rural people how they want rural proofing to be done.

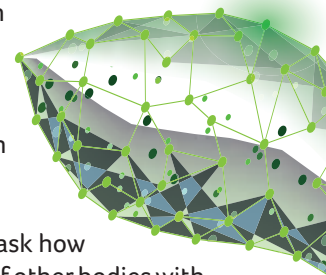
Best Practice

Much of our work in rural communities comes from our roles in supporting and funding housing associations. Rural needs also emerge through the various assessments we undertake, and these enable us to identify where to provide houses; over recent years, we have built about 2,000 houses per annum. This process is complemented by a 'latent demand test', which is particularly pertinent in rural areas. This involves us going to rural communities and saying 'although we don't have houses here, if we had, how would we go about meeting local housing needs'. We do about ten such assessments every year. This engagement has brought up and articulated needs to us that would otherwise have been hidden, and these needs are reflected in our strategic guidelines. Indeed, these guidelines commit our organisation to providing at least ten percent of housing in rural areas.

Rural proofing clearly has an important policy dimension, and is an integral part of our strategic approach. Furthermore, rural proofing is about doing new, positive and innovative things in rural areas. Among the exemplars of such positive action is the NI Housing Executive's development of housing on Rathlin Island. This community of twelve households makes a significant contribution to enabling the island to sustain its population. The effects on the island's school are already evident, and we envisage building a further ten homes on this island, which had been depopulating.

In reflecting on our experiences, we (in the NI Housing Executive) ask how the aforementioned legislation impacts on our work and the work of other bodies with which we engage. Dissemination of good practice is important, as is the need to question, when policies are being formulated, what their impacts on rural areas will be. If there is any possibility that the implications for rural areas will be less than positive,

¹ Northern Ireland Housing Executive (1987) The Roslea Study. An Investigation into Rural Housing in West Region. Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive.



mitigations must be put in place. We recognise that the legislation is in its infancy and that some bodies, including local authorities, can struggle to give full effect to it. Our experience is that rural proofing is part of a wider approach to equality; promoting equality for rural areas involves applying the same set of principles that are required to ensure equality for any population cohort. Evidence-based reporting, including to DAERA, is important in ensuring a continuous and systematic approach to all manifestations of equality proofing.

Concluding Remarks

Looking to the future, we see a number of challenges that need to be addressed. Foremost among these is the need to challenge the idea of nostalgia and to deal effectively with contemporary issues. In rural NI, those issues include access to transport and other public services. Apart from the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line, we have no rail service west of the (River) Bann, and bus services are poorer in the west of NI. We also have new and emerging issues, including rural homelessness, and as we deal with these challenges, it is important to think about how we approach those who are affected by homelessness and ensure they are not moved away from their communities. We note a need for more temporary accommodation solutions in rural areas. We are also dealing with persistent issues of fuel poverty and hidden poverties, which tend to be more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. Access to broadband is an issue – not just in terms of promoting economic development and remote working, but in terms of enabling households to access public services. Outmigration and depopulation continue to afflict many rural communities, and the loss of young people can have detrimental social consequences. At the same time, most rural communities are experiencing in-migration, and require supports in ensuring that they are inclusive and inter-cultural places. It would be impossible to make this intervention (at this conference) without reference to Brexit and the uncertainties and challenges it brings. These challenges are more pertinent to rural areas, than elsewhere, and rural communities along the border are particularly exposed to increased vulnerabilities. Finally, while NI has benefited from the UK welfare state, it should be noted that this model is under threat; indeed, it has been contracting, and the adjustments to health and welfare systems are hitting rural areas hard.

In conclusion, our experiences, which we are happy to share with others, indicate that rural proofing is not a standalone process, but is part of a wider drive to ensure equality. It has consistently been relevant to, and reflected in the work of the NI Housing Executive, and will continue to be so. The recently enacted legislation underpins the importance of rural proofing, and ensures it becomes more mainstream. Ongoing data collection and information sharing will enable all stakeholders to collaboratively ensure greater embeddedness of rural proofing across public bodies.



Perceiving Futures in the Present: Exploring the Future Creativity of Place

Mr Kevin Murray,
Kevin Murray & Associates and
Honorary Professor of Planning at
Dundee and Glasgow Universities

This paper presents community and practitioner insights and perspectives – drawing on some examples of community planning in Scotland. These elucidate techniques and approaches that give effect to the principles of participatory planning, and enable communities to play an active part in place-making. While Scotland is more urbanised than Ireland and has a longer industrial tradition, communities have undergone, and continue to undergo, transitions and changes. Thus, planning and place making need to take account of the past and to deal with issues of heritage, identity and perceptions of place. In both urban and rural areas, newcomers affect community dynamics, and it is important to engage them, among others, in planning processes. In rural areas, newcomers are often those who are most resistant to change, as they have bought into the notion of nostalgic sentiment. Therefore, it is important to bring people together and to promote discussion – in different formats and at different times of the year, and most importantly, across the generations. We don't just talk about the future; we need to get everything on the table. The examples referenced here illustrate, among other features, the importance of dialogue and creativity.

Community engagement and participation in planning require considerable preparatory work, including promotion, advertising and attendance at community events – before and during the planning process. While planning skills are integral to the formulation of plans, other skillsets and disciplines are just as important. Planning is about much more than design, it is an iterative process that encompasses the following:

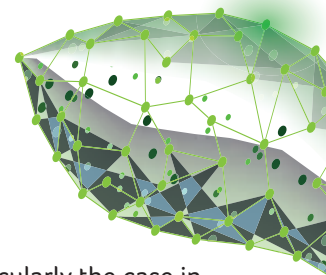
1. Understanding people-place challenge;
2. Getting people together;
3. Thinking about change;
4. Envisioning future scenarios;
5. Exploring options and priorities; and
6. Building action and capability.

Thus, planning can require stakeholders to make leaps of faith, particularly where there are legacies of distrust. In our work, we identify five Place Momentum Steps:

1. Engage & Inform - Make it interesting;
2. Probe and Question – Learning for all;
3. Listen and Explore – Joint dialogue;
4. Learn and Share – Collaborate; and
5. Stimulate and Animate – Empower community.

Understanding people-place challenge

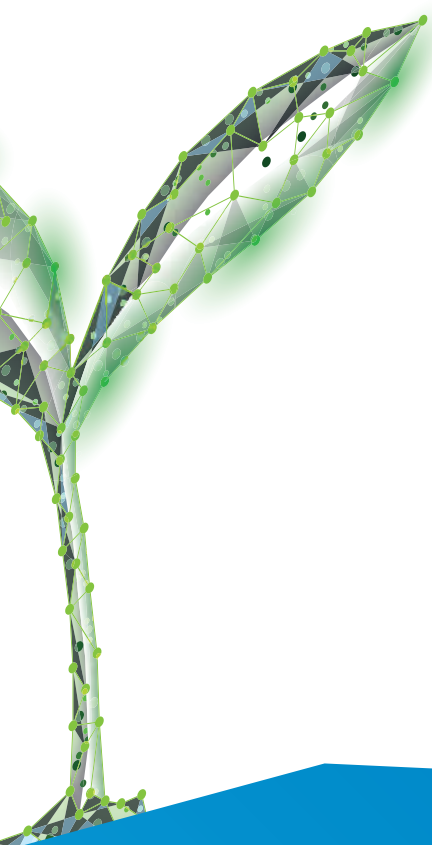
In many communities, there can be a fear of change. This is particularly the case in rural and inner city communities that have been afflicted by depopulation and the loss of services. Communities can be concerned about preserving their identity and about the relationships between their community and other places and interests. In taking cognisance of communities' concerns, we need to work with them, and with and through local media to ensure positive buy-in from the outset. Therefore, we work with cultural, civic and faith groups, and strive to promote consensus. As a set of processes, planning needs to manage varying, sometimes competing, aspirations; stakeholders may have different perspectives and expectations – as captured in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.



