

Harnessing environment policy & practice for a sustainable future

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Environment Policy & Practice in Cork:

- Environment development in Cork has been facilitated by the EcCoWell approach as a partnership for collaboration
- The results in this integrated approach to green, healthy, learning cities which was reflected in the *Cork Call for Action on Learning Cities* coming from the UNESCO Conference hosted by Cork in 2017
- This paper captures the challenges of reflecting environment policy locally in Cork with some insights for a better future
- OECD has argued that an inclusive green recovery from the pandemic is possible with broader well-being goals at its core

Inspired by the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, the founders of Cork Environmental Forum commenced the organisation's quarter of a century journey in 1995 with high hopes and ambitions to motivate change, protect the environment and implement sustainable development through the agenda 21 process at a local level in the Cork region.

In 2020 the Forum marks its 25th Anniversary. It was set up with support from a visionary local government leader and is persisting primarily with resourcing from local and national government, with an active membership and committed volunteers.

Ireland has a long history of active environmental NGOs with An Taisce, The National Trust for Ireland, founded over 70 years ago in 1948, and others such as Birdwatch in existence over 50 years. However, there was an upsurge in activity following the Earth Summit of 1992, which coincided with EU LEADER programmes, with a focus on sustainable development, as well as the emergence of new networks such as the Irish Environmental Network and the Sustainable Water Network.

The 2015 ratification of Local Agenda 2030, more commonly referenced as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has enhanced the global framework which has resulted in more traction across all nations, a reprioritisation of development that delivers for all, with a slow trickle down impetus for agencies and organisations to incorporate the goals in plans and delivery of work programmes.¹ The goals are decipherable and with clear targets have an easy applicability for all countries, and all sectors, whereas heretofore there was more emphasis on developing states. The underpinning of deliverables is dependent on the Partnership for the Goals, SDG 17.

EcCoWell Cork a Partnership for Collaboration

In Cork, the introduction of the EcCoWell concept in 2012 by George Osborne, guest speaker at Cork Lifelong Learning Festival and invitations to key sectoral leaders by Tina Neylon, the Festival's

¹ Ireland has one of the lowest awareness levels across the EU with just 36% of the population ever having heard of the Goals according to - Eurobarometer, 2017, EU Citizens' views on development, cooperation and aid. https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/sp455-development-aid-final_en.pdf

Coordinator, ignited such a partnership through EcCoWell Cork. This collaboration has led to a holistic approach and the realisation of the co-benefits of cross-sectoral goals across education, health, environment, arts, culture, economy with community and social inclusion overarching considerations. Cork had in 2012 received the designation of a **WHO Healthy City** and EcCoWell was an ideal vehicle to highlight and incorporate those aims.

The initial public awareness raising conference at Triskel Christchurch in March 2013, heard from Peter Kearns, PASCAL, of the rationale and the benefits of the EcCoWell approach and gave space for participants to experiment and reflect on how we could practically apply it in Cork. From an environmental perspective the deliverable co-benefits for environment action and preservation in meeting health, learning, economic, art, culture and well-being targets was readily identifiable.

Later that year in September, Cork hosted an International Conference **Cities for the Future: Learning from the Global to the Local**. Jose Ignacio Arriba, Vitoria Gasteiz City Council gave an impressive and inspiring input on the theme of “**A City on the Road to Sustainable Development**” which had been acknowledged for its work by the prestigious title: [European Green Capital in 2012](#). It was the third city awarded this title, joining Stockholm and Hamburg, very much due to its emphasis on accessibility for all its population to quality green spaces, to addressing the fragmentation of the habitats of flora and fauna, incorporating actions to combat light pollution and promotion and support for green and circular businesses.

On foot of this Cork City Council made applications to both the global [100ResilientCities](#) programme and the **EU Green Capital Programme** in 2015, with direct input and support from CEF. Whilst not successful per se, Cork received a mid-point average score on the Green Capital application. However, as the programme highlighted, being an applicant and receiving very pertinent feedback is in itself a useful way of assessing progress on the [indicators](#) and on local implementation to support delivery of the 7th EU Environmental Action Programme, by identifying gaps and areas requiring further attention and work.

