Sustainable Rural Tourism: Lessons for Rural Development

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Introduction

The scale and accelerating pace of rural change has been a remarkable feature of recent decades. The countryside is now being challenged as never before by issues of agricultural restructuring; declining service provision; depopulation and counter-urbanisation; communication and infrastructural deficits; and the degradation of the natural environment (McDonagh 2007). The agricultural sector has undergone extensive restructuring with farm numbers and contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) falling year on year (see Hubbard and Ward 2008). Varley et al. (2009) cognizant of how the 'global, EU and national regulations impact significantly on the environmental, social and economic choices being made by rural actors, particularly in relation to land use'(p.8) argue that rural areas are functioning less and less as production orientated spaces with consumption-type demands on the countryside increasing all the time. The current rural policy paradigm, evident across the globe, relies on an integrated, decentralised approach that uses public-private-voluntary sector partnerships to develop policy and to implement local strategies (OECD 2006). It attempts to reposition the rural, so that it is attuned to the demands and needs of different places; with a focus on investment rather than subsidisation; and an emphasis on the 'public good' underpinning new economic activities in rural areas from biodiversity, landscape management, tourist spaces and new rural enterprises.

The multifunctional countryside whereby we see it 'producing not only food but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and

contributing to the viability of rural areas' (Potter and Burney 2002 p.35) is particularly prominent in terms of demand for, and supply of, leisure and recreation, arenas in which rural tourism is increasingly considered. The conception that rural areas can be addressed in some homogeneous way is recognised for its obvious shortcomings and instead they are considered in terms of diversity of needs, and more importantly, opportunities they present. Subsequently, as argued by the EC (2005 p.32) 'increased diversification, innovation and value added of products and services, both within and beyond the agricultural sector, are indispensable in order to promote integrated and sustainable rural development'. In this multifunctional arena production and consumption run side by side and consumption is considered a 'public-good', providing ecological, aesthetic, amenity and recreational spaces that heretofore were largely ignored. While the drive towards a multifunctional countryside is gaining pace and sustainable rural tourism is seen as a key component of rural development (Sharpley 2000; Garrod, Wornell and Youell 2006; Saxena and Ilbery 2008), how this is played out in the context of the governance of sustainable rural tourism remains unclear.

Sustainable rural tourism is not unproblematic, having a plethora of meanings depending on the context. Indeed the literature concedes that it is because 'of the oxymoronic nature of the term 'sustainable tourism' and its amenability to appropriation by supporters of various ideologies ... (that) ... it can be used to represent and support just about any model of development' (Weaver 2004, p.518). Nonetheless there is some consensus that it relates to tourism that is 'economically viable, but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment, and the social fabric of the host

community' (Swarbrooke 1999 p.13). This normative representation focuses on the inter-relationship between the human and physical environment with competing social, economic, cultural and environmental interests, priorities and negotiations. Consequently conflict is evident between different interest groups as well as *within* those groups with a tourism affiliation (Butler 1998; Van Rensburg et al. 2006).

It is from this backdrop that we wish to examine the new European rural development programme. Specifically we ask the question: what potential has sustainable rural tourism to contribute to rural development? In addressing this question, we consider the scope for utilising adaptive management to overcome some of the challenges previously identified within the LEADER approach. The paper begins with an overview of sustainable rural tourism and of the new European rural development programme. Then, using case studies, we consider the potential for the adoption of a sustainable tourism paradigm by rural development groups. Final remarks and observations conclude the analysis.

Sustainable rural tourism

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries (Wallace and Russell 2004; Saarinen 2006) and this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. In 2005 European states recorded in excess of 440 million visitor arrivals accounting for 10 per cent of European GDP and 20 million jobs (Tourism Sustainability Group 2007). Consequently the tourism sector must respond to the pressures placed on it directly, from increased visitor numbers, and indirectly, from negative impacts on the environment and on destination

communities, as a 'business-as usual approach will not provide a more sustainable tourism industry' (Gössling, Hall, Lane and Weaver 2008 p.123).

'Development' and the notion of 'carrying capacity' consumed tourism studies during the 1960s through to the early 1980s. The mass tourism that epitomised this era was accompanied by visible negative impacts such as the degradation of the Spanish coast. In response to this and as post-Fordist economies enjoyed more flexible forms of production and consumption, the idea of sustainable tourism was moved from the margins to assume centre stage in tourism debates. Ecology, conservation and economic development played a role in this process (Bramwell and Lane 1993). These issues resonate with the seminal Brundtland Report, otherwise known as the World Commission on Environment and Development which emphasises development and environmental responsibility (WCED 1987). Further, this influential publication stresses the significance of inter-and intra-generational equity, bringing social equity and cultural diversity to the core of debates relating to sustainable development, matters that are reflected in the European Union's sustainable development strategy.

