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## Social impacts of forestry: A case study approach

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- ▶ *The social impact of forestry is more positive in areas with a long history of forest cover than in those that have been recently afforested.*
- ▶ *Stakeholders want to see more broadleaves planted.*
- ▶ *Consultation with stakeholders improves the social impact of forestry.*

### Background

Studies concerning the social impact of forestry have been less numerous than those dealing with the ecological and economic impacts, primarily because of the earlier over-riding emphasis placed on the economic aspects. Yet, as Slee et al. (2004) outline, forests may generate social values, or be connected with people's lives, in ways that contribute to, or deduct from, social well-being. Thus in examining whether forests are being sustainably managed it is necessary to take into account social impacts. One means of assessing these impacts is to investigate how local stakeholders perceive forestry as part of their social and physical environment (Wiersum and Elands 2002).

### The study

The social impacts of forestry were investigated in five case study areas: Arigna in Co Leitrim, Shillelagh in Co Wicklow, Newmarket in Co Cork, Causeway and Brosna, both in Co Kerry. The five case study areas were chosen primarily for their contrasting histories of forest cover.

The interview data for this study were gathered and analyzed using grounded theory, a qualitative, inductive approach to understanding social phenomena. The interviewing process is used to identify sociologically relevant categories representative of the phenomena under study. In this approach, insights emerge from the data, in contrast to testing data against predetermined hypotheses. Typically, observed patterns emerge early in the data collection and are then tested with additional observations. Data collection is suspended only when patterns stabilize and no novel information is forthcoming from later observations (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In order to reflect the variety of opinions and concerns in the five case study areas, stakeholders were divided into three categories:

1. **Producers (P):** people deriving their living from the land (e.g. farmers and foresters);

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2. **Consumers (C):** people living in or using the area but not deriving their incomes from the land (e.g. community members and visitors);
3. **Decision makers (DM):** people involved in public policy and lobbying (e.g. councillors, officers from administrations, local group representatives, NGOs, etc.).

The identification and selection of individuals in each stakeholder category was initially done using local and regional key informants. These included representatives from organisations such as Teagasc, the Forest Service, County Boards and Councils, and locally based rural development organisations. The initial group of respondents then guided the interviewer to further contacts, a process known as the ‘snowball effect’. An *aide-mémoire* was used to conduct the interview but the discourse was essentially a co-construction between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer aimed to cover the objectives of the research including:

- ▶ What is the perception of the person of the rural environment she/he lives in?
- ▶ What role(s) does forestry (and specifically the amount and type of forest cover) play in it?
- ▶ How can this role be optimised or reinforced?

On average 34 persons were interviewed in each case study. Unless interviewees opposed it each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The analysis of the interviews allowed themes in relation to forestry within each of the case study areas to emerge. Where appropriate, direct quotes from those interviewed are presented to illustrate these themes.

## Emerging themes

### *Forestry and employment*

*There wouldn't be that many people employed in forestry now compared to 10 to 20 years ago because there is not that much planting going on now. There are just a few people involved in forest maintenance and most of the harvesting and cutting is done by contractors. Not necessarily local people...So I suppose the forest economy is very small even in this area*

One of the key roles forestry is perceived to play in rural areas is employment generation. However, in the case study areas, the economic value of forestry as a source of local employment was hardly ever mentioned and when raised as an issue, the employment benefit from forestry was often contested. In Shillelagh, employment linked with forestry was perceived to be generated only through the processing and timber craft sector. In Newmarket, employment associated with forestry was considered a feature of the past. The absence of processing activity within the case study area (CSA) probably contributes to this negative image. In Arigna, the general perception among consumers and producers was that commercial forestry based on Sitka spruce plantations generated little local employment. It was interesting to observe that direct employment was not what people necessarily perceive as the most important benefit associated with forestry, even though this is one of the standard criteria used to assess the socio-economic benefit of the forest sector. Indeed, forestry in the context of rural development is essentially perceived within the perspective of landscape quality rather than in the context of an economic activity.

### *Forestry and the landscape*

*Blanket afforestation is using non-indigenous species that are alien to the people and alien to the landscape*

In some case studies (e.g. Newmarket and Arigna), there was an overall perception among local people that forestry does not belong to the traditional Irish landscape or rather to the representation they have of the Irish landscape. However, forestry in this context almost always referred to commercial Sitka spruce plantations and the perception of mixed and broadleaved forests is generally more positive. In Shillelagh, forestry is an accepted part of the landscape and those interviewed were happy with the current level of forest cover. Conifers comprise a similar proportion of the forest estate in the case studies yet those interviewed in Shillelagh seem content with the composition of the estate. Yet, even here, people alluded to the importance of keeping forestry development under control so as to not negatively impact on the natural environment and the scenery in the area. The key difference between the case study areas is the rate at which afforestation has progressed. In Newmarket, the majority of the estate is less than 20 years old, reflecting

the rapid increase in planting since grants were made available. Similarly in Arigna much of the planting has taken place since the 1970s. In contrast, the age-class of the forest estate in Shillelagh is more balanced, arising from the longer history of forest cover in the area and the more gradual rate of afforestation. Hellström and Reunala (1995) have studied the origin of forest conflicts in Europe and the USA over the period 1950-1983 and found that the speed of intensification was often a source of conflict and that this intensification was frequently associated with the 'desolation of the countryside' (i.e. in Scandinavian countries and France). Similar terminology describing forests as 'isolating' communities was used by some of those interviewed in Newmarket and the more heavily afforested areas of Kerry. In the Kerry studies when people were asked for their opinion of the appropriate afforestation rate for an area or region, their answers tended to focus on the type of trees planted with blanket planting of large parcels of Sitka spruce being more objectionable than the planting of a variety of species, particularly broadleaves.

