

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background to the Project

In 1995 the Irish Uplands Forum (IUF), a voluntary group whose focus is the pursuit of a partnership approach to sustainable upland management, was founded following a national conference held in Galway. The purpose of the conference was to explore the many issues impacting on the management of the upland regions of Ireland at that time.

Since 1995 the IUF has been active throughout the country identifying and tackling issues in cooperation with local upland communities. In 2009 the **‘Challenges, Changes and Opportunities in the Irish Uplands’ Research Project** was commissioned by the IUF, with funding from the Heritage Council and the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.

The primary aim of this research project was to investigate the current social, economic and environmental issues affecting landscapes and communities in three upland areas in Ireland:

- North Sligo / North Leitrim uplands
- The Comeragh Mountains in County Waterford
- The Twelve Bens and Benchoonas of North-West Connemara

This final project report:

- Establishes the current position within these three upland areas, with respect to the issues identified at the Galway conference in 1995
- Identifies the new challenges facing these areas and
- Identifies opportunities for future sustainable development within the uplands.

The findings of this research will contribute to national policy development in the area of upland management and inform the Irish Upland Forum’s future work programme.

Methodology

The main focus of the research was a community consultation process. Landowners, local residents, representatives of community groups, statutory and non-statutory agencies and interested individuals involved with the three areas of study were consulted. A comprehensive view of upland issues from various perspectives was sought through the administering of an interviewer-led questionnaire survey. Each respondent who took part in the questionnaire survey was invited to attend a community workshop where their views were sought with regard to the findings of the survey plus any other relevant issues which they felt should be included.

The research findings of similar surveys carried out in the Burren, Connemara and on the Iveragh peninsula, Co. Kerry were examined and comparative findings with the IUF research highlighted. Information on the demographics, landuse patterns, employment and recreational activities in each area was collected in order to explore changes that have taken place in each of the three study areas since 1995.

The findings of the research were presented at the Heritage Council’s ‘Looking Around, Looking Ahead’ Landscape Conference in Tullamore in October 2009.

Main findings of the Research

Upland Study Areas Profile

- All three upland study areas exhibit highly glaciated, scenic landscapes.
- They differ in terms of underlying geology and soil variations, which ultimately affect agricultural land usage.
- The farms in the Connemara uplands are predominantly small hill sheep farms. The Leitrim/Sligo farms are mixed with approximately one-third beef suckler and two-thirds sheep. In the Comeragh uplands the farms were more diverse with beef suckler, dry beef and dairy herds along with sheep.
- Forestry is a feature of farm upland usage in both Leitrim/Sligo and the Comeraghs but less so in the Connemara uplands due to unsuitable terrain for commercial production and conservation designations.

- 76% of upland farms surveyed contained land carrying a conservation designation. 100% of the Connemara farms included designated land.

The Farm Family and the Upland Farm

- Two-thirds of the farms included in the survey have been in the same family ownership for 200+ years. This indicates a uniquely long involvement with land management by upland farmers. This management is now threatened by uncertainty over farm viability and possible non-succession.
- There is a heavy reliance on off-farm work to supplement farm income and this work is mainly in the construction industry.
- There is a high dependence on agri-environmental incentives for farm income with a greater reliance on REPS in the uplands than nationally. 82% of the farmers surveyed participate in REPS, compared to a national average of 45%. The withdrawal of REPS is a severe blow to upland farmers and the economy of the surrounding communities.
- Hill-farming has ceased to be viable. Some of the causes may have long-term effects, e.g.:
 - reduction in farm support payments;
 - an ageing profile among the farming population and unwillingness among the younger generation to become involved in hill sheep farming.

Others may be cyclical, and therefore there could be a prospect of future improvement. However, such possible improvement may come too late to solve some of the present economic problems. Possible cyclical causes include:

 - lack of economic return with market prices generally lower than production costs;
 - the national economic downturn and increasing lack of off-farm work.
- The consequences of these developments are poor morale, farm amalgamations, neglect of marginal land and a loss of skills in traditional upland farming practices.