Sustainable tourism, as a socially constructed and idealised set of aspirations, is dynamic in the sense of constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders. It is a political process that depends on value systems and ethical judgments which are related to knowledge and power (Hall 1997; Hunter 1997; National Research Council (NRC) 1999; Saarinen 2006; Bramwell and Lane 2008). What we see at its core are issues of economic efficiency and equity; environmental protection and cultural awareness. Indeed the Tourism

Sustainability Group (TSG) (2007) suggests that 'tourism can be a destroyer of these special qualities which are so central to sustainable development ... (or) ... can be a driving force for their conservation and promotion' (p.2). Consequently tourism and its integration into the rural product can be very much part of developing employment opportunities; increasing local prosperity; conservation and maintenance of the environment; celebrating cultural assets and generally ensuring a greater spread in terms of who can benefit (economically, socially and culturally).

However not all commentators are convinced that the benefits outweigh the costs. Reeder and Brown (2005) argue that in many cases concerns emerge not only about the quality of the jobs created but also how tourism development affects rural well-being. While advantages can be seen, for example, in businesses growing and landowners/farmers profiting from being able to supplement their incomes, there are other outcomes. Tension can emerge between different interest groups representing the different facets of sustainable tourism, in particular between those that emphasise a development approach and those who highlight the ecological perspective (McKercher 1993; Caffyn 2000). Sustainability itself may become a commodified product by the tourist sector (Hughes 1996).

Even though the European Union claim that within tourism activities 'economic, social and environmental objectives can reinforce each other and should therefore advance together' (TSG 2007 p.2), in reality the pursuit of sustainable tourism is littered with obstacles. On the one hand social and ecological systems intertwine, and on the other artificial demarcations are created with specialists contributing segmented knowledge such as funding information

or business advice. And therefore as Varley et al. (2009) argue, 'is likely to be attended by considerable struggle, as one conception of sustainability comes to vie with another or others and as competition over incompatible ends and the distribution of scarce resources generates tensions and conflicts' (p.7). Tourism groups do not always operate in a cooperative fashion, nor do those groups necessarily claim collective ownership for their activities.

An adaptive approach

Sustainable tourism emphasises the fluid relationship between the human and physical environment. An adaptive paradigm allows options to be explored through the identification of priorities and the selection of favoured choices (Kernel 2005). Drawing from the International Guidelines for Sustainable Tourism (Convention on Biological Diversity, www.retour.net accessed June 2008), it is based on a particular model that was popularised during the 1970s when it was used to explore the uncertainties of large and complex ecosystems (Holling 1978[2005]). It is increasingly employed by policymakers and is evidenced within various partnerships such as those established through the EUs Water Framework Directive (Moberg et al. 2005). The adaptive approach pays attention to the fact that different groups can have different values and needs as, for example, ecological conservation objectives may be incompatible with the desires of local communities (Stocking and Perkin 1992). Thus rather than prescribing an unconditional course of action, adaptive tourism recognises the need for flexibility in order to prioritise between competing interests, depending on the specific circumstances. Adaptive management provides an arena of 'uncertainty, complexity and potential for conflict' (Reed 1999). It embraces uncertainty in

that where a policy is successful, the approach is validated but when there are problems or a policy is seen to fail, then the adaptive approach 'is designed so that learning occurs, adjustments can be made, and future initiatives can be based on the new understanding' (Lee 1993 cited in Reed 1999, p.335). Actors work collaboratively by sharing power and responsibility to create a learning environment that nurtures the generation of new knowledge (Folkes et al. 2005). Its complexity therefore cannot be underestimated as it requires recognition of the importance and intricacies of social dynamics. It also demands deep-seated change such as accepting new ways of working; institutional flexibility; acknowledging unorthodox practices; creating and nurturing political openness and change; and involvement from new stakeholders (Holling 1978[2005]; Folke et al. 2003; Moberg et al. 2005). Meanwhile conflict may emerge through failure to identify common ground or neglect of critical social relations.