EcCoWell Cork played a crucial role in progressing the development and successful designation of Cork as a **UNESCO City of Learning** in 2015, followed by a successful bid to host the **3rd UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in 2017**. The Conference culminated with the [Cork Call to Action](#), which adopted the EcCoWell vision of integrated development in “green, healthy, learning cities”.

EcCoWell Cork has been proactive in showcasing the work across sectors and the real benefit of the multitude of events it organised was the creation of the space for people from all sectors to input, to meet, to learn and to innovate. Inputs from CEF ranged from themes such as water quality, to light pollution, green spaces, social and circular economy.² The EcCoWell approach has spawned a number of city-wide partnerships and projects, such as the Cork Food Policy Council. Cork was the first city in Ireland to initiate a programme of activities for Urban October with EcCoWell as the driver of this project. EcCoWell facilitated many discussions and dialogue on pertinent and emerging topics, not least the boundary extension of the city.

So EcCoWell Cork has for the past 7 years shown how a cross-sectoral partnership can successfully work and deliver many actions, help shift thinking and paradigms and support the emergence of new initiatives to further meet the commitments of the Call to Action.

² Partnership with EU DG Grow, CRNI, Southern Waste Region and Cork City Council - crni.ie/presentations.

Relevance and Resonance of the Environmental Agenda in Cork

The vision of CEF is for a sustainable world which prioritises and protects environmental quality, and restores habitats and biodiversity, where consumption and economics take cognisance of the limitations of our one planet and where there is a fairer and more equitable share of the earth's resources.

In the 25 years since CEF was established the need for greater understanding, action, protection and restoration of our environment has not diminished with the efforts of CEF and others, but rather has become even more acute. Air and water quality is suffering more and more the effects of pollution from traffic, the burning of fossil fuels, intensive agriculture, industry and bad practices in a range of areas, including the lack of adequate wastewater treatment facilities. Soils and habitats are depleted, and increased flood events are being addressed by destructive hard engineering, rather than natural flood and catchment management, and there is even greater social inequality.

However, inroads have been made at local level where other positive collaborations have also borne fruit. Through a successful funding application to an EU Sustainable Urban Mobility Programme, CEF was instrumental in the setting-up of the **Transport and Mobility Forum (TMF)** in 2013. The TMF is a cross sectoral stakeholder group promoting and delivering actions on active travel and sustainable modes of movement as well as inputting into policy. Traction on the overlap and co-benefits of environment and health in national programmes resulted in 2018 in securing resources for a coordinator for this Forum. The TMF has successfully continued to run "Mix Your Mode" which brings a focus to mixed means of travel and for the past number of years includes a Seminar that allows for CPD accreditation from professional engineering and planning bodies. It has engaged for successive years in the global PARKing day, a movement to transform parking spaces to parklets one space at a time. Cork got its first semi-permanent parklet through resourcing from the city as part of its placemaking fund, which has been a real success. Sustainable Travel/ Car Free Day has been highlighted by CEF's Annual Rebel Pedal since 2001 (Cork is known as the Rebel County) and is just part of a much wider programme of activities for Mobility Week annually in September.

Raising awareness, providing information and opportunities to engage in activities that support the achievement of Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (2015) is a key feature of our work and is particularly relevant in the delivery of the Global Action Plan Greener Living Programme. In 2019 our anchor education programme, the Greener Living Course, based on the Global Action Plan Eco-Team training, branched out to provide courses to Primary School teachers as well as a growth in requests for the programme from communities and groups. CEF, as a member of GAP International³, is able to avail of the learnings and insights of this network of 16 countries across the globe.

We are involved with other annual events that engage with the public and highlight key environmental themes, including working with Mahon Youth Group as part of the St. Patrick's Day Parade float or celebrating World Oceans and World Environment Day. Last year we partnered with the French Film Festival in March and with Indie Cork in October to facilitate panel discussions following screenings of *Le Temps des Forêts* and *Losing Alaska*. Film is a great medium to further explore environmental themes and issues.