¹ For an elaboration on the Place Standard, please see the proceeding of the 2018 ICLRD – Cooperation Ireland Conference: Rural Society in Transition: Planning for 21st Century Rural Potential and Challenge.



One of the most significant tools that is applied, and which is supported by the Scottish Government and the National Health Service (NHS), is the Place Standard.



Getting people together

In getting people together, it is necessary to have conversations about how things were, before we start talking about the future. This can pose challenges in terms of getting consensus across the generations. Regardless of the challenges, it's the discussion that matters most. A useful way of engaging older people, who may have seen a place decline over time, is actually to get the youth involved – particularly while they are still there (before they move away). In Denny (in the Falkirk Council Area), for example, which had been rural and then urbanised very rapidly, and went into equally rapid decline, we asked the young people to take the adults around and to show them the places they valued, the places that were unsafe and the places that had potential for improvement. This fed into the dialogue we had. Similarly, in Lochgilphead (Argyllshire), the youth played a significant role in planning. There, the main issue was to get them to consider staying locally, as the trend had been that they went to Glasgow and further afield for study and work. Here, they identified broadband connectivity as essential. In terms of enabling engagement and structured dialogue, we used mats; these showed maps and images of the locality and were laid out on the ground, thereby enabling participants to physically point to the areas that needed particular interventions.

Thinking about change

In enabling people to talk about the future of their community, it can be useful to encourage them to talk about the past – not just the recent past, but to go back fifty or one hundred years. This allows communities to demonstrate, and appreciate, the nature of continuous change. It encourages dialogue, and in order to guide and channel that, we use maps, charts and images – progressively working from engagement, through to collaboration and co-production, and ultimately to co-design. We need to recognise that the old-style modes of communication and the use of technical language can be disempowering, and we need to be cognisant of varying perspectives and the fact that different stakeholders may see the world differently. In our work, we apply sets of tools to enable people to talk about the past and the present and to envision their futures. These tools and methods can include walking tours, role plays, roundtable meetings (including with officers), visual minutes, storytelling, line drawing and field workshops. One of the most significant tools that is applied, and which is supported by the Scottish Government and the National Health Service (NHS), is the Place Standard¹. This toolkit enables communities to score their localities on the basis of fourteen dimensions of place, including for example: feeling safe; traffic and parking; economy; moving around; transport, social interaction; and sense of influence. The scores can be computed to generate a diagram or visualisation of place, the overriding value of which is the discussion it generates – discussion and dialogue about the needs for the future.

In preparing for the future, it is important that communities see themselves as part of a continuum. This allows people to see themselves as shaping the next part of that continuum, and, to that end, we use maps, charts, aerial photographs and other visual aids. This leads to the generation of ideas, which we then structure and classify, usually thematically, for example as: infrastructure; landscape; economy or services, among others. By drawing out the negatives and weaknesses, we enable participants to then talk about the positives, identifying local assets and strengths. We can use wordclouds to capture and visualise place-based assets, challenges and ideas. The emerging ideas relate not just to community amenities and infrastructure; they also include business and economic proposals and conservation / ecological projects. Our role is to capture the conversations around place futures, and one of the methods we use in that regard

is the ‘charrette’. Using charrettes allows people to see their conversations and ideas build up over time. This is key to enabling communities to move towards visioning and scenario mapping.

Envisioning future scenarios

There are several ways in which we can enable and support communities to envision future scenarios. In one community, for example, we invited young people to colour a picture of their community – using one colour to illustrate it at present, and using another colour to illustrate it in the future. In that community, we did this exercise with children and with local politicians. The results were the exact same; the colours the politicians chose were the same colours the children (aged 8 to 16) had selected. Using this and other similar techniques to help envision future scenarios, we strive to capture people’s visions and to plot these in a way that shows possibilities of future progress and / or decline. Their respective group discussions and visions can form one part of a bigger overall jigsaw, where different visions can diverge, connect or overlap; we illustrate the complementarities that exist.

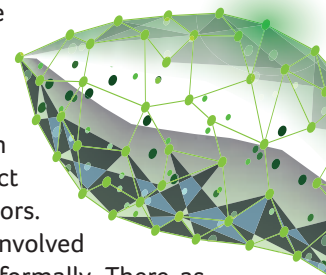
Exploring options and priorities

Nostalgic sentiment and fear of change can inhibit communities from embracing new scenarios. Therefore, in our work, we use projections and artists’ impressions to enable people to visualise different possibilities and to consider ranges of options in respect of place making. In scenarios, where a particular development is proposed, three dimensional models can help people to visualise change. The drawings, models and images help to encourage discussion, and it behoves landscapers, architects, planners and designers to capture what people are saying. In some instances, people who were initially opposed to change, have become some of its strongest advocates. In other places, several sets of drawings and rounds of engagement may be necessary to forge agreements and consensus. Depending on the local context, we work with all stakeholders to ensure places become slower, safer, smarter and stickier (able to keep people).

Building action and capability

Having facilitated communities to envision their futures and agree priorities, we work with them to understand how to action and achieve desired outcomes and aspirations. In the case of Prestwick, for example, which has a significant older population, the community’s priorities were to enhance walkability along the beach and to encourage gardening projects. Having captured their project ideas, we facilitated people to establish themselves as groups of actors. They had already done considerable local work, and the next steps involved them building up capacity in groups and networks – formally and informally. There, as in other locations, including in Dunfermline and Kincardine people have established development trusts, land trusts and other legal vehicles that can capture money and resources to enable projects to progress. This requires confidence-building actions and bringing actors together, all of whom might not necessarily get on with one another.

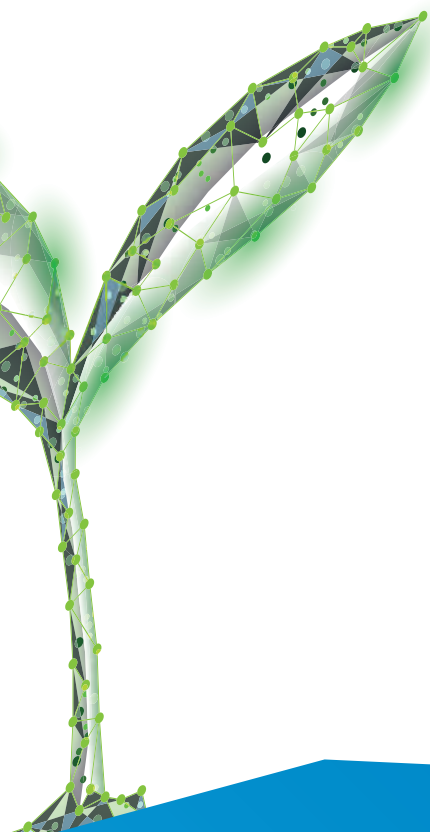
Among the most recent examples of successful community planning is the development in Ardrishaig (a coastal village on Loch Gilp), where the community has influenced the retention and conversion of a former egg shed (an industrial-type building on the docks) that had been due for demolition, turning it into a civic, cultural and tourism hub. There are already several notable successes throughout Ireland, not least at Clonakilty (County Cork), and these, along with the examples I have referenced from Scotland, encourage us to ‘understand the successes and share the lessons’.





A new narrative: an enabling State

Pippa Coutts,
Policy and Development Manager,
Carnegie Trust



This presentation contends that the Enabling State has an important role to play in promoting wellbeing. This implies viewing wellbeing as a multi-layered concept, which includes kindness. The material presented here draws on the work, including research, practice and policy-making, of the Carnegie Trust. The Trust, which Andrew Carnegie, a Scots-American philanthropist, established in 1913, works with several partner organisations and communities across these islands. Its mission is to support the wellbeing of the people of the UK and Ireland. The Trust's work and areas of activity have changed, over time, as society has changed, and we continue to promote policy development, create new organisations and support innovative practice.

