Towards sustainable development in the mid-west region of Ireland

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Keywords  Local government, Steering committees, Sustainable development

Abstract  The University of Limerick, Ireland, in collaboration with the major local authorities in the mid-west region of Ireland (Limerick County Council, Limerick Corporation, Clare County Council, Tipperary (North Riding) County Council and the Mid-Western Regional Authority) is currently undertaking a project to promote sustainable development in the region. This is being achieved, first, through the promotion of public participation by directly involving members of local government, the voluntary and community sector and the general public in the region who form the mid-west steering and advisory groups, second, the development of a range of indicators selected on the basis of sensitivity to sustainable development, and third, the design of a Local Agenda 21 programme in the mid-west. The paper falls into two parts. First, the current situation in Ireland in relation to sustainable development is reviewed, and second, the University of Limerick case study is described.

Introduction

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) report, Our Common Future, is credited with having popularised the concept of sustainable development (Meldon, 1998). However, it has been argued that the history of the concept of sustainability can be traced back to the terms “stationary” or “steady state economy” used by the nineteenth century political economist (European Environment Agency, 1997). Today there are over 300 published definitions of sustainable development, the products of diverse world views and competing vested interests. Fundamentally, sustainable development addresses three major areas:

(1) people living today are entitled to justice and equal rights;
(2) environmental degeneration must be alleviated or eliminated; and
(3) future generations must not be impoverished as a result of current actions (Redclift, 1987).

Our Common Future explores how sustainable development “is not a fixed state of harmony but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs”. In other words “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

The immediate outcome of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Bruntland) report was the United Nations Conference on
Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference represented the culmination of negotiations on the development of a coherent framework for transition to global sustainable development (McLaren and Bosworth, 1994). Ireland was one of the 150 nations which endorsed Agenda 21, a blueprint which is intended to set out an international programme of action for the application of sustainable development (Grubb and Koch, 1993). Local Agenda 21 is part of the process of achieving sustainable development at local and regional levels, in part through consultation with local communities.

Content to Chapter 28 of Local Agenda 21 was supplied, among other agencies, by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) and provides an agenda for local authorities worldwide (Otto-Zimmerman, 1995). It has precipitated widespread action for sustainable development at the level of the municipality (Selman, 1998) by introducing the need for holistic approaches and integrative strategies, and by strengthening the principles of participation and partnership (European Environment Agency, 1997).

Preparation and implementation of Local Agenda 21 in Ireland
The first government-level recognition of sustainable development in Ireland was in the 1990 Environment Action Programme (Department of the Environment, 1990). The aim of this programme was to provide a comprehensive and systematic framework for environmental protection in Ireland, based on the principles of sustainable development. In 1992, sustainable development was included in the Irish Environment Protection Agency Act as a guiding principle for the agency’s operation (Scannell, 1995). The national development plan (NDP) 1994-1999, as a fundamental strategic consideration, sought the integration of environmental and economic objectives in the interests of sustainable development (Stationery Office, Dublin, 1993). The environmental profile of the NDP was incorporated in the agreed Community Support Framework for Ireland (CSF) 1994-1999, which identifies as a key issue the need to reduce the pollution and destruction of environmental media which have finite assimilative capacities (Honohan, 1997). The Irish government, in its policy agreement for a government of renewal (Stationery Office, 1994), committed itself to the preparation of a national sustainable development strategy. Sustainable Development – A Strategy for Ireland (1997) represented the first attempt to draw together a comprehensive and integrated national agenda for sustainable development (Department of the Environment, 1997).

A 1998 report published by An Taisce, an NGO founded in 1948 to advance the conservation and management of Ireland’s natural and built endowments in a sustainable manner, considers that sustainable development rests on two basic considerations. First, development must not deplete the resource base. This is particularly crucial in Ireland because international trade significantly depends on our “green image” and both tourism and the food industries are
subject to a quality environment (Meldon, 1998). Second, economic growth must find a balance and harmony with environmental protection. This involves using resources more efficiently, and with less harmful impacts on the environment.

In 1995, the Department of the Environment prepared guidelines on Local Agenda 21 for Irish local authorities, inviting them to develop this process further in their own functional areas, building on the existing policies, plans and programmes and bringing forward appropriate initiatives. However, the guidelines are no more than a suggested framework for action, and it was left to local authorities to “lead by example in their areas, and to give democratic expression to the vision of the communities they represent” (Department of the Environment, 1995).

