

Rural economic development through collective action

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Abstract

The downturn in the Irish economy, coupled with high levels of unemployment, has focused attention on the need to promote economic development. This paper provides case study evidence on one successful approach to rural economic development by outlining the evolution, outcomes and key capabilities of a collective action response to the challenge of rural underdevelopment in north-west Connemara. Reviewing a fifty-year period, the case study shows that collective action has evolved as a key strategy to overcome government and market failure in relation to rural development. Crucially from a development perspective, the collective action response has not only been a series of events – it is embedded as an institution and a process. In broad policy terms, the implication is that there are public-good benefits to be gained from assisting and encouraging local communities, through the provision of finance and capability-building support, to deliver collective action responses to their particular challenges.

Keywords: Rural, economic development, collective action, market and government failure

Introduction

The downturn in the Irish economy, coupled with high levels of unemployment, has focused attention on the need to promote economic development throughout the economy. However, given the global recession, the Irish banking and public finance difficulties, the weakened sectoral profile of the Irish economy in terms of its job-creation capability and the credit squeeze that is impacting the enterprise sector, there is consternation about where impulses for economic development and employment creation might come from. Employment from foreign direct investment in sectors such as medical devices, ICT, financial services, food, travel, entertainment and digital media is seen as part of the solution (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2010). However, many of those enterprises will be urban based as they seek to benefit from economies of agglomeration. In the rural economy the enduring structural weakness of local economies that was masked by the Celtic tiger explosion in rural employment in construction, retail and services is once again exposed. In the medium term these sectors are unlikely to be significant providers of jobs.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides evidence on one successful approach to economic development in a rural area. More specifically, it is a case study of the evolution and outcomes of a collective action response to the challenge of rural underdevelopment in north-west Connemara. A key actor in this process is Connemara West plc, a community-owned and community-managed rural development organisation based in Letterfrack, Co. Galway, that was created in 1971. The rationale for focusing on this story is that it illustrates critical drivers and success factors and provides important insights that may be of use to other rural communities and policymakers with a rural development remit.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, attention is drawn to some pertinent literature about the importance of locality, the sources of economic development in rural areas and the role of collective action. The case study region is then briefly outlined. In the third part the evolution and outcomes of collective action in the case study region and its role in promoting economic development are presented. The fourth section discusses insights from the case study and identifies key drivers and capabilities important for successful collective action. The final part contains concluding remarks.

Perspectives on rural economic development

This section discusses three important perspectives on rural economic development. First, why is it that in an increasingly globalised world locality is becoming more important for economic development? Second, what are the possible sources of economic development in rural areas? Third, what do we mean by collective action?

The increasing importance of locality

Globalisation refers to the shift towards a more integrated and interdependent world economy. Undoubtedly, there are both positive and negative aspects to globalisation and these impacts are experienced at the level of the individual, the household, the firm, the town, the region, the sector and the nation (Kaplinsky & Readman, 2005). On the positive side, growing global integration leads to increased incomes and greater product and service quality and choice for some of the world's population. On the negative side, there is also a tendency towards growing disparity within and between countries and, globally, a stubbornly large number of people living in absolute poverty (Kaplinsky & Readman, 2005).

Paradoxically, however, in a globalising world, locality is becoming more important in economic development processes (Porter, 1998). For example, in the rural economic development literature there is clear evidence that successful rural areas are those that have used community-led approaches to development that focus on leveraging local resources, institutions, capabilities and skills that do not exist anywhere else (e.g. Heanue, 2002b; Terluin, 2003). Elsewhere – for example, in the industrial economics literature – it is argued that critical learning processes which rest on local innovation systems characterised by inter-firm collaboration, good-quality regional infrastructures, access to high-grade design resources and highly skilled labour forces give some enterprises an advantage over competitors (Hirsch-Kreinsen et al., 2003). This advantage lies increasingly in local factors such as knowledge, relationships and motivation that distant rival firms cannot access (Porter, 1998). Moreover, especially for sectors such as food and tourism, the ability to draw closely on the attributes of an area to deliver authentic local food and unique culturally based tourism products is an important source of competitive advantage (Bessière, 1998; Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2010).

By drawing on their unique local resources, communities and firms are able to exert some influence over their interaction with global forces, an interaction that is mediated through national policies and frameworks (Terluin, 2003). It is locality in the broad sense discussed here that is at the centre of ideas about the possibility of endogenous development for rural areas (Terluin, 2003).