The concept of wellbeing

Wellbeing can be envisaged as having three connected tiers – personal, community and societal. Personal relates to how we think and feel, and it emerges frequently in discussions about mental health. In the Carnegie Trust, we are particularly interested in how we live well together. Where we live affects our wellbeing; thus, communities and community wellbeing are important. Where we live also affects what we perceive to be good wellbeing. We, in the Trust, in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), think of wellbeing as having four components – the economic, social, environmental and democratic. Therefore, there is no point in promoting economic development if it is at the expense of the environmental (wellbeing). The third tier is that of societal wellbeing, and we contend that it is the purpose of government to promote societal wellbeing. While most of the rural narrative falls mainly within the middle tier, namely community wellbeing, it needs to be supported by policies and wellbeing frameworks.

Wellbeing as a policy goal

Our changing economic and political context is obliging us to think differently about policy. Austerity policies persist; as documented by the New Economics Foundation, local authorities in England have had their budgets reduced from £35bn to £4.5bn over the past ten years. Our current context is one in which some people have not done as well as others. Inequality is increasing, and in the UK, there are more 'left-behind places'. Those who live in such places feel forgotten and excluded, as they have not benefited from the general economic development that has taken place across the northern hemisphere over the past few decades. Therefore, we need to strive harder to include those people. At the same time, increasing evidence is emerging of the participation, control and agency benefits of wellbeing.

In the context of these changes, the Carnegie Trust has been looking at how we move forward and advance wellbeing – at all tiers. Our observation is that we (collectively) ought to promote an 'Enabling State', although the power of the State is not our first port of call. Instead, when people are looking for supports, they look to their own strengths, their families and their communities. We see this, for example, in the form of shared childcare, park-runs and other community-based scaffolds. It is only when people cannot find support at familial and community levels that they look to more formalised settings. Beyond that, they look to the public sector, for example, for emergency services and other supports that cannot otherwise be provided.

The Enabling State

Having undertaken an in-depth review of policies, and drawing on evaluations and independent research, across the UK and Ireland, the Carnegie Trust observes seven policy shifts associated with the Enabling State, all of which need to be occurring simultaneously. These are as follows:

From the Welfare State	To the Enabling State
target setting	outcomes
top-down	bottom-up
representation	participation
silos	working together
crisis management	prevention
doing to State	doing with third sector

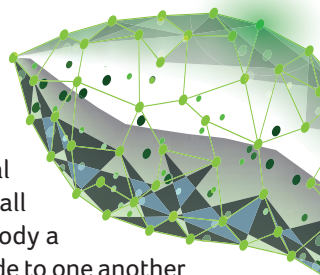
In order for this set of shifts to happen effectively, actors, particularly public bodies and policy makers, need to focus on an outcomes-oriented approach, longer-term impacts, integration and localism – encouraging people to work together in the places in which they live.

In 2018, the Carnegie Trust undertook a review of the progress of the Enabling State over the preceding five years. Entitled *The Enabling State: Where are we now?*, this review documents progress in respect of policies becoming more outcome oriented (Wallace *et al.*, 2019)¹. Progress on this front is most evident in Wales and Scotland, as the administrations there have put in place wellbeing frameworks that shape public policy. We also see evidence of the Enabling State in terms of early intervention – before issues hit crisis points. In Wales, for example, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act requires all decision-makers to consider not just the immediate impacts of policies and approaches, but to take account of the longer-term impacts on sustainable development.

Our research also unearths and documents a number of blockages in respect of the Enabling State. In examining how we overcome such blockages, our research recommends a focus on 'kindness', and we identify three concentric layers of kindness: random, relational and radical. Random kindness refers to the types of actions we all undertake – helping somebody across the road or lending somebody a phone. Relational kindness refers to the support communities provide to one another and to individuals / families. We see this in many of the collaborative approaches to planning that this conference has highlighted. The third level, namely radical kindness, refers to policy and public services. It relates to a public policy focus on building positive relations. There are several examples of radical kindness, including Wigan Borough Council's drive to promote relational service delivery and those documented in the *Practice of Kindness: Learning from KIN and North Ayrshire*.

¹ Wallace, J.; Brotchie, J. and Ormston, H. (2019) *The Enabling State: Where are we now? Review of policy developments 2013-2018 Summary Report*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust.

² Wallace, J. and Thurman, B. (2018) *Quantifying kindness, public engagement and place*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust...



Our review identifies two distinct lexicons in respect of public policy, as follows:

The Rational Lexicon		The Relational Lexicon
Balanced Fair Safe Transparent	Motive	Connection Hope Individual Personal Change
Scrutiny Value for money Boundaries Targets Evidence Data Accountability	Tools	Wellbeing Desire Spontaneity Discretion Intuition Warmth Story telling Metaphor
Arid and sterile Gaming targets Declining trust Detachment	Risks	Populist responses Difficulty in explaining Favouritism
Systems and processes Professional codes	Outcomes	Relationships Trust Challenge

The more traditional (rational) lexicon focuses mainly on targets, measurements and efficiencies, all of which are appropriate, but which are limited in terms of advancing kindness and wellbeing. The relational lexicon is more progressive, as it focuses, to a greater extent, on building constructive relationships and hope and on feelings / sentiments, positive change and wellbeing. It also focuses on friends, family and desire. The challenges are to get both lexicons working together and to ensure that policy makers and agencies consider them of equal importance. Too often, we find the relational lexicon appended to the rational lexicon. Instead, an integrated embeddedness needs to be applied.

The evidence for an Enabling State

In order to garner empirical data on the Enabling State, the Carnegie Trust, in 2018, in conjunction with Ipsos MORI conducted a survey on kindness, place and engagement with public services (Wallace and Thurman, 2018)². The sample size comprised c.1,000 persons in each of the four UK jurisdictions and c.1,000 in Ireland (a total sample of c.5,000). Of the geographies surveyed, Ireland and Wales have the highest proportions of people residing in rural areas, at 41% and 42% respectively – based on survey participants' own descriptions of where they live. Self-declared rural residents in Ireland were more likely to describe their 'place' as countryside, while in Wales, people were more likely to live in villages. The survey used several indicators to measure people's perceptions of kindness in their communities – relational kindness.

The results showed that sixty percent of people in Ireland strongly agreed with the statement that most people in their community are kind. This was the highest level of agreement with that statement across the five participating locations.

These survey findings add weight to our contention that kindness offers a way in which to change public services. We contend that there is a need for a set of kindness policies – radical kindness, and perhaps a need to regulate kindness. There is a need to tackle blockages in public service provision and to address the risk-aversion culture that pertains across so many parts of the public service. We need to give more agency and control to those at the front line – to enable them to be true to the factors that motivated them to enter into their professions and to put more kindness into the services they deliver. Across the public service, there is a need to engender a public service management culture that focuses more on enablement and emotional intelligence, rather than on counting / enumerating.

In policy terms, it is worth citing and advancing the eight steps to an Enabling State advocated by the Carnegie Trust (Elvidge, 2012)³, as follows:

- 1 Get out of the way;
- 2 Give people permission to take control;
- 3 Help people to help each other;
- 4 Help people to do more;
- 5 Give people more rights;
- 6 Enablement is the new normal;
- 7 Invest in disadvantaged communities; and
- 8 Tangible focus on wellbeing.

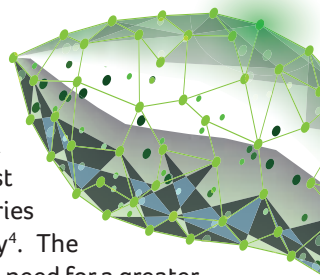
Our reviews of the progress on the attainment of these eight steps indicate that performance is patchy. There have been several worthy and worthwhile projects and initiatives, particularly with respect to enabling people to help each other. It has been more difficult, however, to advance progress in terms of the State ‘getting out of the way’ and enabling people to ‘take control’.

