

# Capacity and community

– The balance between the social and the environmental  
in a specific cultural context

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## Introduction

Rural housing development in Ireland has traditionally been of a dispersed nature and rural communities have often been based on an inhabited countryside rather than on settlements. This pattern of development was significantly altered during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when emigration and urbanisation led to substantial depopulation of the rural areas of the country. This depopulation led to declining communities with little leadership and a declining sense of optimism and purpose.

As economic prosperity returned to the country in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the historic wish of people to live in the rural areas of the country reasserted itself. This wish, partly driven by increasing affluence, partly by the cost of housing in the urban settlements and partly driven by a wish of landowners to liquidate some of their capital asset, has led to substantial pressure for development in the Irish countryside.

This pressure has led to the development of two bodies of opinion in the country. One, which represents conservation interests, central government, the planning profession and local authority management, proposes severe restrictions on such development. This proposal is made on the basis of the lack of sustainability of such development, the fact that it is not associated with the employment location of the residents and the implications for fossil fuel use and water quality. The second body of opinion, which represents rural communities, local political representatives and agricultural interests, supports a much more liberal approach to such development. This perspective is based on concerns for the social and economic sustainability of rural communities. This body of opinion suggests that the decline in rural communities will lead to a stranded and isolated population with a very low level of service provision. In addition, the notion exists that development in the countryside is a right of those who were born in such an area.

The Irish planning system that manages development, including that of rural housing, was introduced in the mid 1960s. This system, which reflects the UK system though with some important differences, was traditionally relatively liberal towards the construction of houses in the countryside. Though local

planning policies often spoke of concentrating development in towns and villages, in practice this policy was not adhered to.

It may be argued that the scale of development in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s was such as not to give rise to major causes for concern regarding these matters. However, over the last 10 to 15 years, the growing strength of the Irish economy, the numbers of returning emigrants and the costs of housing in the major urban settlements have given rise to a huge increase in development pressures of all kinds including that for one-off rural housing.

This, in turn, has led to a more vigorous debate on the issue with positions being adopted that, at their extremes, propose a virtual ban on housing in the countryside on the one hand or an almost unfettered approach to rural housing development on the other.

This is, of course, not a uniquely Irish situation. Westlund, for example, has examined the Swedish situation and states that:

In total, the countryside showed a higher population increase than the municipality centres. The process of change has run directly counter to the policy that was formulated for small municipalities from the end of the 1960s onwards. The growth of rural population was spontaneous for the most part and more or less in conflict with the plans of the municipalities.

## Part one – historic factors

Our histories influence the way we behave today. They are the foundation of cultural perspectives; they influence things that we think are right and things we think are wrong, they influence our desires and the visions and goals that we set for ourselves. They even impact on our perceptions of reality. In the context of the issue that is the subject of this paper, there are three areas that are of importance in terms of their impact – cultural issues, economic issues and population issues.

### **Cultural issues**

Traditionally Ireland has been a very rural country in cultural terms. Much of its culture has had a rural base and, until the middle part of this century, even the urban population had very strong rural roots.

This cultural background is reflected in the fact that many would hold that Ireland never really had an Industrial Revolution, little large-scale industry and a very small proletarian population.

The strong rural aspect to the country's culture has also been traditionally reflected in the extent that rural and agricultural concerns have been at the heart of the country's decision-making processes and the extent to which rural-based organisations have been able to influence Government and other public policy.

One interesting recent example in this regard was evidenced by the foot and mouth disease crisis and the approaches that were taken, both in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. Though the disease left Ireland virtually untouched with only one case being confirmed, the approach of the Irish Government and, more importantly the whole population, was both extensive and widely supported. In contrast, the response in the UK was relatively more limited and appeared to have had less understanding of the community at large.

In addition, the commitment of a great part of the Irish community to the rural ideal is substantial and the extent to which the population is connected with the landowning class is unusually high.

A further historical factor that is of importance but of uncertain magnitude is the effect of the ownership of the land of Ireland. For many generations the indigenous population did not own this land. While this population had a variety of tenures over the years, the majority of the land was owned by a landlord class that was viewed as being both foreign and usurping. This developed in the Irish people a particular affiliation with the land and with their rights over it when the landlord class was eventually removed and, in the Republic of Ireland at any rate, the land largely reverted to the native population. These rights are felt in many landowners to be virtually absolute. There is then resentment against any attempt to interfere with the rights of landowners to do as they please with their land. Any attempt by the State to manage the way in which land is used is seen as an imposition and accepted grudgingly at best. In addition, the rights to private property are enshrined in the Irish Constitution and it is only in recent years that the Courts have been willing to impose any significant restrictions on these rights in the interests of the common good.