Ireland held its first Biodiversity Conference in February 2019 which was an inspiring start of the year event and the presentation by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, was mesmerising in its hard hitting accuracy regarding our universal lack of protection of the natural world – "if we were coal miners, we would be up to our necks in dead canaries".

³ <https://www.globalactionplan.com/>

The Citizen Science Annual Coastwatch Survey engages people all around the Cork coastline and it is heartening to see increased interest from schools. Last year's survey coincided with the aftermath of Storm Lorenzo which saw many Portuguese Men of War and "By the Wind Sailors" being washed up on the shore, real time evidence of changing weather patterns due to climate change.

Collaborative efforts with others were also strengthened with Green Spaces for Health, Cork Climate Action, the Cork Food Policy Council, Cork Sky Friendly Campaign together with workshops and activities with the Sustainable Water Network, Coastwatch, the Community Resources Network of Ireland and the National Water Forum.

CEF and other partners from Cork Sky Friendly Campaign attended the 14th International Annual Dark Sky Symposium which took place in the beautiful villages of Newtown and Mulranny and Ballycroy National Park part of the Mayo Dark Sky Reserve. It was a wonderfully informative and engaging event with presenters from EU Countries and the US reflecting themes from the importance of dark skies from human and wildlife health perspectives, to cultural and space exploration.

CEF's Awards Ceremony is an annual end of year highlight, with 2019's recipients reflecting youthful activism alongside the hard slog of decades of work by very worthy recipients across all categories of the awards.⁴

CEF Chairperson James O'Donovan pointed to *"the strengths we have in Ireland to make the positive changes required and this event is a recognition of just some of those contributing to this trajectory."* Whilst not shying away from the dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change that challenges us all, as Co-ordinator of CEF I said *"this is a chance to pause and reflect on what is being achieved by all the individuals, groups and organisations being honoured here this evening."*

CEF is inspired by the work and campaigns of many others to protect our environment; for instance in 2019 the success of Save Our Skibbereen in stopping a plastic factory, to Save Cork City engaging people against the flood plans for Cork. However, most especially our member group Bantry Bay Protect Our Native Kelp who, whilst still mired in the legal system, got a judgement through the judicial review process that there is not a valid licence in place to mechanically harvest kelp. The activism and wake up calls by the youth through the climate marches and Fridays4Future demonstrations on a weekly basis was a particular highlight as they have kept the momentum going and continue to shine a light on the need to act on climate and biodiversity loss.

Action and Policy Gaps

The lowlight of the last year for CEF was the closure of the Boomerang Enterprises project which it had successfully set-up and managed for almost 6 years. This social enterprise had diverted over 45,000 mattresses from landfill, provided 5 direct jobs and placement based work and training to 60 people. It had increased earned income from a low base of less than €10k Year 1 to €160k in 2019.

⁴ The CEF Environmental Awards reflect the 4 pillar structure of the organisation Private, Public and Community & Voluntary Sectors as well as Individual with a Sustainable Agriculture Award introduced in 2017.

Challenges from full employment in the economy, and the private sector getting involved in mattress shredding, meant difficult trading for the social enterprise with no grant funding, excepting a partial contribution to employment under the Community Services Programme. It was a painful and very disappointing outcome but the situation, without some small level of State support, was untenable and threatened the viability of CEF itself. This is a useful case study to highlight the pitfalls and policy gaps that exist. In fact it is only now that national policy and supports are being formulated to support social and circular enterprises.

The ongoing lowlight is always the continuing destruction of our environment. This ranges from the unnecessary felling of trees, which we saw a lot of in 2019, to the resistance to end overfishing by our government. The Irish Government ignores the science every time, in particular in relation to Total Allowable Catch (TAC) levels, when the EU Common Fisheries Policy is agreed. The EU CAP Policy together with the Irish Government Agriculture Policies, Food Harvest 2020 and now Foodwise 2025 is the main driver of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation in Ireland with only 7% of the land achieving Good Environmental Status.

