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The emergence of the quest for evidence to inform rural policy

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The development of proposals for a robust rural evidence base to underpin rural policy making in Northern Ireland

OBJECTIVES:

To examine the existing rural evidence base of economic and social studies used to underpin rural policymaking in Northern Ireland and identify evidence/ research gaps.

- To identify the priority themes and indicators for future research to address these gaps in the evidence base.
- To develop models for the most efficient and effective methods of collecting, using and disseminating rural evidence and research.

Overview

- Emergence of the need for rural evidence
- Case study: Department of Agriculture and Rural development Northern Ireland
- Rural evidence models from elsewhere
- Some reflections

Rural Development in Northern Ireland

- The Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland (DANI) given responsibility for EU rural development activities (LEADER Programmes; Pillar II of the CAP)
- In 1999 DANI becomes DARD; Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
- The culture change is slower than the name change. The relevant Assembly Committee is universally referred to as the 'Agriculture Committee'.

Rural Development in Northern Ireland

- DANI had an established scientific basis for forestry, fisheries, food and agriculture
- Regular farm-based surveys
- Long established economics and statistics division in DANI/DARD
- EU demanded monitoring returns on the RDP and body of evidence exists for this
- Rural Policy Team established in 2006, and Rural Policy Division in 2009
- A realisation of the increased need for social scientific evidence to underpin rural policy

The Rural Policy Division

- This evidence-based research is closely knitted into the Rural Policy Division's priorities:
- Rural proofing
- Rural Champion
- Rural Poverty and Inclusion
- The Rural White Paper

- Key to these priorities is working with other Government Departments

Work to date

- Need to establish what evidence already exists
- Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group 2005
- Sophisticated classifications of rural/ urban, with a default definition of rural as 4,500 or less
- NISRA: urban/ rural definitions and urban/ rural tracking

Work to date

- Identifying what is out there:
- A) Academic research and reports
- B) Industry and rural organisations' research and reports
- Considerable amount of research out there: housing/ transport/ ageing/ social inclusion/ participatory democracy/ rural labour markets/ travel to work
- Examination of evidence-based models from elsewhere

Work to date:

- Identifying models and best practice from elsewhere
- Scotland: SAC Rural Policy Centre
- Defra's Rural Evidence Research Centre
- The Wales Rural Observatory
- Teagasc's Rural Economic Research Centre
- Defra's Science Advisory Council
- Scottish Committee of Inquiry on Crofting

Lessons learned

- Democratic consent is the basis of policy, not evidence
- Endless amounts of evidence. The key is to develop expertise in order to know what evidence will work in what context
- All parties need to be 'educated customers'
- Communication is essential especially with and within the civil service (staff turnover etc.)
- Difficulties of independent advice and finance
- Different types of evidence needed; strategic, problem related and 'rapid response'

Some reflections

- RERC: cannot assume that if we put 'rural' in front of something it is different
- Difficulties about being funded to produce evidence for a government department for public sector targets relating to different government departments (Wales Rural Observatory and WAG team)
- Danger that rural is seen as separate or 'done', and reduced sense of commitment across other government departments
- Turnover of staff within the civil service
- Communication with and within the civil service

Some reflections

- Need a more sophisticated understanding of the role of social science research in informing rural policy.
- Need to identify appropriate providers of different types of 'evidence'
- Need to carefully establish evidence to support concepts such as rural proofing and rural champion
- Need to consider how to ensure robustness of social science research in government.

Some reflections:

- Department of Rural Development or Rural Affairs? These demand different types of evidence.
- Who decides what evidence is needed or generated?
- Evidence or knowledge is disputed
- Different types of evidence will be needed for different questions
- CRC report on Rural Proofing: 'In most countries interest groups are more significant than formal policy processes'.
- What is the balance between evidence, power of interest groups, political priorities, budgetary constraints etc?
- Little evidence on how to improve evidence use in policy making process!