### **Economic issues**

The role of agriculture in the Irish economy has been extremely important historically. The contribution of agriculture to the National Economy has always been substantial. Though the contribution is declining it is still greater than the average within the EU.

The numbers employed in agriculture were very significant in the past. Again this is declining but is still significant.

Despite this, however, the historical importance of agriculture and the rural way of life creates a context in which the preservation of this aspect of the economy and of this way of life is axiomatic within Irish society at large. While there is a city-based resentment of the perceived featherbedding of the agricultural community there is still an overall acceptance of the importance of the agricultural and the rural in Ireland.

## Population issues

### Size

The population of Ireland has demonstrated a pattern that is unique in the developed world in that the famine of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century had a major and permanent impact on the population of the country.

The population of the country declined catastrophically between 1845 and 1855 and continued at a low level until it started to recover somewhat in recent years. This is counter to the normal demographic pattern where even a major population decline is reversed within a relatively short period of time as the natural increase of population has its effect. In Ireland, however, endemic emigration for over a century meant that high birth rates and low death rates did not lead to significant population growth.

These historic factors have led to a decline in the size and viability of rural communities. As those that migrate from a community tend to be the more active and enterprising the rural population of Ireland tended to lose many of its leaders over time and this led to concerns about the viability of rural communities themselves.

### Distribution

The Irish population has traditionally been distributed in a dispersed fashion. Historically this took place due to the large number of the population who were essentially peasants occupying very small areas of land rented from a landlord and who worked on the landlords lands as labourers. This was the population that was most affected by the famine and reduced rapidly at that time.

In the subsequent period the structure of the Irish agricultural sector also supported a large rural population. While the number of very small holdings declined dramatically in the post-famine period, the number of these holdings stayed relatively stable between 1850 and 1930 with upwards of 500,000 landholdings existing during this period. The tradition of Irish agriculture is for landholders to live on their property rather than in communal settlements and this gave rise to a large population occupying the rural countryside. This pattern was added to by the agricultural labourers that were employed by the larger landholders and who occupied dwellings that were tied to their employment or that were constructed by the Local Authorities for those on low incomes.

All of these factors have developed a folk memory or a culture of defensiveness and concern in the Irish rural population. This folk memory is one of poverty, of decline, of emigration and of communal disintegration. This memory has developed in the community a wish to ensure that this does not happen in the future, that population loss in these areas is reversed and indeed that these populations are preserved, protected and expanded.

## Part two – current development patterns

### Population change

The brief discussion above outlined some of the historical factors that influence the difficulties in coming to a national consensus on the management of housing development in rural areas. As well as these historical factors there are a number of more recent factors in Irish society that have had an influence on such matters.

Amongst these are population changes in more recent times, the density of population in Ireland and the nature of the development that has been occurring.

The overall population has grown as shown in the next table. Here we can readily see that the population of the State has been growing steadily since 1966.

Despite this aggregate growth at a State level, such growth was not shared equally across the various parts of the Country. The provinces of Leinster and Munster that contain the greatest concentrations of urban centres have grown the most, while the populations of Connacht and Ulster are still well under their 1926 population levels.

Year	State	Leinster	Munster	Connacht	Ulster (part of)
1926	2,971,992	1,149,092	969,902	552,907	300,091
1936	2,968,420	1,220,411	942,272	525,468	280,269
1946	2,955,107	1,281,117	917,306	492,797	263,887
1951	2,960,593	1,336,576	898,870	471,895	253,252
1956	2,898,264	1,338,942	877,238	446,221	235,863
1961	2,818,341	1,332,149	849,203	419,465	217,524
1966	2,884,002	1,414,415	859,334	401,950	208,303
1971	2,978,248	1,498,140	882,002	390,902	207,204
1979	3,368,217	1,743,861	979,819	418,500	226,037
1981	3,443,405	1,790,521	998,315	424,410	230,159
1986	3,540,643	1,852,649	1,020,577	431,409	236,008
1991	3,525,719	1,860,949	1,009,533	423,031	232,206
1996	3,626,087	1,924,702	1,033,903	433,231	234,251
2002	3,917,336	2,105,449	1,101,266	464,050	246,571

