

Local Involvement in Countryside Management – What is Working?

Presented to the Wickow Uplands Council and Irish Uplands Forum Conference, Glendalough Hotel, Tuesday 23 October 2007 by [Frank J. Convery](#), Heritage Trust Professor of Environmental Policy, and Chair of Comhar Sustainable Development Council

It's a great idea to stand back and look back critically and rigorously at what we have learnt from experience.

This goes against human nature: we mostly wander through life repeating the same mistakes, bumping into low ceilings and making a point of not learning to duck. As Robert Frost puts it: *How many things have to happen to you before something occurs to you?* So, well done to Wicklow Uplands Council and the Irish Uplands Forum for something occurring to you. And I like the title: What works? We so often focus on what doesn't work – what's wrong with the Health Service, what's wrong with the Irish rugby team, what's wrong with Wicklow's Gaelic football team.

Comhar Sustainable Development Council (www.comharsdc.ie/) exists to support the concept and the reality of partnership at all levels. In the Government's Agreed Programme, we have been given a new and expanded mandate, and look forward to working with you collaboratively as we roll out our programme in the coming months.

Last week the Nobel Prize in economics was awarded to three economists for something called **Mechanism design theory**. They try to understand why some organisations and markets work, and others don't. They focus in particular on 'incentive compatibility': are the incentives facing the actors in institutions and markets compatible with advancing the public interest. This idea is a powerful one for examining what works, and for explaining sometimes why something does not work in the public interest.

Using their approach as an underlying organising idea, let's see if we can identify some principles that are necessary for countryside management to work, and in particular to engage with communities and non-governmental organisations.

My proposition is the following: Every statutory organisation given authority and resources by the citizenry should be obliged to engage seriously and substantively with communities and relevant non-governmental organisations and indeed support them with funds and with information. In doing so, they should make demands of themselves, but also of their collaborators. Partnership is a two-way process – communities and NGOs should meet certain standards if they are to be viable and productive partners. The following are a few ideas that should apply if partnership is to be real.

1. Getting the right organisational incentives and imperatives

What are the incentives that drive a public servant in a local authority, state agency or government department? Public sector organisations need to enable their employees to engage. The worst case situation is where a career could be blighted if an employee is seen to take community engagement seriously. It could be viewed by management as wimpish, a sign of getting co-opted by the other side. We cannot expect employees to go against the tide – this may happen as a once off, but will not be sustained. How would we know that a public sector organisation took community engagement seriously? We would see this encouraged in their mission statement, we

would see the board and the CEO or elected members supporting it, we would find a section on their website devoted to the topic, would ideally observe a dedicated budget to partnership. So we should review how community engagement is enabled or otherwise by key stakeholders – local authorities, key State bodies such as Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife and Teagasc – and ensure that the incentives facing key employees are enabling rather than the converse.

I note that in the Government's Agreed Programme 2007-12, we find a commitment to:

- *Review the Forest Environmental Payments Scheme (FEPS) pilot underway with a view to a full roll-out in the years ahead.*
- *Initiate a review of Forestry Acts and programmes to reflect sustainable social and environmental objectives.*

This provides an opportunity to shape policy in this regard in this arena. More generally, all government departments are as we speak developing Strategy Statements for the next three years. Each of them should state partnership with communities as a priority.

2. Understanding Professional imperatives

George Bernard Shaw defined a profession as 'a conspiracy against the laity.' This perhaps overstates the case, but the fact is that each profession is driven by an *idée fixe*, a central value that shapes their reflexes to problems and opportunities. Architects see excellence in design as the solution, engineers like to build their way out of problems, planners have a love affair with zoning, economists see markets and prices as the way forward. For foresters it is tree planting, and ecologists usually favour the status quo. Communities need to be aware of these sometimes unconscious impulses as they engage with the professions.

3. Professionalising performance of communities and NGOs.

Time is our scarcest resource. There are few less productive activities in life than engagement with organisations that don't have agendas, don't have short meetings, don't have a mandate and are not informed. Professionalism builds legitimacy, and means having agendas for meetings, being informed about options and choices, starting on time, and finishing within a specified period – 2 hours is a good maximum, having a chair that does not talk for more than 10 per cent of the time, doing minutes with key action points specified, honouring confidences, having a mandate from a membership, and sticking to agreements. This is a large set of pre-requisites, but if they are not met, it is difficult for other partners to have faith that the investment in time and effort to engage is worthwhile. The organisation and execution of this conference is a model as to how to strike all the right notes. Your Countryside Recreation Officer Helen Lawless and the organising team deserve great credit.

