A Cooperative Approach to Rural Development in Ireland: Cultural Artifacts and the Irish Diaspora as an Example

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Abstract

There is a need for rural development and policy interests to explore alternative methods of rural economic development. In rural Ireland, where diverse economic conditions exist, this is particularly true. Here, a rural development framework which focuses on the use of cooperatives manufacturing culturally significant items as a primary or supplemental economic development tool is described. Such cooperatives could provide steady jobs and incomes making them resistant to the seasonality of tourism and recurring agricultural crises. Such a development strategy allows for the retention of decision-making in rural communities, further contributing to social and economic well-being. Ireland is highlighted because the goods produced have a clearly defined market in the Irish-American population.

Keywords: Rural Development, Cooperative Development, Ireland, Cultural Artifacts
Introduction
The need for community and economic development in rural Ireland has been widely recognized (Murray & Greer, 1993; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Commins, et al., 2000; Varley & Curtin, 2002). Here and elsewhere, extension and development agents routinely seek alternative approaches for enhancing community and economic development opportunities. Such information is particularly relevant in light of Irish economic stabilization following years of unprecedented growth coupled to declining state and European Union financial support. Further, events like the Foot and Mouth Crisis of 2001 and terrorist attacks of September 11th highlight the increasingly fragile climate in which the mainstays of rural Irish economies, namely agriculture and tourism, operate.

Historically, agricultural cooperatives have been successfully used in rural America and Ireland to aid economic development while contributing to rural community development (Briscoe & Ward, 2000; ICOS, 2003). Limited production cooperatives and small manufacturing enterprises have also shown promise (Cawley, 2001; Jodahl, 2003; Phillips, 2004). Using a similar methodology that focuses on the production of culturally significant items marketed directly to specific diaspora groups could serve as a tool for alternative rural and community development in rural Ireland.

Through a review of the extant literature related to cooperatives, rural development, economic conditions, and markets the viability of such a cooperative is explored. This review is directed at the primary question: “Can cooperatives that create culturally representative items be a method for promoting rural and community development in Ireland and elsewhere?”

Related Research
Ireland’s Rural Economy
A variety of conditions exist which suggest a possible role for specialized production cooperatives as an alternative or supplemental rural community and economic development strategy in Ireland. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing through the late 1990s, economic and social conditions in the Republic of Ireland improved dramatically (O’Hearn, 1998; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Commins, et al., 2000; Ferreira & Vanhoudt, 2004). This remarkable economy, referred to as the Celtic Tiger, reshaped Ireland’s economic climate. Much of the upturn was directly related to economic reinvestment by the Irish government and the location of technology and manufacturing firms that capitalized on an educated workforce, cheap labor, and low cost of living in urban Ireland during the late 1980’s (O’Hearn, 1998; Ferreira & Vanhoudt, 2004). A low corporate profit tax, reduced personal income taxes, and an improved social and political climate brought on by the Good Friday Agreement peace accord in the north of Ireland also enhanced this growth. And, significant urban labor shortages led to new immigration from rural areas.

Not surprisingly, this growth did not contribute to improvements in the quality of life and economic conditions of rural Ireland (O’Hagan, 1995; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Commins, et al., 2000; Leavy, 2001). Simply stated, the majority of increases in technology and manufacturing services occurred in larger metropolitan areas. This uneven development was recognized, and steps taken throughout the 1990s to encourage rural development and revitalization. Often, these efforts focused on tourism development.

Despite numerous state-funded projects, only a slight increase in improvements to existing economic
conditions in rural Ireland was realized (Murray & Greer, 1993; O’Connor & Cronin, 1993; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999). As a result of these projects, some success in promoting economic growth, stopping outward migration, and improving socioeconomic conditions in rural areas were realized (O’Cinneide & Walsh, 1990; O’Cearbhaill & Varley, 1996; Varley & Curtin, 2002). Where successful, however, only local economies appeared to benefit with little multiplier effect beyond the immediate development zone (Murray & Greer, 1993).

Rural development efforts that have focused on community development, local leadership, and self-help models of change have demonstrated promising results (O’Cearbhaill & O’Cinneide, 1986; Devereux, 1993; O’Cearbhaill & Varley, 1996; Leavy, 2001; Varley & Curtin, 2002). In contrast to government development efforts, many rural residents have turned to locally owned small manufacturing enterprises to sustain and supplement their economic needs (Cawley, et al., 1999; Jodahl, 2003; Phillips, 2004).