Sources of rural economic development

Economic development is sustained progressive change to attain individual and group interests through the expanded, intensified and adjusted use of resources (Shaffer et al., 2004). Rural economic development is no different. By way of a simplistic model, economic development in any rural area may arise from the activities of government, the private sector and the voluntary/community sector. However, it is clear that in some areas, or at different times in a single area, one or more of these actors may not be making a significant contribution to rural economic development. In other words, there may be government, private or community sector failure in terms of their contribution to economic development. Dissatisfaction with the contribution of government and the private sector to economic development has led some rural communities to try to stimulate development themselves. This usually involves the provision of services, enterprise, training or infrastructure. More narrowly, community economic development has taken three main forms (Curtin, 1996):

- i. communities have sought to establish and manage enterprises themselves;
- ii. communities have sought, usually in negotiation or partnership with state agencies, to bring jobs to their areas;
- iii. communities have sought, again typically in conjunction with state agencies and through such means as the provision of workspace and training and education supports, to promote indigenous enterprise.

At community level, any of these three activities is necessarily underpinned by collective action to initiate, plan and manage any of these forms of economic development activities. The questions of how such collective action emerges and is harnessed and nurtured and of what it can achieve are central to the remainder of this paper.

What is collective action and why is it useful?

Collective action is the *involvement of a group of people with a shared interest* undertaking some kind of *voluntary common action* in pursuit of that shared interest (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). There is a large amount of academic and policy literature on collective action and also empirical examples of its application to issues as diverse as natural resource management, neighbourhood watch, political action and social movements, in addition to rural development projects (see Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). It is important to understand the notion of collective action as it implicitly, if not explicitly, underpins what are called the endogenous and mixed endogenous/exogenous approaches to rural development in advanced economies (Terluin, 2003).

Collective action can be understood as an event (a one-time occurrence), as an institution (rule of the game applied over and over again) or as a process (how it actually happens) (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). Although it is often taken for granted that groups of individuals with common interests will attempt to further those common interests, Olson (1965) suggests that it is not always the case, especially if the group is large. Ostrom (1990) argues that the world contains many types of individuals, some more willing than others to initiate the type of reciprocity necessary for collective action to flourish. As a result, it is difficult to outline a single model of collective action, although there are general principles. The following case study illustrates these principles.

The case study region

As shown in Figure 1 the case study area, which is focused on the parish of Ballinakill, especially the villages of Letterfrack, Tully, Tullycross, Moyard and Kylemore and their surrounding areas (c. 1,900 inhabitants), is located on the western seaboard of Co. Galway, approximately 100 km from Galway city. The region is mountainous, with relatively poor infrastructure.

The locality is characterised by a dispersed and low-density population, with 11 persons per square km compared with the national average of 60 and a European average of 143. Economically, the case study region is classified as severely disadvantaged. The residents of the area are heavily dependent on small-scale agriculture, construction sector employment and seasonal service sector jobs, primarily in the tourist sector, with little industrial or permanent service sector work in the region. Dependency rates in the region are

Figure 1: The case study region

significantly above the national average. The locality has a long tradition of emigration, with the population being reduced by half since 1926; a recent recognition of this structural problem was the inclusion of the area in the CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Ard-Riachtanais) programme for revitalising rural areas, an initiative that aimed to fast-track *National Development Plan* spending, particularly infrastructural investment, in selected rural areas. At the same time, however, the region is characterised by a vibrant community development sector that has participated in, and indeed pioneered, initiatives unique in Ireland, many of which are discussed later in this article. There is also an energetic social and artistic community. In total there are approximately 160 active community, sporting and social organisations in the area (Heanue & Macken-Walsh, 2012).