European Rural Development

Sustainability is found at the heart of rural policy with the ideal of achieving sustainable rural development a key dimension of EU, national, regional, and local policy in recent years (McDonagh et al. 2009). These objectives are promoted through the European Agriculture Rural Development Fund in which the LEADER methodology has been mainstreamed (CEC 2004). The fund aims to improve the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry while achieving environmentally sustainable land management and also diversifying rural economic activity (Council Regulation (EU) No. 1698/2005). Specifically, Pillar Two[1] of the CAP is aimed at helping rural communities to develop and diversify and accordingly Member States have discretion to set out their plans for expenditure (CEC 2005). Instruments include

traditional agricultural activities as well as broader rural development measures such as the development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage; land improvement; diversification of agricultural activities; and the establishment of farm-relief services. Both farmers and non-farmers can access the available funding. Importantly, member states are required to spread their plans, and hence rural development funding, between three thematic axes: improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; improving the environment and the countryside; and improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy.

The Leader initiative has attracted much debate and it is not our intention to replicate the existing comprehensive critiques (see for instance Ray 1998, 1999; Shortall and Shucksmith 2001; Scott 2004; Bryden 2006; Convery et al. 2010). A number of features are however salient to our analysis. The specificity of rural tourism resonates with the European rural development model. Local Action Groups (LAGs) are active at the very local level having the flexibility to agree objectives, all within the framework of the programme. LAGs embrace the LEADER methodology that focuses on 'partnership capacity, implementation of local strategies, cooperation, networking and acquisition of skills' (CEC, 2005 p.6 (50)). Through these mechanisms, territories cultivate their own 'development repertoire' which pays attention to the unique features of an area and so takes account of all aspects of the locale such as food, craft, language and dialect, landscape and music (Ray 1999 p.525).

Just as the lack of consensus on sustainable development means that the concept remains contested and ambiguous at best, tensions have existed in the past between competing

economic and social objectives and on the meaning of rural development. There remains no 'blueprint' for rural development. Consequently as the themes of agricultural restructuring, economic diversification, cultural diversity and environmental management pervade the current European programme, the process requires co-operation among the range of interest groups that are working towards the common goal of achieving rural development. They must identify and articulate different preferences and priorities according to national or regional circumstances. The overall process is rarely straightforward and tensions have already been identified within the existing programme as actors manage a 'balancing act' between seeking active involvement while providing leadership (Convery et al. 2010 p.16). This suggests to us the suitability of the adaptive management paradigm as a fitting mechanism for negotiating these diverse interests.

European guidance on rural development emphasises the need for consistency with other EU policies such as economic cohesion and the environment (http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm 27th April 2009). Integration is a key feature of the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) as it seeks to accommodate 'multi-sectoral needs for endogenous rural development' (Council Regulation (EU) No. 1698/2005, no.47). With this backdrop in mind, it is likely that many emerging projects will have, among others, tourist objectives. In connection to this, potential difficulties have already been noted by the NITB as they suggest that 'the key challenge is to ensure that the proposals for [farm] diversification integrate with the broad direction of the tourism strategy' (discussion paper: 11), before going on to indicate how tourist board staff will liaise directly with LAGs. Similarly, Convery et al. (2010) state the importance of adaptive management within the

RDR as a mechanism to ensure integration, highlighting the emergence of power and local politics as LAGs articulate and advance diverse priorities. However it is not yet fully evident how different interests will be negotiated within this contentious arena of economic, social, environmental and cultural matters. The potential contribution of tourism to rural development within this new and emerging institutional framework and the extent to which the sustainable tourism paradigm is understood and executed within rural development is also unclear. The remainder of the study highlights the critical issues that emerge as sustainable tourism is played out within a local area. Four themes are revealed from this analysis: institutional (in)capacity; legitimacy of local groups; navigating between stakeholder interests and sustainable tourism in practice. All have clear implications for the new rural development programme. Before presenting these issues, an overview of the Mourne Area is provided.