Existing Rural Development Efforts and Possibilities for Alternatives

In response to economic conditions, rural development in Ireland has historically taken a variety of governmental and nongovernmental forms (Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999). Among the Irish government departments and agencies responsible for rural development are the Department of Agriculture and Food, Teagasc (The Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority), and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The Teagasc is an independent research and extension agency under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture and Food. Both organizations focus largely on the role of agriculture and rural development in rural areas. Similarly, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs have taken on an increased role in community development in rural locales. Rural development has become a consistent and important aspect to all of these departments within the Irish context.

Due to traditionally limited government support and funding, numerous nongovernmental organizations and community institutions evolved to meet rural resident needs (Commins, et al., 2000; Varley & Curtin, 2002). These organizations provided services, support, and a voice for rural communities in policy and development settings. The Catholic Church played a central role in the provision of education, health, and welfare services. This followed the historical principle of the state being responsible for community development only when conditions went beyond what the family, Church, and local community could provide.

Similarly, Muintir na Tíre (People of the Land), a national voluntary organization dedicated to promoting the process of community development, evolved. In addition, Macra na Feirme (Young Farmers Association), a national, voluntary, rural youth organization came to be involved in rural development efforts. It promotes agricultural, rural, and the personal development of its members. Essentially this organization is the Irish equivalent of the 4-H program found in America, but it directs its efforts at an older audience. Finally, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has been important. While a local sport organization in most Irish communities, the GAA also has various support structures that extend beyond sports, including community service, fundraising, and cultural promotion.

Bridging the gap between government and nongovernmental efforts has been the EU sponsored LEADER and Area Development Management (ADM)
programs (Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Linn Services, 2004). LEADER and ADM seek to stimulate the development of rural areas by encouraging rural individuals or groups to find innovative and locally based ways to develop their community. Central to their efforts were all were integrated development, involvement of the local community, long-term programmed approaches, and voluntary input, each envisioned as being reflective of local character and culture.

Problems Facing Irish Communities

Rural Ireland has long been noted for its beauty and harsh economic realities. Its history is marked by self-sufficiency and subsistence activities including farming and fishing that rarely generated ancillary economic benefits for the immediate area (Devereux, 1993; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Commins, et al., 2000). This problem has been exacerbated by industrial relocation from rural to urban (and overseas) locations during the last several decades (Curtin & Varley, 1986; Commins, et al., 2000).

This economic restructuring has led to the declining economic viability of many Irish rural communities (O’Cinneide, 1987; O’Cinneide & Walsh, 1990; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999). While tourism from the United States and Europe has infused a new source of income into some local economies, it has not been dependable or reliable for long-term economic development (O’Connor & Cronin, 1993). Further, tourism’s role as an effective Irish rural development strategy has not been demonstrated. This reflects Ireland’s limited tourist season (June-September) and the dedication of government funding to projects more directly linked to economic growth such as industrial recruitment and foreign investment (O’Connor & Cronin, 1993; Hannigan, 1994; O’Hagan, 1995).

Moreover, tourism efforts, while nationally successful, have had limited impacts on rural locales due to improper planning, the lack of local leadership, poor rural infrastructure, and the recent phenomenon of tourists remaining in larger, urban areas (Hannigan, 1994; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999). Compounding these problems has been the out-migration of younger residents from rural areas (O’Cearbhail & O’Cinneide, 1986; O’Sullivan, 1995). With limited opportunities for dependable work, many have been forced to relocate to urban areas, neighboring European nations, and America. This migration depletes the local workforce and removes central components of the social structure (Wilkinson, 1991; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999).

In response to these problems, many rural communities have simply refocused their survival on traditional means of existence – agriculture, dairy, livestock, and fishing. Current state efforts focus on traditional financial methods for economic development (grants, loans, assistance), but routinely ignore community and social needs. In some areas, small manufacturing enterprises have developed around the production of traditional clothing and other culturally representative items which have been marketed to local residents and tourists (Cawley, et al., 1999). Such industries have allowed rural residents to supplement their incomes and to retain community identities. Based on strong community ties, economic needs, and established lines of communication, a logical method for community and economic development would be the creation of a production cooperative (Bender, 1986; Bendick & Egan, 1995).
Cooperatives

In their most basic configuration, cooperatives are jointly owned enterprises engaged in the production and/or distribution of goods. These enterprises are operated by their members for their own mutual benefit. The use of cooperatives in fostering rural community and economic development has received considerable attention (Bendick & Egan, 1995; Briscoe & Ward, 2000; Madane, 2002; Phillips, 2004). Much work has focused on the use of agricultural cooperatives as a means for promoting local economic development. Only limited work has been devoted to the role of cooperatives in tourism related activities or other alternative industries.