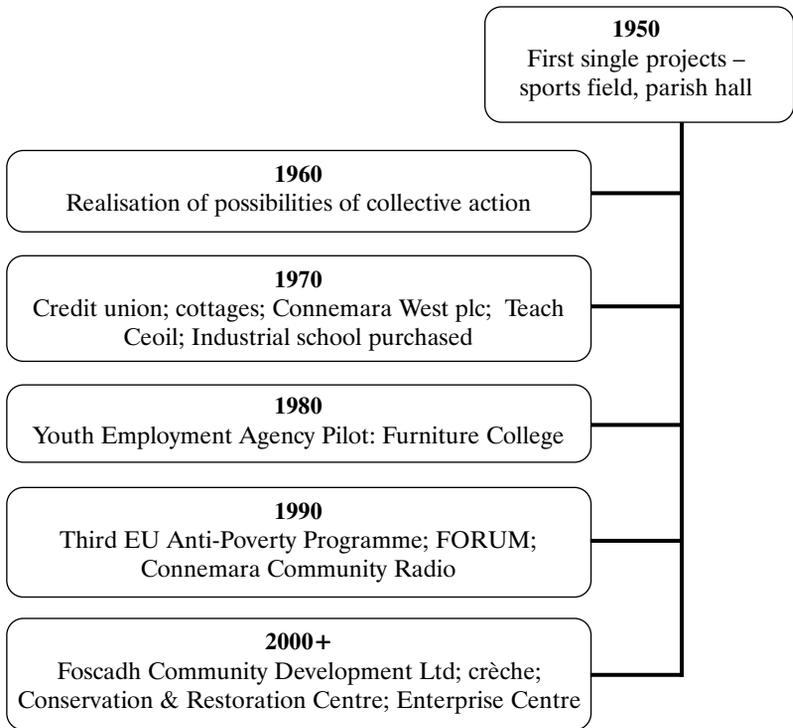
The evolution and outcomes of collective action in north-west Connemara¹

To fully understand the evolution of a collective action response to the challenge of underdevelopment in the case study region, it is necessary to begin at the 1950s. Clearly, it is impossible to outline all the activities that have taken place since then. What are described below,

¹ This section draws extensively on O'Donohue (1992) and O'Neill (2008). For a full overview of the activities of Connemara West plc since its establishment and development activities more generally in the locality, these two sources are invaluable.

and outlined for convenience in Figure 2, are those key activities that were pivotal in terms of either their size, shaping the direction of collective action in the locality or addressing specific challenges identified by the community at a particular time, and that is why they are reported here.

Figure 2: Overview of collective action 1950 to 2000+



The 1950s and 1960s

A sports field and parish hall were built in Tullycross using voluntary labour and opened in 1957 and 1959, respectively. Enthused by these successes and the realisation that collective action could produce positive results for the area, a guild of Muintir na Tíre was established in the 1960s.² However, little else of note was achieved in the 1960s

² Muintir na Tíre, established in 1931 initially as an agricultural producers' co-operative, was Ireland's premier community development organisation for over fifty years. It was instrumental in establishing all-embracing parish councils (Curtin, 1996).

and the earlier enthusiasm of the 1950s waned. Nonetheless, these first attempts at community development laid the foundations for a learning process that bore fruit in later decades.

The 1970s

In 1971 Tullycross Credit Union was formed. This was regarded as a pivotal breakthrough in that, for the first time, people realised they had financial resources that they could trust to be locally managed and used for development purposes. In the same year, the Ballinakill Parish Development Committee was established to undertake a range of economic, social and cultural development activities, and a year later it was formally constituted as a community council affiliated to Muintir na Tíre. Throughout the 1970s the committee was instrumental in promoting shellfish farming in Killary Fjord and establishing Connemara National Park in Letterfrack.

Also in the early 1970s the decision was made to build a scheme of nine thatched self-catering cottages in the village of Tullycross. A separate company was formed to build and manage the cottage scheme and hence Connemara West plc was created in 1971. It is a company limited by guarantee, with a share capital and over 500 local shareholders. Finance was raised locally for the cottages project and contributions were also received from Galway County Council and the Western Regional Tourism Organisation. The cottages were viewed as a catalyst for future development, with the decision that any profits earned should be retained and invested by Connemara West plc in new projects, rather than distributed to shareholders. Subsequently, the commercial success of the cottage scheme gave Connemara West plc the financial and organisational base from which to develop other activities.

In the late 1970s Connemara West plc undertook its next two major projects. The first was the construction in 1977 of Teach Ceoil, a performance and training centre for social and cultural activities in the village of Tully. The second was the purchase of the former industrial school in Letterfrack in 1978.³ Local finance was raised (made up of a second issue of shares in the company and a loan from three local families) and a donation received from the Guinness Workers Educational Fund. The building was purchased and named the Connemara West Centre. This large building of 28,000 sq ft (2,601 m²)

³ The Industrial Schools Act of 1868 established industrial schools to care for neglected, orphaned and abandoned children.

needed extensive repairs, which were carried out incrementally over several years. With the exception of a grant from Galway County Development and some projects funded by the Youth Employment Agency (YEA), all the money spent on renovations was generated by Connemara West plc. Since the purchase, a large number of new buildings housing various activities were constructed around the Connemara West Centre, so that the location is now better described as a campus.

