

National Jobs Conference

Dunhill Ecopark, Ballyphilip, Dunhill, Co. Waterford – 23rd April, 2010

Co-Hosted by Waterford County Council & Dunhill Rural Enterprises Ltd. and addressed by Mr. Éamonn Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Social & Family Affairs

'How We Can Create New Enterprises & Jobs in Rural Ireland 2010 – 2016'

The aim of the conference was to learn from the collective experience; to duplicated successes and avoid pitfalls – to look outside the box to achieve innovative job creation solutions – to create networks and to establish models of best practice through cooperation between rural communities and state agencies.

Rural Job Creation in Context

David Meredith's presentation 'Where to from here – Ireland's Rural Economy' set the stage for the event. David, an Economic Geographer, currently works for Teagasc in their Rural Economy Research Centre.

Outlining how Ireland's rural economy has undergone restructuring over the last 10 to 15 years, his presentation highlighted the fall in numbers of rural dwellers employed in the traditional areas of Agriculture and Manufacturing. The need for upskilling and re-training the rural workforce in order to be ready for growth in high skilled areas, was effectively demonstrated, as was the necessity to ensure adequate infrastructure to accommodate future growth.

Underpinning the necessity for change is the future direction of European policy which, according to Meredith, focuses on Territorial Cohesion potential. Rural development needs to be based on a rigorous and critical assessment of Territorial Capital, and rural strategies need to focus on supporting development of indigenous enterprise capable of displacing imports, exporting globally and attracting foreign and domestic earnings. Potential growth areas were identified as; food production, food tourism and energy production.

Case Studies

Five rural community groups delivered presentations on personal experiences of regeneration in their areas.

Dunhill Rural Enterprises Ltd.

Set against a backdrop of high unemployment, falling teacher and pupil numbers in the local schools and dwindling membership of the local clubs Dunhill Rural Enterprises Ltd. has effected a transformation of the rural landscape. Dunhill Enterprise Centre now houses businesses which provide 97 jobs along with a Multi-Education Centre. Among the initiatives undertaken are development of the Copper Coast Geopark, which has EU and UNESCO designation and the award winning Fenor Bog. Other undertakings include construction of Affordable Houses and future plans include completion of the Dunhill Eco-Park and Inventors' Village. The group has submitted 'A Programme for Economic Self Reliance 2010 - 2016' to Government, which sets out proposals to empower rural communities to build sustainable micro economies.

Castleblayney Community Enterprises Ltd.

Set against a backdrop of 'The Troubles' and the loss of the main employer, McElroy's, coupled with the unique challenge of border trading and currency fluctuation, Castleblayney Community Enterprises Ltd. was formed and now boasts an Enterprise Centre and Training & Conference Facilities which provide 141 jobs. Among the initiatives progressed were construction of an advance food plant which now employs 150 people. Other successful initiatives include the Festival Networks Projects and the very successful 'Muckno Mania Festival' which continues to expand and evolve.

Connemara West Plc

Connemara West Plc was formed to address the economically disadvantaged area, covering 790 sq.km. The original project, development of Renvyle Thatched cottages, provided working capital which facilitated development of a Furniture Training Centre, geared towards combating youth unemployment. The ensuing partnership with GMIT has led to the establishment of a Centre of Excellence, catering for 290 third level students pursuing BSC degrees in the rural area. Other projects include Connemara Community Radio & Establishment of Foscadh Community Development Ltd. which was set up to progress delivery of 20 social houses and a community service building. The Conservation & Restoration Centre and Enterprise Centre continue to evolve and 9 Companies now provide 80 jobs.

Allenwood Community Development Association Ltd.

The Company was formed to address the fallout from the closure of an ESB power station and job losses in Bord na Móna. The Allenwood Centre initially began as Incubation Units which evolved into the current Administration and Training Centre, which continues to house a number of small businesses and provides 23 jobs. Additional Enterprise Units were added over the years and a Childcare Centre, catering for 90 children, was developed. The Enterprise Park comprises 23,000 sq. ft. on 40 acres, and is home to 18 companies with 96 full time employees. The Association is looking to innovation with a green agenda for the future and is seeking to expand its accredited training programme and strengthen links with the local authority.

Skull-Skibereen Community

A number of community based initiatives were outlined with the focus on community empowerment. A Co-operative was established in conjunction with the Credit Union to invest in the Cork/Swansea ferry route, providing a tourism gateway to West Cork. The group took over the running of an unprofitable leisure centre, bringing it into profitability and creating 15 jobs locally. Future emphasis is being placed on addressing the imbalance which exists in the food production sector – 90% of fish consumed in Ireland is imported and 85% of fish caught in Ireland is exported – and capitalising on the opportunities which this imbalance presents. The Bio-Power report, referenced by the group, proposes creation of 80,000 jobs in rural Ireland and the offset of tens of millions of tons of CO₂.

The Global Context

Sarah Fleming of the Slow Food movement in Italy, presented a case study on the closure of Fiat, in Turin, and on how regeneration of the area, by harnessing rural tourism, can be directly replicated in rural Ireland, albeit on a smaller scale.

Carlene Weachock-Moloney, founder of Moloney International Ltd, a marketing and sales distribution company, advised on exporting and marketing in the U.S. and gave examples of export opportunities. She highlighted two specific customers; the knowledgeable Irish-American seeking a specific product or quality goods from a specific place or region and the customer seeking simply a quality Irish product. She illustrated the potential for sales by brand creation, or by association with an established brand.

Summation

In rounding up the day's events, Ray O'Dwyer, Waterford County Manager summarised the challenges and opportunities which had emerged as common themes among all the groups presenting case studies.

Challenges:

- Availability of Grants & Loans and complexity of sourcing funding:
 - Too many actors
 - Simplify regulations
 - Operational supports
- Competition to reduce rents resulting from oversupply of Industrial units in private sector
- Pressure on SMEs to cut costs and maintain jobs
- Volunteers under increasing stress caused by economic difficulties
- Parochial - NIMBYism

Opportunities:

- Potential Territorial Capital – Local Strengths
- Dormant Potential in:
 - Tourism
 - Food & Food Tourism
 - Energy
 - Creative Industries
 - Export Markets

Future Focus for Job Creation

- Skills/Training
- Coaching & Facilitation
- Networking & Partnerships
- Sectors With Jobs Potential:
 - Education
 - Green Economy
 - Food
 - Tourism
 - Creative Industries
- Planning – vision & creativity

The Conference, a joint venture between Dunhill Rural Enterprises Ltd. and Waterford County Council, was separately described as; focussed, practical, useful and motivational.