



Think-tank for action on social change

The Ireland We Want

TASC Policy Brief Series

Community led just recovery for rural Ireland



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Summary

In the wake of COVID-19, the need for climate action will remain urgent yet the focus of the public will be on the social and economic recovery. Building social approval for climate action through its design, planning and implementation will be critical if emissions reductions are to be fast and enduring, particularly in rural Ireland.

A sea change in policy makers' approach to climate action is necessary to design climate action so that it addresses community development needs and priorities. This will enable a social and economic recovery while creating opportunities to reduce emissions and build community adaptative capacity.

This work must include: deliberative fora at the local level to identify community needs; systems thinking approaches to transform community priorities into climate solutions; and the necessary supports and capacity building in place to channel spending on climate action into rural communities to create economic opportunities and incubate community business.

Urgent climate action must be taken, in the absence of broad-based support

There remains only a small window of opportunity to enact the necessary climate action required to avoid catastrophic climate change. In recent years, thanks to the efforts of campaigners and activists, awareness of climate change has increased. However, other social and economic concerns, perceived as more immediate, are given priority by the public. In the most recent General Election in Ireland, in February 2020, exit polls showed that climate change was a key issue for only 6% of voters, with the electorate attributing greater importance to issues like health, housing and homelessness.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that public appetite for climate action will be further diminished as concerns about jobs and economic security come to the fore. Yet the urgent need to take climate action remains. Relying on public opinion to build in support of climate action, and, inversely, implementation of climate action without regard for public opinion are strategies that are bound to fail. The former would delay climate action to such an extent as to render it futile. The latter is likely to exacerbate inequality and lead to social resistance similar to that which helped fuel the Gillet Jaunes protests in France, the farmers protests in the Netherlands and underlies the anti-climate platforms of far-right parties in Germany and elsewhere.

To be effective, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, a sea change in policy makers' approach to climate action is necessary. Recognising the urgency for action and the limited propensity for public support, it will be necessary to design climate action so that it addresses community development needs and priorities.

Forthcoming enhanced action by the EU is likely to increase pressure on Irish emissions reductions

The current EU emission reduction targets are set to be increased. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have indicated a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of about 45% (in the region of 40% - 60%) is required globally by 2030 to stabilise warming at or close to the 1.5°C threshold. To achieve 45% reductions, emissions in Europe would need to fall by 5% annually between now and 2030 and emissions in Ireland would need to fall 5.55% annually in the same period. To reach the upper threshold of 60% reductions, emissions in Europe and Ireland would need to fall annually by 7.95% and 8.49% respectively.

The current EU target, determined by the EU's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement is a 40% reduction by 2030 against a baseline of 1990. This amounts to a just 14% reduction versus the latest available emissions data from 2018.

