

## Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation UFU Paper

### *Introduction*

The 'Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation' framework was a very welcome initiative from DARD. The Rural White Paper action plan made it a policy priority to "minimise, where it exists, disadvantage, poverty, social exclusion and inequality amongst those living in rural areas and particularly amongst vulnerable groups" and we believe that the TRPSI framework shows that policy documents can indeed become a reality on the ground which benefits real people. Farming in Northern Ireland has been under increasing pressure in recent years, in 1997, there were 32118 farms in NI, in 2013 there were 24503- a drop of 24%. Of the farms in 1997, 11386 were classified as 'small' and 3322 were 'medium'; in 2013 there were 3063 small and 1187 medium- a combined drop of 71%. However, the number of 'large' farms has increased from 551 in 1997 to 1534 in 2013, while the number of 'very small' has remained largely stable, increasing from 16859 in 1997 to 18719 in 2013. Thus the dynamic of farming has changed considerably, with the pressure on farmers either to 'scale up or ship out'. There are many reasons for this change, which the committee will be familiar with but the economics aside, the impact on farmers and their families has been substantial.

Poverty and social isolation are of course issues which unfortunately exist in all parts of society, but this strategy shows that DARD have recognised that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to the problem. In towns and cities, poverty tends to exist within geographical boundaries, with one area being affluent and another in poverty. This makes it easier for government to target anti-poverty initiatives effectively; this is much more difficult in rural areas where there are no such boundaries. Thus tackling the issue is that much more difficult.

Largely we believe that the TRPSI framework has been a success. The MARA initiative has clocked up 12000 visits with 36000 referrals for additional benefits which rural dwellers were not claiming. The numbers calling Rural Support, which receives funding under this framework have doubled in the last two years, which shows both that there is a real need and that Rural Support are addressing it- 60% of these calls are followed up with further action from Rural Support volunteers. The Farm Family Health Checks have been very well received with 1971 clients already seen this year, of whom 1068 were referred to their GP for follow-up, another 130 were referred to MARA and 316 to the DARD FarmSafe programme. This joined-up working is highly commendable as it shows awareness of what is available and how best to tackle the problems. Going forward, we believe that the measures we mentioned above could be very beneficial to the success of any future initiatives as it will be important to target resources and interventions, this will require cross-departmental working and effective research and engagement.

### *Recommendation One: Joined-up Departmental Working.*

For this reason, it is very encouraging that DARD are designing and delivering programmes which are 'tailor-made' for rural areas but this does not take away from the responsibilities of other Departments to rural dwellers as well as urban ones. It makes sense for DARD to take the initiative on this, and their joined-up work with the PHA, DRD, DSD, DEL and DCAL is very encouraging. However, going forward, might it make sense for an inter-departmental

working group to exist on rural wellbeing? All departments can have a positive role to play in improving the lot of rural areas and in our opinion it makes sense for them all to be involved. Part of the issue seems to be that other Government Departments do not factor in the specific issues surrounding rural deprivation in their policy-making and service delivery. Hopefully the DARD minister's ambition to make the rural proofing procedure more robust will help with the former, but much more needs to be done with the latter.

Another benefit of an inter-departmental approach is that it will help to identify the causes and catalysts of rural disadvantage at all levels. For example, the policies adopted for healthcare provision will have a huge impact on rural areas in terms of access to these services if the policy of centralisation of delivery is continued. The same principle applies for DED on rural schooling and other departments as well. On the service-delivery side, more training and information could be given to other government agencies. For example DARD vets and NIEA inspectors who will see a person when they may be at their lowest point. If they know more about the reality of the situation for these rural dwellers they will be able to act appropriately. The same also applies for health and social care workers who operate in rural areas. In that vein, we are currently looking at having the UFU's Technical Officers, who are the ones who go out to farmers who are in difficulty, trained in recognising the symptoms of distress and in how to react appropriately.