The Irish Government in 1997 requested all local authorities to complete a Local Agenda 21 plan for their functional areas by 1998. This is to be advanced by building on the suggestions made in the Department of the Environment guidelines of 1995, or by participating in the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign (by adopting and signing the Aalborg Charter), or in other Local Agenda 21 initiatives endorsed by the ICLEI. ICLEI, whose motto is “if you move your community, you can move the world”, has also issued a Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide (Internet ref. A), and has a worldwide membership of over 250 local governments, but only two from Ireland, namely Dublin Corporation and Dun Laoighaire-Rathdown County Council.

Most Irish local authorities have achieved little in preparing Local Agenda 21 plans (McDarby, 1997). Of those which have acted, most are beginning at the internal stage of “greening” themselves and training staff, and have yet to move on to externalising the process within the community.

**Recent developments in Ireland**

Ireland’s *National Development Plan 2000-2006* (Stationery Office, Dublin, 1999) stresses that economic and social development should not be to the detriment of environmental quality. The plan has been designed to take account of the need for “balance between environment and development, embodied in the concept of sustainable development, so that economic and social activity will not undermine the long-term productivity of supporting ecosystems”. The integration of environmental concerns into all policy areas is the proposed means of achieving this balance. A national spatial strategy will in future be prepared to secure sustainable development over the long term and a new state of the environment report was published by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency in April 2000.

Comhar, the National Sustainable Development Partnership, was formally established in February 1999. Its terms of reference are, in brief, to promote the national agenda for sustainable development, to assist in developing suitable mechanisms and advising on their implementation, and to encourage the establishment of a national consensus in relation to sustainability policy. Comhar is the forum for national consultation and dialogue on all issues
relevant to Ireland’s quest for sustainable development and it plays a vital role in the development and implementation of policy. Essential features of Comhar are:

- it is representative of both policy and economic sectors, NGOs and community groups;
- it has a high degree of independence in advising government;
- its membership has the calibre to lead and influence real integration of environmental consideration and socio-economic factors;
- it can recommend innovative policy options and instruments for environmental protection;
- it has the potential to achieve a high level of information exchange and public awareness towards a sustainable ethos throughout society; and
- it is represented at relevant consultative fora in Ireland and elsewhere, including the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

To reflect the three major concerns of sustainable development, environmental, economic, and social, a wide range of representative bodies, both governmental and non-governmental, were included in five nominating panels for the 25 members of Comhar. A total of 59 organisations were invited to make nominations from which the Minister for the Environment and Local Government selected the 25 members of Comhar, who are appointed for a term of three years.

In 1998, the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), in association with the Department of the Environment and Local Government, held a series of regional seminars in counties Dublin, Roscommon and Tipperary on the implementation of Local Agenda 21. Most county councils and county borough corporations were represented at the seminars. There was general consensus among the local authorities that Local Agenda 21 could be effectively facilitated through regional networks of Local Agenda 21 officers. Each local authority in Ireland has since designated a Local Agenda 21 officer and they meet regularly in order to promote information sharing and avoid duplication of effort. The objective is to develop a more holistic approach to sustainable development and to facilitate the evolution of effective strategies which are complementary rather than conflicting, thus enabling effective implementation (Written Communication – The Environment Policy Section, Department of the Environment, Dublin).

Case study: Local Agenda 21 initiatives in the mid-west of Ireland
In 1998, the University of Limerick in association with the four main local authorities in the mid-west region of Ireland (Limerick County Council, Limerick Corporation, Clare County Council and Tipperary (NR) County Council) launched a project to formulate a range of sustainability indicators for the region, designed to be integrated into a Local Agenda 21 plan.
Growing public concern and involvement in environmental and social affairs has prompted local governments in the mid-west region to evaluate their capacity to monitor the state of the environment and the economy and detect trends and patterns. Thus, sustainability indicators are evolving as essential components to chart the transition towards a more sustainable future (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1994). Large networks of community, voluntary and environmental groups in the mid-west are growing more vociferous in their demand for better information reporting systems in relation to the state of the environment and the economy in the region.

An example of an ongoing environmental problem in the mid-west region includes that of a large number of cattle deaths in the Askeaton area of County Limerick. The local community believes this to be as a direct result of industrial pollution (MacConnell, 1995). Local residents established the Askeaton/Ballysteen Animal Health Committee aimed at raising public awareness in the region. The highest number of cattle deaths was recorded between 1992-1993 and was characterised by weight loss, ill-thrift, substantial drops in milk yields, increased cases of infertility and loss of calves at birth. Concern, too, was expressed in relation to public health and increased incidences of respiratory diseases, miscarriages and foetal abnormalities in the area (Purcell, 1995). Askeaton and its environs are areas of relatively high industrial activity. These industries have subsequently come under suspicion following the cattle deaths. Despite intense investigations by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the publication of two reports, no definite conclusions have been made as to how the deaths occurred. Information is still being compiled by the EPA and a final report is expected to be published by December 2000 (Nolan, 1999).

