



Comhar

Sustainable Development Council

Comhar SDC National Conference

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Implementing Sustainable Development: Empowering Local
Communities

Translating national policy on sustainable development into action on the ground requires a range of responses at local level. Local authorities play a key role but a wide range of sectoral agencies, business, community and voluntary groups as well as individual citizens must engage in this process.

Peoples' consumption habits and lifestyles are bound by social norms and cultural perspectives meaning that they can be difficult to change. Understanding these norms is essential in terms of encouraging new ways of consuming and making sustainable lifestyle choices.

In order to discuss and debate these issues Comhar Sustainable Development Council (SDC) held a conference at the Radisson SAS Royal Hotel, Golden Lane, Dublin on Tuesday 11th and Wednesday 12th November 2008. The theme of the Conference was Implementing Sustainable Development: Empowering Local Communities. The conference examined the role of regional and local authorities, local communities and local groups in fostering positive change in relation to sustainable living. The issues addressed were:

1. Governance and structures: the role of local and regional authorities
2. Local communities and best practice
3. Developing local responses for adapting to climate change
4. Local and regional indicators for sustainable development

The conference was inter-active with a mix of keynote presentations, panel discussion and open forum. Background briefing papers and commissioned research are available on the Comhar SDC website www.comharsdc.ie under the documents icon.

All the presentations are available on <http://www.comharsdc.ie/conference2008/>.

The Comhar SDC Chairman, Professor Frank Convery provided opening and closing remarks and commentary on both days of the conference.

COMHAR SDC NATIONAL CONFERENCE.....ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

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Module 1: Governance and Structures- Tuesday 11th of November 2008

Achieving Sustainable Communities- John Vidal, Environment Editor, The Guardian

John discussed various routes to achieving sustainability while simultaneously building community.

Implementing sustainable development: The role of local authorities- Joe MacGrath, Galway City Manager

Joe discussed the role of local authorities in implementing sustainable development and some of the key challenges, approaches and measures involved in the transition.

Sustaining Rural Communities- John McDonagh, NUI, Galway

John discussed the challenges facing rural communities and the strategies to maintain rural communities and transition to sustainability.

Towards a Sustainable City: A Business Perspective- Tom Coffey, Dublin City Centre Business Association

Tom discussed the concept of the creative city and the need to move towards 'living cities' that provide places where people want to live.

Module 2: Parallel Workshops- Tuesday 11th of November 2008

Module 2a: Local responses to climate change

Climate Change Scenarios- Jackie McLoughlin, NUI Maynooth

Jackie discussed projected climate changes for Ireland and some possible impacts and consequences.

Local Adaptation- Niamh Kirwan and Stephen Flood, Comhar SDC

Niamh and Stephen discussed the findings from research conducted on with Comhar SDC. The research examined international best practice and a sample of Irish County Development Plans to provide practical adaptation measures for local authorities. The research looks at a diversity of adaptation issues including; flooding water supply, biodiversity, agriculture, coastal management, infrastructure and planning/development.

National Adaptation Strategy- Owen Ryan, DOEHLG

The National Adaptation Strategy aims to provide a framework for the integration of adaptation issues into decision-making at national and local level. Owen discussed the issues to be included in Ireland's National Adaptation Strategy and where the strategy development process is at the moment.

Energy Initiatives at local level: Sustainable Energy Communities Programme- Aideen O’Hora, SEI

Aideen talked about an SEI project using the CONCERTO approach in Dundalk. The CONCERTO initiative sets a powerful example of how the concept of low-energy neighbourhoods combined with sustainable energy supply can be realised on a European scale. The outcome of the study demonstrates that it is only through the whole community approach that we will successfully improve energy efficiency in our communities and achieve the elusive balance between social, environmental and economic life.

Empowering local action- Ken Macken, EPA

Ken discussed some initiatives happening at both community and local authority level that are helping both mitigate and adapt to climate change.

World Café

This is the summary of discussions at a World Café that took place as part of Module 2a: Local responses to climate change.

World Café is an innovative, yet simple, methodology for hosting conversations about questions that matter. These conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important to them. As a process, the World Café can evoke and make visible the collective intelligence of any group, thus increasing people’s capacity for effective action in pursuit of common aims. (extract from website : www.theworldcafe.com)

The Café followed on from the series of presentations, as outlined above. The module, as a whole, was chaired by Lisa Ryan of Comhar SDC and the subsequent discussion was facilitated by Chris Chapman.

The core question considered in the Café was ‘How to make the relationship between local responses to climate change and national strategy work as well as possible?’ This question sought to address both how local responses to date could best inform national strategy and how national strategy could best support future local responses.