The Carnegie UK Trust is active in promoting an Enabling State in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the Trust is promoting a project entitled Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland. This sees the Trust working with three councils to support community planning partnerships. The initiative has engendered a move towards more co-production of services. In Ireland, the Trust worked with The Wheel to support the People’s Conversation – a series of engagements to nurture citizenship and strengthen civil society⁴. The final report on this initiative, entitled Citizens Rising, highlighted the need for a greater understanding of citizenship, which relates to the concept of relational kindness. In the second phase of the People’s Conversation, ideas and proposals emerged in respect of citizen participation and active citizenship. These initiatives on the island of Ireland, among others, underscore the need for, and merits of, involving people more in shaping society.

³ Elvidge, J. (2012) The Enabling State: A discussion paper. Dunfermline : Carnegie UK Trust.

⁴ The Wheel and Carnegie UK Trust (2015). Citizens Rising - A report from the People’s Conversation. Dublin: The Wheel.

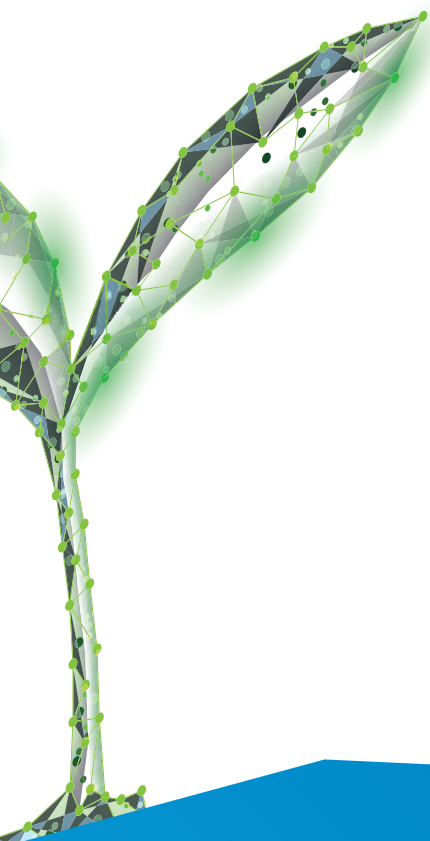
⁵ Davidson, S.; Wallace, J. and Ormston, H. (2020) Revisiting the Route Map to an Enabling State: Guiding Principles for Recovery. Dunfermline : Carnegie UK Trust.





Conclusion

Wellbeing is an important policy and societal objective. Its attainment is strongly associated with the promotion of kindness, and specifically with embedding radical kindness in the formulation of public policy and delivery of public services. In these respects, the Enabling State offers a scaffold to ensure a more bottom-up, participatory and collaborative approach to place-making, policy formulation and service delivery. Initiatives undertaken by the Carnegie UK Trust demonstrate that the presence of random and relational kindness in families and communities offers a solid base on which policymakers and service delivery bodies can work more effectively to promote radical kindness⁵. While there has been some notable progress in advancing the Enabling State, blockages remain, and the Carnegie Trust's eight steps to an Enabling State offer a constructive roadmap.





Breaking Ground – European Approaches to Changing Rural Narratives

Caroline Creamer,
Director, International Centre for
Local and Regional Development
(ICLRDR)

This paper presents some interesting examples of rural narrative change from across Europe and beyond, and it looks at the extent to which it is possible to push out boundaries. These examples underscore the need for us all to grapple with some big and thorny questions, and to make tough, brave and innovative decisions. It is increasingly evident that ‘business as usual’ is no longer an option.

Rural regions make up roughly half of the territory of the EU-28; and are home to just over a quarter of the population. According to the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) policy brief, *Shrinking Rural Regions in Europe*, the population of our rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million, by 2050, across the EU-28 – an indication of the global trend towards urbanisation¹.

Small towns and villages across Europe are diverse. There is no such thing as a typical small town. Rural and small town narratives cannot, and should not, be based on stereotype or nostalgia, but on the reality of ‘place’. While the narrative of the rural idyll dominates, our rural regions face a range of challenges as they strive to stay attractive and competitive and to maintain sustainable, viable and resilient communities.

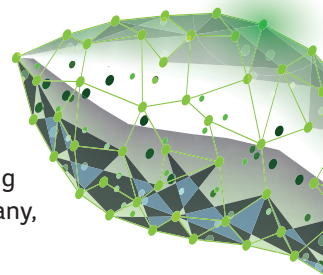
We all know rural places that are in decline – a decline just starting to take hold and / or a decline spanning decades. At the same time, we all know rural places that are doing well and places that are thriving, and we need to question what differentiates them. For those in decline, we need to ask: what is the worst-case scenario? Do we let them fizzle out? Should we let them go? Why do we struggle to let go? For whom are we ‘saving’ these places? These questions arise not just in Ireland, but in municipalities across the globe. In order to seek to answer them, it is useful to look at international examples and experiences.

While all places are distinctive, there is much we can learn from other geographies. As with any comparative analysis, in this context, there are two caveats to bear in mind:

- The definition of ‘rural’ and the ‘scale’ of what constitutes rural are different across Europe; and
- There are different types of rural areas, and there must be, therefore, different types of rural development policies and responses.

Colleagues in ICLRDR and ESPON have provided us with the following case study insights from Scotland, France, Belgium (Flanders), Germany, and Norway.

In 2011/2012, Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) developed a vulnerability index for Scotland’s towns. Its objectives are to inform dialogue on why, and in what ways, Scotland is changing, and to provide a narrative on why these changes matter, thereby informing policy and practice decisions and supporting the application of place-based solutions. The Index covers a range of demographic, socio-economic, land use and governance themes. In their application of the Vulnerability Index, Dr Jane Atterton and her colleagues, at SRUC, selected ninety towns that offered a geographical spread across fourteen rural local authority areas. Thus, while the sample is a stratified one,



¹ ESPON (2017) Policy Brief: Shrinking rural regions in Europe. Luxembourg: European Spatial Planning Observation Network. Available at: <https://www.espon.eu/rural-shrinking>

Ecopower is a Belgian renewable energy cooperative with nearly 50,000 members.

the Index reveals that there is a 'cluster' of towns with poor vulnerability rankings in the south, and particularly the south-west, of Scotland. Furthermore, the Index shows that vulnerability is not homogenous; the most vulnerable places are a mix - ranging from 'remote small towns' to 'other urban' settlements. In terms of positive discrimination, this tool gives policy-makers evidence with which to weight funding towards 'vulnerable' communities, provided that there is a strong case to do so and that there is an endogenous potential with which to work.

Vitry-Le-Francois (pop. 13,000) is located in the Champagne Region of Eastern France, and is part of a wider functional area of 35,000 people. Demographic shrinkage is a core concern in this former industrial area; the population declined by a third between 1975 and 2014. De-industrialisation has led to a fifty percent decline in the number of industrial jobs and a nine percent decline in the total number of jobs between 1982 and 2012. In response, public and private actors came together to advance a form of planned shrinkage. In its response to population decline, the municipality began to look at ways to introduce competition into the local housing market and to diversify the stock on offer and types of tenure available.

Working with the ANRU (Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine - national agency for urban renewal), the municipal authorities agreed to waive a rule that had imposed identical numbers of demolitions and reconstructions. Instead, for every three dwellings demolished, only two were rebuilt. The new approach further embraced inter-agency collaboration to address actual community needs - including promoting a greater socio-economic mix in neighbourhoods, creating a vibrant urban core and supporting a decentralised energy system (in partnership with an energy provider). The energy project, which involved building wind turbines and upgrading the biomass heating system, was also an economic development project, as it embedded circular economy principles. Despite the many social, economic and environmental benefits arising from this new model, tensions remain around the practice of planned shrinkage and its longer-term impacts.