It was envisaged that at least part of this large building would be used as the location for micro craft enterprises to provide employment and training for local people. Various craft workshops were established, including workshops on woodturning, ceramics, sculpting, weaving, leatherwork, pewter ware, fireplaces, wrought iron and soft toys, as well as a craft co-op and a patchwork venture. The building was also the location for a farmers' co-op, fishermen's co-op and the first EU Anti-Poverty Programme, in which Connemara West plc was a partner. This EU-funded project, called the West Connemara Community Action Project, provided finance for Connemara West plc to employ its first full-time office secretary and also facilitated the opening of the Connemara West office in 1980 to provide office services such as typing, photocopying and faxing to the local community. Funding from the Department of Education supported the employment of a development officer. Early renovation work on the former industrial school, including the installation of a new heating system and electrical rewiring, continued during this project.

The 1980s

In the early 1980s youth unemployment, early school-leaving and emigration were identified as particular problems for north-west Connemara. To improve the employment chances of local youngsters, a craft training course was established in 1982 and ran until 1985 in the Connemara West Centre. The course, which provided comprehensive wood-skills training for fifteen local young people, was designed and managed by Connemara West plc under contract from the YEA. Connemara West plc had sole responsibility for the development and management of the course. The fifteen young people obtained City & Guilds Certificates in Furniture Craft. However, this course was a once-off arrangement.

In 1985 Connemara West plc successfully applied to the Combat Poverty Agency for project funding under the second EU Anti-Poverty Programme. As a result, a four-year project called the Community

Resource and Education Project was established. This project facilitated specific activities such as the compilation of a community information directory, the hosting of a Wood Sculpture Symposium, the design of development plans for the villages of Letterfrack, Tullycross and Tully, and the establishment of Connemara Community Radio (for more on the radio, see below). This project, by financing the employment of two project staff, also enabled development and planning work to be carried out on future education courses (see below), and laid the foundation for much of the activities that were to develop in the Connemara West Centre over the following decade and a half.

After the successful once-off wood-skills course, Connemara West plc engaged in a strategic research exercise focused on exploring the training and skills requirements of the furniture industry that could be serviced from Letterfrack. A proposal for an Education Programme in Fine Woodworking and Design was developed and circulated to agencies that were considered possible collaborators and funding sources (e.g. Kilkenny Design, the Crafts Council of Ireland, the Industrial Development Authority, AnCO,⁴ the YEA and the Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)).⁵ In 1987 Connemara West plc and GMIT jointly initiated a two-year National Certificate in Furniture Design and Manufacture. This partnership – named The Furniture College – was, and still is, a unique and innovative model of education provision. The initiative has developed to the stage that in 2010 there were 260 students pursuing a choice of six BSc degree courses in furniture design, manufacturing, technology, management or teaching at the GMIT facility in Letterfrack.⁶ The expansion in student numbers and course options was facilitated by an ambitious €6 million building programme at the Connemara West campus, completed in 2000, funded primarily through the Operational Programme for Agriculture, Rural Development and Forestry. This is not the only education initiative on the campus. In the late 1980s a

⁴ AnCO was a forerunner of FÁS.

⁵ Although GMIT was known as The Regional Technical College Galway at the time, its current name is used here.

⁶ Bachelor of Science in Furniture Design and Manufacture; Bachelor of Science in Furniture Production and Technology; Bachelor of Science in Furniture Conservation and Restoration; Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Product Design (Furniture); Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Manufacturing Technology (Furniture); Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Design and Technology Education. For more information see <http://www.gmit.ie/letterfrack-campus.html>.

programme for early school-leavers, which later evolved into the Youthreach inter-agency education programme, was established. Youthreach caters for young people who opt out of the formal education system without adequate training, qualifications or skills. In 2010 the Youthreach programme had forty-five participants.

Drawing on further findings from the strategic research exercise mentioned above, other initiatives targeted at the furniture industry were developed by Connemara West plc. A commercial unit specialising in furniture restoration and conservation was established in 2000. The main objective of the unit, now called Conservation|Letterfrack, is to provide a complete conservation and restoration service for furniture, wooden artefacts and architectural woodwork to the highest international standards.⁷ This enterprise, although a division of Connemara West plc, is a commercial operation. In 2010 Conservation|Letterfrack employed two full-time conservators and management staff and one part-time conservator.

