

Ireland: New modes of LEADER governance



Research team

Countryside and Community Research Institute, Cheltenham, UK

Introduction

Rural development has been a significant policy priority in Ireland for a number of years, and LEADER and its operational ethos (see diagram) have been championed and supported since the first programme in 1991. The amount of funding and the way LEADER functions in the 2007-13 programme have changed significantly from previous programmes. The budget (€425.4m) is almost three times the size of the LEADER+ budget for 2000-06, and it now accounts for the whole of Axis 3 delivery under the RDP. In common with other Member States, LEADER has also been 'mainstreamed' within the 2007-13 Programme. Concurrent with these changes, there has been a process of governance 'cohesion' within Ireland, whereby a number of different programmes, including LEADER, are now delivered by 36 privately run Integrated Local Development Companies (ILDCs): see map for details. The intention has been to enable synergies across a number of programmes being delivered at a local level. As such, the focus of this case study has been on examining these new modes of LEADER governance in Ireland.

The study **methodology** included three key stages:

1. brief interviews with 16 people at the National Ploughing Championships (the largest rural event in Ireland) in September 2009, who were managing / involved with different ILDCs, or had a background in LEADER in Ireland more generally;
2. telephone interviews with 23 ILDC representatives, usually the Chief Executive Officer or the Rural Development Manager;
3. three in-depth case studies, involving researchers spending a week with the ILDC concerned, interviewing key staff, and attending project and board meetings.

Operating rules and their interpretation

The operating rules are a significant element in any RDP, and were a common feature in previous rounds of LEADER in Ireland and elsewhere. The rules for Axes 3 and 4 of the 2007-13 Irish RDP cover a range of standard topics, including area of operations (for each company), board activities, application processing, evaluation, monitoring and inspections, ceiling on grant aid/the 'de minimis' rule, insurance, taxation, and so on. As in previous RDPs, the rules act as a set of outline guidelines issued by the managing authority, and are by no means static; instead, they are likely to change during the course of the Programme as a consequence of on-going discussions between the managing authority department and the ILDCs delivering LEADER 'on the ground'.

The operating rules, and their interpretation following mainstreaming within the current Programme, emerged as a very significant issue within the Irish LEADER case study. Most of the interviewed ILDC representatives highlighted that they are much more restrictive and bureaucratic than in previous iterations of LEADER in Ireland. They are now perceived to be overly rigid and inflexible, resulting in a markedly increased administrative burden.

There has also been a change in the inspection regime, which has gone from being advice-based to one that is audit-based. This extra layer of bureaucracy was deemed by many to be a step change in the new programme, with a much greater level of 'micro management' from the department and inspectorate in relation to project inspection and project checks. It is clear that this is hampering the ability of ILDCs to deliver their budget allocations and to engage with potential beneficiaries, as a significantly

Bureaucratic implications

A key feature of previous LEADER programmes was bottom-up development and the engagement of a wide range of local stakeholders (see diagram). An important part of this process was the time spent by project officers in the field. Their knowledge of local areas and of people who might benefit from LEADER funding was crucial, yet in the new Programme a much higher percentage of their time is taken up with bureaucracy. It is important to devise a means of monitoring that is less time-consuming for those working at a project level. This comment is also relevant in terms of not discouraging potential applicants for LEADER funding, who seem on occasions to be deterred by the amount of paperwork involved.

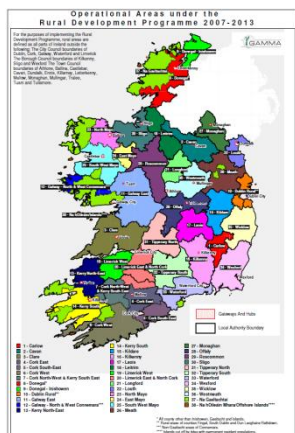
The underlying cause of many of the bureaucratic problems seems to be **fear**:

- at the department level that they will be criticised by Brussels if they are seen to be failing to implement the more stringent operating rules; and
- at the ILDC level that they may fail a departmental audit, and have to pay back funds that are already committed to projects.

The main impact of this fear at the ILDC level is that they have become more risk-averse and less prepared to fund more innovative projects, which had previously been a significant hallmark of what was distinctive about the LEADER approach. It has also made it more difficult to be flexible and to respond to the particular needs of local areas, or to be a test bed for the development of endogenous rural development that may not always be certain to succeed, but that hitherto has been considered worth trying.

Key findings and institutional learning

- In a small number of cases, where ILDCs have genuinely integrated strategies for delivering a range of programmes, there are clear signs that synergies are possible, ultimately improving the sustainability of the areas concerned. Time, energy and training are fundamental to achieving this.
- There are widespread concerns that mainstreaming may lead to the loss of the LEADER ethos, even though it is generally accepted that the tripling of the LEADER budget warrants a stronger inspection regime. There is therefore a need to balance the increased profile of LEADER within the RDP and its ability to deliver flexible, location-specific projects that exhibit innovation and perhaps higher levels of economic risk. In terms of the process of governance cohesion, it is still too early to assess with any certainty the potential of the ILDCs to improve the delivery of LEADER.
- It is clear that the effect of mainstreaming has had a considerable effect on the delivery of LEADER, but that it should not be seen in isolation from the process of governance cohesion, or the wider problems that have been prevalent in the Irish economy during this period.



Source: GAMMA: (www.gamma.ie)



Source: EU (2006) The Leader Approach – a basic guide

