Rural Social Inclusion - Seamus Boland, CEO of Irish Rural Link and member of the European Economic and Social Committee

To set the scene, Seamus presented statistics on social exclusion in the EU and Irish context. He discussed definitions of social inclusion and ‘rural’, how they are constantly changing and difficult to gain consensus on, but needed as part of the policy process.

Key messages

In the EU, almost 1 in 4 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and those in rural areas are at higher risk. Social exclusion can be less visible in rural than urban contexts. The rural social exclusion problem can be transplanted into cities as the social excluded can move to urban areas.

Social exclusion is a complex problem with multiple groups impacted for multi-faceted reasons. Some issues persist through times of economic prosperity and decline, such as rural youth unemployment.

LEADER has a role to play in rural social inclusion. In light of the complexity of the problem we need to think more deeply about what influence LEADER can have. For example, how can LEADER’S influence be strengthened
by leveraging synergies with other programmes and how we can better measure its impact on social inclusion.

Rural youth, minority groups and social inclusion issues - Anne Walsh, Equality and Intercultural Programme Manager, NYCI

Focusing on minority ethic youth social inclusion issues, Ann presented the findings of the ‘Make Minority a Priority’ research assessing minority young people’s experiences of growing up in Ireland and its recommendations for the youth sector. She also discussed the findings of another research project mapping youth organisation activities that engage young asylum seekers and refugees.

Key messages

Minority young people’s experiences of growing up in Ireland can be conflicted in terms of identity and belonging, such as feeling Irish but not being seen as Irish as well as maintaining a balance between connections to cultural origins and Irish culture.

To support integration, there is a need for greater cultural awareness and education around cultural and religious competencies. Racism is also experienced by minority young people which can go under-reported or acknowledged and needs to be brought to the fore.

A crucial need and first step is for more safe spaces where minority youth can come together to share experiences, meet and develop projects from the bottom up, alongside support for leadership so youth themselves can be leaders and facilitators of new initiatives.

Rural youth can often need to travel to access youth services and mobile youth services can help to increase accessibility. Access is even more difficult in the context of youth in direct provision centres.

“When seeking to reach the hard to reach a key challenge is the lack of networks. Trying to build up and open out those networks for young people, that is the biggest piece of work. It is a long process and needs a lot of support behind it. It is not enough to reach out to them once. You also need to reach out to young people and their parents so it is across the generations.” Anne Walsh, NYCI

Accora Orchestra - LEADER funded Rural Youth project, Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

Under the social inclusion and rural youth sub-theme, Accora Orchestra received a LEADER grant to support rebranding and investment in new equipment bringing a wide range of benefits.

The new equipment has enabled the orchestra to accept invitations to perform outdoors which previously was not possible. Rebranding has rejuvenated the orchestra, bringing a newly revived sense of pride. The funding also went towards purchase of a laptop and software with significant organisational benefits, streamlining administration, enhancing communication and use of digital services.
Key messages

The LEADER grant covered 75% of the total project costs. Fundraising was essential to raise the match funds. Fundraising is an ongoing activity, but is an unpredictable source of funds and challenging to raise significant amounts of funding. This makes wider funding sources such as through the LEADER programme of vital importance to the sustainability and development of groups such as Accora Orchestra.

The voluntary nature of most local music and youth groups leaves time limited to commit to the process. Strong cooperation and trust between promoters and Implementing Partners is of vital importance to overcome challenges and get through the LEADER application process.

“Ongoing guidance and assistance to project promoters is essential, don’t take anything for granted. Some committees may not have the experience or skills base. Have endless patience and understanding of the difficulties the promoters face. Trust was strong between us and the staff at Breffini Integrated CLG. Promoters also need to accept the need for openness and transparency. Once we had a reason why things had to be done in a certain way then I could go back to committee and rationalise what was needed.” Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

Community plans are another type of intervention. Part of the ‘soft’ supports under Clare Local Development Strategy is to develop a community plan for 50 communities in the county. This can help build cohesion, connections and further strengthen communities. Community plans provide a valuable resource for making local community resources such as community centres more inclusive providing evidence to guide how services should be tailored or particular groups to target identified as hard to reach.

A challenge raised is effectively reaching the hard to reach. Well-organised community groups are often not composed of hard to reach populations. One way to address this involves finding ways that more well organised and resourced communities can share their learning and skills, such as experience of the LEADER process, with others who are hard to reach and lack those resources.

Social inclusion with a LEADER focus, Gloria Callinan, LEADER Programme Coordinator, CLDC

A case study of CLDC provided an example of the LEADER approach from the Implementing Partner perspective. Gloria provided examples of a diverse range of LEADER funded projects in Clare but also pointed to a number of wider issues beyond the project level that cut across the LEADER approach to support rural community development.

Key messages

Bottom-up community development is a process that takes time. It also needs a number of different types of interventions.

Capital investment projects such as community centres, which can receive criticism, are essential to provide spaces for further community development which need continuing community engagement, participation and empowerment.
Ankara Festival - LEADER funded Hard to Reach Communities project, Abiodun Ladigbolu, Association of Nigerian Community in Clare

Organised by the Association of the Nigerian Community in County Clare (ANCC), the Ankara Festival is an annual cultural event growing in popularity that supports social inclusion. It brings diverse communities together that didn’t previously have a space to do this. The ANCC successfully gained LEADER support towards essential sound equipment in 2017. Abiodun presented the ANCC’s experience of the LEADER process and how the funding has benefited Ankara Festival.

Panel discussion: Overcoming barriers to social inclusion and reaching hard to reach communities?

The panel discussion focused on ways to effectively overcome barriers to reaching rural youth and wider hard to reach populations.

Key messages

Effectively overcoming barriers is a process that takes time. Work is required through various layers of the process to achieve results.

“Reaching hard to reach for NYCI is about trust building. Linking to existing groups helps to push an open door. Collaborate with people who have the relationships on the ground. Connecting people to other people and joining the dots is important.” Anne Walsh, NYCI

“We start to engage youth from a very young age, from as young as four upwards. They are not only learning a skill but there is a social element to it. It is a different network outside their school friends. They also travel with the orchestra and build friendships. They see benefit of investing the time.” Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

The reputation of the LEADER programme as a difficult, long and challenging process needs to be addressed so hard to reach groups are not discouraged from engaging with the process. There is also a need to raise awareness of LEADER funding among the hard to reach and to work closely with these groups to assist them access supports that enable them to advance their objectives.

“Reaching the hard to reach is easier when there is a critical mass. It is difficult to reach those who are more dispersed. Development officers spend a lot of time on the process and outreach to rurally dispersed socially excluded populations is particularly challenging. Reputational damage to the LEADER programme is also issue. We need to work on fixing this. Case studies illustrating positive stories are part of the solution.” Gloria Callinan, CLDC

Key messages

LEADER funding supported the ANCC take Ankara Festival to a new level, as a larger scale event. The sound equipment is also available to other community groups for use.

While the ANCC found the LEADER process initially daunting, all issues were surmountable. Encouragement and support from CLDC staff was essential to effectively engage this ‘hard to reach’ group with the LEADER programme.

“People discouraged us, said this is a very hard process, but what we learned is never underestimate what can be achieved, be proactive and organised. Have all the requirements ready before the time. Nothing is impossible if you are ready to take it on and are organised and prepared.” Abiodun Ladigbolu, ANCC