The 1990s to date

In 1989 Connemara West plc invited five statutory agencies (FÁS, Co. Galway VEC, City of Galway VEC, Galway County Council and the Western Health Board) to join with the local community to submit a proposal for a large rural project under the third EU Anti-Poverty Programme. The project, which was called FORUM and was based in the village of Letterfrack, commenced activities in 1990. FORUM Connemara Ltd, as the organisation is now called, delivers not only the LEADER Programme for non-Gaeltacht Connemara but also the Local Community Development Programme, three FÁS schemes (Social Care, Essential Housing Repairs and Youth in Action), the Rural Social Scheme and an Adolescent Support Programme.⁸ Since it began its work in 1990, FORUM Connemara Ltd has had an incalculable impact on the social and economic well-being of the residents of north-west Connemara.

As mentioned earlier, the Connemara Community Radio Group was established in 1987 as part of the Community Resource and Education Project. The project found that a credible, accessible and local forum was needed to provide information, allow debate and permit questioning of developments and issues that impact on the

⁷ See <http://www.conservationletterfrack.ie/index.html>.

⁸ For more information see <http://www.forumconnemara.ie>.

area. In 1988 the radio service went on air for three months. Then, following a long interval off air, the station was eventually licensed for thirty months as part of the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) Community Radio Pilot Project, and began broadcasting on 1 July 1995.⁹ Connemara Community Radio (CCR), as it is now known, has broadcast consistently since 1995, moving into a purpose-built studio facility on the Connemara West campus in 2001. This building was funded with resources from Connemara West plc and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. CCR also opened a studio on the island of Inishbofin in September 2000. In 2007 a ten-year licence was granted to CCR by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland. Evaluations of CCR have consistently confirmed its contribution to social-capital building and its role as a key source of locally relevant information and advice (see Heanue, 2002a; Heanue & Macken-Walsh, 2012; Macken-Walsh & Heanue, 2008).

In 1999 Foscadh Community Development Ltd, a partnership between Connemara West plc, FORUM Connemara Ltd and Tullycross Credit Union, was established with a view to undertaking an ambitious project that includes building thirty social houses to cater for the elderly, families in need of housing and returning emigrants. This project also includes a community services centre, a community sports field and a sports and leisure centre on a site adjacent to the Connemara West campus. Following a decade of protracted negotiations over land transfers, design, development work and the securing of funding, the main portion of this project still has some obstacles to overcome before it can begin. The sports field, however, has been completed.

In 2007 a community crèche costing €1 million was built on the Connemara West campus. Looking ahead, there are several projects being investigated for the near future as a response to contemporary community needs of employment, training for employment and local service provision. For example, there are vacant premises available in the Connemara West campus that would be suitable for conversion to use as an Enterprise Incubation Centre, where, in conjunction with other agencies, business start-up support and mentoring could be provided to local entrepreneurs, including graduates of GMIT Letterfrack, wishing to start furniture-related businesses.

⁹ The IRTC functions are now subsumed into the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

Discussion

The activities of Connemara West plc have had a significant impact on the locality. In visible terms, the Connemara West campus in Letterfrack hosts an impressive physical infrastructure, including the buildings that host the Connemara West Centre, GMIT Letterfrack, FORUM Connemara Ltd, CCR, Youthreach, the crèche and Conservation|Letterfrack. Other infrastructure, such as the nine thatched cottages and Teach Ceoil are located in the nearby villages of Tullycross and Tully, two and three miles away, respectively.

There are 134 people employed in organisations headquartered at the campus, making it one of the largest sources of employment in the region. Connemara West plc directly employs nineteen staff in the five activity centres that run its various projects. In addition, approximately another 115 people are employed in organisations that were established by, or in partnership with, Connemara West plc and are based on the campus in Letterfrack (GMIT Letterfrack, 25 employees; FORUM, 16 employees; FÁS, 45 employees; Rural Social Scheme, 14 employees; Youthreach, 15 employees). There is undoubtedly a significant euro injection into the local economy although the total impact has never been formally evaluated. Focusing on just one aspect, Heanue (2007) estimates that the direct expenditure in the area from the students of GMIT Letterfrack alone is €891,872.¹⁰ More broadly, Kelly (1992) and Rosenfeld (2001) conclude that the impact of the students' residency for nine months each year on community, cultural and social vitality is positive.

There are other less-visible, but equally important, impacts from the activities of Connemara West plc. These impacts take three forms. First, the local community has developed the confidence that it has the capability to address what it determines as key challenges and to find a way of providing locally appropriate solutions to these challenges based on a collective response. Second, there is an understanding that critical local resources in terms of people, finances and skills exist and can be harnessed in partnership with external agencies to address local needs. Third, the contribution of Connemara West plc's activities to the social, community and cultural fabric of the area is incalculable.