Cooperatives serve several purposes. First, they allow for local resources – human, economic, and natural – to be maximized. Second, while direct economic opportunities may arise from cooperatives, they also allow for sustainable economic development in areas that traditionally have had little opportunity to engage such processes (Bendick & Egan, 1995; Fairbairn, 2001; Madane, 2002; Gordon, 2004). By providing public input and clear linkages to local community development, cooperative members rural take a much more active role in local development than they do in projects designed by extralocal organizations or interests (Briscoe & Ward, 2000; Dorsner, 2004; San Gabriel, 2004).

The use of cooperatives to foster social and economic growth is not new to Ireland (European Commission, 1997; Briscoe & Ward, 2000; McCarthy & Ward, 2001). Approximately 100 cooperatives exist, with 200,000 members and 35,000 employees, and they account for €12 billion in sales (ICOS, 2003). These groups, especially in rural areas, consist of formal and informal economies that provide primary and secondary incomes for community residents (O’Cinneide & Walsh, 1990; Briscoe & Ward, 2000). At the heart of the informal economy is cooperative work, reflecting the historic collective organization of labor characteristic of local communities and economies. The subsistence economy helps maintain the social integration of rural populations and provides protection against extreme poverty (O’Cinneide & Walsh, 1990; Briscoe & Ward, 2000; Madane, 2002; Gordon, 2004).

Using cooperatives to produce cultural items of interest to tourists and others appears well suited to many Irish rural communities (Phillips, 2004). Typically, the latter communities have gone to considerable lengths to retain their social character, preserve vital aspects of community structure (communication, social support, and interdependence), and maintained symbolic cultural characteristics including the traditional Irish language (Gaelic). Further, locally owned and operated cooperatives could protect and support these unique communities and characteristics.

Rural communities, either from necessity or choice, have come to rely on residents to provide services and functions to ensure community systems operate (Bendick & Egan, 1995; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). Such communities often have a strong sense of identity, culture, and social support systems. The presence of established lines of communication, social interaction patterns, and other cultural components, all vital to the development of community are also important (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). The role and importance of each of these characteristics would be enhanced as cooperative partners identify procedures for operating cooperatives and producing goods (Bendick & Egan, 1995).

Tangible benefits of using cooperatives in this setting include increased economic traffic and employment opportunities, potential declines in out
migration, and support for essential community components (McCarthy & Ward, 2001; Madane, 2002; Gordon, 2004). The use of cooperatives can also have a direct impact on community cohesion and development (Luloff & Bridger, 2003). Cooperative structures produce informed and committed leaders able to guide local development processes (McArthur, 1995; Dorsner, 2004; San Gabriel, 2004). Such leaders could facilitate the expansion and tightening of social relationships and creation of a shared identity necessary for community development (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Bridger, 2003).

Similarly cooperatives can be used to encourage community members to remain in their locales, as demonstrated by examples in the United States and elsewhere (Christenson & Robinson, 1989). They could provide steady jobs and incomes, which are more or less impervious to the seasonality of tourism, swings in government policy, and unpredictable agricultural crises. Because these jobs and income would be directly tied to the community and its residents, they would aid in supporting community identity (Wilkinson, 1991; Briscoe & Ward, 2000; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Dorsner, 2004).

Finally, cooperatives as proposed here could be used in cooperation with government and nongovernmental programs. They could augment existing programs, and provide primary economic opportunities in areas not reached by state and nongovernmental agencies. In particular, the use of specialized cooperatives could possibly fit well with LEADER, ADM, and other programs seeking to capitalize on the unique character of specific regions. Cooperatives would build on established traditions of community involvement (Church, GAA). Future assessments of the unique conditions present in rural areas could be assessed to determine the extent to which these cooperatives could contribute to rural development.