The entire sector was disconcerted and troubled with proposed changes to the Housing, Planning and Development Bill 2019 which would erode citizens' abilities to contest planning. In June 2020 this is currently in abeyance, due to the recent election and lack of a new government.

Poor levels of resourcing for the entire environmental NGO sector is a constant disappointment and a further cut by one of our main funders is truly disheartening at a time when we need to be most active. This limits the capacity to deliver for organisations such as CEF without whom delivery of Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Plans and the Sustainable Development Goals remains a challenge and Ireland has been shown to be a laggard in both regards.

Peripheral Context of the Green Agenda in Policy

So Cork, rightly so, is very proud to be a Healthy City and a Learning City, and strives to be amongst other things a SMART City but, aside from earlier applications, has not shown any real commitment since 2015 to being a Green or Sustainable City. It is not alone in this, despite all of the policies and the growing realisation of the impacts of climate change, resource depletion and biodiversity loss, it has been difficult also for such a green country as Ireland to grasp the green agenda.

The nature of a centralised system of government in Ireland, which in the main controls budgets as well, has not delivered well for local governance. In fact subsidiarity was diluted further in 2014 by the Local Government Reform Act which abolished elected Town Councils. Unlike most other European cities, Ireland does not have elected Mayors.⁵ This reduces the leadership and vision for change and, in the case of the environment, if it is not a priority within the vision of the City Manager or the elected councillors it has little hope of being prioritised, reflected in plans or adequately resourced.

⁵ In a referendum as part of the local elections in May 2019 Cork and Waterford rejected directly-elected mayor proposal but Limerick voted in favour.

Cork Environmental Forum at the end of last year still had hopes that there may be more of a concerted effort to accelerate delivery of the green agenda, with continuing calls from the youth, a national election on the horizon, the scale and devastation of the bush fires in Australia having global resonance and talks of a robust EU Green New Deal.

COVID-19 a Game-changer for the Future

As the New Year rang out across the globe little did any of us know how swiftly change would come at an entire global level though the impact of the Corona Virus.

Thus far the virus has had a four-fold impact:

Firstly, the direct loss of life, the pain and suffering for individual families and communities and the staff at the coalface in hospitals and care homes. In Ireland grieving is very much a communal experience and the new norm of social distancing, lack of touch and intimacy has had a toll on the bereaved and those close friends and family who can't be together to honour the deceased in the normal way.

Secondly the virus has been the big revelation about so many things, not least the inequalities across the globe, including in countries such as Ireland. We have had three months of lockdown and the experiences by and large have reflected the socio-economic status of people. For those of us who are better off with our own homes, gardens, money, it has not been so difficult, but for people cramped in small apartments, those disadvantaged or experiencing difficulties and with lack of access to green space or the technology many of us take for granted, it has been nightmarish.

Thirdly, and the area that has sustained many and given hope for the future, are the positive benefits to nature and our environment. Across the globe for the first time in living memory many cities are clear of smog, the lack of air and road traffic has reduced CO2 levels dramatically and as a result the air is cleaner. We are really heartened by how quickly people have adapted to working from home, reducing consumption, engaging with nature and renewing or developing practical skills.

Lastly, the reaction of governments to quickly step in with financial supports so that people could manage having lost jobs or that companies could retain staff has been admirable. The "Covid-19 payment" in Ireland is the nearest experiment we have had to a Universal Basic Income. There is no doubt that the financial impacts for all countries will be extensive, long-lasting and painful, but there is also this one opportunity to change the narrative and the systemic failings of the economic model. Everywhere there is a call to not revert to business as usual.

Lessons and Legacies

The Covid-19 unprecedented experience has shown that real and lasting change is possible. Mass behavioural change is possible with clear messaging, understanding and political will. The call we hear most is the need to embrace the Green New Deal and provide a Green stimulus. Yet there is the economic imperative and push by many to take the familiar path and rush to revert to the business as usual model.

