

THE FUTURE OF RURAL AREAS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Civil society has multiple meanings: the social space of individuals, associations of reciprocity, ideological struggle, a contribution to social cohesion and social justice, an arena of interactions between government, business and community.

Strategic planning has multiple purposes: guidance for public sector investment in infrastructure and services; the spatial allocation of public sector support to reduce spatial inequalities; indicative guidance for private sector investment; public / private collaboration in development; rationalised resource allocations across space and within government policies and programmes; a level of certainty and consistency in decision making within and across sectors; spatial guidance for land use management, including the content of development plans and related development control decision-making; a long term action plan for the implementation of the strategic vision.

Citizen participation is the glue that can connect civil society and strategic planning: Rights based participation; functional participation through consultation; social learning participation through stakeholder interaction and shared dialogue.

Participatory planning is vital for the future of rural areas: This plays out at multiple spatial scales:

- the transnational scale, for example, the European Citizens' Panel initiative;
- the cross-border scale, for example, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- the multi-community scale involving collaboration;
- the small town / village scale;
- within the open countryside with dispersed patterns of living and working.

Requirements: a commitment to community development processes and strategic planning toolkits which collectively seek to build the capacity of individuals and organisations. The goal is to build successful rural communities by bridging top-down and bottom-up perspectives on facilitating change.

The development agenda: must combine economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions; it must go beyond agriculture and focus on poor people and poor places; must have a strong focus on potential not just problems; must embrace partnership governance perhaps requiring institutional reform; must have access to funding from multiple sources; must be strategy – projects linkages and a long term commitment.

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September 2007

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