¹⁰ The direct expenditure of students occurs mostly in the off-peak tourist season and therefore significantly bolsters other locally generated income. Obviously, such an estimate gives no indication of the indirect expenditure generated by the students' presence and is therefore only a partial measure of their economic impact.

Although it is impossible to construct a counterfactual (what the situation would be in the locality if Connemara West plc had never existed), it is reasonable to conclude that most socio-economic indicators are more positive than they would have been in the absence of the activities of Connemara West plc.

In trying to identify insights that might be of use for other communities trying to grapple with rural underdevelopment, it is important to try to distil key drivers of change and critical factors that contributed to Connemara West plc's success. First and foremost, it is clear that there is no simple template to be derived from the Connemara West plc experience for other communities to try to replicate in the expectation that it would necessarily result in successful local rural development elsewhere. That is because each area is different in terms of both its challenges and the local resources it starts off with (and subsequently develops). In addition, serendipity and luck have a role to play. There are, however, insights that are useful. Specifically in terms of key drivers, it is important to reflect on whether it was individuals or groups that started initiatives; what specific experience or skills those people had; what role the wider north Connemara community (the diaspora) played; and how Connemara West plc convinced those in other public and private organisations, locally, regionally and nationally, to partner with them.

Key drivers of change

For the north-west Connemara area, a relatively small group of individuals were instrumental in instigating action around the one-off activities in the 1950s; a local priest, in particular, played an important role. This same small group was also to the forefront in the early days in the drive to formalise organisational structures (e.g. establish a guild of Muintir na Tíre) and to identify other initiatives to pursue. Like many other community development efforts at that time, many of the central individuals involved were teachers and/or priests; for example, the first board of Connemara West plc consisted of five members, two of whom were teachers and one of whom was a priest. It could be argued that those first board members had particular skills, connections and reputations, without which at the time initial attempts at collective action might not have flourished. Over the decades, as Connemara West plc employed 'professional' development workers, this original skill set was augmented to complement a changed environment. The personal connections, network membership and

ethos these new people brought to local development efforts influenced the strategies developed and the choices made. In addition, the occupational background and associated skills set of the board of directors changed as board members came and went. Crucially, however, in terms of specific competence and continuity, two of the members of the first board of Connemara West plc are still actively involved with the present board – one as a director and the other as an advisor to the board.

In many of the fundraising activities that were undertaken at critical junctures in the early days (e.g. for the building of the cottages and the purchase of the industrial school) there was a significant financial contribution by emigrants from the area. Many of these emigrants also bought shares in Connemara West plc when it was incorporated. By contrast, maybe partly as a reflection of the state of communications technologies in the 1970s and 1980s, the Connemara diaspora was not, in any significant way, used as a source of specific skills or expertise. The core human resources used to drive initiatives were locally based and, to a great extent, that is still the case today.

That being said, it is clear that without the support, cooperation and partnership of myriad public and private organisations, both within and outside north Connemara, many of the key activities outlined previously could not have happened. Connemara West plc was fortunate that, for example, in terms of two key episodes – the initial three-year training course run by the YEA and the subsequent partnership with GMIT to develop The Furniture College – the respective public servant in both organisations involved had the vision and leadership to see how partnering with Connemara West plc could help fulfil their own organisation's objectives, as well as contributing to local development efforts in north-west Connemara. Importantly, these public servants perceived that their remit included practically and innovatively engaging with such efforts. Moreover, both of these public servants were in such positions where they could make the decision in relation to the commitment of resources or convince others within their own organisations or the respective government departments to make the necessary decision. How this was actually achieved is outside the scope of this article.

In terms of outcomes, however, clearly in the case of the YEA the proposed Connemara West plc training course allowed that organisation to fulfil its training remit for unemployed young people in a locality that might otherwise have been difficult to service. For GMIT, the partnership opportunity offered the prospect for it to add

value to its regional development remit in an innovative and tangible way.¹¹ This partnership placed the activities on the Connemara West campus onto a strategically different trajectory (for a fuller discussion of this, see Heanue, 2007) and contributed to the ongoing financial security of Connemara West plc.

On a more general level, it is also possible to discuss the key factors necessary for successful collective action. Based on a series of case studies, twelve factors associated with a range of successful Irish rural development organisations were identified by O'Hara (1998).¹² For the purposes of this paper, these may be usefully collapsed into four and reinterpreted as capabilities necessary for realising collective action: leadership and personnel, planning and strategy, accessing funding, and effective partnerships.

