



NRN CASE STUDY

Upperchurch-Drombane Rural Community Development In Action



Introduction

This Case Study forms part of a series produced by the National Rural Network aimed at analysing and disseminating examples of good practice within the Rural Development Programme and to act as a stimulus to others.

Context

The concept of building inclusive, sustainable rural communities has gained much attention in policy terms over the past decades. Throughout the 1990's, Europe's rural areas were encouraged by programmes such as LEADER to embrace local action and local development solutions to face the challenges of the restructuring of agriculture and the concomitant lack of employment opportunities, development and displacement of population. This was a significant challenge in Ireland where rural areas, particularly those more remote from the urban, were associated with high rates of economic dependency, gender imbalances, a lack of employment opportunities, loss of essential services and, as a result, weakened communities entering into a spiral of decline (Jackson and Haase, 1996).

The LEADER approach was essentially an area-based or spatial approach to local development *'taking a small homogenous, socially cohesive territory, often characterised by common traditions, a local identity, a sense of belonging or common needs and expectations, as the target area for policy implementation'* (ELARD, 2011). Ireland has thirty-six Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are responsible for supporting projects that encourage farm diversification, tourism and business development and rural renewal. In the Upperchurch-Drombane area, the 2007-2013 LEADER programme is being delivered by North Tipperary LEADER Partnership. North Tipperary LEADER Partnership has emerged from a process of *'cohesion'* that has resulted in merging together the delivery of a number of different programmes along with LEADER, principally the local development social inclusion programme.

The integrated organisation has a wide remit across the area and includes many previously excluded groups within its focus. In the view of Curtin et al. (1996) it is never areas or localities that are poor/marginalised or wealthy or included but *people* or social groups. Areas that contain many poor people can also be a source of wealth-generation e.g. mining areas, tourist areas. Inequalities between social groups can be exacerbated by development, as witnessed during the *'boom'* years of the 1990's and 2000's when income inequality between groups widened to an unprecedented level (CSO, 2007).





Shaw in Asthana et al (2002) identifies three features of rural disadvantage:

1. Resource deprivation such as lack of adequate housing and infrastructure;
2. Opportunity deprivation arising from lack of essential health, education and recreational services; and
3. Mobility disadvantage due to lack of transport and inaccessibility.

This would imply that any attempt to address rural disadvantage would need to address infrastructural development, the development of essential services and accessibility, aimed at meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in particular.

Upperchurch-Drombane is an example of a community that has identified and addressed issues that were of importance to it and that has accessed many different forms of funding both targeted and mainstream. Together these have helped to address aspects of the three features of rural disadvantage referred to above.

It is important that the factors that facilitated this approach can be identified and supported by future programmes and initiatives as well as providing information for other developing community organisations.

The Emergence of a Self-Reliant Community

THE PERIOD OF CHALLENGE

The emergence of Upperchurch-Drombane as a self-reliant community did not happen overnight. The community in the 40's and 50's was as challenged as many others. A series of small, successful actions gave rise to an increasing level of confidence to the extent that today the community seems capable of engaging in any project.

Upperchurch-Drombane is a rural area located fifteen kilometres from Thurles on the old Limerick road. The population is about 1,200 and the area covers about 200 sq. km. The settlement pattern is quite dispersed, with many isolated households and even the two main villages, Upperchurch and Drombane, having only about a dozen houses in each. The countryside is mostly hilly with an elevation varying between 300 ft. and 1,400 ft. above sea level and the area is rich in historical sites.

In the 1950's and 1960's the Upperchurch-Drombane area was in a very negative situation, the population was falling, no new houses were being built, and there was a total dependence on farming and seasonal work in Thurles sugar factory. Out-migration was high, as was poverty. There was very poor infrastructure, little entertainment and many houses still had no electricity.

Emigration has always hit the area hard, though the so-called '*Celtic Tiger*' years saw a reversal in this trend.

THE START OF THE DEVELOPMENT PHASE

Improving Demographics

Up to the 1970's there were few women in the area and local social activity began to dwindle as there were a lot of ageing bachelors in the community. However during the 1970's a stabilisation of population began to occur as part of the general improvement in economic circumstances particularly in the farming sector. Con Harrington, a key member of the Community Development Association, says that as a result new houses were built in the area, a new consolidated primary school was developed in Upperchurch, and people stayed living in the area while perhaps commuting to Limerick and Thurles for employment.

