

*Dated:* March 2014

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### Summary

This policy paper, which has been ratified by the Board of Directors of South Kerry Development Partnership, responds to the findings from the RVMl (Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index) survey work that was completed in South Kerry in 2013. This research, which involved over one hundred civil society organisations, was based on a template provided through the Rural Alliances Transnational Partnership, which was subsequently adapted for local use and development purposes. Furthermore, this paper is informed by academic literature and policy reviews provided by esteemed academics and other impartial actors and internationally-renowned bodies, such as the OECD and Council of Europe.

### Partnership and Territorial Development in North West Europe

Over the past twenty years, national and regional authorities throughout NW Europe have, with EU support, been promoting territorial over sectoral approaches to development. Policies and strategies have become increasingly tailored to suit local needs and conditions, and there is a greater emphasis on the potential of all places. The European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) recognises the need to place a renewed focus on enabling communities to overcome traditional perceptions that associated the rural with the peripheral or residual. Since 1991, the EU has provided financial and institutional support to LEADER Partnerships (Local Action Groups) to devise and implement territorial development strategies at the micro-regional level. These partnerships have subsequently broadened their remit, so as to apply a more integrated and cohesive approach to territorial development - maintaining a local remit and a bottom-up approach to development, while working in partnership with the productive sector and statutory bodies, so as to co-ordinate development efforts and lever public resources. Successive independent external evaluations (OECD, 2001, 2005, 2006; Council of Europe, 2009, 2011, European Court of Auditors, 2010 and Metis MmbH for the European Commission, 2011) have found the LEADER approach to be particularly successful & innovative and a mechanism for enabling participative democracy through channels that are community-led, and thereby independent of the state apparatus.

### Experience and Perceptions of Community-Led Local Development

Community-Led Local Development, which was first piloted in France, and subsequently rolled-out in Ireland, Belgium and The Netherlands (and in other EU member states) via LEADER Local Action Groups in rural areas is perceived by the European Commission (2011) and Court of Auditors (2010) as offering the most appropriate mechanism for the targeting of future EU structural funds. Indeed, the Commission has offered incentives to member states that take this approach to the disbursement of public funds, and has held up the Irish (and to a lesser extent the current French) approach as the appropriate models for local governance, which can be further developed and strengthened. In the UK, as in parts of Eastern Europe, where civil society has not been as actively involved in the design and delivery of development interventions, local authorities (very large by mainland European scales) have acted as the co-ordinators of local development interventions, and the Council of Europe (2013) has cautioned Ireland, which is currently undergoing a period of centralisation, against any moves in this direction.

### *Experience and Perceptions of Community-Led Local Development (continued)*

The favourable perception of Community-Led Local Development, given expression via independent and largely autonomous multi-stakeholder partnerships is strongly supported by civil society organisations. The RVMl research found that as a result of LEADER interventions since 1990, the level of volunteerism, as measured by the number of members of civil society organisations, has increased. The RVMl research also found that the range of activities, levels of local services and engagement in public policy decision-making on the parts of civil society organisations has expanded very considerably, and citizens have gained much greater say over the decisions that affect their localities. In South Kerry alone, 55% of civil society organisations reported that they involve the local citizens to a “great extent,” while a further 30% reported that they do so to “some extent.” Civil society bodies have been also proven to offer effective mechanisms through which to engage citizens, who do not tend to participate in representative democracy (e.g. local authority elections). In South Kerry, for example, 67% of civil society bodies provide for direct participation by young people (aged <25). Thus, the RVMl findings demonstrate strong support at local level, and among those at the coal face of local development for the thrust of international expertise, which emphasises the continuance, consolidation and strengthening of the community-led, participative approach to governance and territorial development.

### **Strengthening Community-Led Local Development**

While the RVMl research revealed very considerable support for the European Commission and Council of Europe positions on local development and governance, the findings also provided some very clear requirements regarding how such approaches can be better mainstreamed. Civil society leaders and volunteers expressed strong support for the partnership approach at local level, but specified the need for greater and continued emphasis on animation, capacity-building and the promotion of social inclusion. While they were generally very praiseworthy of the local partnership directors and staff, they were critical of what they perceive to be a growing and superfluous level of bureaucracy and paperwork, which they claim presents barriers to local development, rather than helping to promote greater accountability. They noted the need for all agencies to be equally transparent in publishing details of funding allocations, decision-making criteria & processes. These findings point to the need for all EU member states to fully implement and apply the INSPIRE directive (2007) on the transparency of, and public access to, data on public bodies. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for national (and regional) governments to be more practical and consistent in exercising bureaucratic controls.

The RVMl research, which opened with a socio-economic and demographic profile of rural areas together with the Rural Alliances Transnational workshops (e.g. in Oisterwijk) have identified a number of structural weaknesses in many rural areas – not just those that would traditionally have been perceived as remote / peripheral. The closures of schools, post offices, police stations and curtailments to rural transport services, associated neo-liberalism and the contracting state, do not sit well with the European Spatial Development Perspective and the visions expressed in the Cork (1996) and Salzburg (2003) Declarations of *A Living Countryside*. Through the RVMl research, civil society leaders consistently expressed the view that the on-going state withdrawal from Rural Europe is leading to profound social problems and militates against the efforts of civil society. They recommended that the state become more proactive as an enabler and facilitator of development, and that it engage more positively in area-based partnerships / Local Action Groups in line with the Oisterwijk / Brabant Model.

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This policy recommendation paper has been jointly produced as part of the Rural Alliances project, involving twelve partners from Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium.

The project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, to promote strong and prosperous communities.