

Opportunities for Sustainable Economic and Community Development in County Kerry

Issues Paper prepared for the Public Participation Network (PPN) by Breandán Ó Caoimh, July 2021

This paper draws on a set of conversations with the PPN membership and secretariat between November 2020 and June 2021. It seeks to provide baseline indicators in respect of demographic, socio-economic and community development issues and to identify pointers to enable Kerry to excel in respect of sustainable development. The conversations with the PPN advocated an assets-based approach – identifying and harnessing potential and making investments in enabling Kerry to realise its potential, while promoting spatial justice. In this respect, Kerry ought to be in a strong position, considering the county's traditional striving for excellence and its citizens' endeavours and achievements in sport, literature, the arts, and public life among many other fields.

Demographics

According to the most recent Census of Population, County Kerry has a total resident population of 147,707. While the county's population has increased gradually since the early 1970s, it is still below the level it had in 1911 (159,691 persons). Over the same period, the population of the State has grown by 52% (from 3.13m to 4.76m).

Between 1996 and 2016, County Kerry's population increased by 17%, but this growth was geographically uneven. Many peri-urban areas and the suburbs of our main towns have experienced rapid population growth. Rates exceed thirty percent in most electoral divisions (EDs) in an area formed by an imaginary triangle from Abbeydorney to Barraduff to Cromane. This core of the county is experiencing some demographic pressures (e.g. for school places), while other parts of the county have capacity to absorb population growth, and many need a demographic injection to sustain existing services. While suburbs and peri-urban zones are growing, many neighbourhoods in the centres of Tralee and, to a lesser extent, Killarney, have experienced population decline. Population decline is most prevalent in the Iveragh Peninsula, along the Shannon Estuary, in the Mullaghareirk Mountains (from Knocknagoshel to Ballydesmond) and parts of Beara. Several EDs in these areas lost over ten percent of their population in the twenty years to the most recent census.

Unless recent trends are arrested, Kerry's demographic imbalance is likely to deteriorate further. Population projections can be derived from the current distribution of particular age cohorts. Children and teenagers are, in proportional terms, much more likely to live in the centre of the county than elsewhere; in some EDs – from Kilcummin to Ballymacelligott to Milltown – over thirty percent of the population is aged under 19. Conversely the proportion of the population aged 0 to 19 is below fourteen percent across most of the three peninsulas (Corca Dhuibhne, Iveragh and Beara).

While core areas have high proportions of young people, peripheral areas tend to have high proportions of older people. Over a quarter of the population is aged over 65 in most of Beara, Iveragh and in rural communities north of Listowel. These (latter) areas have considerable and growing needs in respect of services for older people and carers.

The current spatial imbalance in County Kerry can be expressed in terms of core – periphery; the county has a core (triangle) that is performing strongly, while the periphery is either stagnant or declining. This profile is similar to that which pertained in the EU (EU15) in the 1980s. Then, Europe’s economic core was largely within a pentagon (imaginary 5-sided area), the five points of which were denoted by London, Hamburg, Munich, Milan and Paris. In order to correct this imbalance – to alleviate agglomeration effects in the pentagon (core) and to enable the periphery to develop, the EU increased its investments in the periphery – mainly through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF). EU regional and cohesion policy ensured substantial transfers of resources from the core to the periphery. Ireland was the single biggest beneficiary, in per capita terms, of these investments, and they contributed to our country’s development over the past thirty years. At the same time, the core benefited from reduced pressures on infrastructure, although many of its larger urban areas continue to need bespoke and area-based integration and social inclusion interventions. A similar approach in respect of County Kerry would seek to promote convergence between the core and the periphery and to ensure spatial justice, in the interest of social cohesion and inclusion.

Income and Economic Opportunities

In 2019, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) published county-level data in respect of household income. Figures showed that the median gross national household income was €45,256. Among the thirty-one local authority areas, Kerry recorded the fifth-lowest level at €37,339.

As with demographics, there is a notable spatial imbalance within County Kerry in respect of household income. The median household income is in excess of €49,000 in the environs of Killarney – in Muckross, Beaufort, Faha and Kilcummin and in Tralee’s northern environs – from Spa to Kielduff. In contrast, the lowest median household incomes (<€29,000) are in the south and west of Iveragh and Beara and in Ballybunion. Levels are also below the county average in several parts of rural North Kerry.

The Pobal HP Index, which provides a composite measure of affluence and deprivation, can be mapped at small area (SA) level. When this is done for County Kerry, some areas around Killarney emerge as ‘affluent’. They include Muckross and Fossa along with some of the town’s southern suburbs. Levels of affluence are notably lower in Tralee. The highest levels of compound socio-economic disadvantage, in County Kerry, are found in Tralee Town, and in particular in its northern and eastern suburbs, as well as in the Iveragh Gaeltacht, the Mullaghareirks and along the Shannon Estuary. Levels of disadvantage are also elevated in much of East Kerry – along the border with County Cork.

The levels of dependency on either the State pension and / or social welfare are highest in disadvantaged urban areas, particularly in Tralee, Castleisland and Listowel and in rural North Kerry.