*Source: Central Statistics Office, Population Census, 2002*

Population movement has been very variable throughout the country. The influence of the larger cities is quite clear, as most of the areas of population growth are associated with these centres. In addition, the huge impact of Dublin can be clearly seen. As well as population growth that is occurring in both urban and rural areas throughout the country, there are considerable areas where population is declining. This demonstrates that from a population point of view, we can no longer talk about “the rural areas of Ireland”. There is in fact a range

of rural areas in Ireland. This is a pattern that would be familiar throughout much of Europe, though it is only in more recent times that it has become apparent in Ireland. This variation in population change allied to the issues that have been outlined in Part One, indicate that any attempt to arrive at a single approach to the management of rural development is likely to face great difficulty.

This population movement can be contrasted with that of Sweden as noted by Westlund. Much of the increase of population in the rural areas of the county is associated with large urban centres and can be considered as urban sprawl. However, consistent with the pattern noted in Sweden by Westlund, Irish population patterns have tended to see increases in the metropolitan and larger urban centres together with their associated hinterlands, while many smaller settlements have tended to be static or declining in population terms. Westlund notes that population growth in Sweden in the rural areas has been amongst the 30-64-age group and those up to 15. He states that:

The conclusion seems to be that population change during the period studied shows a picture almost of polarisation, with metropolitan regions increasing strongly, sparsely populated areas increasing weakly and smaller population centres particularly showing decline.

While the Irish situation is similar, the sparsely populated areas of Ireland have tended to decline, while non-metropolitan urban centres have varied in their performance.

Of course these figures must be approached with some caution. Firstly even some of those rural electoral divisions (the Irish census unit) that have demonstrated a high percentage increase in population may have shown a very small absolute growth, as the 1996 population base is extremely small.

A second factor that must be taken into account is the relationship between household size and population. The average household size in Ireland has been declining over the past few decades with a marked decline in the last ten years. Thus, a declining population may mask an increase in household numbers and this issue cannot be finally addressed until these details of the 2002 Census figures are available towards the middle of 2003.

## **Density**

The population density of Ireland is low by European standards. Based on 1987 figures, Coleman estimated that the density of population in Ireland was 52 per square kilometre compared with a median of 116.5 in 36 industrial countries and a mean of 416.8. In 2001 the department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development estimated that the population density in Ireland was 53 per sq. k. as opposed to a European Union average of 116 per sq. k. When account is taken of

the percentage of the population in urban centres the rural density is lower still, though difficult to estimate at the present time.

This low density of population leads to the perception that there is no pressure for space on the Irish countryside and that there is ample opportunity for development without creating difficulty. There is indeed some truth in this assertion. However, the overall truth can mask the reality that the pressure for development in the countryside is concentrated in particular types of location.

### **Location of housing development**

There is a constant tension between those that claim that the level of permissions granted to one-off houses in the countryside is too high and those that claim that it is too low. Some figures suggest that two-thirds of housing permissions are granted in rural areas. However, this includes permissions granted within settlements of 1500 and less which accounts for many settlements in Ireland.

### **Rural enterprise and agriculture**

As noted in Part One above, the agricultural population of Ireland has been in decline for many years. This has created a supply push for development in rural areas as well as the demand pull of those that wish to reside in their or their family's area of origin. The supply push has been created by the low incomes of many farm families and by their need to generate income for investment, for family expenditure commitments or to deal with one of the vicissitudes that are the lot of farmers the world over. As the value of a site with planning permission for a dwelling in a rural area grew, the importance to individual landowners of the capacity to sell such a site also grew. In many cases the sale of such a site would generate a return equal to twice or three times the annual farm income. In circumstances of deprivation and serious need such an opportunity is not one to be relinquished without a battle. When allied to the sense of resentment at any interference with a landowner's right to do with his or her land as considered appropriate by them, this created a powerful impetus to resist attempts to curtail the disposal of land for development in the countryside.