Eeklo is a municipality, in the province of East Flanders (Belgium), with an interesting and colourful history. It is relevant to our current discourse because of its self-sustainability agenda and cooperative model. Ecopower is a Belgian renewable energy cooperative with nearly 50,000 members. The members, who are local citizens, buy a cooperative share and become co-owners of local wind turbines, hydropower installations and / or solar panels. Thus, they share in the cooperative's profits, and get the opportunity to buy green electricity at a competitive price. The cooperative model means that citizens participate in decision-making, including in relation to investments and price setting. In Eeklo, residents do not object to windmills in their backyard. Instead, they embrace them, and take care of them, because they own them. Ecopower also works on energy efficiency. An energy expert works for the local community, and provides citizens with free energy advice.

In terms of next steps, the Eeklo Community Energy Plan was produced in 2018. This gives consideration to district heating, and it emphasises evolving from a wind landscape to 100% renewable heat generation by 2036. Eeklo envisages developing a prototype that can be transferred to other municipalities in Flanders.

Staying in East Flanders, Evergem (pop. 33,000) is located in one of the most built-up areas in Europe. Planners have had to deal with extensive 'urban sprawl' (across the region). The Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders (1997) marked the beginning of an extensive 'urbanisation' of the landscape; best reflected in the Plan's vision of 'Flanders, open and urban'. Between 1990 and 2007, the total area of developed space increased by 22%, housing space by 37%, and commercial and industrial activity by 27%. The area dedicated to agricultural shrank by 6.5%, with 3% of woodlands and nature reserves disappearing (Vloebergh, 2013)². More recently, in 2012, the government published a Green Paper – Flanders in 2050: Human Scale in a Metropolis. The Green Paper recognised that Flanders was characterised by intensive soil sealing and fragmentation, and that spatial policy was facing a number of societal challenges, including managing anticipated growth, providing high-quality open spaces, enabling mobility, preventing flooding and supporting green energy.

Evergem's response entailed a complete u-turn in its planning policy and practice. The municipal council placed a blanket ban on the construction of houses outside the village centres. In addition, they scrapped the designated residential expansion areas (WUGs), an area of 150 hectares, and replaced them with 'white lands' – land for agricultural use and natural spaces. This new approach seeks to enable the municipality to meet climate mitigation targets and to preserve the maximum amount of open / green space. Indeed in early 2019, largely in response to climate change, the wider municipality of Evergem proposed scrapping residential expansion areas at seven locations and converting them to construction-free agricultural areas, thus safeguarding 1.5 million square meters of open space. Such brave decisions set Evergem apart in Flanders.

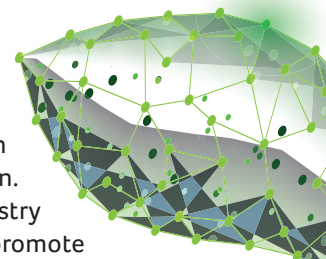
In Germany – a country of more than 2,100 small towns with between 5,000 and 20,000 residents, there is a shifting narrative. Communities are progressively seen as being more than part of the rural landscape and as enablers of balanced spatial development. This shift is expressed through 'Hidden Champions' – companies located in rural communities, but which have an international reach, and value the place in which they have chosen to locate. These companies are committed to making their communities the best possible places in which to live and work.

In Norway, several rural regions and municipalities are embracing the value of the silver economy. Elverum (pop. 20,000) is located in eastern Norway. This remote and heavily afforested area faces many challenges, including low levels of research and education activity, low levels of innovation and little enterprise creation. Through the Cube Network, academia, the public sector, industry (business park) and the third sector, have come together to promote innovation, and enterprise creation, as well as health and well-being - turning the negative aspects of an ageing population into an opportunity, creating a dedicated space where students and entrepreneurs can work with, and receive the support of, their peers.

² Vloebergh, G. (2013) 'New spatial strategies for the densely built-up Flanders region (Belgium)', Presentation to the 49th ISOCARP Congress 2013, Frontiers of Planning – Evolving and declining models of city planning practice, Brisbane, Australia, 1–4 October 2013.

Available at:
http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/2378.pdf

³ OECD (2006) Reinventing Rural Policy. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Available at:
<https://www.oecd.org/regional/37556607.pdf>



Concluding Remarks

In 2006, the OECD³ advised of the need for “reinventing rural policy” on a continuous basis. Thus, the need for new rural narratives is not new. There is widespread recognition among researchers, practitioners and rural communities that traditional and sectoral approaches to rural development are increasingly inefficient and ineffective, and that there is a need to emphasise place-based and local specificities. It is also recognised that collaboration is essential, and that innovation is critical to the future sustainability of rural economies. While these principles are accepted, they are tinged with, and can be mixed with, other emotions, including fear, sadness, nostalgia, frustration and hope.

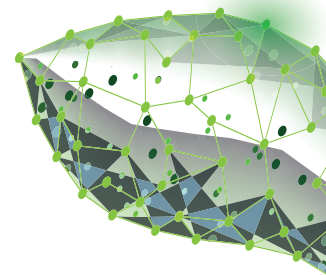
I grew up in rural Ireland, and today live in rural Ireland - in different counties. One of my favourite books is a John McGahern novel, ‘That They May Face The Rising Sun’. It is set in a particular point of time (mid c20), and it beautifully captures that time, including the many hardships, in terms of rural living and the relations between local residents. This novel speaks to me because it is set in my local area – Ballinamore/Fenagh, Co. Leitrim. It is reflective of my nostalgia of childhood, I can identify characters in it as if they were people in my home town. Today, however, my home town is very different. Its employment base has changed. It sits on the Shannon-Erne waterway, but that has not been the panacea that was expected. It sees other towns thriving and reinventing themselves, and questions why it isn’t doing as well. In responding, therefore, to the Ballinamores across Ireland, it behoves us to question the potential damage associated with nostalgia, and to push for truth and evidence. The body of evidence, not least from European case study research, points towards the following steps:

1. We need to systematically take stock of the challenges we face. Scotland’s Vulnerability Index could certainly enable us to add to our evidence base. If there are issues with the terminology, we could call it an ‘Opportunity Index’.
2. We need a multi-disciplinary approach. As we grapple with global issues, such as climate change, energy supply and food security, the development of rural policies / strategies should not be the preserve of the central government departments / ministries, or indeed the Department with relevant ‘rural experts’. Instead, the approach should be multi-disciplinary, and should involve planners, businesses / SMEs, health care professionals, scientists, the new Irish, stay-at-home mums and dads, among many others. There is too much at stake with an insular approach, and so much to gain from tapping into a wider range of knowledge and lived experiences.

3. We need to do things differently - for real! We cannot continue to do the same things, and just call them something else. I note for example the rollout of the 'smart towns and villages' agenda, and while information and communications technology (ICT) and digital infrastructure have a role to play in the future sustainability of our towns and villages, they are not a panacea, and we should not use the associated terminology to give the impression that systemic change is happening. Speaking at last year's conference, Dr Stephen Brennan, the Chief Digital Advisor to the Irish Government, remarked that 'Smart Towns and Villages' are where digital technologies and innovation come together to improve quality of life, offer new opportunities around how we work vis-à-vis where we live, improve service delivery, and create new opportunities for rural value chains. Carrying out an energy audit, in and of itself, is not enough to constitute branding a place 'smart'.

4. We need to be brave. Can we learn from the experiences I referenced in East Flanders? What would happen if we put in place a blanket ban on ribbon development and housing in the countryside without a 'real' need being demonstrated? Would it reinvigorate our town and village cores? Will councils and government ever grasp that nettle?