4. Understanding and mobilising commercial motivation and incentives

We live in an age where markets are key drivers of behaviour

Adam Smith: *It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address*

ourselves not to their humanity but their self love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages. (Wealth of Nations, 1776).

Farming is a good example

According to the CSO Irish farming in 2006 had:

- A gross value of output at basic prices of €5.503 billion
- Net value added from production of just over €1 billion
- Single Payment Scheme (subsidy on production) €1.847 billion in 2006

Market Failure

But of course the countryside produces many values that are not wholly captured by the landowner – beautiful scenery, carbon capture and storage in the case of woodland owners, water storage and purification in the case of wetlands, diversity of habitats and species that support wild populations, opportunities to hike, walk the hills. Via REPS, we can see that the habit of compensating some landowners for providing specified ecological and related services that would be underprovided by markets has now taken shape.

5. Valuing and cherishing Enthusiasm and Encouraging Informed Risk Taking

We need Churchillian enthusiasm that surmounts cynicism and that is immune to set backs and misunderstanding.

Churchill: *Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.*

We also need a willingness to take informed risks, make mistakes, just so long as the mistakes are all new ones.

6. We should take politicians seriously

Most of us treat politicians as a glorified Ombudsman, a source of individual favours – more grant money, a planning permission, a medical card. This is precisely the wrong focus. Their main role can be in setting the policy and strategic stage that allows and encourages community interaction, via directions to State agencies, specifications in the Development Plan, etc. They nearly all take seriously positions that are well argued and supported by evidence. They can be crucial in ensuring that the incentives, mission statements etc. discussed above that shape partnership are appropriate and in place, but they need your help in moving this agenda forward. Most want to do good, and all want to be re-elected, so structuring interaction that draws on both of these impulses is important. And power follows population. I note that County Wicklow's population rose by over 11,600, or 10.2 per cent, over the 2002-06 period. But Glendalough fell from 280 to 260, a 7 per cent fall over the period.

7. Generosity of spirit

We need this at all levels. Co-operation cannot blossom where attitudes are defensive and negative. We need to avoid negative sum games, the mentality nicely captured by Confucius. *How pleasant it is to see an old friend fall from a roof-top.*

8. Clarity of Responsibility

In managing the countryside, who has a role, who has responsibility? Turf wars between agencies at national, local and regional levels are fostered by ambiguities. And difficulties are compounded where 'cute hoorism' - hoarding information and connections – pervade. This cultural leaning is nicely captured by this reflection by Eamon De Valera:

In England, you could say what you liked so long as you did the right thing, while in Ireland you could do what you liked, so long as you said the right thing.

9. Good information

This is the seed corn from which collaboration can grow. It is crucial in understanding the present, and informing the future. Communities have a great role in bringing understanding and 'ground truthing' to managing the countryside. Constable makes the point: *You can't see what you don't understand.* No one who is serious about managing the countryside can afford to ignore this invaluable source of knowledge. Seamus Heaney, quotes John Montague's words, that *'the Irish landscape is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read.'* You can help us all read again. Universities and especially their research students are key sources of cutting edge information. The technology waves we ride – GPS, remote sensing and GIS and Google Earth, zero carbon design – are all facilitated and enhanced to the extent that we link with third level institutions, and I'm delighted to see many represented here today. I developed this idea of local third level collaboration in a recent Comhar Sustainable Development Commentary (see: www.comharsdc.ie/)

10. The Importance of Personality

While we can mechanistically roll out a template that will enhance and advance partnership and collaboration, we know that in the end it depends so much on personalities, on the ability to combine astuteness, humour, ability to link evidence to action, communicate in ways that don't alienate, be informed, but with humility. I know that the late Adrian Phillips combined these characteristics. I know also that two other stalwarts - David Rowe and Joss Lynam – are here today and I would like to pay my personal tribute to their extraordinary and selfless achievements in advancing the common interest.