However, as we all become expert at on-line forums such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, we are exploring alternatives. On June 5th CEF is partnering with the Foundation for Economic Sustainability (FEASTA) to host a webinar "Beyond GDP, Governance and Budgeting for Well-being." The aim is to learn from work done elsewhere and the opportunities that now exist for criteria and measurements that reflect much better than the crude instrument of GDP how well people really are doing.

As Ireland's 5 phase emergence from lockdown begins there has been a push for "Streets for People" and for cities to give more space to people to allow social distancing whilst travelling more actively by walking and cycling. The co-benefits of active travel are well articulated and this will we hope lead to a "new norm" for travel especially in cities and urban areas.

The links between our destruction and the emergence of this virus have been well documented in the past few months and, like climate change, the science is indisputable. The EU has just published its Biodiversity Strategy and the Farm to Fork Strategy both with the potential for encouraging deliverables if implemented. We recently celebrated UN Biodiversity Day on 22nd May and UN World Environment Day on 5th June with a theme of Biodiveristy.⁶ People have been able to slow down, probably for the first time in too busy lives, and have had the time and ability to notice nature on their doorsteps. By reconnecting with nature there is the opportunity for more people to fight for its protection and restoration. As David Attenborough has always stressed people can't protect what they can't see or care for.

EcCoWell Cork has organised an on-line event in June on lessons and legacies ranging from working from home, to mental health and wellbeing, to changes in the way we travel, to technology gaps and community responses as well as reflecting on the social contract around art and culture which has also been a key support area from music to visiting art galleries and museums on-line.

EcCoWell Cork was set up with cross sectoral representation with all those engaging having total commitment in trying to make the concept work for a better Cork. UNESCO's Cork Call to Action includes three areas that have been the focus of work since 2017:

24. promote equitable and inclusive learning and living environments by eradicating all forms of discrimination and widening access to learning opportunities for all members of society, particularly for vulnerable groups;
25. promote green and healthy learning and living environments by combating climate change, pollution and poor health conditions and fostering safe drinking water and sanitation, sustainable mobility and good health services;
26. promote opportunities for decent work and entrepreneurship, including enhancing skills development and securing safe and healthy wo conditions for everyone, particularly in the informal work sector.

The future is very uncertain but the future will be different in the short to medium term as we have to adjust to living with the virus perhaps for 12 months, perhaps for years. This is an opportunity for change like no other as it is being experienced on a global scale yet has turned the focus to living locally and with changed priorities.

People have had to rely on their own sense of resilience and innovation, this has had a very empowering effect. There are many possibilities to co-design the future, perhaps a hybrid model of home working, reduced travel, sharing space, a resurgence of growing and practical skills, matched by a shift to new models of governance and measurement of well-being. As well as a refocusing on low impact and low carbon localised living in general.

Our deep observation in the study of natural forms gives us a paradigm that takes us back to human culture and the aspiration to preserve the environment in human lives that integrate the great themes of the human story. The EcCoWell story resulted from this perception.

⁶ In 2020, the **theme is biodiversity** – a concern that is both urgent and existential. Recent events, from bushfires in Brazil, the United States, and Australia, to locust infestations across East Africa – and now, a global disease pandemic – demonstrate the interdependence of humans and the webs of life, in which they exist.

The Environment Challenge: An inclusive green recovery from the pandemic is possible

OECD, with its Green Growth strategy, has explored the options for a green, sustainable future. Recovery from the pandemic provides an opportunity. On 22 April 2020, the Secretary-General of OECD put this challenge in the following terms:

As we move towards the next phase of the COVID-19 crisis in many countries, governments have a unique chance for a green and inclusive recovery that they must seize – a recovery that not only provides income and jobs, but also has broader well-being goals at its core, integrates strong climate and biodiversity action, and builds resilience. Stimulus packages need to be aligned with ambitious policies to tackle climate change and environmental damage. Only such an approach can deliver win-win-win policies for people, planet and prosperity.