The purpose of the Café was two-fold:

- To inform the process of developing the National Adaptation Strategy
- To build common understandings and relationships between stakeholders

The discussion mainly focussed on the nature of the communications that would be needed for a National Adaptation Strategy to be effective. To this end, key challenges identified included:

- How to get the linkages right between central and local government and then in turn with the business / industry, education and community sectors?
- How to ensure that information provided is balanced, consistent, clear and accessible?
- How to ‘fill the gap’ between national policy and community / local actions?

Main points:

- Responses to the challenges of Climate Change need to be comprehensive and connected up, not isolated initiatives here and there. 'Partial approaches don't work' – EU, National Government, Local Authority and community activities need to be visibly joined up within the same overall strategy.
- The national vision needs to incorporate a vision of how communication needs to work and the nature of the partnerships that will be required
- There needs to be very clear commitment from 'the top'
- Guidance is needed in relation to monitoring parameters, legislation, regulation, reliable sources for key information and how to set local priorities (priorities should include what there should be less of as well as where there should be additional focus)
- There is a need to bring together the best of expertise using local and traditional knowledge to create strategies and communications that work and underpin a common understanding of needs and / or objectives.
- Communications need to be made highly relevant and consistent and happen through diverse media. The aim is to not be unnecessarily technical, but to make the scientific data, legal frameworks and EU guidance as transparent, accessible and useful as possible, without compromising the science. (There appears to be some history of great effort going into specific communications, without anyone ever checking on whether they provided what was needed on the ground)
- There is a real difficulty in communicating issues where the science is not 'cut and dried'. This is not straightforward, but people value transparency – we can acknowledge where there is debate, but make it as clear as we can which bodies have come to decisions and why.
- Ongoing communications need to publicise and celebrate successes, be results oriented and demonstrate progress against locally set quantifiable goals
- Effective communications will be the basis of local informed participation (community groups, schools, local government, business etc) and ownership – there needs to be a constant feedback loop to those responsible for communication as to the effectiveness of their communication. As communication becomes increasingly effective, increasingly effective actions will follow.
- Leadership from local and central government needs to stimulate local action partnerships to ensure local co-ordination and ongoing dialogue to improve the effectiveness of strategy on the ground. There needs to be human contact to work through issues, not just e-mails etc to ensure both local and national realities are reflected.
- Local authorities need to be recognised as having key roles both as the deliverers of services and in providing community leadership.
- Partnerships, founded on an informed common understanding, will be the basis for local innovation and creativity and ongoing engagement. There needs to be the opportunity for people involved in local actions to ask questions of national experts.
- Where a high degree of ownership and engagement can be achieved, this will help strengthen communities, encourage self-regulation and build a sense of personal responsibility and self-reliance. ('Decisions taken behind closed

- doors' were recognised as a substantial barrier to engagement)
- The aim of a national campaign should be to make things real and relevant at a local level and stimulate local debate that will lead to local partnerships for action. A campaign should begin by identifying the key local stakeholders to get on board.
- The overall approach needs to be informed by best practice in relation to the EU Directive on Public Participation

Specific Actions Suggested

- Stakeholder panels should be formed to help guide the communications that are needed and to give feedback on communication initiatives. (There should possibly be a national survey of key stakeholders to determine existing levels of awareness, ownership and engagement)
- Models / templates for area and village plans should be developed (possibly through the fast-tracking of pilot plans)
- Guidance should be given to schools as to how they could be a resource to support change in their local communities and how they could participate in local policy development (again, possibly pilot approach with a small number of schools that could then be showcased – a relevant model already exists at Ballina National School, Co Tipperary – see www.ul.ie/lowcarbonfutures for further info)
- Hold local sustainability competitions to highlight and share best practices – particular acknowledgement should be given to initiatives which demonstrate high levels of community buy-in / ownership.
- Develop local leadership development initiatives to further develop awareness of issues and encourage integrated local actions – there is a need to be imaginative in thinking who might provide the leadership needed.
- Establish Public / Private Partnerships (Limited Liability Partnerships) as the vehicles to deliver national strategy at local levels – focussing initially on areas where there are common goals, to help build momentum
- Establish a panel of 'experts' (inc EPA) and key contacts who can be referred to when people involved in local actions have specific questions.

Module 2b: Local communities and best practice

Wicklow Uplands Council- Colin Murphy, Director, Wicklow Uplands Council

Colin informed the attendees on the work of the Wicklow Uplands Council and how they have engaged with the local community. There are several interesting initiatives underway by the Wicklow Uplands Council such as the Wicklow Countryside Access Service, the Wicklow Sustainable Trails Network, the Young Observers Education Project, Village Interpretive Panels and the PURE – Protecting Uplands and Rural Environment Project.