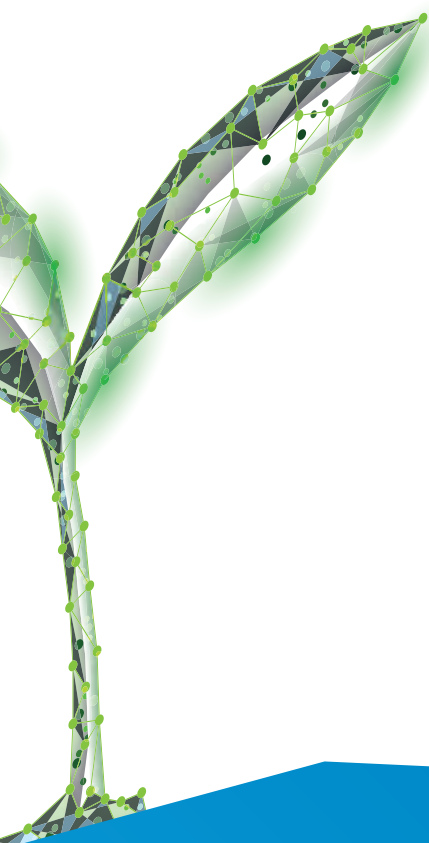
The four approaches I am advocating seek to respond to the myriad of challenges facing rural Ireland. We are beginning to operate in a new spatial planning environment nationally and regionally – in which our councils now need to reflect on their existing policies and review their plans. Our sense of place, and any associated nostalgia, are increasingly challenged by the realities of day-to-day life; we need to plan around new concepts such as compact growth, carbon neutral, climate action. As a new rural strategy is being developed, in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, never has there been a more opportune time to push boundaries and to create a new narrative.





Rural Shrinkage: A New Narrative for Rural Ireland?

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Teagasc,
Rural Economy Development
Programme



The term ‘rural shrinkage’ has come to prominence recently, mainly through the work of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON)¹. This paper traces the provenance and trajectory of the concept of shrinkage and its relevance to the EU and Irish contexts. In doing so we critically address the conference theme by assessing whether shrinkage represents a new narrative, or if it is simply a classification of demographic trends that are evident in many rural regions and their towns.

Shrinkage – concept emergence

As a concept, shrinkage was initially applied in the urban context. It emerged as part of a set of planning responses that enabled cities, predominantly those dependent on declining industries, e.g., coal mining, car manufacturing etc., re-organise their spatial structure in response to sustained population decline. In most cases, policy responses involved re-configuring modes of service delivery, but, in the most extreme cases, involved reducing city footprints, as occurred, for example, in Detroit. The term came further to the fore around the turn of the millennium, particularly in Germany, as authorities there (mainly in the former East Germany) grappled with increasing levels of housing vacancy². Over the past twenty years, it has gained increasing traction, particularly amongst policy stakeholders grappling with the uneven spatial impacts of processes of social and economic change driven, largely, by globalisation. Its emergence and increased application are driven by increasing attention being given to places and communities that have been ‘left behind’ as a consequence of these developments. These are helped by the fact that shrinkage embodies a range of concepts in a singular and understandable term.

Defining Shrinkage

While depopulation is synonymous with shrinkage, the concept has evolved from one focused on population and demographic change to one that views population decline as the effect, rather than the specific cause. Increasingly, shrinkage is associated with the set of inter-related and iterative processes that give rise to depopulation. These conceptual developments are evident in the differences between a number of key contributors to the literature on shrinkage. Grasland *et al.* (2008: 25)³ stress the significance of population decline, stating, “a region that is ‘shrinking’ is a region that is losing a significant proportion of its population over a period greater than or equal to one generation.” This definition has subsequently been refined and extended by Sepp and Veemaa (2017: 6)⁴ who link processes of population and economic change: “regional shrinkage is a simultaneously demographic and economic process – demography and economy in combination are potential drivers of shrinking”.

Because the impacts of economic and demographic change are spatially differentiated affecting both urban and rural spaces, shrinkage has universal application. In the rural context, it offers a useful way of repackaging and embodying a number of terms and concepts used by policy makers, among other stakeholders. These terms and concepts include, *inter alia*, rural restructuring, agricultural change and population decline. In the urban context, the term provides a useful means of challenging the notion, that was prevalent within public discourse that the ‘future is urban’. However, spatial patterns of decline affecting formally ‘strong’ regions, including their cities, undermined this narrative. Current indications are that approximately forty percent of cities, worldwide, with a population of over 200,000, are in decline.

This evidence necessitates the development of a more nuanced view of urban change and the role of urban centres in future planning.

The scale of shrinkage

For rural areas, the lessons associated with urban shrinkage are that having a critical mass or well-developed infrastructure are not a guarantee against failure – although the chances of failure are much greater in the absence of infrastructure. Much of the narrative around rural Ireland, particularly in the media, is framed in the context of shrinkage. This is dominated by references to population decline, isolation and service depletion. Indeed, references to rural communities, and to community structures such as GAA clubs, are frequently presented through negative narratives, such as the inability to field a senior team. In this sense then, ‘shrinkage’ is nothing new in the Irish context where issues of population and economic decline are regularly featured in public discourse. Notwithstanding this, the concept of shrinkage offers significant potential to move beyond standard tropes and narratives of decline and, in doing so, consider not only (young) males or economic issues, resulting in more inclusive and holistic narratives of rural change.

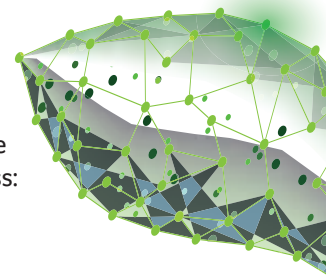
ESPON’s ESCAPE project seeks to do this by identifying how a range of policies could better serve shrinking rural areas across all governance levels – EU, national / member state, regional and local. In order to achieve this, the project aims to improve understanding of the many facets and manifestations of population decline and the complex ways in which these developments are tied into wider socio-economic processes (as both causes and effects), especially where they seem to drive cumulative processes of decline. ESPON’s territorial reference units are generally the NUTS III regions, of which Ireland (Republic) has eight, and Northern Ireland has five (based on groups of district council areas)⁵. When these territorial units are compared with regions across the EU, the island of Ireland performs well in respect of rural demography. Analysis at this scale indicates the preponderance and significance of rural population decline in much of Eastern and Southern Europe, most notably in Bulgaria, Greece, the Baltic States and parts of Iberia.

Shrinkage in rural Ireland

Analysis at the regional level (NUTS III) brings up the challenges associated with the modified areal unit problem (MAUP) and accentuates the need for more refined spatial analysis. Thus, in the Irish context (RoI), and considering the period 1991 to 2016, the following aggregate data emerge: Population decline occurred across:

- No region;
- One county;
- 35 urban or rural districts; and
- 836 electoral divisions (EDs).

Of these EDs, 643 are rural, and they experienced a combined population decline of 27,566 persons. These EDs are predominantly outside the main commuter belts (>80km from the five main cities), and are more likely to be in upland and peripheral areas, most



¹ Gavin Daly (formerly of Maynooth University), was the ESPON Senior Project Expert with responsibility for the ESCAPE project, which informed the basis of this paper.

² Großmann, K., Haase, A., Rink, D. and Steinführer, A. (2008) Urban shrinkage in East Central Europe? Benefits and limits of a cross-national transfer of research approaches. In: Nowak, M. and Nowosielski, M. (eds.) Declining Cities/ Developing Cities: Polish and German Perspectives. Poznan: Instytut Zachodni.

³ Grasland, C., et al. (+21 authors) (2008) Shrinking Regions: A Paradigm Shift in Demography and Territorial Development. Study for Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policy, European Parliament. Brussels: European Parliament.

⁴ Sepp, V., and Veemaa, J. (2017) Shrinking regions and innovative solutions: entrepreneurship, employment and the accessibility of services. Study report was commissioned by the Estonian Ministry of Finance, Department of Regional Development, Tartu.

⁵ Murphy, E. (2015) NUTS III Regions – Research and Information Service – Briefing Note. Belfast: NI Assembly.

⁶ ESPON (2017) Shrinking rural regions in Europe – Towards smart and innovative approaches to regional development challenges in depopulating rural regions. Luxembourg: ESPON. Available at: <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/ES PON%20Policy%20Brief%20on%20Shrinking%20Rural%20Regions.pdf>

⁷ Martínez-Fernández, C.; Kubo, N.; Noya, A. and Weyman, T. (2012) Demographic Change and Local Development: Shrinkage, Regeneration and Social Dynamics. Paris: OECD.

