

**1. THE EVOLUTION OF THE LEADER
PROGRAMME IN IRELAND AND ITS ROLE IN
RURAL DEVELOPMENT.**

**Brendan Kearney
Brendan Kearney and Associates**

2. Outline of Paper

Context for LEADER

LEADER 1

LEADER 11

LEADER+

The current LEADER Programme- Axes 3 and 4

Concluding remarks

3. Context for LEADER

- Problems of rural areas in Ireland - low incomes, population decline and migration - not solved by agricultural development alone.**
- Response to these issues from a rural development perspective given prominence at EU policy level.**
- Problems facing rural society were addressed in "The Future of Rural Society" (CEC, 1988).**
- The Commission advocated an integrated development strategic approach through a diversification of the rural economy.**

4. LEADER 1 1991-1994

- Network of local action groups financed in the form of integrated global grants, including leading figures in the local economy and society.**
- Selected on the basis of criteria such as degree of solvency, administrative ability, local presence, quality of plans submitted, and expertise in rural development.**
- Seventeen Groups selected- widely dispersed. EU funding was IR£20.8m (€26.4m) with a further IR£13.9m (€17.6m) of co-funding from the Irish exchequer.**
- Areas covered 61% of the land area of Ireland and 30% of the population; population density varied from 10 to 40 persons per square km. with an average of 25. LEADER areas- predominantly rural, suffered population decline, high dependence on agriculture.**

5. LEADER 1 Outcomes

- LEADER Initiative - considerable degree of success e.g. achievement of objectives, commitment of Board Members, support structures and local communities, dedication and enthusiasm of management.
- First opportunity for most Groups to examine the potential of their areas, to pool and co-ordinate their activities in devising and implementing an innovative local development strategy for the betterment of their communities.
- Key points from analysis of LEADER-supported projects:
 - ~ In total, Groups committed funds to over 2,900 projects,
 - ~ In terms of LEADER measures, the average Group allocated about 45% of its total expenditure to the *Rural Tourism* measure and about 19% to each of the *Small Enterprise* and *Natural Resource* measures.
 - ~ Estimated number of total *jobs created* in full-time equivalent was 2,854 while a further 1,686 jobs were *sustained*.

6. LEADER 11

- LEADER 11 Initiative for Ireland 1994 – 1999, - €68.8m from EU and €29.3m from exchequer.
- Emphasis on "innovation" and “complementarity”, inclusion of measure "preservation and improvement of the environment and living conditions", and animation as a specific element
- Extended to all rural areas-34 groups- operating side by side with the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development.

7. LEADER 11 Outcomes

- The financial provision for the Initiative was virtually fully taken up and over 10,000 projects approved

- Estimated to have supported the creation of 4,849 FTE jobs and sustained a further 3,508 FTE jobs.

- Less easily quantifiable impacts - particularly but not only through animation and capacity building, achieved much in relation to rural identity, self-confidence, vibrancy and development awareness.

8. The LEADER+ Community Initiative, 2000-2006

New ways of:

- enhancing the natural and cultural heritage;**
- reinforcing the economic environment, in order to contribute to jobs;**
- improving the organisational abilities of communities.**

Four priority themes:

- the use of new know-how and new technologies;**
- improving the quality of life of rural areas;**
- adding value to local products; and**
- making the best use of natural and cultural resources.**

22 LAGs selected in particular areas: public funding of €74.3m; in rural areas not selected, RDP Groups were allocated budgets totalling €44.8m. Programme also provided €13.5m for rural and agri-tourism development by LEADER+ Groups.

9. LEADER+ Outcomes

- Complied closely with EU Guidelines and the national OP at the outset of the programming period; overarching objectives of LEADER+ at EU level achieved in Ireland.**
- The rate of financial progress accelerated significantly in the second half of the programme and the initial financial provision was almost fully drawn down.**
- End-programme targets in relation to jobs created and sustained, enterprises assisted or established, training courses held and training recipient numbers all likely to be exceeded, in many cases very considerably.**

10. The current LEADER Programme- Axes 3 and 4, 2007-2013

- **The priorities for new RD programme under the following axes:
Axis 1: Improving competitiveness of farming and forestry:
Axis 2: Environment and land management:
Axis 3: Diversification of the rural economy and quality of life.
A fourth implementation axis (LEADER) mainstreams local strategies.**
- **Activities to be funded include diversification into non-agricultural activities, support for business creation, encouragement of tourism activities, basic services for the economy and rural population, village renewal and development, conservation and upgrading of rural heritage and training and information.**
- **Funding of €425million provided- the largest ever package for rural development- 55% from European Union and 45% from Exchequer, to the 36 new, integrated Local Action Groups**

11. Concluding remarks

- LEADER- a unique programme unlikely to be adopted in Ireland without EU stimulus.**
- Over €270m in public expenditure provided to date on three Initiatives and NRDP, of which about half from Exchequer.**
- Programmes have had considerable initial economic and social impacts in rural Ireland but sustainability and viability of supported projects should be the subject of greater scrutiny.**
- Late start and state of the public finances may have serious consequences for the implementation and impact of the new programme.**