Goods produced through such cooperatives could be produced and marketed year round, both in Ireland to tourists and internationally through other specialty channels. The goods produced through such cooperatives would already have a clearly defined market that continues to seek such items (Enterprise Ireland, 1999). By capitalizing on the substantial product interest of Irish Americans for cultural and social artifacts (Enterprise Ireland, 1999) rural communities would enhance their social and economic viability.

Ireland’s Connections with the United States

The desire of many Irish Americans and others of Irish descent to obtain sentimental items related to their heritage has created a potential economic niche for rural manufacturers (Enterprise Ireland, 1999). More than 33 million Americans claim Irish ancestry (Enterprise Ireland, 1999; United States Census Bureau, 2002; Coogan, 2002). Segments of the Irish business community have recognized the economic potential of this population. Not only are such people willing to spend substantial amounts of money to visit the lands of their ancestors, but also they have shown a clear and consistent interest in obtaining items representative of their Irish heritage (Enterprise Ireland, 1999). Items such as woolen goods, tweeds, sweaters, crystal, and china have been of particular interest to this population (Enterprise Ireland, 1999).

While many American cultural groups quickly assimilated into American society, Irish Americans often took on a different character. Despite their active contribution to America’s sociopolitical culture, many Irish Americans closely guarded their heritage (McCaffrey, 1997; Byron, 1999; Coogan, 2002). A
determination to link themselves with the culture of their ancestors marks a significant segment of this population (Esman, 1984; van den Bergh, et al., 1984).

This identification has its roots in the massive waves of Irish migrations to America, beginning in 1845 and continuing until 1854. Most Irish Americans identify with this migration, often glorified in Irish myth (Coogan, 2002). Driven from Ireland by the escalating poverty and starvation during the Great Hunger or Famine (An Gorta Mhóir) in the mid 1800s, over 1.5 million Irish emigrated to America and institutionalized emigration as a permanent feature of Irish life (Byron, 1999; Coogan, 2002). This process continued between 1860 and 1900, during which 50,000 emigrants from Ireland entered America annually (Byron, 1999). The rapid growth of the Irish in America created a “nation in exile” which became an integral part of the historical development of both their native and new homeland (Byron, 1999; McCaffrey, 1997; Coogan, 2002). Political and social Irish activists from the 1800’s through the present day continue to recognize the potentials of this sentiment and consistently rely upon the vast wealth and power of Irish America for numerous causes.

The desire to attain a lost culture, which large segments of Irish America believe they were denied, has encouraged them to possess items representative of their culture (Esman, 1984; van den Bergh, et al., 1984; Allcock, 1988). Community members assign a sentimental value to such items. Cultures with these characteristics have been identified as strong candidates for tourism and related projects (Allcock, 1988; Madane, 2002; Jodahl, 2003).

Proposed Development Model

While attention is give here to Ireland and Irish America, it could prove equally valuable in other nations with large diaspora populations. A possible innovative methodology that communities could adopt would include:

1. Establish Partnerships. Establish cooperative relationships with Irish rural development groups (LEADER, Teagasc, NGOs), business/marketing groups (Enterprise Ireland), and academic interests willing to provide assistance in the initial planning, establishment, and launching of a cooperative. Such partnerships would provide training in the areas of community and leadership development designed to enhance local decision making and cooperative development;

2. Community Level Research and Assessment. Conducting formal and informal assessments within the community and region to identify possible obstacles to development, leadership needs, and local skill levels. Key informant interviews, SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), focus group discussions, community surveys, and strategic planning meetings facilitated by Irish academic and community development personnel would be useful in this stage (Luloff, 1998; Valentin, 2001). Such steps would also identify key players and help form a network for local resources to be coordinated and managed;

3. Conduct Market Analysis. Conducting analysis of the Irish American market and identify cultural groups, associations, and potential marketing channels. Through a review of directories, Internet resources, and business sources, the American market could be evaluated. The primary market channels would include existing Irish American retail stores, cultural
associations, and individuals of Irish heritage. Items could also be offered to specialty retailers (catalogs, Internet web sites, etc.) and small clothing store chains (Enterprise Ireland, 1999). Identifying US and Irish import/export companies and distribution channels through a review of secondary trade data (SEC, EU) and other sources. These organizations can be assessed to determine those most closely compatible with the community economic development strategy of the community. Particular attention could be focused on firms located in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston since each has significant and active Irish American communities and cultural organizations (United States Census Bureau, 2002). Through this stage, the feasibility of selling cooperative items directly to consumers through the Internet or specialized mailings could also be determined; and,