While it is right and proper that DARD should continue to take the lead on this issue, we believe that there needs to be a joined-up approach to this issue. Just because DARD is the only department with "rural" in its name does not mean that it is the only Department with responsibility for rural dwellers.

#### *Recommendation Two: Evidence-based Policy*

As well as the joined-up approach to policy-making and delivery between Departments, we also recognise that the work which is to be carried out needs to be done on the basis of sound evidence and robust stakeholder engagement. As an example, the UFU and Rural Support have lately been collaborating on how we can tackle the problem of illiteracy in rural areas, however, we are hampered by the fact that no research exists to tell us just how big a problem we are facing. We believe that the TRPSI framework should include not only the very worthwhile programmes on policy and delivery but could benefit hugely from research being carried out into the reality of the situation on the ground. Perhaps there could be joined-up work with QUB or UU to fund some research into the issues of rural poverty and social isolation in Northern Ireland.

This research would not only benefit us in the here and now, but would have great importance in the long-term vision for our rural society. While the policy priority from the RWP quoted above is important, it is interesting to note that it is the only one which begins with a reactive ambition: namely to "minimise" these issues. All the other priorities are to "support", "promote", "safeguard", "provide", "maintain", "preserve", "enhance" and "maximise". Research carried out to help with this aspect of the Government's strategy will help avoid problems with the others. An example of this is the OCSI paper which was commissioned by the Local Government Data Unit in Wales on behalf of the Welsh Local Government Association's Rural Forum in 2012.

Stakeholder engagement is also very important in the targeting and delivery of these initiatives and programmes. Due to a variety of factors, it is often difficult to get information from rural communities as to what their needs actually are and what difficulties they may be in. Very often they will approach organisations such as ourselves before they would go to a government body. Sending out a clear message that this is something we are very much agreed upon will hopefully help to break down these barriers. As well as ourselves, there are many other community organisations, such as churches and sports clubs which can help to play a role in both identifying and solving issues.

### *Social Isolation: Older People*

The issue of social isolation is one which we are becoming increasingly concerned with. We believe that there are three issues which require priority in this area: that of older farmers, lone workers and those with disabilities. With increasing centralisation of services, older workers find themselves more and more isolated, and many older people in rural areas live in fear of losing their driving licence as they believe that once it is gone they will be trapped in their home. Many of them therefore keep driving even though it is perhaps not safe for them to do so. As well as this, there is something of a cultural shift- the digital revolution, which has on the one hand led to easier access to information and services for rural people, but many older people are not comfortable with IT and feel that the speed with which this moves is quickly leaving them behind. There may be something of an assumption among policy-makers that everyone has access to the digital ether and knows how to use it. This is quite simply not the case among older people in rural areas. For starters, many people in rural areas have limited broadband access, or no access at all, second to that, many older people do not know how to use the internet- these people, vulnerable and isolated are often easy prey for the multitude of scammers who lurk online. Even if the chances of being a victim are small, the perception that they exist has a great impact on older people.

### *Social Isolation: Lone Workers*

The Second issue we referred to was that of lone workers. Increasingly, farmers are working alone as the cost of living now means that most families require two incomes in order to get by. This means that many farmers have to go throughout the day possibly without seeing anyone else at all. It used to be the case that the farming community was very close knit with people coming in and out of each other's yards to borrow equipment or to work together on tasks. Nowadays, with technology now being responsible for so much of the work this is no longer the case. Farming is thus an increasingly lonely existence and loneliness can often lead to mental health problems- particularly when things start to go wrong and these people have nowhere to turn. Lone workers are also much more prone to have accidents as they do not have a business, they are the business. Tasks which on other premises may be split among several people all must be performed by one. This kind of pressure leads to stress and stress leads to accidents. Ever-tightening margins only exacerbate this issue.