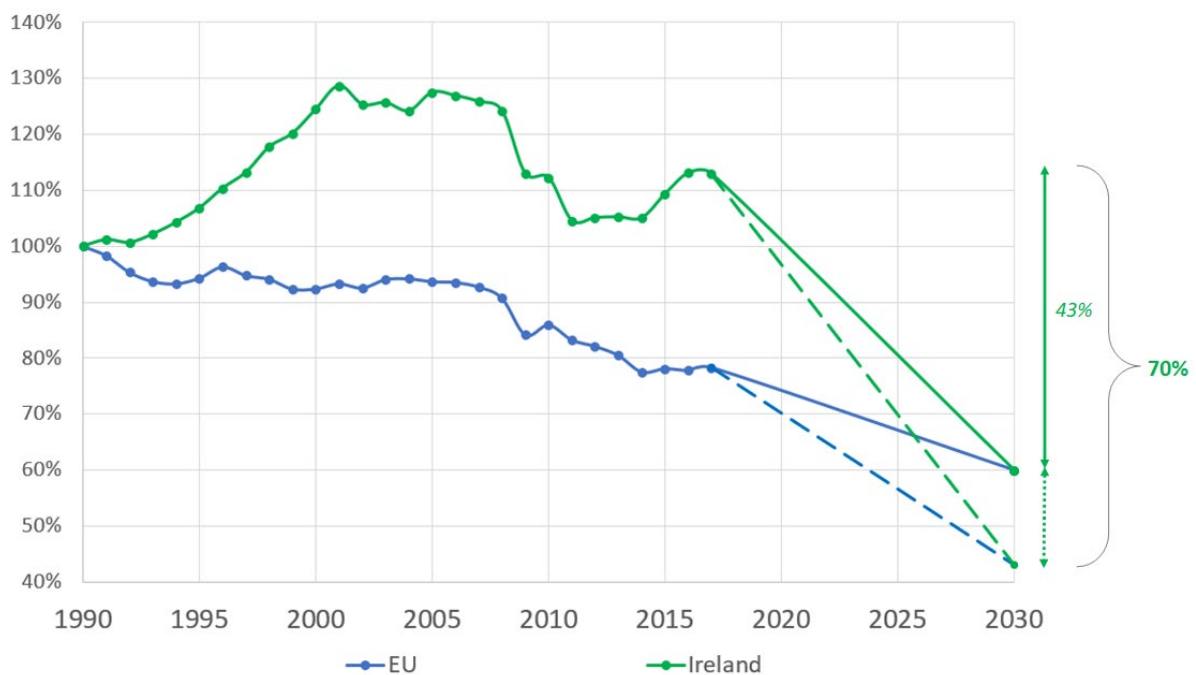


Figure 1: Greenhouse gas emissions from the EU28 and Ireland, normalised to 1990 levels, the baseline year for the EU NDC under the Paris Agreement. While EU emissions reduced between 1990 and 2017, Irish emissions in the same period increased. Meeting the current EU target requires a 43% reduction in Irish emissions in 2017. Meeting an enhanced target, in line with the reductions required by the findings of the IPCC SR1.5 would mean a 70% reduction in Irish emissions by 2030 against 2017 levels. (Source: www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/data/data-viewers/greenhouse-gases-viewer)

However, because of increases in Irish emissions over the same period, achieving the current EU NDC target would necessitate a 43% reduction in Irish emissions by 2030. Should the anticipated enhanced EU NDC target the 45% reductions (vs 2020 baseline) called for in the IPCC's Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C, then Ireland would need to reduce emissions by a challenging 70% before 2030, in the absence of effort sharing.

Under the UNFCCC's greenhouse gas accounting, the inclusion of emissions from LULUCF remain voluntary until 2026. If at that time the reporting of these emissions becomes compulsory, the emissions from Ireland's damaged peatlands could increase Ireland's total emissions by up to 15%. Greater rigour in accounting, coupled with more ambitious EU targets, will increase Ireland's reduction targets even further still.

Climate action as a stimulus for rural communities in Ireland.

Communities in rural Ireland are confronted by a triple pronged challenge. Firstly, they face economic marginalisation. This is driven by a lack of economic opportunity and insufficient public services in rural areas. For example, people in cities have the highest median annual disposable income at €23,497, with independent towns the lowest at €17,433 and remote areas at €18,366¹. Independent towns also have the highest consistent poverty rate at 9.4% compared to 6.2% in cities while highly remote rural areas have the highest proportion of their population at risk of poverty at 19.3% compared to 12.8% in cities².

Second, a lack of public services and connectivity, coupled with high financial uncertainty leads to net out-migration of working-age citizens to urban centres. Inequality in access to public services is striking between rural and urban settings. The average distance to a public bus stop in remote areas at 7.1km is 17 times longer than the average distance of 0.4km in cities. The average distance to a train station in rural and remote areas is 47.3km— 14 times longer than in cities at 3.3km.

Finally, rural livelihoods are particularly at risk, both from the impacts of climate change, and poorly implemented climate action. The IPCC Special Report on Search Results Global Warming of 1.5 °C highlights agriculture and fisheries as the most vulnerable sectors in terms of climate impacts. Efforts to tackle climate change, if implemented regressively, could increase the isolation of rural communities, increase the cost of living and doing business and undermine local business.

However, climate action also offers an opportunity for communities in rural Ireland. Climate action can provide an unparalleled economic stimulus globally and nationally. The New Climate Economy

¹ CSO, 2017, Median equivalised disposable income by area type

² CSO, 2017, Key indicators of poverty by area type

(NCE) report estimates that, globally, €85 trillion will be invested in infrastructure and that investment in bold climate action could yield a direct economic gain of €24 trillion compared to business as usual. Under the National Development Plan, Ireland is forecast to invest €116 billion in public infrastructure and capital works between 2018 and 2027. Using this development to accelerate climate action could, by the NCE estimations, drive a national economic gain of €33 billion. How such action is undertaken will determine who benefits from both the economic return and the enhanced quality of life which climate action can deliver.

