

Using the Concept of Sustainability in Regional Environmental Management in Ireland

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Abstract

Sustainable development encompasses two basic considerations in Ireland. First, development must not deplete the national resource base. This is particularly crucial in Ireland because international trade significantly depends on our "green image," and both tourism and the food industry are highly dependent on a quality environment. Second, economic growth must find a balance and harmony with environmental protection by using resources more efficiently, with less harmful impacts on the environment. A collaborative project is being conducted by the University of Limerick, Ireland together with the major local government agencies in the Mid-West of Ireland [Limerick County Council, Limerick Corporation, Clare County Council, Tipperary (North Riding) County Council and the Mid-Western Regional Authority] to promote sustainable development in the region. This is being achieved through the promotion of public participation and involvement, the development of a range of indicators for the most crucial factors pertaining to sustainable development, and the implementation of a Local Agenda 21 programme in the region.

Background

The most frequently cited definition of sustainable development emerged from the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission, 1987) report, *Our Common Future*, which is "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Meldon, 1998). However, there are over 300 different published definitions of sustainable development, the products of conflicting world views and ideologies, opposing knowledge traditions and vested interests (Official Publications of the European Community, 1997). Despite this diversity in

definition, at its core sustainable development refers to three basic concerns:

- the need to arrest environmental degradation and ecological imbalance;
- the need to not impoverish future generations; and
- the need for equity in the quality of life among people living today (Redclift, 1987).

Local Agenda 21 was endorsed by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Local Agenda 21 is part of the process of achieving sustainable development at a local level by directly involving members of the local community (McLaren, 1994). Over two thirds of the Local Agenda 21 programme cannot be delivered without the commitment and dedication of local government, and the key role of local authorities is set out in Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 document (UK Local Government Management Board, 1993). Each local authority in Ireland was encouraged by central government to adopt, by 1998, its own local development strategy, involving partnerships with many sectors such as the farming community, the business community, environmental/voluntary groups, women's groups, youth organisations, local industry and co-ops, local training and development groups and of course, the general public. Public participation and involvement are crucial to the success of Local Agenda 21.

Aim of the Project

The aim of the Sustainable Development Project is to formulate a range of sustainability indicators for the Mid-West region of Ireland, which will in the future be built into a Local Agenda 21 plan for the region [city of Limerick, counties Clare and Tipperary (North Riding)].

Interest in sustainable development and growing public concern and involvement in environmental matters have prompted governments to re-examine their capacities to assess and monitor the state of the environment and detect changing trends and conditions. Interest is also increasing in measuring environmental performance and evaluating the success of governments

in their efforts to implement European and domestic environmental policies. Thus, indicators are constantly evolving as vital tools to map the course towards a more sustainable future (OECD, 1994). Indicators are an essential component in the overall evaluation of the progress towards sustainable development (Moldan and Billharz, 1997).

Ideally, the indicators meet the following criteria. They will, among other things:

- be representative and scientifically valid;
- be simple, easy to interpret, and show trends over time;
- give early warnings about irreversible trends where possible;
- allow timely identification of trends;
- be based on readily available data or be available at reasonable cost; and
- cover a diversity of issues (environmental, social and economic) and overlap as little as possible (Harger and Meyer, 1996).

The indicators allow evaluation of community involvement in sustainable development. The following questions were designed jointly by the University of Limerick and the local government agencies in the region to enable the formulation of local action policy towards sustainability:

- Are the basic needs of local people being met?
- Is the environment being cared for to ensure that future generations are able to meet their own needs?
- How many people are active in their community/social/political life?
- What is current public opinion in relation to the state of environment/economy/society?

Sustainability indicators are becoming increasingly important for several reasons. First, the public needs to be informed about the state of the environment and the economy and how and why they are changing so that they can understand and monitor government policies and see how their own personal actions may have an impact. Second, the indicators provide a measure to link environmental impacts and socio-economic concerns, and may in some cases provide early warning of potential environ-

mental problems arising from human activity. Third, sustainability indicators can help measure the extent to which policies aimed at sustainable development objectives are being achieved. Finally, they can help clarify the confusion caused by the mass of environmental and economic data available (UK Department of the Environment, 1996).

In this project, the involvement of the public and general interest groups is achieved through the formation of an Advisory Group (discussed in the next section) and by utilising a questionnaire. Over 800 "Quality of Life" questionnaires were sent out to various interest groups in the region, such as chambers of commerce, environmental groups, housing and community sector, local government representatives, women's groups, the Irish Fisheries Board (BIM), the Irish Farmers Association, local industry, training and development groups, youth groups, and schools and colleges. Copies of the questionnaires are available to members of the public from their nearest local government offices.

Establishment of the Steering and Advisory Groups

The Steering Group consists of local government representatives and Senior Environmental Engineers from Limerick Corporation, Limerick County Council, Clare County Council and Tipperary (North Riding) County Council, the Mid-Western Regional Authority, as well as academics from the University of Limerick. The support of the Mid-Western Health Board has also been secured.

The establishment of the Advisory Group is designed to enable members of various interest groups and the general public to have input into shaping and prioritising the needs of the local community, with respect to planning developments, the provision and delivery of basic services, and equitable opportunities for all the population (UK Local Government Management Board, 1994). The two groups collaborate in selecting the most suitable and effective indicators for the region.

The Advisory Group enables members of the public to voice more freely their opin-

Table 1. Categories of sustainability indicators

Environment	Socioeconomic
Air Quality	Homelessness
Water Quality	Unemployment and Poverty
Built Urban and Rural Environment	Life Expectancy
Biodiversity	Education
Solid Waste Disposal	Crime
	Health
	Transport

ions on the selection of suitable and effective sustainability indicators. The first meeting of this group is planned for February 2000. The main role of each member is to review the list of proposed indicators and select those most relevant to the region. The Advisory Group will also be responsible for promoting the work of the project amongst their members, thus facilitating maximum dissemination of information about the project amongst the community within the general timetable for the project.

The Master List of Indicators

Based on questionnaires received so far, we have compiled a master list of 77 sustainability indicators. The primary aim of the first meeting of the Advisory Group is to reduce this number to a more manageable total, say between 30 and 40 indicators. Resources available will not permit gathering of information on all the proposed indicators. The challenge is to strike a balance between having a small number of indicators so that the messages are concise and clear, while not over-simplifying the issues or omitting significant areas (*Sustainable Development—the UK Strategy*, 1994).

Each of the sustainability indicators on the master list can be categorized under one of the headings given in Table 1.

Local Agenda 21

The next stage of the project is to build selected indicators into a Local Agenda 21 plan for the region. This is expected to commence in November 2000 and involves an investigation of the relationship between the economic and environmental strategies pursued by the local authorities.

The objective is to explore existing environmental policies and examine the weight attached to them internally by those working in local government.

Both the Steering Group and the Advisory Group will play a direct role in agreeing to the best strategy to pursue in working towards a more sustainable future by incorporating six main themes into the Local Agenda 21 plan. These are:

- improving the local authorities' own performance on environmental issues,
- integrating sustainable development goals with existing policies and practices,
- raising local awareness,
- encouraging the participation of the public,
- forming partnerships with a range of interests, and
- monitoring and reporting on progress (Reid, 1995).

The finished product will be an integrated plan for approaching sustainable development in the Mid-West region of Ireland. Emphasis will be on all areas of policy and action, not just the more pressing environmental issues. A systematic and comprehensive approach is required. This project is a clear example of "interactive" environmental research for wider social relevance, and is the first step in building a more sustainable future for subsequent generations in the Mid-West of Ireland.

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