Organisational Assistance

In order to address some of the negative issues in the area, people then began to take action. A Muintir-na-Tíre group started in the 1950's followed by Macra na Feirme; the GAA club bought a local field and established a proper pitch; Muintir-na-Tíre gave classes in leadership and Macra in public speaking. This



was particularly important in helping to develop the leadership in the community which later provided the impetus for social and economic development.

Economic Support

An economic breakthrough came in the 1970's when the Less Favoured Area (LFA) scheme for farmers was introduced. The Upperchurch-Drombane area was eventually included in the LFA Scheme after seven years of lobbying. This significantly helped the creation of a stable economic base in the area.

Festivals and Connections

The first major community undertaking, and the project that initiated the establishment of the Development Association, was the Ned O' the Hill festival which started in 1988. This event proved to be a great success and was supported by Shannon Development and other Government agencies and businesses. This was identified by Con Harrington as a key stage in the emergence of a community structure and a community self belief. The festival was supported by state bodies and was something that many members of the community could identify with and feel positive about.

CONSOLIDATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Development Association is now in existence over twenty years. Unlike many groups, the membership tends to be fluid with a central core group (ten-twelve people) and others joining for particular events/activities/initiatives. This approach was debated in the past with some believing that there should be a tighter membership structure but the more informal approach was considered as working best for the community. The Association is formally structured as a company to meet the legal requirements of funding agencies.

The informal approach has succeeded due to the culture of community co-operation in the area. The general public have a high level of trust in the community group and as a result have supported the initiatives which have emerged and been driven by the core group. Con Harrington identified the local culture of co-operation as one of the key factors behind the success of the Upperchurch-Drombane community.

The openness of the development group means that people feel included and that there are '*no hidden agendas*' and generally people '*row in behind*' new projects. Development in Upperchurch-Drombane therefore, was highly project driven. As successful projects were undertaken community confidence grew and the confidence of agencies in the community also grew.

The approach has also meant that no project was undertaken if it did not have a number of '*champions*'. Individual energy and commitment were cited as some of the principal reasons that projects were successful. If a project proposal faced significant opposition it was not proceeded with; in effect a system of consensus was used to decide on whether or not to proceed with a project. Some projects did not proceed because there was not sufficient energy within the community at the time for that project.





Actions Undertaken by the Upperchurch Drombane Community

From these small beginnings and connections, the self-development approach of the Upperchurch-Drombane Community progressed into areas including: caring in the community; community childcare; community employment; rural transport; local enterprise; tourism, and local energy.

Urban and Village Renewal

This was one of the first projects developed by the community in co-operation with the Local Authority. The Chairman of the Development Association at the time Con Harrington explained that the community did not initially think that they would be taken seriously enough to obtain the funding. However, they met with Local Authority staff and were encouraged by their initial meetings to such an extent that they submitted a proposal and were awarded funding for village enhancement.

Care in the Community

Many older people were living in isolation in remote areas of the parish resulting in considerable difficulty in accessing emergency health care, fear and loneliness. Four houses were completed in early 1996 in Upperchurch village and later four houses were also completed in Drombane. One family house was also constructed in each village.

Community Childcare

A Crèche building (playrooms, kitchen, outdoor play area and offices) was opened in September 2009, catering for up to seventy-one children aged from six months to twelve years (prior to the development, a community childcare service was provided by the Development Association in the local community centre). Its primary objective is to provide high quality, affordable childcare in a safe modern local facility which is accessible to all (financial assistance is available to parents who cannot afford the full cost).

Community Employment

A FÁS scheme has operated in the area since 1987 and a Rural Social Scheme in recent years. Largely with FÁS involvement, three scenic lookout points have been developed in the area. FÁS has also helped renovate a local holy well and provided fishing facilities with wheelchair access at the river as well as improving access to and cleaning up three local cemeteries. The group has also availed of LEADER and CLÁR funding to improve the two villages and other locations.



Children at play in the Crèche



Ladies who reside in the Community House



Rural Transport

With help initially from Tipperary LEADER and now from the North Tipperary LEADER Partnership and in co-operation with the neighbouring parish of Kilcommon, a Rural Transport Programme operates in the area (as part of the Rural Transport Initiative). This is a door-to-door service rather than a fixed route. About 1,200 passenger journeys per month are provided. The scheme provides not only transport but a vital social service to older people and this is borne out in the Upperchurch case (Fitzpatrick and Associates, 2004).