Another contentious environmental issue in the mid-west region is that of the proposed landfill at a disused open-cast mine site in the Silvermines mountains area of County Tipperary (O’Sullivan, 1999a). The application was made by Waste Management Ireland (WMI), a subsidiary of the US multinational Waste Management Incorporated. The £6 million landfill would accommodate 180,000 tonnes of refuse over a period of 25 years. The venture is supported by Iarnród Éireann, the Irish Railway company. It is envisaged that compacted waste will be brought by railway in sealed containers and deposited in the mine. The proposed landfill faces strong opposition from local residents who form the Silvermines Action Group. The Silvermines community depends on tourism to counter economic decline and environmental damage caused by decades of base metal mining in the area. Tipperary (North Riding) County Council has since refused planning permission for the landfill facility. This decision is to be appealed by WMI to An Bord Pleanála, the Irish Planning Authority (O’Sullivan, 1999b).

Representatives from both these and several other interest groups came together in February 2000 for the first meeting of the Mid-West Advisory
Group which is designed to promote sustainable development by direct involvement of members of the local community. This is discussed in the next section.

Promoting integrated participation
Local Agenda 21 places major emphasis on local accountability and democratisation, challenges existing local government structures and offers an opportunity for local authorities to develop effective participatory structures (Freeman et al., 1996). Sustainable development demands integrated policy, planning and social learning processes in order to be effective. Its political viability depends on the full support and participation of the people it affects through their local authorities, social institutions and their own personal actions (Galvin and Jackson, 1995).

Sustainable development cannot be achieved by one local authority on its own. It requires an integrated effort between communities and regions. Given the environmental and social challenges facing local governments, not only in the mid-west region of Ireland but also worldwide, sustainable development issues need to be highlighted. This will enhance the overall development of communities and the role they play in regional decision making; educate the wider community to ensure a high level of integrated knowledge, so as to influence the public’s attitudes and encourage the necessary behavioral changes; enable council departments and other stakeholders to recognise the links between environmental impacts and socio-economic concerns and how such interdependent relationships exist; and finally, to ensure that environmental issues are not viewed in isolation from daily activities but are included in strategic planning for future development (Bartlett, 1993).

The University of Limerick, which is leading the indicators project, sought to foster community participation while also formalising links with the four participating local authorities by establishing two independent working groups, the steering group and the advisory group.

The steering group consists of local government representatives and senior environmental engineers from Limerick County Council, Limerick Corporation, Clare County Council, Tipperary (NR) County Council, representatives from the University of Limerick and The Mid-Western Health Board. The role of this group is to contribute to developing collaborative strategic regional management systems for the mid-west region, while simultaneously integrating community-based visioning processes. Local Agenda 21 is seen as essentially being “bottom up”, with the four local authorities playing the role of facilitators, without infringing the rights of other participating groups by adopting a form of “top down” control (Kitchen et al., 1997).

The establishment of the advisory group is designed to enable members of the general public and the voluntary and community sectors to voice their concerns and have their input into shaping and prioritising the needs of the mid-west region with respect to environmental protection, economic development and social cohesion.
Essentially, the role of the advisory group is to:

- review the list of proposed sustainability indicators and select those most relevant to their community;
- promote the work of the project among their members thus facilitating a wide distribution of information and advising mechanisms for action.

The two groups collaborate in selecting the most representative and effective sustainability indicators for the region.

To be meaningful at a regional level, the selected sustainability indicators must reflect community concerns, values and hopes for the future. It is not sufficient to provide the public with information if they are not prepared to utilise it, and provide their own contributions to addressing the problems to which they ultimately contribute (Leal Filho, 1999). The next section reviews the methodology used in developing indicators of sustainable development for the mid-west region.

“Quality of life” survey and sustainability indicators

In addition to establishing the two independent workgroups, public participation was encouraged by disseminating over 800 “Quality of life” questionnaires to various interest groups in the region, such as local housing and community groups, businesses, farming organisations, environmental groups, training and development groups, fisheries bodies, local co-operatives, local women’s organisations, youth groups, universities, colleges and schools. Members of the general public can obtain copies of the questionnaire from their local government offices. The objective of this regional survey was to enable members of the public to express their views on quality of life, participate in decision making at a local and regional level and contribute to maintaining and improving the quality of the environment in the mid-west region of Ireland.