### *Forestry and farm land ownership*

One issue which emerged particularly in the Kerry cases studies was the relationship of tree planting to farming as an occupation and way of life in a rapidly changing rural economy. Two schools of thought emerged among interviewees on this issue. One group felt that, in the context of the rationalization of dairy farming and the dramatic shift to part time farming, planting trees on marginal farm land represented a way to keep land in farmer's families even if primary incomes were being derived elsewhere. The other school of thought held that, in a practical sense, any shift in land use to forestry would be very difficult to reverse and the process of afforestation was accelerating the decline of the family farm. The former school of thought was more broadly held but the latter held more sway among those in more economically disadvantaged and more heavily planted areas.

### *Forestry and communication*

Arigna and its surrounds represent a part of Ireland where antagonism towards afforestation and forestry has prevailed for many years. This level of negative feeling towards forestry in the area has declined but not disappeared. Part of

the reason for this is the improved level of communication with Coillte identified during the course of the interviews. In particular, the presence of a local forester, clearly identifiable by stakeholders as the contact person to whom comments and complaints can be lodged, is of key importance. Furthermore, the existence of social and environmental panels within Coillte's organisation has provided a platform for discussion.

These panels are intended to provide a consultation forum whereby environmental, social and community bodies can provide information and promote their interests in co-operation with Coillte management. The panels also provide an opportunity for Coillte to receive advice, views and suggestions and for stakeholders to receive information about Coillte's policies, plans and practices. These initiatives were introduced as part of the process of Coillte receiving certification from the Forest Stewardship Council that its forests are well managed. In contrast, when private afforestation projects are initiated consumers find it hard to identify an interlocutor and have no one to consult with when projects commence.

In Newmarket also, the lack of consultation and the approach to planning were criticised. Even the foresters surveyed in Newmarket recognised that greater consultation with the public is required. However, it is not clear whether consultation meant the same thing to foresters and the general public. As was evident from some of their comments, the general public, including farmers, wanted to influence which lands should be afforested and with what species. From the foresters' perspective, consultation may have meant greater dialogue with the local community as to the choice of species planted but without giving the local community the power of veto. Nevertheless, a key element of sustainable forest management is community participation and consultation with stakeholder groups.

It is a well documented fact that lack of consultation can lead to increased conflicts and misunderstandings (Hellström and Reunala 1995; Hellström and Ryttilä 1998) and that a more collaborative and participatory approach can help in resolving them (Daniels and Walker 2001). Slee (2001), reporting on the use of 'Regional Forest Agreements' in Australia, in solving production-environment conflicts, points out that taking account of stakeholders interests and using a participatory approach in a regional policy process can help to improve the public

perception of forest policy issues: ‘policy determination can thus be seen as a negotiated outcome between different communities of interest and public agencies, and less as a top-down dictate’.

### Forestry and its potential

One of the aspects teased out during the course of the interviews related to the future role of forestry in the case study areas. What emerged was that many of those who had expressed negative opinions of forestry were able, and willing, to describe a form of forestry that was acceptable to them. It was felt that more space should be given to broadleaved and mixed forests and that farm forestry should continue to be encouraged albeit on land not suitable for agriculture. There was also an acceptance that broadleaves cannot be introduced everywhere because of site constraints. However, some argued that broadleaves could be introduced on suitable sites and that this introduction may be of both commercial and ecological benefit in the future, if a long term management approach is adopted.

*The main argument against planting broadleaves is that it is not commercial. That it is not sustainable because rotations are much longer... But you have to take a longer term approach with broadleaves*

In Shillelagh, the wish that more broadleaves be planted was also expressed. However, here the opinions of the future role of forestry were much more positive with interviewees hoping that the existing knowledge and management skills within the area would be built on and exploited to a greater extent. In the Kerry cases there was also enthusiasm for the potential of forests as an alternative energy source.

## Conclusion

If there was one overall theme that emerged from these case studies, it was that “one size does not fit all” in terms of locally socially acceptable planting of forests. Rather there appears to be fairly strong sentiment for a stronger linkage between the community development needs of a local area and the nature and extent of forestry planting in that area. This is captured in a quote from one of the Kerry cases:

*Yeah I’d like to see a more localized approach [to afforestation]...The basic..., principle of forestry is the right tree in the right place and we’d like to see the right afforestation in the right place, the right scale and the right type of forest management in particular areas. Not every area is the same.*

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