Enterprise Development and Employment in the Uplands

- There has been growth in both local development organisations and local enterprise over the past 15 years, but it is not sufficient. More employment needs to be generated and there is a danger of over-reliance on tourism as a solution.
- There has been very little new or innovative local enterprise development in the past 15 years. Dependency on the traditional (often seasonal and part-time) agriculture, tourism and construction industries is very high in all three upland study areas and the recent national economic downturn has impacted heavily on these sectors. This is likely to result in a much larger adverse impact among upland communities in comparison to lowland areas where employment opportunities are more diverse.
- The maintenance of upland community life now depends on the development of alternative enterprise and employment within and adjacent to the uplands.

Recreational Use of the Uplands

- Over half the farmers surveyed and almost all of the community respondents participate in a recreational activity in their upland area.
- Hill walking and countryside walking are the most popular activities.
- Problems with access to the uplands for recreation are very often localised, with specific ‘hot spots’ in each of the uplands areas studied. These problems have in general arisen from:
 - a lack of consultation between landowners and groups/individuals promoting recreational access to the uplands
 - damage to property caused by recreationalists and
 - a perceived economic return to activity organisers, with no economic gain to the landowner.
- The survey respondents identified the following actions required for the development of recreational activity in the uplands:
 - A local consultation process should be put in place to solve access issues
 - Agencies must consult locally before planning any recreational facilities or activities
 - There is a need to create economic gain for landowners through the possible development of local guiding services; on-farm services and facilities and maintenance of recreational trails.
 - There is a need for the development of an overall policy and inclusive process, which will result in local management plans to develop the recreational strengths of the upland areas.

Issues of Concern in the Uplands

- In addition to the concerns over the future of upland farming, local employment and recreation detailed above, concerns over planning and rural services were highlighted through the survey and community workshops. Planning issues are a widespread concern among the upland communities. Inconsistent treatment is the main cause of resentment, both as regards individual applications in an area, and attitudes of adjoining planning authorities. Attitudes to rural planning are thought to be urban-oriented with not enough consideration given to encouraging local initiatives and maintaining family units on the land. Farming restrictions and environmental designations are hindering local enterprise development.
- Poor services and infrastructure in terms of roads, water, illegal dumping and broadband/mobile phone coverage were also identified as issues of concern. Lack of public transport and maintenance of roads/roadside hedges are of major concern.

Local Representation

- There is a strong feeling at local level that community views and interests are not being heard with regard to the issues affecting the uplands.
- Local development organisations such as Community Councils, Development Associations and the Integrated Local Development Companies are those considered as being the most representative of the local community.
- Farming bodies are believed to be mainly concerned with lowland farming and that there is a lack of interest or understanding of upland farming at Government level.

Implications for National Policy

- The uplands have special significance for society, in particular for tourism, recreation and community well-being, as areas of high quality landscape, rich heritage, and biodiversity. There is a need for the uplands to be recognised as a distinct landscape area and specific policies to be formulated as is provided for the islands.
- There is an urgent need for joined-up thinking, with a spatial and holistic approach, integrating policies across all agencies and sectors, including Government departments and local authorities. Policies and any legislation to underpin them should be oriented to maintaining communities, supporting traditional farming practices and conserving landscapes. The formulation of policies must be an inclusive process, involving those who live, work and recreate in the landscape. Ireland ratified the European Landscape Convention in 2004. The measures which we have agreed to put into effect under this Convention could address these issues if we act upon them.
- Upland farming needs to be encouraged and supported. An agri-environment scheme with a clear uplands focus is needed.
- Local indigenous industry and new initiatives need encouragement and support. There is a danger of over-reliance on tourism as the solution, yet there is still significant unrealised potential in this area, and greater imagination is needed in developing tourist products.
- Access to the uplands for recreation, in a manner sympathetic to farming activity and local communities, needs to be encouraged and developed.

Implications within Upland Areas

- Processes which enable communication between all interests and stakeholders in upland areas need to be developed and implemented in an inclusive and participatory manner. Such processes will empower local communities to take local ownership of issues, enable them to reach consensus on a way forward and work together to achieve future viability for their area. They should result in local action plans which can be implemented through the support of the relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies.
- The approach to the process must be holistic and integrate with the existing community development structures and plans already being operated in the upland area. The processes, structures and players may differ in each upland area dependent on the issues, but there must be consultation and communication between all stakeholders.