

Reviewing the EU Rural Development Programme

Professor Sally Shortall, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, and Roisin Kelly, Researcher¹

What is the EU Rural Development Programme?

Agriculture and rural development have long been policy priorities at European level, as they make a key contribution to competitiveness and sustainable development across the Member States of the European Union. The policy measures available to Member States and the rules governing rural development policy for the period 2007-13 are set out in Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005. The Regulation identified three themes, known as thematic axes, to inform and guide the development of Rural Development Programmes by Member States and regions. These are:

- Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
- Improving the environment and countryside; and
- Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy.

In developing their rural development programmes, Member States were required to spread their funding between all three thematic axes. There was also a requirement to support a local partnership approach to projects based on experience with the LEADER Community Initiatives (sometimes referred to as Axis 4 and mostly applied in Axis 3).

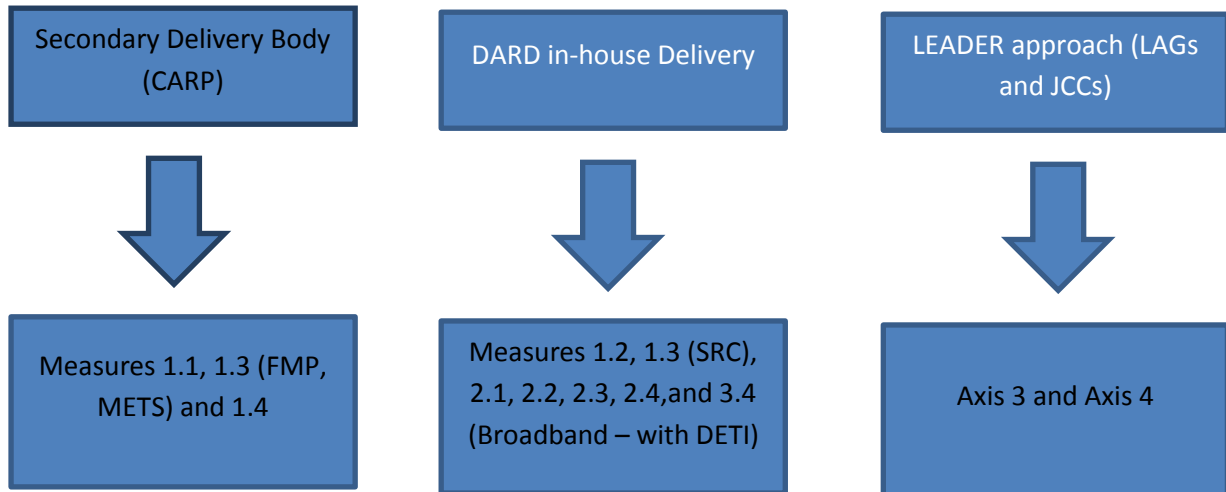
The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-13:

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development received European Commission approval for the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRD) 2007-2013 on 24 July 2007. Jointly funded by the European Union (through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) and by DARD, it is worth in excess of £500 million and is a significant investment in rural areas in Northern Ireland. There are four key themes within the NIRD:

- Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry by supporting restructuring, development and innovation (Axis 1)
- Improving the environment and countryside by supporting land management (Axis 2)
- Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of economic activity (Axis 3)
- Using a LEADER-type approach (Axis 4)

¹ Roisin Kelly was on research leave in Queen's University between February and August 2012 when the research was carried out.

The structures for the delivery of the NIRDP have been characterised as relatively complex, reflecting to a large degree the diverse range of measures and schemes that make up the programme². Three different channels are used in delivering the Programme:



Effective implementation of the Programme is monitored by the Programme Monitoring Committee, comprised of representatives from Local Government, the Farming Sector, Environmental Non-government Organisations and the voluntary and community sector which is comprised of the Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network, the Rural Community Network, the Rural Development Council, the Women’s Institute and Disability Action. It is chaired by a member of DARD, as the Managing Authority of the programme.

As part of its work, the Monitoring Committee established two sub groups, on the Environment (ESG) and on Equality and Good Relations (EGRSG) to monitor and consider in greater detail the impact of the programme in these areas. The Equality and Good Relations Sub Group (EGRSG) is made up of members of the Monitoring Committee and it reports back to the main monitoring committee on progress. Membership of the EGRSG changed over the course of the programme, but included representatives from Disability Action, NIRWN, UFU, the National Trust and the Rural Community Network. NISRA, the Department and the Rural Network participated in the group in an advisory capacity.