### *Social Isolation: Disabilities and Mental Health*

Thirdly, the issue of those living in rural areas who are disabled needs to be addressed. Lately we have been working closely with other organisations to help raise the profile of this issue. In particular we have become concerned with dyslexia in rural areas, which prevents farmers from getting their spraying licences and from filling out all the forms required by the Government. This means that they either have to pay for form-fillers and record-keepers or else risk being caught out. Given the amount of paperwork now required in agriculture, we would like to request that research be carried out to ascertain how big a problem lexical disability is in rural Northern Ireland- and that something should be done to ensure that those who are disabled in this way are not disproportionately disadvantaged.

Mental health continues to be an issue, as we have seen from the numbers calling Rural Support's helpline. Deaths recorded as suicide in rural areas increased from 47 in 2001 to 99 in 2010, as well as from 111 to 214 in urban areas during the same period. Although the number fell to 65 in 2012 there can be no complacency on this issue, and awareness raising needs to continue to prevent the numbers increasing again. The UFU are working closely with Rural Support to highlight the issues and to try to remove the stigma which still surrounds mental health.

### *Social Isolation: Vulnerability*

It is also the case that those living in rural areas feel more vulnerable as a result of their isolation. For example, I have heard of a case where an older lady insists on carrying her handbag around the house with her from room to room as she is so frightened of it being stolen or of someone breaking into her home. The fear of crime is an issue in and of itself, even if the statistics show that, in the grand scheme of things, crime in rural areas is relatively low. There is still a perception that there is a lack of policing and engagement between police officers and the rural community. Lately, the UFU have been working with the PSNI, DARD, NFU Mutual and the DOJ to raise the profile of rural crime. Living on your own, possibly far away from another dwelling, on a farm where there may be valuable equipment makes you feel like a sitting duck for thieves and criminals. We believe more needs to be done to help rural dwellers feel safe and secure.

### *Social Isolation: Inequalities*

It remains the case that there is a distinct lack of services for women in rural areas. These women frequently raise the issue that isolation and loneliness are among the greatest worries that they have: particularly with issues relating to finances. Often it is the case that women are left to look after the books of the farm and as such are often acutely aware of the pressures which may be facing the business. As well as this, women in rural areas are often left with the responsibility of caring for their parents and their parents-in-law. There remains a great reluctance to put older people in rural areas into a home as it would be so out of the ordinary for them, and the distances required for visiting are so much greater for rural dwellers than for urban. This reluctance often means that rural women have a huge extra responsibility added to their shoulders and one which they often have to deal with in

isolation. There needs to be more support provided for these carers in the form of respite centres and other forms of help for these women. As we noted in the introduction, farm incomes are falling and there has been a slight increase in the amount of farms with off-farm incomes (50% in 2008/09 to 54% in 2012/13). Thus, there is the need for spouses of farmers to contribute to the income, which, due to caring responsibilities, they are unable to do. This is where programmes like MARA are of paramount importance, in allowing these people to access the services and help they are entitled to.

#### *Poverty: Financial Pressures*

It is well recognised that while farmers may be asset-rich, they are very often cash-poor, with cash flow being a great burden for many farmers. Overheads in the industry are remaining high and in a global economy where we are competing worldwide it is difficult to envisage them coming down any time soon. While the price of overheads may be remaining high, the price of commodities fluctuates with changes in the weather, with the prolonged wet weather in 2012 leading to many farmers paying greatly inflated prices for feed as stocks of silage hit rock bottom being only one example; while the agrifood sector may have weathered the recent financial storm better than most, it is simply not the case that they got through unscathed. In 2012/13, average farm business income decreased from £31992 to £19336 per farm from 2011/12- arising from a decrease of 3.5% in the average value of farm output and an average increase in expenditure on inputs of 7.7%. During this period, only 57% of farms covered by the Farm Business Survey achieved an income of over £10k and 23% incurred a loss. To put this in perspective, only 56% of farms have off-farm income, and 23% had the spouse of the farmer bringing in income; animal health, we are all too familiar with the ravages of BSE and Foot and Mouth which have caused so much distress to farmers, but there are other health issues which affect farmers, like TB, IBR and BVD, all of which can have a devastating effect on herd numbers and can sometimes even spell the end for a farmer's livelihood; and political issues, it would be interesting to know how many dairy farmers thought that the crisis in Ukraine would lead to such a drop in the price of their commodities- milk price in September 2014 was 7.58 pence per litre lower than it had been in September 2013 and 4.56 pence per litre lower than in May 2014. All these factors can have a huge impact on the financial burdens under which farmers must live. Rural Support have started a scheme whereby they are providing financial mentors to those who are in difficulty. While this is wholly commendable and we hope to see it continuing, it is treating the symptom rather than the cause. If we can do something to make farmer's incomes more secure it will go a long way to providing peace of mind.