### **Service availability**

It has been stated if not the implemented policy of many local authorities over the last two decades to encourage development to take place in the country's towns and villages. However, this stated objective has been undermined by a lack of infrastructure to accommodate such development within these towns and villages. This issue has been addressed in recent times but for many years the absence of such facilities brought the nominal policy of the planning authorities into disrepute. If you could not build in the countryside and there were no

services in the towns, then the only option that remained was to migrate to the major towns and cities. This was neither politically acceptable nor acceptable to rural communities and led to a further source of pressure for the development of housing in the countryside.

## **Part three – the system of development management**

The factors that have given rise to the difficulties in managing development in the Irish countryside are related to the nature of Irish public sector governance as much as they are to social and economic factors. The nature of Irish local government, of the political system, of central/local relationships, of the planning system and of environmental management are all factors that influence the overall situation.

### **Nature of Irish local government**

Local government in Ireland is somewhat different from that in other countries in Europe and elsewhere. In many countries local government has responsibility for a wide range of social and economic services as well as for environmental management, planning and infrastructure provision. This wide range of functions has given those authorities an opportunity to manage development and service provision in an integrated way so that the implications of one aspect of community life are taken into account when decisions are being made about another.

In Ireland the range of functions is far more limited. Virtually all education, social service, economic development, health, public transport and policing functions are strategically managed and funded from central government, though some operational control resides at regional level even if not with the local authorities. This has meant that local government in the form of the Planning Authorities have been restricted to considering physical infrastructure matters essentially, with neither authority nor responsibility regarding other matters.

### **Nature of the political system**

The Irish electoral system at both local and national levels is that of proportional representation in multi-seat constituencies. While this has many advantages in giving an opportunity for the representation of minority political views, it has also has the effect of enabling public representatives to be elected with a very small number of first preference votes. This, it is often argued, has made national politics local and local politics community based. It is also argued that it has given rise to clientism and representation rather than a policy focus dominating Irish political thinking particularly at a local level. In the context of this paper, it has meant that the individual politician has been encouraged to react to the perceived needs of the individual seeking a house in the countryside or the



individual landowner seeking to sell a rural housing site, rather than to the policy needs of the community and the environment as a whole. It may be argued that it has also had an impact at the national level, in that national politicians, who must be re-elected in this complex and uncertain system, are inhibited from making difficult strategic decisions that would have an impact within their constituencies.

The complexity of the context for national politicians was particularly evident in the 2002 national elections, where nearly ten per cent of the seats were won by independent candidates running on a variety of local issue platforms, promising particular benefits for local electors. Moreover, such candidates often did not feel required to make statements about national policy issues.

### **Central/local relationships**

Ireland has a tradition of a very centralised government system. While this has been changing a little in recent times, there is still a very strong influence from central Government on local government. This influence is exercised by funding control, administrative control and political control. This means that central and local government often does not operate as a seamless whole but are often in an oppositional relationship with local government demanding action and funding from central government.

It also means that national strategies, developed at a central government level with the expectation that they will be implemented at the local level, give rise to opposition and complaint as well as to attempts to undermine the policy at an operational level.

### **Nature of the planning system**

The Irish planning system is modelled on the English system though with significant elements of difference. The critical features of the system are as follows:

- A system of planning authorities which are the County Councils, City Councils and councils of the larger urban areas.
- The adoption of development plans for each planning authority area that forms the basis for future planning decisions. These plans are adopted by the elected members of the planning authority.
- A system of application for permission for individual developments, which are decided upon by the planning authority. These decisions are normally made by the County Manager who is an official appointed through a centralised system and who has powers independent of the elected members of the planning authority. In making these decisions the Manager is restricted to considering the development plan policies and the proper planning and sustainable development of the area as well as taking into account Government policies.

- An independent appeals board which hears appeals against the decision of the planning authority.
- A right of anyone to object to a proposed development and to appeal the decision of the planning authority.

The system also makes provision for the Minister for the Environment to issue “directives” regarding the matters that must be taken into account by the planning authorities when coming to decisions. These directives would be legally binding on planning authorities. Crucially, however, this power has been used very sparingly and has never been used with regard to developments in rural areas. These directives would be equivalent to the UK’s Planning Policy Guidance notes which are used extensively by central government in that country and the lack of such guidance in Ireland is one of the difficulties facing those that wish to develop a coherent policy for managing rural housing development in that country.

While it is difficult to be certain as to the reasons for a reluctance to issues such directives, one may speculate that the electoral system that requires Ministers to seek election through the same multi-seat proportional representation process may well have a significant influence. Ministers for the Environment (who have tended to represent rural constituencies) can no more offend their local electorate than can any other politician.