The proposed Mourne National Park

Situated within Northern Ireland (NI), this case study offers a lens through which to consider institutional arrangements for sustainable tourism within a region that has experienced the emergence of an array of governing bodies. Consequently mapped within a single locality are numerous partnerships and strategic alliances. Since the signing of the historic NI Good Friday Agreement in 1998, society in the region has experienced considerable transformation. One consequence of the changes has been the so-called 'peace dividend' which has resulted in substantial growth in tourism. In 2006 tourism continued to grow with visitor and domestic revenue exceeding £0.5billion (NITB – Tourism Facts 2006), an upward trend that continued unto the global recession affected the local economy. From 2008 the

sector experienced an overall decline in visitor numbers, with the South East and North West regions suffering the most, the former being the location of the Mourne Area (Tourism Barometers 2007, 2008, 2009 & 2010 NITB) (see figure one). It was not until2009 however that revenue fell from £540m to £529m (Tourism Barometers 2007, 2008, 2009 & 2010 NITB). Even so, supporting almost 30,000 full-time equivalent jobs, it is now on a par with the agricultural sector, traditionally seen as the mainstay of the rural economy.

'Place figure one about here.'

Figure one: Map showing location of Mourne Area within Ireland

Part of the tourism strategy that followed the political reconciliation was the development of five signature projects aiming to raise the international profile of NI (NITB 2003). The Tourist Board assumes a strategic role as all signature projects rely on the active engagement of relevant stakeholders: specific funding is not automatically guaranteed. Diverse projects were selected ranging from Titanic Belfast to the development of Christian Heritage. But it is with the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast (see figure two) that the Mourne Area shares most similarities. Both are designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and both destinations attract large numbers of tourists albeit both have been particularly affected by the recent recession. The estimated annual visitor numbers to the High Mourne Area exceeds 200,000[2] (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee), surpassed in popularity only by the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast destination in Antrim.

'Place figure two about here.'

In addition to its designation as a signature project, in 2002 a report commissioned by the Environment and Heritage Service identified the Mourne area as being the most suited for national park status. Following this study, the former Minister of the Environment, Dermot Nesbitt, announced that he would be working towards creating a national park in Mourne. Meanwhile a DoE 2004 report states that 'Shared Horizons signals the Department of the Environment's intentions to...take forward proposals for the designation of a national park in the Mournes' (2004 p.3).

The proposed Mourne National Park covers around 570km^2 and has been a focal point for visitors ever since the Victorian era. Evans (1967) noted its special qualities in highlighting the area's many historical and cultural customs along with the rich land use traditions. Its landscape comprises a spectacular coastline, twelve significant peaks, a high granite wall, walking trails, state forests and interesting topography. Its archaeological landscape reflects an area rich with heritage and tradition and one where 'unifying geological, natural and cultural factors ... have shaped the living landscape we see today' (Alison Farmer Associates and Julie Martin Associates 2005 p.28).

The Mourne Area has a fragile and fragmented economy, relying on tourism related activities for up to 15% of employment (Colin Buchanan and Partners Limited 2006). Some 53% of the land is actively farmed and is in small holdings (average farm size is 15 hectares) with approximately 1500 landowners (Haydon 2007). Much of the uplands and High Mournes are in large holdings with ownership residing with Mourne Trustees, Water Service, Forest

Service and the National Trust. In short, the area's economic buoyancy relies on agriculture, tourism, self-employment and commuting (Mack et al. 2006).

The Mourne National Park Working Party (MNPWP) was established in 2004 following public consultation. Its remit was to consult on proposals regarding boundaries of the mooted park; on a management structure; and finally to make recommendations to government. As such it was a partnership of stakeholders with multiple interests who were attempting to work towards a common goal of sustainable rural tourism while remaining cognisant of local social, economic, environmental and cultural assets.

Institutional (in)capacity for sustainable tourism in Northern Ireland

Within the European rural development programme, each Member State was responsible for creating 'the conditions for a broad and effective involvement of all appropriate bodies, in accordance with national rules and practice' through creating appropriate partnership structures to ensure integration between environmental protection and economic development (Council Regulation (EU) No. 1698/2005, Art. 6 no.1). Article 33 of the Rural Development Regulation provides a list of thirteen activities indicative of what funding will be spent on which measures during the period 2007-2013. Within NI the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) set out the relevant framework for the establishment of the corresponding LAGs. The approved LAG, in partnership with a council (i.e. local government) cluster[3] in the area, addresses the measures outlined within Axis Three of the NIRDP 2007-13. In line with the European Regulation, Axis Three seeks to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to encourage diversification of economic activity

(http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/rural-development/nirdp2007-2013.htm, accessed 13.08.08).

In circumstances such as these where objectives and actions are carefully defined from the centre, innovation may be curtailed, reflecting tension between top-down and bottom-up development (Bryden 2006). This reflects a tendency to address processes of development in silos whereby government creates a policy agenda, community activists animate and development agencies administer funding programmes. Fragmentation and entrenched positions follow as interest groups do not wish to be seen to concede their position. Adaptive management encourages actors to confer at an earlier stage so that they may, through a process of knowledge generation, identify the problems and agree the challenges from the outset thereby avoiding patent pursuit of blatant self-interest.