Building a community centred solution

To address the climate crisis and ensure a just transition, it will be necessary to develop local transition strategies in conjunction with local communities. Such strategies should not focus on climate change, or climate action, but rather on the needs and priorities of rural communities. By taking a “community-first” approach to climate action, social approval for the transformational changes will be enhanced and progress towards emissions reductions accelerated.

This can be achieved by adopting a community wealth building approach to climate action, and coupling it with community led local development, Ireland’s response to the climate crisis can build local resilience and enable sustained local development that will enhance standards of living, tackle inequality and enable communities in rural areas to thrive. Such an approach would require a wide ranging development strategy that would look to ensure local, broad based ownership of climate action; active democratic design and development of local development solutions that are climate-proofed; localising of investment; and meaningful collaboration between local communities and local public institutions.

Community Led Local Development

Community Led Local Development (CLLD) is an integrated and place-based mechanism to foster economic, social and territorial cohesion. The European Parliament has put a strong emphasis on the role played by local action groups in designing and implementing community-led local development strategies. The CLLD approach is highly complementary to, and could serve as a catalyst for, local wealth development as an enabler of a just transition by ensuring prospective local wealth building initiatives could be sustained and scaled.

Ireland has a successful track record of implementing community-led local development in rural Ireland through the LEADER programme, which has been active in the country since 1991. Similarly, CLÁR, a programme designed for areas of the country suffering from pervasive out-migration has shown the potential of community agency when properly supported. However, further expansion of

community-led approaches have not been sufficiently explored, particularly in the space of building community owned responses to climate change.

Unfortunately, Ireland was one of only eight countries to not opt into the multi-fund approach to CLLD for the 2014-2020 programming period. The multi-fund approach of the European Commission aims to dismantle the barriers between EU funds and so boost synergy and coherence at both local and regional level. In the 2014-2020 period, CLLD initiatives are eligible for support from all European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds (with the exception of the Cohesion Fund). It will be of critical importance that Ireland opts into the multi-fund CLLD for the 2021-2027 programming period.

Similarly, by working with existing institutions, like Local Development Companies, Climate Action Regional Offices and the Credit Unions, the national Government should develop climate focused Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and not-for-profit Community Business Development Corporations (CBDCs) to stimulate the development of local and social enterprise and provide access to capital that could respond to the demand created by an ambitious climate action planning which, among other things, would require significant retrofitting of homes, the roll out of micro-generation through renewable technology, enhanced transit oriented development, on farm developments such as silvopasture, paludiculture, local food producer cooperatives and forestry management. To deliver community-led climate action, it will be necessary to rapidly empower local government to meaningfully support such initiatives.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the national response here in Ireland serve to illustrate the remarkable measures that can be adopted in the face of a crisis and the capability of Irish communities to adapt and work together to overcome unprecedented challenges. In the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the aim of national decision makers should be to build local resilience and empower people across Ireland to envision and co-create the future of their communities. This will require:

- Localised consultative processes through deliberative assemblies that allow policy makers to work with community members to identify community priorities that can be addressed through climate action. Establishing local communities as stakeholders in climate policymaking is critical to ensuring public support for climate action.
- Systems-thinking approaches at national and local level to develop local strategies based on community inputs and provide an interconnected response across the relevant Departments, Offices and Local Authorities (Department of Agriculture, Food and the

Marine; Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation; Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment; Department of Education and Skills; Department of Rural and Community Development; Office of Government Procurement; ETBs; CAROs). This should be facilitated by the Climate Action Delivery Board, a Just Transition Commissioner with an expanded mandate and the Just Transition Review Group.

- Identifying opportunities to local business to benefit from climate action by shortening supply chains and prioritising local business. This will leverage local and national government procurement to drive the development of cooperatives, local and community business and social enterprise. This would require lowering administrative barriers to entry for small business; resources for the incubation of cooperatives, small and community business; and de-risking of small enterprise through capacity building and partitioning of tenders.
- Document best practice and capture data on social, environmental and economic outcomes in order to rapidly bring successful initiatives to scale across the country. This could resemble the UNFCCC's NAZCA Portal which tracks global climate actions. A similar web resource for the publicising and sharing of community-led actions and capturing evidence would help to proliferate solutions.



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