Leadership and personnel

Effective leadership and management are critical. Leadership includes having a vision and a willingness to take calculated risks. At pivotal junctures in the development of Connemara West plc, key individuals both inside the organisation and in external state and other institutions were instrumental in ensuring that projects and initiatives went ahead, even though they were risky. There are four good examples. First, when the cottages were being built, Connemara West plc was advised that the work should not be carried out by locals as they would not deliver it on time and within budget. As a matter of principle, Connemara West's board of directors were adamant that the work should go to local people; it did, and the project was completed on time and within budget. The cottages project gave the community a huge psychological boost and the finances to fund other projects. Second, a similar situation arose in relation to the purchase of the former industrial school, where the board of directors were advised that it was not a good decision to buy the building and that they would

¹¹ Although GMIT now has three campuses outside Galway city – Castlebar, Mountbellew and Letterfrack – the latter was the first of these.

¹² These were (1) effective leadership and management; (2) a good board; (3) quality and commitment of professional staff; (4) commitment to ongoing training and capacity building; (5) importance of sound planning; (6) commitment to evaluation; (7) creation of appropriate structures at each stage of development; (8) a local and ongoing source of revenue; (9) ability to access and successfully utilise funding sources and schemes; (10) early success and visibility through a 'flagship project'; (11) effective partnership arrangements; (12) capacity to learn from others and commitment to innovation.

never be able to make maximum use of it.¹³ Today, the building is utilised to capacity and in fact, as outlined previously, a significant amount of additional capacity was added to the campus in the past two decades. Without the physical resources provided by the former industrial school, most of the activities described above might not have emerged. The YEA and GMIT partnerships discussed previously are two examples where key public servants displayed similar vision, leadership and risk-taking.

Planning and strategy

Like any venture, it is important to devise plans based on sound research and analysis. Connemara West plc has consistently approached its activities in this way. For example, as part of its involvement in the first, second and third EU Anti-Poverty Programmes, extensive research was carried out on the socio-economic situation in the community and the identification of possible projects and structures to address the identified challenges. The provision of education courses targeted at the furniture industry, which culminated in the GMIT facility in Letterfrack, arose from extensive research undertaken by national and international experts on behalf of Connemara West plc with the industry and other stakeholders from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s. More recently, research was undertaken to identify the need for social housing (see Heanue, 2006) and sports facilities provision in north-west Connemara. This particular research informed the project plans of Foscadh Community Development Ltd.

The need to evaluate activities and use the results from evaluations for future planning is critical. Connemara West plc has always tried to critically evaluate and reflect on its activities. Unsurprisingly, over the decades, the organisation has been involved in projects that for one reason or another did not turn out as expected and learning from these experiences also informs future project design, development and planning.

Strategically, Connemara West plc closely aligned itself with the EU Anti-Poverty Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, such that many of the activities on the campus today emerged directly from those programmes, e.g. FORUM Connemara Ltd and CCR. More recently,

¹³ It later emerged that the plans for the former industrial school by other bidders included stripping it, demolishing the building and selling the land as sites (O'Donohue, 1992, p. 18).

developing part of the campus to be a centre of excellence in relation to furniture manufacturing education and research in partnership with GMIT has been the focus.¹⁴ At various stages, the creation of appropriate structures (e.g. FORUM Connemara Ltd, the GMIT/Connemara West partnership, Foscadh Community Development Ltd) was critical to ensuring that the momentum generated was maintained and that Connemara West plc could focus on its core activity of identifying local needs, devising initiatives to address those needs and creating the appropriate structures to progress those activities.

Irrespective of the amount of planning, strategising and evaluation that is undertaken, one of the key features of local rural development work is the long amount of time it takes for projects to come to fruition – the Foscadh Community Development Ltd experience mentioned previously is just one example. Therefore, patience and perseverance to bring projects to completion are two of the most desirable attributes that need to be fostered by any community embarking on a collective action response. More generally, the commitment of staff and volunteers to implement projects once decided upon, no matter what the setbacks, is fundamental.