There was evidence of inadequate institutional capacity in relation to the national park designation. Among the legislative amendments was a Review of Public Administration (RPA) undertaken in 2002 in an attempt to develop administrative arrangements to meet the needs of a devolved government. The delays in the implementation of the RPA were viewed by members of the Working Party to have held back the development of a legislative framework for establishing a National Park in NI and so they felt that 'the gap is widening between the consultative and legislative processes' (minutes 19.10.06, item5).Consequently, even though the MNPWP was mooted as having the characteristics that would merit national park status, the legislation was unable to deliver – it did not support the designation and implementation of a national park. Only in the recent past is the subject of national parks

being presented to the NI Executive and it is expected that it will take nearly two years to get through the process of public consultation and become possible from a legislative perspective. After that point the Heritage Trust aims to promote the Mourne Area as a pilot National Park (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

Bryden et al. note how sectoral policies and the centralised sectoral administration of them is important leading to policy contradictions between the different scales of governance (2006). The consultation indicated a belief among landowners that they were at that time liable for any injury experienced by anyone entering their land. It revealed a strong fear of litigation among this group of stakeholders. Meanwhile the government did 'not consider that the current provisions for occupiers' liability are a barrier to access...There is no known reported case of adult trespassers successfully suing a landowner because of an injury caused due to natural features arising in the countryside' (DoE DFP Information Leaflet ND pp. 1,7). Nonetheless only months after making this statement, the government announced that it was allocating half a million pounds for access management in the Mourne area, to include helping landowners deal with their access problems (press release NI executive, online accessed 24.04.08).

Legitimacy of local groups

Membership for both groups is ultimately time-bound (to either the European Programme or to the national park consultation process), determined in a top-down manner validated by earlier consultation processes. Membership of the LAGs was not only defined by DARD and reflects requirements set out under anti-discriminatory legislation enshrined in Section

15

75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1988), but was also based on previous consultations and evaluations relating to LEADER. DARD stipulated that all LAGs within the new Rural Development Programme (2007-13) comprise of twenty-one individuals who have equal representation within their partnerships. The LAGs were to be new groups: they could not be the same bodies as those that existed under LEADER +, albeit individuals previously involved with a LAG were able to apply to join a new group.

The constitution of the LAGs is not entirely dissimilar to that of the MNPWP where the DoE, under instruction from the Minister and following public consultation, selected prospective members. Each group comprises a multiplicity of stakeholders who are likely to have different values and diverse agendas: one third of the 26 MNPWP members were drawn from central and local government bodies with just under half of the membership comprising community actors. Within this latter group, farmer's interests were heavily represented as they took up nearly a quarter of the membership overall. Meanwhile half of the LAG members comprise economic and social partners and civil society while elected councillors make up the remainder of the group.

Similarities between LAGs and the MNPWP do not end at membership. Operating in partnership, the success of each relies on establishing and agreeing common objectives through collaboration and co-operation; the over-arching concern of all is the sustainable development of a particular territory. Although the council cluster is financially and administratively responsible for the programme funds and for the operation of the local LAG, the contract for the implementation and delivery of the programme at a local level is between

DARD and *one* of the councils within the cluster (NIRDP 2007 Guidance for selection of Local

Action Groups and submission of funding bids). The LAGs are responsible for supporting the

implementation of a funding initiative through facilitation, public consultations and by

making recommendations to the funding body. They do not have financial authority.

Meanwhile the Working Party had a remit to conduct a public consultation and to submit

proposals to government; it did not develop projects directly. Thus while all of the bodies

hold powerful supporting and indeed leadership roles, none were directly responsible for

funds, a situation which raises questions of power – who has it and how much are they

willing to share? Ostensibly the institutional apparatus for rural development has been set

up to facilitate bottom-up development but if LAGs are not directly responsible for allocating

finances, then exactly how much power can they wield? It is claimed that only limited local

governance exists where such asymmetrical power relations prevail between central and

local government and without major reform of central government regional centralism

remains (Knox 2009). In many respects rather than signifying a genuinely inter-related

group, development bodies are closer to a collection of stakeholders brought together for the

purposes of achieving a specific objective, be it programme delivery or public consultation.