An objective spatial analysis of socio-economic variables reveals persistent spatial inequalities in Ireland and within County Kerry. Their persistence and the growing social polarisation between communities is resulting in several population cohorts being prevented from realising their development potential; these include migrants, travellers and those who grow up in households that experience inter-generational unemployment / under-employment. Across the OECD, the most equal societies e.g. the Scandinavian

countries, Austria and Switzerland tend to have the fewest social problems (e.g. low levels of criminality), while the more unequal countries (e.g. the USA, UK and Italy) tend to have greater social problems. Thus, the promotion of equality of opportunity, through investments in education, housing, healthcare and community development, evidently promotes social cohesion. Indeed, despite their climates and infrastructural challenges, the Scandinavian countries also record the highest levels of happiness in Europe.

It is worth noting that on all the aforementioned demographic and socio-economic variables, values in Kerry's periphery are similar to those that pertain in West Limerick, Duhallow, West Muskerry and Beara. This cross-border commonality underscores the merits of inter-community and cross-boundary collaboration, including in the formulation of county development plans and local area plans.

Wellbeing and Social Capital

Successive studies have shown the merits of investing in the various dimensions of wellbeing i.e. evaluative, emotional, functioning, vitality, community and supportive relationships. Indeed, the Kerry PPN has done considerable work in promoting wellbeing at community and county levels.

Research undertaken by the Carnegie Institute, on public engagement, shows that relative to the four UK jurisdictions, Ireland has the highest level of volunteerism, and more people in Ireland (rather than in GB or NI) were likely to agree that people in their community are kind. People in Ireland were also more likely to report that they have been helpful to others and could turn to friends and neighbours for support. While these figures are encouraging, the most recent Irish Health Survey reveals that non-Irish people living here have fewer friends available to them to provide support when they need it; nine percent of them have nobody to turn to, compared to two percent of Irish people. These figures, among others, point to the importance of marrying integration with the promotion of wellbeing. Indeed, despite our society's claims of being generous to the so-called 'developing (third) world', Ireland has taken in relatively few refugees, and many parishes have yet failed to heed Pope Francis' call to host a refugee family.

The aforementioned Carnegie Commission research finds that levels of kindness and public engagement (in community development and decision-making) are higher in rural areas (than in cities or towns). Relative to their urban counterparts, rural residents are more likely to volunteer, attend public meetings, contact elected representatives, make complaints and set up groups.

Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) show that almost one fifth of Europeans believe that voluntary work is 'very important' in their lives. The corresponding figure in Ireland is 15%. ESS data in respect of the proportion of the population who devote time to voluntary activities show the highest levels are in Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Spain, all of which have strong cooperative structures. Ireland records a value that is similar to the European average; approximately one fifth of people volunteer monthly, and a further quarter does so less frequently. Ireland's Census of Population has not recorded data on volunteering since 2006. The figures that emerged at that time revealed that just over sixteen percent of people had engaged in some volunteering within the previous month. Values were generally higher in rural areas and lowest in the cities.

Community and Ecology

The promotion of wellbeing and the fostering of social capital dovetail with ecology, and there are several emerging opportunities in respect of engaging citizens and civil society organisations in promoting ecological conservation.

Ireland's recently published (and first ever) marine spatial plan is hugely significant for coastal counties, such as Kerry, and local stakeholders will need to be equipped with the tools to enable them to engage in it, so that opportunities are realised – for local community and ecological gain.

Across Kerry, there are currently several place-based ecological initiatives underway, and several communities are working with farmers, foresters, planners, scientists and statutory bodies to develop and implement river catchment management plans. The recently published evaluation of KerryLIFE notes scope for greater community participation in agri-environmental initiatives. Kerry has further significant potential in respect of high-nature-value farming, and community involvement ensures that local heritage, traditions and social structures are to the fore – along with ecological considerations.

Citizen science initiatives provide useful ways of ensuring that communities are empowered to gather, collate and analyse scientific data, so that all stakeholders, including government, put a value on ecological resources. Citizen science is most successful when communities are provided with training, capacity-building and supports, and are encouraged to ask questions and enabled to make decisions, in partnership with others. The National Biodiversity Data Centre provides a mechanism for showcasing citizen science and connecting communities.

Good Governance

Public Participation Networks represent an important element of Ireland's sub-national governance infrastructure. Under the Local Government (Reform) Act, 2014, they are part of the framework “for the purposes of promoting, developing and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to participation in decision-making processes of the local authority by the local community.” The legislation requires that all local authorities have participatory mechanisms in place to ensure two-way communication between local government and communities.

Just as the *Governance Code* relates to community and voluntary organisations, the Council of Europe *12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance* provide a useful mechanism for guiding local authorities. While all twelve principles relate to the work of PPNs, particularly through their representation on SPCs, Principles 4 (Openness and Transparency) and 12 (Accountability) are of paramount relevance. Each principle has a clear set of indicators, to enable the effective monitoring of governance performance. Several local authorities have received Council of Europe awards in recognition of their excellence in governance, and Kerry ought to strive for such an award.