Local Enterprise

A local demand for computer training was recognised and a programme was started in 1998 which delivered considerable familiarisation and training in IT to people of all ages and backgrounds. A suitable room was made available in the local national school. Funding was secured in two tranches one of €87,000 and one of €30,000 from a national training programme called CAIT. Over the years 1,119 internal course places were completed. In addition, customised courses were run in conjunction with Teagasc, FÁS, Coillte, the County Enterprise Board and the VEC.

The level of ICT competence has also led to the establishment of a community website (<http://www.upperchurch.ie>) which is used both for community news and to promote the area to visitors. Also, unlike many websites of its kind, it is regularly updated and kept current.

Tourism

A home-farm stay programme (three families) in the 1990's was the first initiative taken to develop accommodation in the area for visitors. It opened up the area to those from other places and cultures. At present, a feasibility study is underway to assess the provision of a twenty bed centre in the area.

Three National Loop Walks have been completed and were included in a national pilot scheme. This scheme has now been mainstreamed and has provided the model for most of the new walking trails in Ireland. Other events such as festivals, lectures and exhibitions are usually held in conjunction with this resource.

Local Energy

In 2010, following initial consultation regarding village enhancement in Drombane, energy emerged as a topic of interest. Discussions were held with Tipperary Institute and the Tipperary Energy Agency and an energy efficiency project established. A survey of every household will determine the level of energy efficiency and interest in upgrading their homes (insulation, heating, lighting etc.).



Rural Transport bus



National Trails Day



Critical Success Factors and Barriers

The Upperchurch-Drombane Development Association has clearly demonstrated success in local development. It has combined a commitment to developing the economic potential of the area through the development of tourism, IT and local energy provision with social inclusion aspects such as services for the elderly and the Crèche. As has been recognised by the Agencies, the development association has the ambition, capacity and experience to achieve even more. The partnership approach to development and its outward-focus is another key success factor. The following is an outline of the critical success factors for this community.

Provision of a Local Funding Mechanism

The Development Association looks after the running of the Lotto and over €300,000 has been raised in the past six years. Overall, funding has never been a limiting factor in getting something done in the area. Many initiatives have been supported by way of local funding and other sources.

Access to a Wide Range of Other Funding

The capacity of the community to access a wide range of funding sources relevant to their needs at the time through working with external agencies has played a critical role in terms of providing funding and supports to the community. The initial funding provided by LEADER kick-started the work in the area but more important than the actual amount received was the fact that it instilled a belief in the local community that they could secure funding to *'do something for themselves'*.

According to Con Harrington, initially the community had little confidence in its capacity to access funding. They felt that they would not be taken seriously and that it was in an isolated and marginalised situation which would make it difficult to convince funders. However, a number of community leaders decided that it was worthwhile making an application for a small amount of funding for a modest project. The combination of community support, convincing individuals with no personal gain in mind and a project of an appropriate scale were the factors that led to the support being provided from the LEADER and other programmes.

The securing of a FÁS Community Employment Scheme ensured that 20 people gained employment and significant work was undertaken in the area. Importantly it demonstrated that the local Development Association was capable of achieving things and gave them credibility as a group who could *'get things done and most of all manage people and resources'*.



Book launch of Upperchurch-Drombane Historical Journal



Initial successes encouraged more people to get involved in community activities. The recognition of the community's activities by LEADER and the County Council was critical to the momentum that was started in the Upperchurch-Drombane area. Over time, the Development Association fostered links with agencies, external bodies and sources of funding which benefited all groups in the community.

As Upperchurch-Drombane continued to deliver successful projects (meeting the legal and contractual requirements) they became regarded as a trustworthy community that could be relied on to give value for money, not to get mired in controversy and to deliver on time and on budget.

Leadership and Individual Commitment

It is obvious that Upperchurch-Drombane is an extremely active community which has and continues to address the challenges facing the area. One of the reasons for the success is that the local community has a history of cooperation long before the Development Association. The key drivers in the area are a small number of individuals who keep initiatives moving and look at new ideas for their own area.

The importance of fostering leadership and identifying leaders within a community is extremely important. Evidence both from Upperchurch-Drombane and elsewhere demonstrates that ultimately success is led by individuals and the active fostering of leadership.

Project Focus

The success of the community in achieving developments in the area is project-driven – people are mobilised to work together around a specific issue/project. The project group may or may not involve the core group. If it does not directly involve the core group, they will be supportive of the initiative and those involved in it indirectly.