They are also used to enhance legitimacy as for example the NIRDP structure is aligned to an

emerging administrative framework (the new local government bodies, due to be

implemented in 2015) while the MNPWP was created following public consultation.

Navigating between stakeholder interests

In the past the legitimacy with which rural development partnerships operated raised

questions in relation to power, representation and vested interests. As the preceding

discussion shows, the premise of the Mourne Area consultation was flawed. The Working Party was **not** charged with consulting on whether or not the public wished to see a national park. But due to widespread mis-interpretation regarding the process, there was a popularly held belief that the Working Party would be consulting on whether or not to proceed with establishing national park status. Given these misaligned expectations, it was of little surprise that a common view was that the Working Party was a 'smoke screen' for a 'done deal' (Minutes 28.10.04, item 3f). So, even though the government attempted to hand a degree of power over to the locality, asymmetric power relations were evident with the opinion that important decisions were made outside of the control of the local group. In this way the legitimacy of the Working Party was undermined.

Additional difficulties were associated with this consultation process. The Mobile Information Unit travelled to 34 locations in the area during September 2006 during the consultation period when 12,000 out of the total 42,000 leaflets were distributed. Highly distinctive, it was loaned to the MNPWP by the local council (all from http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/working_party_consultation_report_may_2007.pdf, last accessed 26 July 2010). This was complemented by a range of other measures including a high profile media strategy with local radio, newspapers and television and a series of public meetings that included themed events for specific interests such as farming, business, youth and environment. (http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/working_party_consultation_report_may_2007.pdf, last accessed 26 July 2010). Consequently many of the issues were raised at a NI wide level by a number of newspapers and through a regional television programme.

The Working Party thus endeavoured to develop a consultation process that would accommodate many different interests. By avoiding catch-all public meetings and developing a programme of clinics, it hoped to ensure that the process would not get hijacked by an articulate group at the expense of other interest groups that may be less able to voice their concerns (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee). Even so, there was a perception among some of the Working Party that their attempts to consult were over-shadowed by other national park consultation activity, with evidence of a 'flying squad' of consultees attending connected public meetings and their viewpoints being given unequal weight (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

Due to lack of resources the Mobile Information Unit did not travel outside the area and this caused concern for some members of the Working Party (Minutes, 19.10.06; 18.04.07). No doubt further clashes would have emerged between residents in the area reliant on development (either in the form of agriculture or tourism related activities) and leisure seekers objecting to development in the wish to retain the landscape in its existing form. Such conflict was witnessed in the pro- and anti- Mullaghmore development in county Clare in the 1990s where the dispute progressed to one that was 'increasingly interpreted as an 'insider-outside', 'rural-urban' conflict' (Healy and McDonagh 2009, p. 385) and depicted the 'state's failure to foster and participate in local consultation' (Healy and McDonagh 2009 p. 387).

Given the remit of the LAGs it is unlikely that they will be in a position to undertake consultation beyond the immediate locale. Any consultation that does occur is likely to be

limited by resource and skill capacity at the local level. One possibility for expanding LAG expertise lies within the wider rural development network that connects actors across the programme. However much of the network's debate tends to be at the operational level concerning the administration of funds, eligibility criteria and generally exchanging good practice. It is unlikely to be a forum for deep-seated change relating to consultation practices.

Sustainable tourism in practice

It is perhaps only in more recent decades that tourism, and the particular challenges that this sector poses for rural areas, has been linked with the notion of sustainability. By focusing on the economic gains of rural tourism, strategies are developed that attract tourists to rural areas (for example what marketing tools to use; what range of activities need to be provided) rather than address their likely impact on arrival, thereby separating ecological and environmental concerns from economic issues. For instance the Tourism Minister in NI continues to advance ambitious plans for growth through an ongoing programme of public consultation on a new strategy and associated action plan for the period to 2020. It aims to 'double the income earned from tourism in the 10 years to 2020' through growing visitor numbers particularly from the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain (NITB 2010:13)[4]. Simultaneously, the DoE highlight the fact that 'suggested aims for Northern Ireland's national parks draw on recognition of several well-developed sustainable tourism and rural socio-economic development initiatives in areas of special landscape significance in Northern Ireland' (DoE 2004 p.14). In this way inter-relationships within sustainable tourism are not apparent: it is repeatedly understood as a disjointed concept.