⁸ Tietjen, A. and Jørgensen, G. (2016) ‘Translating a wicked problem: A strategic planning approach to rural shrinkage in Denmark’ Landscape and Urban Planning, 154: 29–43.

notably in the north-west, west and south-west. When the age profiles of the 643 EDs are analysed, they reveal very considerable declines in the absolute and relative size of the population aged 0 to 20, notable declines among those aged 20 to 50, but increases in the numbers aged over 50 – particularly those aged 50 to 69. Thus, shrinking is about more than population decline; it also indicates a changing demographic profile. Further analysis of those who have left rural communities (among those born in the 1970s and 1980s) reveals that the rate of male exodus is twice that of the female exodus. The data show a small, but not insignificant, number of people returning to rural communities, when they are aged 40 to 59. These figures and this analysis are important in terms of rural shrinkage, as they indicate the types of policy responses that are required and the types of services that ought to be provided in particular rural areas and take into consideration the needs of particular groups.

Responding to, and dealing with, shrinkage

While micro-geographies aid our understanding and analysis of rural shrinkage, a more aggregate spatial scale is required in responding to it. Teagasc data reveal that over half of all Irish farmers have an off-farm job. Thus, most rural households are connected to economic activities that are based in towns and / or villages. As other speakers at this conference have noted, rural – urban dichotomies are unhelpful, and we need instead to focus on rural – urban collaboration. The current demographic and economic realities, in rural Ireland, point to the merits of using functional spaces as the bases for development. This implies working at the appropriate spatial scale – not necessarily the regional or county level, but at smaller territories that aggregate EDs into functional areas that, generally, comprise towns, villages and the open countryside, and devising appropriate place-based strategies.

Experiences from Eastern and Southern Europe, as captured in the ESCAPE project, demonstrate that economic growth strategies focusing investment in towns and cities did not generate spillover effects or benefit rural areas, particularly those distant from or inaccessible to large urban centres. Instead, rural decline / shrinkage appears to impact negatively on adjoining towns and villages. Thus, the evidence suggests the need for integrated approaches involving rural and urban places.

Concluding Remarks

The term ‘rural shrinkage’ is useful in that it brings a focus to rural areas that are experiencing negative outcomes of change over the longer term. While it is spatially focused, there is a need to consider how ‘shrinking’ rural areas fit with other rural areas and with urban areas. Dealing with shrinkages opens up the potential to promote (sometimes) radical policy alternatives, including meeting the needs of the remaining resident population, rather than promoting growth. ESPON (2017)⁶ advises that we emphasise the importance of local governance (Martínez-Fernández *et al.*, 2012)⁷, and while inter-regional knowledge transfers are useful, territorially differentiated interventions are required (Tietjen and Jørgensen, 2016)⁸. Such interventions frequently need to be accompanied by capacity-building actions, particularly in support of those municipalities (rural territories) that have the least capacity. In the absence of local capacity to engage with participative policy processes, it is unlikely that even the best-designed policy measures, will be effective in meeting the challenges of contemporary social and economic change.



Death by Nostalgia - trying to reach the future through the past?

Conor Skehan,
Environment and Planning,
Technological University, Dublin.

Are the best of intentions causing the decline of our rural towns and villages? *Trying to reach the future through the past* is a line from a 1985 song by Paul Brady that summarises the root cause of why we struggle to attract and sustain populations in rural areas.

Developing policies and plans that will be successful for these areas requires a more realistic understanding of where these places really came from and where they are really going.

Our rural areas are changing because of the global modernisation of agriculture and the urbanisation of society. These changes have been happening for centuries elsewhere, but they are later and slower in Ireland.

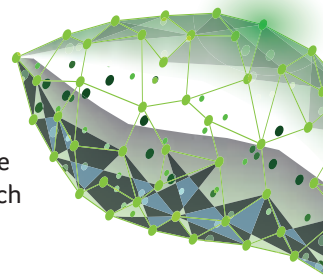
Two important facts set the context. Firstly, Ireland is the only country in Europe that has less people now than it did in the eighteenth century. Secondly, Ireland has one of the EU's highest proportions of people living in rural areas (42% compared to the EU average of 27%), and the division between Ireland's rural and urban population is now the exact opposite of what it was when the State was founded, when 60% was rural.

Ireland is changing quickly; the population is growing and urbanising rapidly. At the same time, agriculture's share of the workforce (4.6%) and of the economy is now very small. Indeed, the proportion of farmers in the workforce is down 85% in the last 50 years, and 75% of that workforce is aged over 50.

Increasing urbanisation changes ideals. Many now have unrealistic values about the countryside – attaching greater importance to heritage, scenery and ecology than to food production. Such values extend to the cores of rural towns, mostly comprising smaller, mainly 19th century stone buildings that are increasingly designated as architectural conservation areas.

Values based on abstraction, idealism and precaution have led to very extensive and restrictive designations that give priority to protection, preservation and restriction, which can increase the cost and complexity of development and reduce the attraction of these areas for new uses.

The redevelopment of 'Main Street', all over Ireland, is also restricted by the ownership of the majority of the commercial core in small sites. Many owners are unable or unwilling to co-operatively develop the scale, access and parking necessary to accommodate modern retail requirements. This is one of the main causes of the migration of modern stores, like Aldi and Lidl, to the outskirts, which drains the already impoverished centre of footfall and vitality.





'Use it or lose it' is a truism that also applies to towns. Unless the main street is filled with uses, it will undergo the death-spiral that begins with charity shops and ends with dereliction and loss. The other truism that can equally apply is 'Change is a Choice'. To change, we will need to both let go and reach out if we are to create vibrant and attractive futures for rural towns and villages that support and sustain rural hinterlands.

Letting go means increasing the incentives for the landowners of the centres of these towns to release land for integrated, plan-led development that would benefit all. Letting go will also involve reducing the influence of well-intentioned, but misplaced, forces of planning and conservation that place a greater priority on preserving the parts, rather than the whole of our settlements.

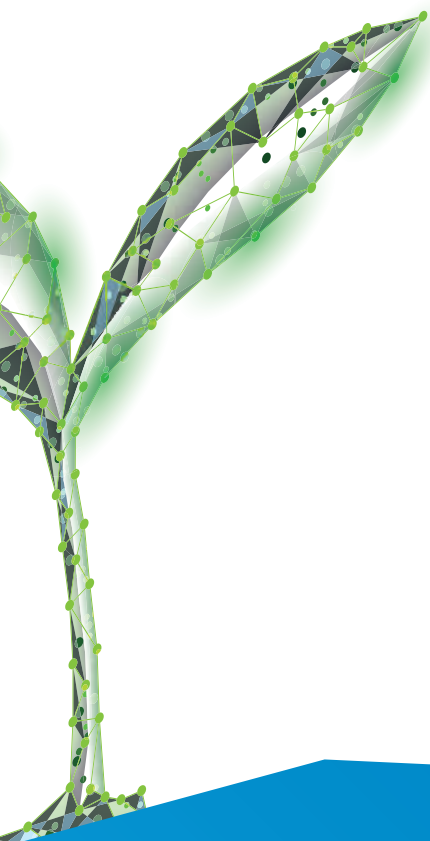
Reaching out means making specific, purposeful plans for definite uses and futures – by assigning specific roles to each place so that all play a specialist part within the larger network of services, supports and attractions that will sustain wider areas at county level. Reaching out means expecting change, and embracing its arrival by preparing for changes in population and economy – especially in matters of age and agriculture. Planning is about facilitating the future by facing reality – not by wishing it away. Planners are well accustomed to making plans for more land to accommodate growth – but, where are our plans to prepare for contraction when people age or leave?

Planning in Ireland is mostly about the development and growth of settlements. Our county development plans are largely silent about countryside – technically called 'white lands', because they are un-zoned – except for necessary designations to protect water, ecology and scenery.

