

Development of an Area Based Eco-Label as Instrument of Sustainable Regional Development

Towards a Holistic Approach

Wie gestaltet sich Nachhaltige Regionalentwicklung im Europa der Regionen? Beispielhaft werden die Ergebnisse eines Pilotprojekts für ein raumbezogenes Umweltkennzeichen in Irland vorgestellt. Der „Beatha“-Award wird anhand eines Kriterienkatalogs an Regionen vergeben, die eine hochwertige Umwelt mit einer glaubhaften Selbstbindung der lokalen Akteure, diese nachhaltig zu schützen, verknüpfen. Als Grundlage dient ein Umweltressourcenaudit.

Von Seán Regan

The four pilot areas of the Area-based Eco-Labeling demonstration project are situated on the west coast of Ireland - west Donegal, west Mayo, Connemara and Galway city in Galway, and the Brandon area of the Dingle peninsula in Kerry (see figure 1). With the exception of Galway city, all areas are rural with a certain similarity in socio-economic profile. All suffer rural decline with decreasing and ageing populations and lack of services. All are predominately agricultural, but with poor land. The environmental and scenic importance of these areas is reflected in the number of designations under the EU Habitats Directive and Birds Directive in the pilot areas.

The project was implemented over the period 1995 to 1998 and jointly funded by the European LIFE programme and a partnership of Irish local and regional authorities (1). It aimed to establish criteria and a methodology for giving recognition, in the form of an area based Eco-Label (which was to be known as the 'Beatha') to areas which have:

- a high quality environment, where such is broadly defined to include the natural, cultural, built, and socio-economic environment and
- a demonstrated commitment on the part of the local community, in partnership with the local authority, to protecting and managing that environment in a sustainable way.

It was intended to demonstrate that a high quality, well managed environment can offer economic as well as environmental benefits to the local community.

The project, officially entitled 'Tourism Eco-Labeling', originally intended to focus on using the environment as a means of marketing an area as a destination for sustainable tourism. However, it became evident in the early stages of the project that it was not realistic to expect all actors in the environment to become more environmentally proactive for the benefit of the tourism sector alone. It was also clear that 'sustainable development' of just one sector of the economy of a region is not in fact sustainable. Therefore the Eco-Label project adopted a more holistic approach. Communities recognised that marketing of local products and attracting inward investment were potential benefits of a sustainable approach to development, too.

► Definition of the Standards

The first task undertaken by the project was the definition of how to assess the environment of an area and the degree to which it is being managed sustainably. After a review of existing standards such as the Blue Flag or the European Award for the Environment, a ten element definition of an areas environment has been developed, covering Air, Built Environment, Culture, Energy, Land Use, Natural Environment, Planning, Transport, Waste, and Water.

Each of these would be considered in two stages – Essential Requirements and Quality Indicators. Essential Requirements were items such as minimum water quality standards, absence of land degradation, etc. Quality Indicators were items such as exceptional scenery, strong cultural identity, and high quality management systems. Anything lacking in Essential Requirements would result in a loss of marks, while the presence of properly managed Quality Indicators would increase an areas marks.

► Consultation and Partnership

The whole ethos of the project demanded ongoing consultation with local communities. Animation was also essential to ensuring that proper community involvement took place. To this end, seven part time local animators were engaged. Their role was to inform the local communities of the project, stimulate interest and commitment to it, and to liaise between the project headquarters and the local communities.

It was important that the project maintained a local focus, ensuring that there was a sense of ownership by the local community. Therefore, the animators worked very much on a local parish level, especially at the early stages. There were 120 local community groups involved in the project. In order to facilitate the practical working, while maintaining a local focus, these were combined into a total of 26 applicant units. In keeping with the principles of Local Agenda 21, it was necessary that the project operated locally as a partnership between the local communities and the relevant local authority. To this end each local authority appointed a Project Liaison Officer. These were in fairly senior positions in order to ensure that the project had a high profile within the local authority structure. It was important that the Liaison Officer was seen to have a commitment to the project, rather than be seen as only representing the interests of the local authority. The partnerships were kept informal at the early stages of the project and meetings were always convened by the Local Animator. It was felt that setting up a formal structure would have been counterproductive resulting in only officers such as chairperson or secretary playing any active role.

► Environmental Resource Audit

In order to assess the environment of an area and its management it was necessary to carry out an environmental resource audit. While it was important that the local community felt a strong



Figure 1: Eco-Label Pilot Areas

sense of ownership of this audit, it was also recognised that they would not have the resources, either in terms of expertise or time, to carry it out themselves. Accordingly it was decided to engage four Technical Assistants to work closely with the local communities in compilation of the environmental audit. The audit was based on the ten elements already discussed, with the addition of basic socio-economic information.

The information collected by the Technical assistant was made available on an on-going basis to the local community. This process proved very beneficial in engaging the local community, reflecting the lack of information normally available to local communities.

A major part of the process was that the local partnership would assess the local environment. In practice, the self-assessment was carried out on an ongoing basis as information was collected on the state of the local environment. From this, the partnership of the local authority and community identified what issues lay within the remit of each, and which might be outside local control. A list of improvements which could be made in the short, medium and long term was drawn up and formed part of the application for the Eco-Label.

Examples of initiatives carried out by local community groups included local composting programmes, waste audits, clean-up campaigns, publications on local culture, and establishment of working groups to study problem areas in more detail.

A panel of six independent assessors was brought together to assess the 26 applicant units for the Eco-Label(2). They were given copies of all Resource Audits and Improvement Programmes in advance of visiting the areas and meeting the local communities. Ten applicant units were successful on that occasion. A number of other areas were deemed to have minor issues to be addressed and were reassessed a number of months later with the result that five more areas were successful.

► Effects of the Eco-Label...

A vital aspect of the Eco-Label was that it was to be awarded only for a period of two to three years, and that an area could lose it if the environment deteriorated or if the Eco-Label was misused. A booklet of guiding principles was produced outlining the general approach to development to be carried out in Eco-Label areas, and giving examples of initiatives that could be car-

ried out locally. While the Eco-Label could be used on general publicity material for the area, it could not be applied to any organisation, product or service. These could, however, state that they were operating in an Eco-Label area, and perhaps give examples of their support of the Eco-Label. At the time of writing no evaluation has been carried out of the impact of the Eco-Label on the areas receiving it. Unfortunately, an application for another round of funding under LIFE has been unsuccessful, so the future of the project is unclear at this stage. Obviously, unless there is some organisation to continue the project, reassess areas, and ensure that the integrity of the Eco-Label is maintained, the project will be devalued and the Eco-Label ultimately become worthless, with the communities involved becoming disillusioned.

► ...and the Improvement Process

The impact of the process, however, has been clearly beneficial. This has been particularly so in three aspects:

- The local authorities involved have found the project very useful as a type of pilot Local Agenda 21 plan. They have also developed new and more participative ways of working with local communities.
- Local communities found the project empowering, particularly in getting direct contact with the local authority. The compilation of the Resource Audit has also been of major benefit, both in terms of making information available to local people, and in helping identify resources which could be further developed.
- A more coordinated approach to development due to the involvement of all actors in the area took place.

Anmerkungen

(1) The so called NASC-partnership consists of Údarás na Gaeltachta, the development authority for Irish language speaking areas, in association with the County Councils of Galway, Mayo, Donegal, Kerry, Meath, Galway Corporation, and the National University of Ireland, Galway.

(2) Two of the assessors were Irish and one represented the IÖW.

Der Autor

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