A further paradox in this debate is the seeming desire to replace one vulnerable activity (agriculture) with another (tourism). The traditional occupation of agriculture has been pilloried in past decades due to its perceived unsustainable and environmentally damaging impacts but increasingly emphasis is being placed on the economic potential of tourism in rural areas, almost ignoring that 'tourism should be regarded as an extractive industrial activity' (Garrod and Fyall 1998 p.199) with wide ranging impacts on environmental, social, human, heritage and cultural resources. As NITB points out, the Mourne area is 'not just about scenery', but also about developing a mix of leisure activities including bike trails, food events and adventure trails as well as providing cultural information such as themed exhibitions and interpretation. (NITB website http://www.nitb.com/CategoryPage.aspx?path=aedbda88-d741-4bec-b324-36204c735653,9fedbeed-b4be-4637-a8d8-f3b31fdbb53e last accessed 24 July 2010).

There appears to be a general agreement among stakeholders of the need to broaden the economic base of rural areas. Expressed most recently as a key issue in the draft tourism strategy, the Working Party recommended support for 'the retention and appropriate development of existing and new industries and a diverse economy' (Recommendation one p14). However, potential contradictions emerge with many of the remaining recommendations reflecting tension between objectives of sustainable tourism among stakeholders. Number three for example draws attention to environmental protection while supporting existing farming and other businesses and diversifying the economy. The theme of further economic development is continued in numerous recommendations, including thirteen, as it draws attention to the inadequacy of the current infrastructure to meet the

needs of existing visitors. As well as considering the capacity of facilities, it specifically calls for improved transport infrastructure. Achieving all of these objectives concurrently is challenging, particularly that of ensuring on the one hand environmental features remain protected while on the other allowing economic diversification and development to take place.

In practice ensuring individual members within a partnership act within these broader aims of achieving comprehensive sustainable development is challenging as individuals often grapple with balancing self-interest with community concerns. In the Mourne consultation process there was evidence that various groups assumed viewpoints reflecting their particular domain, such as being either for or against further development and restriction. Significantly the resistance of many within the farming sector to the idea of a national park was overwhelming: 'At the open meeting held in Newry in early December farmers gave a resounding 'no' to the proposal for a national park in the Mournes although at the moment they did not know what they were saying 'no' to' (Minutes 6, 16.12.04). Entrenched positions seemed to prevail.

Locally within the new rural development programme in NI the question of vested interests surfaced at the outset. At a public consultation meeting to attract new members to the NI Local Action Groups, a farmer made his position clear: 'Well I would like you to guarantee me, as a farmer that this money is not all going to be spent on rural development. We [the farmers] face tough times at the moment and we don't want this money being spent on

projects, it needs to be invested into proper farming activity' (27.02.08, Farmer attendee to public consultation).

By way of response its official sponsors assert that the 'designation should reflect the national importance of the Mourne landscape. It must also have the support of the people who live and work in the Mourne area, as well as those who visit the area for recreation and in doing so, support the local economy' (EHS 2004). In this way the whole notion of sustainable tourism being achieved through the national park seems promising but yet what we see emerging are a number of very different contestations with no overall agreement on how the specific sustainable tourism paradigm should transpire within the Mourne area. In other words, the degree to which environmental, social, economic and cultural aspects are to be addressed remains nebulous, fragmented and potentially contradictory.

Conclusions

The existing and potential value of tourism as a rural change agent is familiar (Crouch 2006) but, despite its growing importance, there is still a dearth of specific rural tourism policies or appropriate political frameworks in place. As a result it appears that many of the old difficulties and problems inherent in earlier rural initiatives still pervade current programmes and policies. For instance there are questions regarding the power afforded to local actors/ partnerships within the new rural development programme. The preceding analysis revealed the legislative mismatch due to the ongoing Review of Public Administration in connection with the proposed national park. Achieving economic diversification through a LEADER methodology will only be attainable if the policy

infrastructure is compatible. This requires intervention from beyond the programme, certainly from regional and European governments. Otherwise the programme will be in constant tension with policies that weaken its very existence. The State not only initiates regional co-operation and therefore local governance, but as Bocher reminds us 'regional cooperation still needs an incentive from outside' (2008 p.385). It is imperative that this incentive is conducive to any activity that is promoted within territorial programmes, be they for sustainable tourism or rural development per se. In fact, whether it is at global, national or local level, the development of sustainable rural tourism, however defined, suggests at minimum the need for synergy of purpose within and between communities, vested interests, individuals, state bodies and other stakeholders.