### **Environmental management**

While the planning system is very much a matter that is managed at a local level, other environmental management structures have a far greater level of input at the national and regional levels. Thus designations of areas of conservation, identification of buildings that require protection, waste management, water quality management and the consideration of applications for integrated pollution control licences have major inputs from the national and regional levels, even where operational implementation remains with the local authorities. This can have the effect of removing the immediacy of these issues from local government and limiting the understanding of local politicians of the importance of these issues and of their role in addressing them.

### **Part four – sustainable development in Irish physical planning**

As noted above, the concept of sustainable development has now been firmly established within the Irish physical planning system. The 2000 Planning and Development Act requires Planning Authorities to take into account the “proper planning and *sustainable development*” of their areas when considering

applications for development. This specific reference, however, hides a range of difficulties.

### **National policies**

As well as references to sustainable development within the planning legislation, the Government has published a specific policy on the same issue, while references to the concept abound in other parts of Government policy such as the National Spatial Strategy discussion papers and the White Paper on Rural Development. While these references to sustainable development may give cause for hope and while they may appear to bring the concept centre stage, they nevertheless hide a multitude of potential difficulties within them.

### **Absence of definition**

The concept of sustainability is notoriously difficult to define. Though many can agree on what are its basic thrusts, there is little agreement on a precise definition. That which is often quoted, namely, the Brundtland definition, while wonderful in its philosophy is cruelly lacking in operational guidance.

While the Planning and Development Act 2000 requires that sustainable development is taken into account and indeed is one of the planks of decision-making within the planning and development context, the only concept of significance that is not defined in the legislation is that of sustainable development. A personal enquiry as to why this might be so elicited the informal response that this was a matter that would need to respond to local circumstances and flexibility would need to be given to individual planning authorities. While there is some truth in this assertion, the absence of central policy direction in any meaningful sense makes the use of the concept of sustainability arbitrary and localised to an extent that is simply not satisfactory.

### **Differences in definition and interpretation**

As we have seen there is no clear definition given for sustainable development in some important contexts. Where such definitions are given, however, they are not always adequate or in accordance with any clear overall vision. Even where a clear vision appears to inform a definition, there is inconsistency in how these definitions are interpreted.

These are not issues of minor importance. The difficulties in definition and interpretation mean that a fundamental and important concept that should underpin much of the decision-making in Ireland regarding rural development is being undermined to an extent that makes it a cause for dissention rather than consensus.

These difficulties are exemplified by drawing a comparison between two Government documents – *Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland* and the *White Paper on Rural Development*.

The Sustainable Development document adopts the Brundtland definition of sustainability and has a very strong environmental focus. This document states:

In general there must be a presumption against urban-generated one-off rural housing adjacent to towns.

It also states, however,

The Planning Acts enable local authorities to grant permission for dwellings for certain categories of persons whose occupations require them to be rurally based, thereby catering for genuine needs.

This is essentially the totality of the strategic view presented on the issue of rural housing in this document of 250 pages. One of the most contentious issues in rural planning and in the issue of sustainability is dealt with in a manner that leaves as many questions answered as unanswered. What is the meaning of urban-generated? What is the meaning of adjacent? What is the meaning of town? It also indicates a strong economic functionalist bias in that it acknowledges occupational need as a basis for rural residency but makes no reference to social, community or family connection as a basis for such a residency.

The White Paper on Rural Development has a somewhat different focus. This document focuses much more on the social and economic realities of rural areas than does the Sustainable Strategy document. With regard to housing development it states:

To achieve the aim of a balanced rural population, planning policy should, as far as possible, facilitate people willing to settle in rural areas, especially those wishing to remain in their own areas of origin. At the same time as respecting the aspirations of the rural community, planning policy must be sensitive to the conservation of the rural environment, including preservation of natural beauty spots and natural habitats.

Whatever we may think about the detail, there is no doubt that this document has a different emphasis. It does also say, however that

[...] the County Development Plan of the local authority [...] should facilitate integrated land use and zoning objectives through encouraging the location, for instance, of commercial and residential development around existing towns and villages where water and sewage facilities can be provided.

Even within the one document, therefore, there is an uncertainty of emphasis and a lack of clarity regarding what exactly is being said.