4. Develop Cooperative Business Plan. In partnership with university and community development interests, an overall synthesis of research findings and methodologies can take place. Such findings can serve as the basis of formal business plans to launch the cooperative. This plan would include specifics on the cooperative structure, industry analysis (Ireland and abroad), a summary of the market analysis, marketing plans, exporting logistics, and relevant financials. Also included in this phase would be efforts to implement a formal evaluation of the cooperative at set intervals. Such evaluations would assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Valentin, 2001; Babbie, 2003) encountered in the cooperatives early organization as well as future needs.

Conclusion
Establishing cooperatives that produce unique, culturally reflective items could be a useful tool for extension and other change agents in their efforts to enhance rural community and economic well-being. The increased interest in uniquely Irish items (sweaters, clothing) by Irish Americans and others provides a direct opportunity for economic growth for the residents of rural Ireland. Employment opportunities, reliable income, and increased trade are direct tangible benefits of such an effort. Further, cooperatives act to strengthen community support functions. Through cooperative development, residents of the community could become closer and more integrated. In this process, the vital tenants of community including communication, interaction, and social support would increase (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). At the same time, such community development facilitates the retention of local control of cooperative decisions.

Finally, programs such as the one described here could provide a template for rural development interests to use in a much broader context. While attention has been focused on Ireland and Irish America, similar opportunities exist elsewhere. This is especially the case in locations where diaspora groups identify with their homelands. Cooperatives, as described here, could be a valuable template for locally based economic development. In doing this, cooperatives would provide a valuable tool for protecting and preserving the character and uniqueness of rural communities.
References


The European network for rural development (ENRD) acts as a hub of information on how rural development policy, programmes, projects and other initiatives work in practice and how they can be improved to achieve more. It aims to engage and reach anyone with an interest in and commitment to rural development in Europe. Today LEADER / CLLD groups manage tens of thousands of projects for economic, cultural, social and environmental benefits in the rural Europe. The ENRD provides detailed information on the LEADER approach, including resources, toolkits, and a database of LAGs. 30 years of LEADER image download. English (675.1 KB - JPG). DownloadJPG - 675.1 KB. European innovation partnership for agriculture. The ENRD uses knowledge of the diaspora, much matured since the 1950s, now provide two master images from which to approach it: diversity and cohesion. On 2 February 1995 President Mary Robinson pinpointed its diversity as embodying the multifaceted nature of native Irish identities, and as a makeweight in domestic argument and experiment as to the recognition and acceptance of those identities. In March 1998 President Mary McAleese spoke of our global Irish family; she accepted such diversity, but sought its reintegration in a master image of cohesion, one obtaining both at home and abroad. The new Article 2 of the Irish constitution states that The Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage. The Politics of Sustainable Development in Rural Ireland Edited by John McDonagh National University of Ireland, Galway Tony Varley National University of Ireland, Galway Sally Shortall Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland © John McDonagh, Tony Varley and Sally Shortall 2009 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher. David Meredith joined Teagasc in 2001 having spent a number of years working as a consultant to the Marine Institute and the broader marine food industry in Ireland. Between 2001 – 2004 he worked on two EU funded projects. The Irish diaspora is one of the largest in the world. Ireland itself has a very small population of 4.8 million. More than double this number has emigrated from Ireland since the 18th Century due to a wealth of different factors. North America and especially the United States was the main destination. Unlike previous Irish waves of immigration, which mainly settled in rural communities to suit their lifestyles and vocations, this new, massive wave instead opted to settle in large cities. This facilitated an easier ability to established communities, a desire birthed by the sheer distress they had endured during the famine. It was also influenced by the considerable poverty sustained by the Irish as a result of the famine, preventing them from travelling further than the coastal cities. There is potential to develop Irish cultural infrastructure through wider support of Irish cultural centres worldwide - for example in key global cities; areas with large diaspora populations; and in other locations where there are strong cultural links with Ireland. In terms of Ireland’s longer-term engagement, particularly in the United States, in the absence of large numbers of current emigrants to replace aging Irish-born communities, realising local infrastructure to support our diaspora engagement efforts will be crucial.