If we accept that different groups value different aspects of sustainable tourism, we must also accept that there will be conflict between these various groups. What needs to be realised is that while a structured group approach may be the way to develop and promote rural tourism, creating inter-community co-operation and collaboration will be a complex and difficult process (Heneghan 2002). To avoid entrenched posturing among stakeholders, conditions need to be created whereby they can work in a truly collaborative manner. Adaptive management is attuned to the importance of social dynamics while also embracing social memory and the different forms of knowledge that actors bring to a particular process (Folke et al. 2005). Moreover it is likely to require major cultural shifts within the organisations involved if they are to adopt new ways of working to generate new knowledge.

This case study reveals how conflict is inevitable within the current European rural development framework as particular groups strive to achieve dominance. The process of identifying a sustainable tourist initiative is no easy task. It requires 'compatibility between the needs and resources of the local community, its residents and the tourists' (McAreavey et al. 2009 p231). Multiple stakeholders and a wide array of interest groups can all make legitimate claims on the concept of sustainability and on the development of a rural area. European guidance falls short in offering direction in cases where competing interests prevail (http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm 27th April 2009). The governance of national parks in England and Wales offers a somewhat limited type of solution. The Sandford Principle (Sandford Committee 1974) gives priority to conservation objectives when land use conflicts arise. But without a means whereby conflict can be negotiated and where ultimate priorities remain unknown or at the very least fragmented, implementing initiatives with competing interests could jeopardize opportunities for positive change. Understanding this and realising the interrelationship between tourism, the environment and local communities is of crucial importance. Collaboration and consultation with stakeholders, however complex, are a critical starting point to any long term perspective of what could be termed a successful sustainable rural tourism approach, but more deep seated changes are necessary.

Perhaps the question for the new rural development actors is less about prioritising between the economic, conservation, environmental, social or even cultural interests and more about finding new ways of framing the challenges facing rural communities. Otherwise there is a danger that debate will not progress from that of earlier rural development programmes and

rural tourism will continually be interpreted as a multi-sectoral concept rather than something that is genuinely interrelated. As institutional arrangements stand fragmentation will prevail, thereby implying that the tensions that rippled through the Working Party will emerge within LAGs, such as the conflict between economic development and landscape aesthetics whereby 'Some wanted to see a proposal that would stop inappropriate developments being built in the area, while a significant number were concerned that there would be increased planning restrictions' (MNPWP p.29). Consequently individuals will continue to protect their own narrow self-interests rather than participating in a process that genuinely attempts to generate knowledge, share learning and ultimately achieve lasting change. Central to such re-framing in order to re-define the terms of engagement are issues of trust, micro-politics and power (McAreavey 2006).

The influence of policy must not be overlooked: it has the potential to provide direction on strategic priorities for cases where conflict will inevitably arise. Policy coherency will also ensure compatibility across different interventions. At an institutional level certain alterations are required to cope with adaptive approaches. Rhetoric must correspond to institutional capacity otherwise the transmission of correct signals is empty and potentially counter-productive and therefore pointless. This analysis suggests that a number of fundamental modifications could provide a starting point. Possible changes might involve organisational adjustments among participating agencies to re-shape the way in which sustainable rural tourism is understood and practiced. Inherent shift within government is required to move away from regional centralism (which in the context of NI would necessitate a review of its civil service). Such a move would offer a glimmer of hope for the

new rural development programme and a real possibility for its liberation from some of the old challenges. Ultimately if central government does not sign up to finding new ways of working and if in fact it is intent on using these type of policy interventions by ticking boxes, delivering project outputs and measurable outcomes, then it is highly unlikely that within the timeframe afforded to such programmes that we will witness anything other than the tried and tested project solutions. Once again opportunities for lasting change within rural communities will be overlooked.

[1]Pillar One of the CAP is concerned with agricultural market support and direct payments, namely the Single Payment Scheme (CEC, 2005).

[2]Ascertaining figures is difficult as, unlike the other signature projects, there is no single point at which all visitors to the area congregate, such as a Visitors Centre or a central car park. These figures are collected by volunteers for the Heritage Trust.

[3]These were aligned to clusters rather than single councils in anticipation of the implementation of new administrative boundaries that were due to be implemented originally in 2011, now in 2015 as a result of a review of public administration in NI.

[4]There is currently little indication on where these expected tourists will visit, but with enduring emphasis on the significance of the signature projects, it could be reasonably deduced that they will remain a central part of the strategy.

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