Our Research: Women and the Rural Development Programme³:

This research set out to examine how to effectively gender mainstream the European Union Rural Development Programme (RDP). It was motivated by policy documents in Europe

² NISRA (2010) Mid-term evaluation of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-2013, p.9

³ Research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ES/JO1031/1, with some DARD funding

referring to the EU level, and documents in Northern Ireland that noted the current programme had not actively targeted women, and recommended that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) engage more with the Rural Women's Network, the Rural Network, and other implementing bodies to use their expertise to reach this target group to promote the programme. We decided to update previous research⁴ and to consider how the rural development programme might be mainstreamed, and whether there are tensions between the EU commitment to gender mainstreaming and the EU commitment to a viable agricultural industry. While the primary focus of the research was gender equality, the rich data collected contained other insights about the rural development programme more generally.

What we did and how we did it (Methodology):

We conducted thirty six interviews, and with consent, taped and transcribed interviews. Twenty five interviews were taped and transcribed. Interviews were purposive and semi-structured and were conducted with people in Divisions within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as the managing authority for the RDP, the Rural Network in the region, women's sector organisations, Local Action Groups who manage delivery, NISRA who conducted the mid-term evaluation, the Equality Commission, and farming groups. We conducted seven focus groups, one more than originally planned, but we had to change the groups we planned to interview, as in one case the organisation who had promised help in organising focus groups did not do so, and in another case, the organisation was unable to mobilise participants. This meant that we conducted focus group work with rural men and women not always attached to the rural development network or process. This actually generated important data. We found that there is a 'project class' or groups schooled in rural development language and mantra, and groups outside of these networks see very different priorities for rural areas and needs for rural men and women. We conducted two focus groups with women on farms, two with women involved in rural development, one with a rural women's group not attached to the rural development programme, one with men on farms, and one with a Men's Sheds group. Focus groups had between eight and fourteen participants. The focus groups allowed us to update information about the needs of rural areas, the needs of family farms, how these are addressed by the RDP, to what extent they are aware of and engage with the RDP and what might make them more likely to engage with the RDP, and gender differences. Notes were taken during focus group interviews as

⁴ Shortall, S. and R. Kelly (2001) *Gender Proofing CAP Reforms*. The Rural Community Network NI, Cookstown.

taping them did not prove successful. We set up an Impact Audience Panel (IAP), a group of the main bodies involved in the RDP. This group met three times during the research and we presented our findings to them as we conducted the research.

Key findings:

- We did not find evidence that the Rural Development Programme discriminates against, or does not sufficiently engage with women.
- The Equality Branch in DARD is seen as excellent by Equality bodies. DARD's commitment to gender equality is exemplary across Europe. It is unique in providing funding for a Rural Women's Network, funding a Rural Childcare Programme, and providing funding for rural women's group representatives to attend international conferences. These are activities additional to managing the RDP.
- There are inbuilt gender inequalities in how land is transferred between the generations. However this is not an issue that DARD or the RDP can address. In our research, the main gender concern raised in focus groups by women and men on farms was isolation of men, working alone on the farm with little social contact.
- While it was not a focus of the study, we were struck by how people in farming accept farm accidents, some of them quite severe, as an occupational hazard and part of the job.
- Accepted wisdom about the needs of rural women has become embedded in the RDP and no longer represents the reality of women's lives in rural areas. This is true for other issues as well as women.
- The baseline information about the impact of the current RDP on equality is extremely poor. This is not a new problem. Improved data is essential to effective monitoring of the programme.
- The Monitoring Committee needs training and support to effectively monitor the programme. There is scope to include members who have a knowledge of agriculture and rural development who are **not** beneficiaries of the programme either as an individual or the organisation they represent.
- The Local Action Groups (LAGs) have worked very well. The challenge is how to maintain expertise that has developed over the programmes, and introduce new blood and fresh perspectives. The capacity of the LAGs needs some consideration. The LAG principles of inclusion and bottom-up governance have served a particularly useful purpose in a post-conflict society.
- The farming and environmental axes (1 and 2) are seen to be the most effective. This seems to be because it is funding targeted at the farming industry and it is managed

and distributed by DARD in consultation with the industry. It is more straightforward funding.

- Sometimes tensions between the farming and rural lobbies is seen as a 'failure' of the programme to strike the right balance. The tensions are endemic to the programme and cannot be resolved at the regional level.
- One of the positive features of rural Northern Ireland is the strong urban-rural inter-linkages.

Women in the Rural Development Programme:

As we conducted the research, asking how the RDP could more effectively engage women, we were often met by blank faces. Many people interviewed did not see gender as a particular problem in the programme. The rural women's lobby groups had very strong views about the disadvantage of rural women. Other focus groups with women not connected to the Rural Development Programme, gave very different interpretations of rural life. While the under-representation of women on the Local Action Groups and on the Programme Monitoring Committee was frequently quoted, our calculations did not bear this out. We began to realise that maybe we were uncritically accepting a set of assumptions about rural women that no longer reflect the real world.