Willingness to Take External Advice

The Upperchurch-Drombane Community was willing to commission external advice when needed and to act on the advice received. A number of projects, (for example a proposal to establish a Call Centre), were evaluated externally and when the evaluation suggested that the project was not viable it was not proceeded with.

Walking Festival





Reasonable Expectations

Some people within the community consider that the pace of progress in Upperchurch-Drombane is slow, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The slow pace ensures that the community are involved and that the actions taken have a general consensus; however the pace can also lead to frustration and an expectation that progress should be faster and that more could be achieved in the area.

Inclusiveness and Respect

The starting point for the group was the inclusion of all existing groups/organisations, to discuss what could be achieved in the area. The Development Association set about filling the gaps in the community and did not try to duplicate anything that was already happening or overshadow the activities of existing local groups. Where required, the Development Association assisted existing groups with the delivery of their own projects and with seeking funding rather than taking over the running of those projects.

Developing Community Confidence

The importance of a local development group being '*seen to do things*' in the area, particularly in the early years, cannot be overestimated. Rural communities, even those who are generally forward thinking can be conservative and sceptical by nature. A local development group will only win credibility when they show what they can achieve as is evident in the Upperchurch-Drombane area. This community started small and built on these initial achievements.

Barriers

The Upperchurch-Drombane community did not believe that they encountered major barriers in their development but '*challenges which had to be overcome*' in order to achieve success.

The informal structure of the group resulted in a lack of coordination and organisation at times. This structure facilitated project development and implementation but it may have done so at the expense of the capacity to take a strategic and holistic approach. The Upperchurch-Drombane group, similar to many other groups that are project focused, rarely take the time to '*stand back and assess what they are doing*'. They can rush from one thing to another and can often lose focus or direction on what they are trying to achieve. Developing ideas within the community can take a lot of time and energy and the community has pursued some projects which did not materialise but yet '*drained energy and enthusiasm*'.



Local School Children

Lessons Learned/Recommendations

In the light of this case study and, in particular the success factors that have been identified, it is possible to extract some key lessons and make recommendations in three broad areas: communities; agencies/public bodies; and policy.

Communities

- Local leaders should ensure that they secure the support of the wider community for their development efforts. Where projects do not command wide-spread community support or where there is contention, the postponing of projects should be seriously considered.
- Community structures need to include appropriate representation and the securing of the involvement of enthusiastic individuals who will make things happen. An overarching strategic group with a number of project sub-committees provides a good model for achieving this.
- The availability of a stable locally-generated source of funding is important in providing the community with the resources necessary to access the type of support that requires co-funding.
- Fledgling development groups should consider high-interest actions/projects which mobilise the wider community. Festivals or social events can have this effect.
- Projects should be developed that meet the criteria of funding bodies, that include some local resourcing and effort and that address a real community need.

Agencies and Public Bodies

- Regulations and conditions governing programmes should minimise the restrictions on publicly-funded bodies with regard to the ways in which they engage with communities.
- Those groups and geographic areas which have little contact with agencies and which may not be aware of available initiatives should be identified and proactively engaged with by development bodies.
- Local Development Groups should continue to be a mechanism of delivery and engagement in future funding programmes.
- Specific training on how to engage in a more productive way with local communities should be included as part of the Continuous Professional Development of relevant staff in publicly-funded agencies.

Policy Recommendations

- Voluntary and community local development groups should be provided with ongoing funding and support measures to enable them to continue to provide vital services for vulnerable groups in rural communities.
- The emergence of formal and informal leaders in local communities is critical for success. Rural support organisations such as Muintir-na-Tíre and Macra na Feirme should continue to be supported.
- The LEADER method and funding should continue to include the social aspects of its economic development principles and not become enmeshed in excessive procedural demands.
- Consideration should be given in future programmes to identifying ways in which support for agriculture can include community development outcomes.
- Future rural development policy should include a focus on developing communities' capacity to exploit assets such as food, water, air and energy in a sustainable way.



- Further encouragement should be given in future programmes to the development of community-based tourism with particular reference to the development of the community's tourism assets.
- The Rural Social Scheme and Community Employment Initiatives should continue to be supported as cost-effective mechanisms for facilitating a large voluntary contribution to community development in rural areas.
- The development of legal and administrative systems to support simple but effective governance is important. The implementation of the Charities Act provisions for governance and the amendment proposed for companies' legislation which would facilitate simpler governance for smaller companies should be addressed as quickly as possible and applied to community-based development organisations.

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