## **Local policies**

Local policies on sustainable development are principally recited in the Development Plans for the planning authorities' functional areas. In the absence of clarity and definition at the central level, more recent local authority development plans have tried to address the issue of sustainability. The danger is, however, that with the large number of planning authorities that exist in Ireland radically different approaches will be taken by different authorities leading inevitably to boundary problems where the areas of different authorities meet, thus highlighting a lack of clarity for developers and a lack of vision for the rural areas of Ireland.

This is not to say that the policy responses to the issues of sustainability have to be the same everywhere. Indeed, given the disparities of population movement noted above this would not be appropriate. However, policies should be responding to a common vision of the future of the Irish countryside and its communities and to a common set of elements of sustainability and of parameters for their measurement.

It is interesting to note that in Sweden during the 1990s increasing development in the countryside ran counter to national policy and, indeed to the policies adopted by local planning authorities. Few authorities specifically decided not to follow national guidelines but the practice did not seem to follow the policies. Westlund states:

Paradoxically, after the introduction of the restrictive planning laws in the early 70s, residential building on the countryside started to increase. The growth of rural population which happened in large parts of Sweden was spontaneous for the most part and more or less in conflict with the plans of the municipalities.

## **Part five – contested viewpoints**

This paper has, thus far, recited the uncertainty of policy regarding the development of housing in the rural areas of Ireland, some of the historic contexts that might give rise to such uncertainties and the structural and political factors that support the uncertainty. In addition to all of these considerations, there are a number of other contested viewpoints on the nature of rural areas, the nature of rural society and the way in which development in the countryside should be managed.

### **Urban v rural**

As noted in Part one above, the political influence of the Irish agricultural and rural community has been unusually strong. The extent to which the needs of the rural communities were listened to, was, for example, indicated by the amount of

agricultural development that was exempted from development control. While this has been reined in a little in recent years it is still of great importance.

In recent decades, however, the viewpoint of an affluent urban population has been gaining more credence. This population views the rural areas of the country as a location for recreation and spiritual regeneration. As such, they require that the countryside reflect some idealised version of a rural landscape. In addition however, they also require access to the landscape, services that reflect the quality of service that they experience in the urban areas and ease of vehicular penetration to areas of high quality.

The rural population does not share this vision of the countryside. The appropriate type of housing that is demanded by this population is modern, of modern dimensions and using modern materials. The rural and particularly the agricultural population have a vision of the countryside where the functional is at least as important as the environmental. While rural dwellers and landowners do wish to protect the rural environment, they do not wish to be an anachronistic addendum to the modern, urban, industrial Ireland.

### **Political v professional**

The basis upon which Irish planners are educated, and the theories and visions that they have been taught to espouse, owe much to English traditions in this field. This tradition is however based in a different social and cultural context, espousing nucleation of development in rural areas. The control of rural development in the UK tradition is very strong, and central government policy supports such control approaches. The planning profession in Ireland has adopted this tradition in general and the theories that are espoused by the planning profession reflect this tradition.

This perception is at variance with the view of politicians at the local level. Given the nature of the Irish local government system, the viewpoint of the professional has a somewhat greater impact than it might have in other European contexts. These differences of opinion have led to an ongoing battle over many years between the politicians and the professionals. The different perspectives were accommodated for many years and negotiation and compromise preserved the system intact.

In recent years, however, bolstered by what they consider to be Government policy and in the light of an explosion of development associated with the strong growth of the Irish economy (referred to widely as the Celtic Tiger), the planning profession and the local government management system have sought less compromise and have confronted the political system at local level in a more determined way. This, in turn has led in some cases to the politicians taking matters into their own hands, ignoring the advice of officials and appointing

external consultants to draw up development policies more in line with their requirements.

### **Technical v management**

Traditionally the Irish Local Government management system comprised those that came through the administrative rather than the technical stream of officials. This meant that, in the past in particular, the management of the local authorities tended to be more attuned to the needs of the political system than were the technical advisers. This tended to give rise to strains between local government management and their planning professionals.

### **Social v environmental**

As noted above, the definition of sustainable development includes concepts of social and environmental concern. The concept of "sustainable" is used in different ways by different groups. When social and community groups use the word sustainable, they tend to refer to social and community sustainability. They refer to the need to ensure that rural communities retain a level of population that ensures that they are viable social entities and that they retain and attract community leaders and those that will drive their areas forward. They also refer to the perceived need to retain the indigenous population and to provide them with the opportunity to remain resident in their birth communities.