The need to critically examine the concept of 'rural women' was evident in the interviews. There are conflicting interpretations in the interviews about what it means to be a rural woman. On the one hand, it continues to be presented as a double negative, suggesting there are limited spaces in which women can move and exist. On the other, it is acknowledged that women are now involved in the Local Action Groups managing the Rural Development Programme, and are active on the Monitoring Committee. Many of the interviews show people struggling with conflicting interpretations of the position of rural women. On the one hand there is a tendency to hold on to an understand of traditional barriers to rural women, based on place (rural) that inhibit their ability to occupy various public spaces; childcare, transport, resources. On the other hand, there is recognition that women are now more visible in public spaces. There was no information available on the gender composition of the LAGs. Our own calculations showed that on average, 37% of LAGs are women. The percentage from the community and voluntary sector is higher as they tried to counterbalance the lower percentage of women councillors. The reality is that women are occupying public space, but the normative assumptions about rural women are that place prevents women's participation in public activity.

Very surprisingly, we were repeatedly told that there were very few women on the Monitoring Committee. We were told this by people on the committee, both men and women. Yet 47% of the committee members are women. We asked the secretariat if women were less likely

to attend Monitoring Committee meetings and they said this was not the case. This finding is very hard to interpret. Is it that we do not 'see' women in a public space where they are not expected? Are normative assumptions shaping how we interpret reality? Keeping 'rural women' on the agenda was seen as the goal in some situations. This leads to further difficulties trying to identify the targets to address the problem of rural women, when what exactly the problem is has never been defined. The importance of culture and norms is evident in shaping the spaces women occupy. Women in rural and urban areas in our culture generally have more childcare and housework duties. Perhaps the reason we believe we need to critically reflect on the concept of 'rural women' is most evident in the differences between the focus groups attached to the rural development organisation and the one that was independent of the rural development programme. In the former, the traditional barriers to women were repeatedly expressed; childcare, transport, lack of self-confidence, and this was the case even when women were successful business people. In the latter, a very different interpretation, and a much more positive one, was given of being a woman and living in a rural area. This group of women did not believe that rural women faced any particular disadvantages different to urban women. They thought that rural women probably enjoyed a better quality of life. There was a sense that asking if there were differences between urban and rural women was a peculiar question to ask.

We suggest that academics, ourselves included, policy makers and rural women's lobby groups have bolstered a notion of 'rural women' as a double negative, where being a woman in a rural area presents particular challenges. In this line of argument, rural becomes an explanatory variable, which it is not. This ignores the world and how it has changed, and it also homogenises the world. Rural women differ from each other, like urban women, depending on social class, levels of education, disability and so on. The lives of women have significantly changed in the last forty years. So too have the lives of rural people. Women have access to many more spaces than their mothers or grandmothers; the workplace, neighbourhoods, associations, and politics. Like their urban counterparts, rural women reside in a particular place, but they occupy multiple spaces. They share many of these spaces with urban women. This has changed significantly over time, and has changed gender identities, for both men and women.

While the inheritance of land is still gendered, the roles of men and women on farms have changed considerably since the beginning of the RDPs. In focus groups with men and women on farms, both spoke about the importance of off-farm income for the survival of the farm. Women's off-farm income is crucial to the survival of the farm family. Men and women spoke of the isolation of men on farms, and their lonely days working alone on the farm. The Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership reported that farm visits and walks have good gender balance.

We were conscious of the matter-of-fact manner in which farm accidents were mentioned in relation to some other point. There is an acceptance of accidents on farms that needs to be challenged.

Monitoring the programme:

When we did the original research twelve years ago, we commented on the poor level of baseline information on the equality impact of the programme. This has not really changed. There is little information about women in the programme, but there is little general information. Part of the problem is that the information gathered is the Section 75 form, and this is voluntary. In order for the programme to be properly managed, more accurate information is needed about the take up of measures and who accesses funding. It is possible to ask much of this information in the application form, thus making it compulsory to provide information. Not all of the Section 75 information needs to be gathered, but information relevant to the effective monitoring and delivery of the programme is important. The Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership (CARP) have gathered some of their own data and this is quite comprehensive. In a number of interviews people referred to the monitoring committee being used to lobby for particular interests in the programme; women, farming and the environment lobbies were the most frequently mentioned. The monitoring committee needs support and training to effectively monitor the programme. There is also scope to include committee members who are not beneficiaries of the programme and their organisations have no vested interest in the programme.