Based on the 312 questionnaires received back, a first listing of 76 indicators was compiled. The primary aim of the first meeting of the advisory group was to reduce this number to a more manageable total. The meeting, which took place at the University of Limerick, 7 February 2000, began with an introductory presentation to the members and outlined the role of the group. Two weeks prior to the meeting, all 30 members, representing over 25 organisations, received an information pack exploring the concepts of sustainable development, Local Agenda 21, sustainability indicators, and defining the objectives of the project. Included in the pack was the initial listing of sustainability indicators.

Each member was requested to select between 30-40 of the indicators which they felt were most relevant the mid-west region. Certain criteria were to be adhered to in selecting the indicators. They were to be representative and understandable, relevant, scientifically valid, show trends over time and, where possible, be based on readily available data. At the meeting it was explained to the group that enormous resources would be required to gather information
about all 76 indicators. The challenge facing them was to strike a balance between having a small number of indicators so that the messages are clear and concise while not over-simplifying the issues or omitting important areas.

After much debate a consensus was reached that several future meetings of the group were required in order to arrive at the final list of indicators. It was also agreed that future meetings were not to be in presentational style but rather that the group should be divided into two sub-groups, thus facilitating more informal, participative and inclusive discussions. One positive outcome of the meeting was the developing sense of camaraderie and common goal. The second meeting of the group was scheduled for April 2000. It was agreed that the 76 indicators were to be placed into two classes, as set out in Figure 1.

The next phase of the project is to integrate the selected sustainability indicators into a Local Agenda 21 plan for the region. Both the steering group and the advisory group will play a direct role in agreeing the best strategy to pursue in working towards a more sustainable future. Maintaining and developing genuine partnerships, open communication channels and consensus building throughout the community, via roundtables, informal exchanges and improved access to information will continue to be given high priority. Emphasis will be placed on adopting a sense of community ownership for each indicator and any resulting sustainability initiatives, focusing on familiarity, relevance and realism.

Another major aspect to consider is the integration of sustainable development concerns into all areas of policy and not just the more pressing environmental issues. Linking the natural world with regional social issues,
economics, culture, politics and industrial activities will hopefully form a holistic analysis of what sustainability is and how it should be approached (O’Dowd, 1995). The indicators selected will show trends over time and, where possible, be very sensitive to changes in the environment or the economy they represent, thus facilitating effective measuring, monitoring and reporting on progress towards sustainable development in the mid-west region.

Conclusion
This paper explores the current situation in Ireland in relation to sustainable development and Local Agenda 21 and has reviewed the progress to date of a project aimed at identification of sustainability indicators appropriate for the mid-west region. At a general level, the concept of sustainable development is still in its infancy in Ireland and most recent work has focused on the definition of parameters within which Local Agenda 21 might be approached. One of the most problematic aspects of Local Agenda 21 as identified in this project is its magnitude, complicated further by the ill-defined nature of the concepts. Other issues identified include the lack of training programmes for those working in local government, as well as the lack of information, expertise and adequate support from national government. However, increasing efforts are being made to “internalise” the Local Agenda 21 process by the local authorities “putting their own houses in order”. This is being achieved, for example, by pursuing green housekeeping measures which include energy conservation in buildings, using recycled products and recycling facilities, staff training days and the use of environmentally friendly products in the management of parks and recreational grounds. The aim is to achieve a level of internal efficiency that eventually will lead to the mid-west local authorities gaining accreditation to a recognised environmental standard, such as the eco-management and audit scheme (EMAS).

For the most part, the mid-west project is focused on the external elements to Local Agenda 21. Public participation and involvement in the process are already mobilising political, industrial, agricultural and social support towards a sense of local “ownership” of the strategy. Those indicators selected at the conclusion of the process will hopefully reflect collective values and inform collective decisions. They are unlikely to be successful unless they are understood and supported by the public: our objective is to make the process as equitable and democratic as possible.

It is still too early to say whether or not the indicators project will be a success in the mid-west region. Local Agenda 21 is an important tool for local achievement across all the sectors, but is still only a means to an end. Nevertheless, progress to date indicates that sustainable development is taking root in the region and that long-term advancement depends on local authority commitment and continued public participation.

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Towards sustainable development


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