When environmental groups refer to the word "sustainable", they tend to refer to the need to protect the environment. This protection includes concepts that are relevant at a global as well as at a local level and include the need to protect groundwater, to preserve the landscape, to limit the use of fossil fuels, to minimise travel and to protect habitats and endangered species.

While it would often be acknowledged by supporters of each viewpoint that the needs of the other viewpoints need to be taken into account, their pronouncements tend to give little away to the other side. This may be due to the vigour of the debate that is taking place but it makes the creation of a sense of consensus extremely difficult.

### **Community v organisational**

Even within the voluntary sector there is disagreement about the sustainability issue. In general, rural community groups tend to support the social elements of sustainability, while some national organisations, though not all are more committed to the concept of environmental sustainability.

However, a number of new organisations have recently been established to promote the acceptance of housing development in the countryside in the context

of retaining and increasing the rural population. These include Rural Re-settlement Ireland and the Irish Rural Dwellers Association.

### **Central v local**

At the political level different perceptions also exist between the local and the central. As noted previously, central government has produced thinking and approaches that tend to be rejected or at least not adopted by the local political system. While there is a greater coherence between policy approaches at the official level, the differences are certainly manifest at the political level. Indeed, even in the political sphere there is evidence of disagreement at Government level, with one Government Minister promoting the idea of rural housing and urging local politicians to adopt policies that facilitate such developments.

This central/local tension is also demonstrated by the position adopted by the independent board that hears appeals against planning decisions. Given the socio/political nature of the planning system in Ireland, decisions to grant permission are sometimes made as the outcome of negotiations between the political and technical/management systems at the local level. When these decisions are appealed to the appeals board, they are often reversed, with permission being refused even where it had been granted at the local level.

### **Part six – towards a solution?**

Any approach to a solution of the debate must start with agreement on the fundamental issues. It is suggested that this can only emerge from an understanding of the concept of sustainability and the development of an operational response to that understanding. All of this is being proposed in a context that might well not be accepted by post-modernist planning theorists. The approach being proposed does assume that we can understand the dynamics of rural areas and of the communities that inhabit them and that management responses can be devised that will influence the operation of those dynamics. The suggestions for further work made here are, it is acknowledged, a contribution to the issue. As noted by Westlund in the Swedish context:

The increase of population in the countryside has for the most part run counter to the thrust of municipal planning. The effects of the frequently very uncritical way in which town planning was copied in rural municipalities have not been studied in Sweden. A study of municipal planning compared with its outcome in the form of settlement patterns in the municipalities would afford new insights into the role of municipal planning as an instrument of local development.



This demonstrates the range of issues that must be addressed if the question of the management of rural housing development is to be properly answered.

### **Definition of sustainable**

No definition of sustainability will be attempted here. So many have tried and there has been so little agreement on the matter that it would be a futile exercise. Nevertheless, it can be argued that sustainability has four elements

- Social sustainability in which social systems and structures are maintained in a manner that will ensure a culturally acceptable quality of life for those living within such structures.
- Economic sustainability in which the ability of a particular social structure to provide for its own physical needs are capable of being maintained over time.
- Environmental sustainability in which the environmental impacts of actions are taken into account when public and private decisions are being made, in which the use of natural resources is minimised and in which the capacity of the environment to accommodate the unintended physical and biological outputs of human actions is considered.
- Sustainability of process in which public decisions are made using mechanisms that have regard to the needs of all and in which the needs of the voiceless and the weak are given particular attention.

These elements of sustainability are not always compatible and it is the search for a balance between them that gives rise to difficulty. However, even if the appropriate balance is elusive and shifting a willingness to search for that balance is the first step in coming to some resolution. In the context of this paper it is proposed that the concepts of sustainable rural communities and environmental carrying capacity are the two boundaries within which decisions regarding rural development can be placed.

### **Sustainable communities**

The concept of socially and economically sustainable communities is one that underlies the concerns of those that argue for a less restrictive approach to rural development. This concept is set in the context of population decline, decline in the numbers engaged in agriculture and the removal of rural services including rural schools, post offices and so on. In such a context the fear that such communities will face inevitable and irreversible decline is real and understandable, as even if such communities do enter a terminal decline they will still retain a population that may end up stranded and abandoned.