Accessing funding

Given the short-term nature and diversity of many funding sources available to local groups, establishing an ongoing source of revenue is important. Allied to this are the benefits that are gained in terms of building community confidence and 'demonstration effects' to partners and funders from securing an early success and visibility through a 'flagship project'. In the case of Connemara West plc, two examples of this are the cottages scheme in the early days and, more recently, the GMIT partnership, each of which at different times became emblematic of the activities of the organisation and a secure source of finance. In time, the Foscadh social housing and community services project might serve a similar function. However, just as important as the generation of a secure source of local funding is the ability to use that funding together with contacts

¹⁴ In 2009 GMIT Letterfrack signed agreements with two US third-level institutions – Virginia Tech University and Southern Virginia Higher Education Centre – that will bring US students to Letterfrack and also lead to research collaboration. The agreements are a testament to GMIT Letterfrack's growing international reputation as a centre of excellence for furniture education.

and partners, and through various networks, to access and successfully leverage external funding sources. As much of Connemara West plc's income is not programme driven, importantly, the organisation has a high level of autonomy about the activities it can become involved with.

Effective partnership arrangements

Networking and collaborating with government departments, statutory agencies, funding bodies, other local development groups and the private sector is important to the design, delivery and resourcing of activities. Such partnerships are also an important opportunity for learning. Connemara West plc, through the promotion of and involvement in especially the third EU Anti-Poverty Programme, was influential in nationally piloting the partnership model as an approach to addressing rural underdevelopment. This capacity for partnership working is a key strength of the organisation, as exemplified in the successful GMIT and Foscadh Community Development Ltd partnerships in particular. The importance of particular networks will wax and wane over time. Therefore, it is the capability to network rather than any specific linkages that is important over the longer term.

Concluding remarks

In addressing the problem of rural underdevelopment, communities have a possible role to play through engaging in collective action responses to the problem. As shown by the case study outlined in this paper, the experience of collective action in the parish of Ballinakill in Connemara was clearly a series of events, but more crucially from a development perspective it is embedded as an institution and a process. Therefore, as a result of a process of learning by this community over a fifty-year period, a collective action response has evolved as a key strategy to overcome the local manifestations of government and market failure in relation to rural development. In doing so, the community has developed a unique set of capabilities, institutions, resources and skills that help it address its underdevelopment challenges. Therefore, this case provides a good example of how 'locality' can be drawn upon and used as an advantage in an increasingly globalised environment and of how a local community can seek to ameliorate the negative aspects of globalisation by harnessing its local resources.

It is clear that over time, and with varying degrees of success, Connemara West plc, on behalf of the community, has engaged with each of the three narrow forms of community economic development outlined by Curtin (1996), and continues to do so. The provision of workshop space (in the early days and possibly again in the near future), the establishment of partnerships to deliver training and education locally (e.g. GMIT, Youthreach) and the direct establishment of commercial enterprises (e.g. Conservation|Letterfrack) are just some of the examples. As one of the largest sources of employment in the region, the Connemara West campus makes a significant contribution to economic activity in the area. More broadly, it is clear that the activities of Connemara West plc have led to economic development as described by Shaffer et al. (2004): sustained change in the locality through the expanded, intensified and adjusted use of resources.

In facing the challenges of the twenty-first century, the appropriateness of a collective response to problems in the locality is unquestioned. As collective responses are derived in a bottom-up way, the resulting solutions are usually by their nature innovative. The very essence of innovation as a non-linear phenomenon means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine where a particular course of action may lead in the longer term. In the parish of Ballinakill, the journey from the provision of a sports field and community hall in the 1950s to the establishment of the diverse set of economic development activities that exist today at the Connemara West campus could not have been predicted or planned. This is clearly endogenous development in action. Although there is no simple template in this case study for other rural communities to follow, the overarching insights are clear. Small groups of people, with vision and determination, deciding to take some action to address locally identified needs can start a collective action process that need not have any defined end point. To ensure momentum and longevity, the group needs to draw on local resources, develop key capabilities and partner strategically with local, regional, national, international, public and private organisations.

In broad policy terms, the implication is that there are public-good benefits to be gained from assisting and encouraging local communities through the provision of finance and capability-building support to deliver collective action responses to their particular challenges. By doing so, public organisations can also find efficient, innovative and targeted ways of achieving their own objectives. The

economic development impact of Connemara West plc on its region is one example of the benefits of such a partnership approach. There are many publicly funded programmes that seek to do this already; the Local Community Development Programme and the LEADER Programme are just two examples. However, as the activities of Connemara West plc are not programme driven per se, it has more freedom in the types of activities it can engage in. This freedom also offers public organisations unique and flexible partnership opportunities to pursue their own objectives. For Connemara West plc, it can concentrate on a key capability that it has developed over the past fifty years: identifying a local problem that needs to be addressed, developing a solution and appropriate organisational and management structure to address the problem, securing a source of finance for the project (either publicly or market derived) and, if appropriate, spinning off that activity either as a partnership or as a stand-alone entity.

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