We need plans for transitions in the rural areas surrounding settlements. We need plans to transition away from agriculture, in some areas, and plans for more intensive agriculture in other areas, because a mere twelve percent of all farms produce almost two-thirds of Ireland's agricultural output, using less than a third of the total farmed-land area. We need plans for older and smaller populations in some places. All of these changes need to be linked to plans for rural uses such as tourism, food production, leisure, energy generation and rural enterprise.

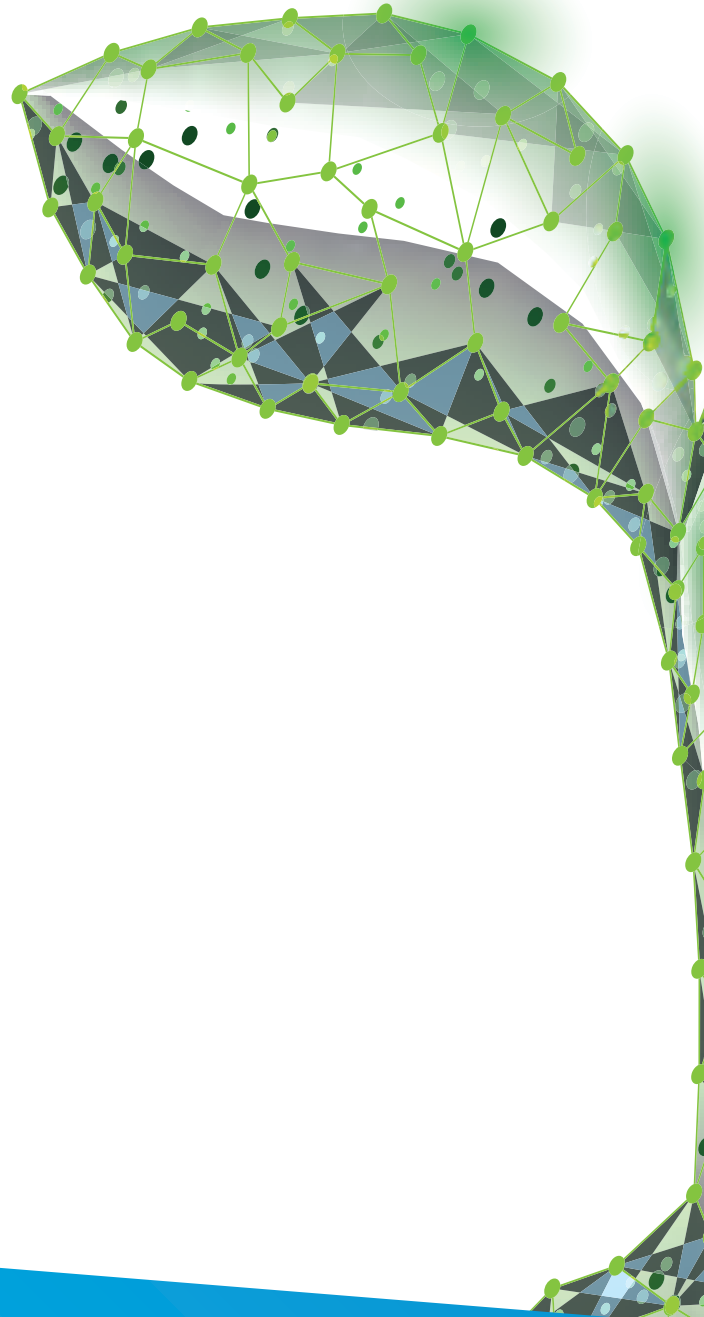
Change can happen by the slow and accepted accumulation of external effects – which is exactly what is happening now in rural Ireland – or change can happen by design. Our rural towns can be transformed by a combination of interventions and strategies by central and local government.

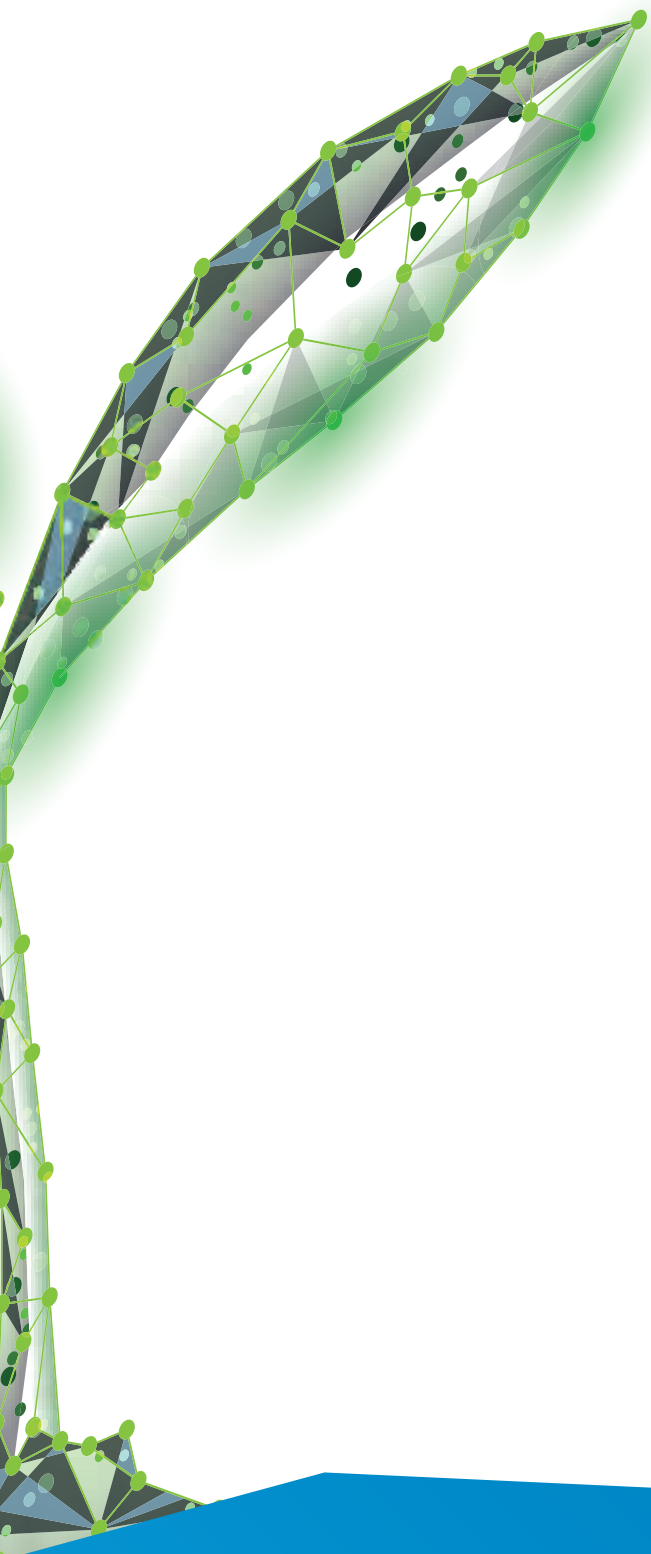
Fiscal instruments could be introduced, based on the successful example of the farmer retirement schemes, to incentivise settlement-centre land-owners to release or combine smaller un-economic back-land and main street sites into viable plots to meet modern land-use requirements. Local authorities could develop new serviced residential frontage roads to wrap behind settlement back-lands – to increase density, reduce ribbon development and improve mobility patterns.



The future of rural Ireland needs a new narrative that addresses the hard realities of irreversible population change caused by agricultural restructuring. This will involve accepting the futility of hankering for the return of a mythical past. It is nostalgia, blaming and denial that are killing our towns - not neglect. We continue to make rural policies based on opinions, expectations and entitlements - not evidence.

We will need to re-purpose our rural areas - town and country, so that they will be able to accommodate these changes instead of becoming lost in a fruitless downward spiral of regret and blame. Newly imagined, these areas have a future with equal, if different, opportunities from the larger settlements. Reaching that future requires us to, first, get out of our own way.









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