

**Submission by PLANET – The Partnerships Network
to the
Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs and the
Department of Agriculture & Food
regarding the
Draft Ireland Rural Development National Strategy Plan 2007-2013**

PLANET has been invited to submit its views on the national strategy document for rural development 2007-2013. The submission is made in the context that 18 of the 38 member partnerships operate in a rural context and therefore have a major input in supporting the development of the communities within their areas. The submission is also made in the context of the fact that the successor to local development social inclusion programme (LDSIP) is to be extended nationally from 2007 onwards thus covering all rural areas.

1. Background to PLANET:

PLANET, the Partnership's Network, is an independent not-for-profit company and registered cooperative, financed by its constituent members, the Area-Based Partnership Companies situated throughout the State

The Partnership Companies are also independent not-for-profit companies (limited by guarantee), which receive core funding from the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs under the Local Development & Social Inclusion Programme, a sub-measure of the National Development Plan (2000-2006). The Partnership Companies work to combat social exclusion in a localised context, targeting both communities and groups of individuals experiencing various and often-cumulative forms of disadvantage. The signal feature of the area-based partnership model is the promotion and sustained

support of interaction and collaboration between local actors in the community, public, statutory and local development sectors.

PLANET's main activities include the following:

- Provision of a structured national forum through which members' experiences can be exchanged and shared and common objectives pursued;
- Promoting the principles and practice of the partnership model;
- Seeking to influence national policy by lobbying policy-makers and decision-makers on issues of common concern to partnership companies;
- Supporting members' needs by providing strategic linkages with key actors.

2. Overview of Partnership development 1991-2006

Over the last fifteen years, the local partnership model has developed. From 12 Partnerships in 1991 to the current number of 38, the initial objective of countering unemployment through local measures has been broadened to the multi-faceted concept of "social exclusion" which has gained currency. In addition to employment-related measures, attempts to tackle educational disadvantage as well as efforts to build organisational capacity in marginalized communities, and to improve the physical environment and infrastructure there, became the focus of local partnership activities.

A deeper understanding of disadvantage, at EU, national and local levels now inform the work of local partnership companies. The focus on unemployment has not been supplanted. Rather, supports for unemployed people are framed

within broader, multi-dimensional strategies which take account of the cumulative effects of different, mutually exacerbating forms of disadvantage, affecting both geographical communities and communities of interest. The mainstreaming of innovative approaches piloted locally has also been a major goal.

Additionally, key functions of local partnership companies have evolved in the context of best practice community development methodologies. Core objectives of partnership companies include the enabling and empowering of disadvantaged communities, brokering linkages and networks between local partners including community, statutory, public and private sector actors and facilitating partnership in local governance through new structures for integration of local government and local development that currently shape the operational environment.

Overall Draft Strategy and comments:

PLANET notes that the strategy is based on the following three broad priorities or Axes as outlined in the EU Community Guidelines

- Axis 1 - Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector
- Axis 2 - Improving the environment and the countryside
- Axis 3 - The quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy

From a Partnership perspective, Axis 3 would have the most direct connection to their work, but it does not preclude us from commenting on the other Axes, these comments will be dealt with later on.

In terms of the Lisbon Reform Agenda, we welcome in particular the focus on supporting social inclusion and sustainable development. PLANET has outlined below the range of supports that Partnerships currently provide in both an urban and rural context.

They are as follows:

A. The Services for the Unemployed Measure:

Under the LDSIP programme, there are three measures. The most relevant to sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social inclusion as defined under the Lisbon agenda is the Services to the Unemployed Measure. Under this measure, Partnership companies provide the following services to client groups in their areas including:

- advice, guidance and mentoring in relation to training, self employment, employment and education
- Delivery of relevant and flexible training programmes
- development of self-employment/social economy initiatives

In 2003, the most recent statistics available, a total of 31,777 people were supported under this LDSIP measure.

B. Local Employment Service Network (LESN)

24 Partnership Companies operate and manage the local employment service network under contract from FAS. All of the LESN offices are involved in the roll-out of the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP). Under the National Employment Action Plan alone, 4,189 men and women became active clients of the Local Employment Services Network (LESN) in 2004.

C. Self Employment Supports:

As a compliment to these supports, Partnerships provide an intensive advise and support service for those wishing to start up their own business. This service extends into the initial set-up phase and beyond. These supports are delivered through the LESN and through Enterprise Officers, where a partnership does not have an LESN. Twenty-Four Partnerships operate an LESN, while other Partnerships have a range of similar support mechanisms for a rural context under the Services to the Unemployed Measure of the LDSIP.

PLANET would see the above supports being maintained and enhanced in the context of a new rural development strategy.

Axis 1:

Through various supports such as the Small Holders Initiative and other rural employment/enterprise supports, Rural Partnerships have made positive progress in supporting the progression of their target groups. In this context, resources have been applied to vocational training, information and advisory measures. Examples can be given for future reference.

In the context of Axis 1, we would argue for greater investment in human capital to ensure long-term sustainability of rural communities.

Axis 2

Rural Partnerships have engaged with communities in the provision of high nature value farming. Examples of this would include organic farming projects selling produce to local businesses and tourism interests, while at the same time employing target groups with the support of government sponsored community employment. Again, examples can be provided and they exemplify the innovative, partnership approach to providing local solutions to local challenges in a rural context.

Ongoing support of these measures would be welcomed in the new rural development strategy.

Axis 3

Through training, enterprise development and employment placement, the rural partnerships have been to the fore in their areas. The key focus is in the creation of employment opportunities either through self employment or employment in existing rural enterprises. Working with statutory agencies is a key mechanism in supporting target groups into employment or self-employment.

PLANET would argue that the new programme should focus more resources on training and information as well as actions to increase the skills set of rural communities into the future.

3. National Rural Network

PLANET would request representation on the proposed national rural network within the context of the new national rural development programme. It would be an important forum for the development of new initiatives in the context of the programme from 2007 to 2012

4. Conclusion:

PLANET would welcome direct discussions with both departments in relation to the work of rural partnerships and its place in the new rural development programme.

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