Ballymun/ Liberties Regeneration- Evelyn Hanlon, Dublin City Council.

Evelyn compared the Ballymun and Liberties Urban Regeneration Projects providing some points of learning as result.

Transition Town Kinsale- Klaus Harvey

Klaus talked about the Transition town movement, which started in Kinsale. He discussed some of the key principles and tools that communities can use to become more resilient and move towards a low carbon and sustainable future.

Cloughjordan Eco-village- Gavin Harte

Gavin talked about an innovative project that plans to expand the village of Cloughjordan in North Tipperary to build a sustainable eco-community. The development utilises participatory approaches to sustainable land-use management and requires high building specifications. It also includes a community farm, a nature reserve and well designed green spaces.

World Café

This is the summary of discussions at a World Café that took place as part of Module 2b: Local Communities and Best Practice. The Café followed on from the series of presentations, as outlined above. The module, as a whole, was chaired by Noel Casserly of Comhar SDC and the subsequent discussion was facilitated by Michael Ewing and rapporteured by Michelle O'Sullivan.

Summary of Discussion

- There needs to be more communication between local representatives at local government level and the public.
- There is a need to try to increase the numbers of the general public getting involved at local government level. Community groups' opinions are not getting enough recognition.
- It is important to educate people as to how to get involved.
- The use of must instead of may send a strong signal in encouraging behavioural change.
- There needs to be a simplified definition of sustainable development and community for the average individual, as they don't understand what it means for them.
- Capacity building, leadership will be required in deciding what sustainable development is in the community.
- Where does the boundary lie in terms of who should get involved in community issues? It should include a mix of people with differing agendas.
- There should be a tier-ing of decision making process.
- People have the right to information and knowledge that is independent, accessible, clear, reliable and written with appropriate language, for full communication.
- Leadership – from above and below, must be respectful. Everyone has the right to own an idea which feeds into the evolution of vision. It is important to have the involvement of everyone, with a need to prioritise decision making.
- Approach is very important in partnerships. Capacity building, training and working in small steps helps to build trust and respect.
- There are four key essential resources- financial, skills, training, access to authority and back-up.
- Sustainable communities need to be promoted as desirable and as source of local pride.
- There needs for a user friendly plan or vision.

- Top-down support must meet bottom-up action.
- Communities must establish links with existing community projects e.g. tidy towns, farmers groups.
- We need to re-invent local politics and encourage participatory democracy in a real sense.
- Education showing people good and bad examples of best practice is essential.
- More work should be done on community definitions e.g. business communities, special interest community.
- A National network of community organisations would be helpful in mobilising action.
- Information dissemination should be age friendly and culturally appropriate.
- Community self managed should be developed.
- Awarding scheme for community groups should be available.

Module 3: The Role of Local Authorities- Tuesday 11th of November 2008

County and City Development Boards- Sean O’Riordain

Sean discussed the findings of research he was conducting on behalf of Comhar SDC on proposed Environmental Sub-committees within the County Development Board structure. This was followed by a panel discussion with Tony Larkin from Wexford County Council and Paddy Walley, a development consultant.

Module 4: Local and Regional Indicators- Wednesday 13th of November

The Way Forward - John Gormley, T.D., Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

John Gormley discussed the challenges Ireland faces with climate change and other sustainability issues. He went on to provide information on the policy that has been and will be introduced to tackle these challenges and move us towards a more sustainable future.

Local and Regional Indicators- Magnus Amajirionwu, Sligo IT

Magnus presented the findings of research being conducted on behalf of comhar on sub-national sustainable development indicators (SDIs) in Ireland. He discussed actions required for developing and implementing sub-national SDIs in Ireland.

Panel Discussion

Anna Lipkin, Stockholm County Council

- Anna discussed the sustainable procurement strategy which was a joint pilot

project for the Stockholm County Council, Västra Götaland Region and Region Skåne. A common code of conduct and an action plan were drawn up. The strategy addressed medical equipment and asked suppliers to sign the code of conduct when signing the contract, which addressed the sustainability of the products.

Brendan McDonnell, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland

- Brendan talked about measuring social assets and how this methodology can be utilised in community development.

Henk Van der Kemp, Dublin Institute of Technology

- Henk proposed a new spatial solution for sustainable communities that moves from concentric and radial to linear and transversal.

Richard Moles, University of Limerick

- Richard posed the question what is needed to make a settlement/community sustainable?