#### *Poverty and social exclusion: Re-definitions*

It is vital that the problem of poverty and social exclusion be looked at holistically- they are not two separate problems. According to UNESCO,

*"To further develop the definition of the concept of relative poverty or relative deprivation, three perspectives are relevant; the income perspective indicates that a person is poor only if his or her income is below the country's poverty line (defined in terms of having income sufficient for a specified amount of food); the basic needs perspective goes beyond the income perspective to include the need for the provision by a community of the basic social services necessary to prevent individuals from*

*falling into poverty; and finally, the capability (or empowerment) perspective suggests that poverty signify a lack of some basic capability to function."*

Thus, poverty cannot be measured in purely financial terms, we need to look at the loss of services in rural areas, with the policies of centralisation in Northern Ireland, many people in rural areas have been left with a lack of access to both services and opportunities, and we are deeply concerned with what lies in store for the future with ever increasing budgetary pressures on Departments. We have seen frequently that services in rural areas are the first to be seen as "unviable" or "unsustainable"- these seem to us to be based on the number of people using them rather than the geographical area that they serve.

Finally, we would like to raise a specific issue regarding the Multiple Deprivation Measure used by NISRA to measure poverty in rural areas. This defines relative poverty as being in a household with a net disposable income below 60% of the UK median income. In 2011/12, DSD reported that of 648,200 individuals in rural NI, 155,568 lived in relative poverty. However, no rural wards are considered among the most deprived in NI. This is because there is no segregation between richer and poorer areas of a rural ward.

We believe that this does not take into account the full reality of rural poverty and social isolation. Ultimately poverty is about not having options and opportunities. In order to develop an area there must be a good infrastructure there to support that development. The increasing centralisation of service provision has led to fewer and fewer opportunities for rural dwellers and traps them in a lifestyle cycle due to a distinct lack of opportunities- particularly for more vulnerable groups, like women. A recent report from the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas on the perceived gaps in education and training provision found that there was an extensive range of perceived gaps in existing provision and associated unmet learner demand across many disciplines and levels. This is just one example of the lack of access to opportunities which will give people living in rural areas more life choices. At present, there is a perception that if you wish to "progress" in life you have to move to the city or travel to and from your work. Many people who commute to Belfast for work spend two hours or more of their day travelling. This is time which could be spent with their families or in other leisure pursuits.

Trutz Haase is to brief the committee in the near future and so it would be advisable to allow him to speak for himself, save to say that the system he has devised for the *All-Island Deprivation Index* seems to us to have several significant advantages in that it takes into account things which are directly related to affluence, and thus indirectly to deprivation as opposed to only those directly related to deprivation, as the MDM does. Haase's system takes into account demographic profile, social class composition and labour market situation into account to gauge the 'bigger picture' and presents a spectrum of affluence as opposed to the clear cut distinction of MDM. As well as this, the basic unit of the Haase model is the small area, which allows for a more pin-point approach to rural deprivation. This also ties in with an issue we have been having with the ward boundaries which dictate the urban/rural divide. There are a number of areas which have been classified as urban but which are, for all intents and purposes, rural. We have encouraged the Minister to allow people in this circumstance to be treated as special cases for the purposes of the TRPSI framework as we find it quite perverse that someone should be excluded from a project that is supposed to be about inclusion. As we have made clear, poverty and deprivation measures should be about people- not definitions.