So what is a sustainable community in an Irish context? It was suggested above that we simply do not know. It is not even clear what might be deemed to

be a community for these purposes. The religious parish has been an important social unit for many generations but there is no guarantee that this unit is still the most suitable basis for deciding on sustainable communities. And what are the parameters of a community that might deem it to be socially sustainable? Again we do not know. Even if work has been done on this issue in other countries it would not necessarily apply in an Irish context as these matters have a strong cultural specificity. And do we know the factors that give rise to socially sustainable communities? Again, we do not. What would make a community stable and socially self-sufficient in an Irish rural context is not clear. It is thus proposed that those that argue, either implicitly or explicitly, that housing development must be permitted in rural areas in order to ensure the sustainability of rural communities, are basing their arguments on supposition and anecdotal evidence rather than on any clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Moreover, merely permitting houses to be built in rural areas will not, of itself, provide a solution to the issue of socially sustainable communities.

### **Environmental carrying capacity**

Those that espouse the more environmentally based view of sustainability propose that housing in the countryside should be severely curtailed and have put forward many arguments as to why this should be done. These arguments include those relating to the use of fossil fuels, the protection of groundwater resources, the protection of the landscape, the economic provision of services, the creation of sufficient population mass to support community services and so on. Many of these arguments, however, are also based on the assumption sometimes stated, sometimes not that “things cannot be allowed to continue like this”. While again accepting that this argument has validity, the question is what does “like this” mean? Indeed, as noted above, there is a huge variation in development pressures and needs throughout the country. In this context it is suggested that the environmental carrying capacity of units of countryside should be used as the basis for assessing the amount of development that different areas can accommodate. The more that these areas can equate to those on which the socially sustainable community is based the better, but even if they are sub-units of those areas, this is not an insurmountable problem.

No proposal can be made at this stage as to what the criteria for determining carrying capacity might be, but it could include:

- The nature and vulnerability of the landscape.
- The extent and assimilation capacity of water resources.
- The extent and fragility of important habitats.
- The average extent of travel that the servicing of the community with social and economic services might require.
- The extent and nature of historic landscapes.

Using criteria of this nature, the extent of development that would be appropriate in different locations could be determined, at least in some rudimentary way.

An important element in determining the carrying capacity of rural areas would be the processes by which such determination would be made. While the criteria to be used and the factors to consider could be designated nationally, the carrying out of the assessments and the determination of outcomes would require a participatory and inclusive approach that would have regard to the opinions of the local communities as well as the opinions of “experts” and professionals in the field.

### **Summary of approach**

The approach suggested here therefore, is one that would acknowledge the two critical aspects of sustainability in the context of the rural areas of Ireland – sustainable communities and the environmental capacity to accommodate such communities. These two concepts would set the limits to development in most areas with some exceptions. For example:

- In some circumstances, the carrying capacity of the environment might be such as to prevent the establishment of sustainable communities. In these circumstances it may be that such areas must be accepted as being of particular environmental importance with the needs of the environment taking precedence. Where such areas are identified other solutions to community support and maintenance would need to be sought and given public sector backing.
- In some circumstances the carrying capacity of the environment might be such as to accommodate levels of development that would be excessive. Upper limits to development in rural areas might also be set that would not permit excessive development even where communities considered that the carrying capacity was high.

Of course this is, at this stage at least, a preliminary proposal that needs considerable refinement. It does not address many practical issues as to where development might be permitted, in what circumstances and to whom. However, if the fundamental concept were to be adopted and worked on solutions to these other issues would more than likely be found.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined one aspect of sustainable development that is of particular interest in the context of Ireland, namely, rural housing development. The issue is one that has become a topic of political debate and community action, and one that does not seem to be coming to any satisfactory conclusion. This

paper has examined the background to the debate and has suggested some reasons for the particular nature that it has taken. It has also been suggested that conventional approaches based on those used in other countries and cultures will not necessarily be accepted in an Irish context. Nevertheless, it also acknowledges the need for sustaining the environment and for ensuring that rural housing development takes place with due regard to environmental as well as social considerations.

In the light of the context within which the debate is taking place it suggests an approach to a solution that would respect Irish history and cultural traditions but that would at the same time also permit the issue of environmental sustainability to be accorded due importance.

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