The Local Action Groups:

The LAGs have operated effectively despite delays with the programme starting. There is considerable expertise, and some people on LAGs have been involved with the programme since its inception in 1991. While this knowledge is invaluable, there is also the possibility that the issues for rural areas are seen as the same almost 25 years later. In the same way that what it means to be a 'rural' woman has changed over time, so too has what it means to be rural. The distinction between urban and rural is seen as less useful than it was in the era of industrialisation, and particularly in the case of a region the size of Northern Ireland. People live in one place and work in the other. There are flows between urban and rural areas that make the idea of separate rural policies difficult. DARD's Rural White Paper Action Plan acknowledges this and a key priority is to foster urban-rural linkages for the benefit of the region. The vast majority of the future actions in the RWP Action Plan have another government department as the lead. There is a real opportunity to develop these links through the new programme. Community Led Local Development (CLLD) initiatives can

access the Structural and Investment Fund, an amalgam of funding streams⁵, and offers an ideal opportunity to foster links between urban and rural areas. The broadening of the LAGs to CLLD groups will bring fresh perspectives and will enhance the innovativeness and effectiveness of the programme. In this programme the LAGs reported that they felt overwhelmed by the size of their budget. In the next programme there is scope to consider, how much of the budget should be devolved to the LAGs, and the benefits of DARD managing some of the funds and using these to collaborate with other departments to advance the actions in the Rural White Paper Action Plan.

The importance of the LAGs is particularly pronounced in a post-conflict society. There is a strong sense of the importance of inclusion and ensuring people are represented by religion, age and gender. These issues were frequently discussed in interviews, and the strategies used to ensure representation. In terms of gender, the community and voluntary sector tried to compensate for the lower number of women elected councillors to ensure women were represented on LAGs.

Moving forward:

DARD is at present consulting on a draft NIRDP for the period 2014-20 together with a draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment. The following points highlight some lessons from our research which may be of use to DARD and stakeholder groups in the development of the 2014-20 programme.

- We need to reflect on what putting 'rural' in front of something tells us. This is true for women, but also for deprivation, poverty and other policy questions. Sometimes academics, policy makers and lobby groups are using concepts and making claims that no longer match reality. The lack of systematic and robust data on applicants and beneficiaries of the programme highlighted here and elsewhere does not help. While the mid-term evaluation and the EQIA for the next programme acknowledge that the available data is not robust, it is still used to comment on the existing programme and shape the future one. The targeting of priorities for the new programme needs critical reflection.

⁵ This Regulation lays down the common rules applicable to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which are operating under a common framework (hereinafter referred to as the 'European Structural and Investment

- Linked to the point above, social isolation, poverty, access to transport, educational, health and other public services are complex social problems and are not peculiar to rural areas in Northern Ireland. It is unrealistic to expect one programme to single-handedly address all these complex problems, and this is not the purpose of the RDP, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere. The opportunity to use funding differently to work together with other Departments and across the urban/ rural divide presents a real opportunity for Northern Ireland in the next programme. It offers a real opportunity for DARD to advance the actions identified in the Rural White Paper Action Plan.
- It is good to see that opportunities are being taken in the new programme to learn from and co-operate with rural development initiatives in the Republic of Ireland, including in priority 6. We would also suggest that lessons could be learned from LEADER experiences in Scotland, England, Wales and further afield.
- How the programme is monitored needs some thought going forward. The consistency and quality of information gathered needs significant improvement. The draft EQIA makes a number of helpful suggestions, and at the very least the information relevant to the monitoring and delivery of the programme should be built into application forms. In addition, there is an opportunity to consider the composition of the monitoring committee to include those with knowledge and experience of rural development who are not beneficiaries programme, as well as to provide training and support for committee members on interpreting and challenging the monitoring data presented to them.
- The research found that, although participation by women on the LAGs was not 50/50, at an average of 37% this was higher than participation rates in other areas of public life such as politics, senior management and other decision making roles, and could be accounted for by higher female participation rates by the social partner LAG members. Going forward, an opportunity exists to critically reflect on the way in which the LEADER approach is operationalized in the new programme.
- Our data, as well as recent evidence, indicates that health and safety on farms is an issue that needs policy attention. Aside from the human and social costs arising from accidents on farms, there are longer term financial, productivity and other benefits to farm families and farm businesses from improved health and safety on farms. Scope exists within DARD's draft programme to address this issue.
- Finally, whether or not isolation is a health and well-being issue for men on farms needs some further research.

Further reading:

Shortall, S. and B. Bock (2014, forthcoming) Special issue of *Gender, Place and Culture examining gender mainstreaming rural development policy in Europe*.

<http://www.oecd.org/derec/afdb/48294202.pdf>

Shortall, S. (2013) Women and Rural Development: Gender Mainstreaming. Factsheet for the Rural Network Northern Ireland

[http://www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk/download/files/Gender%20factsheet\(1\).pdf](http://www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk/download/files/Gender%20factsheet(1).pdf)