

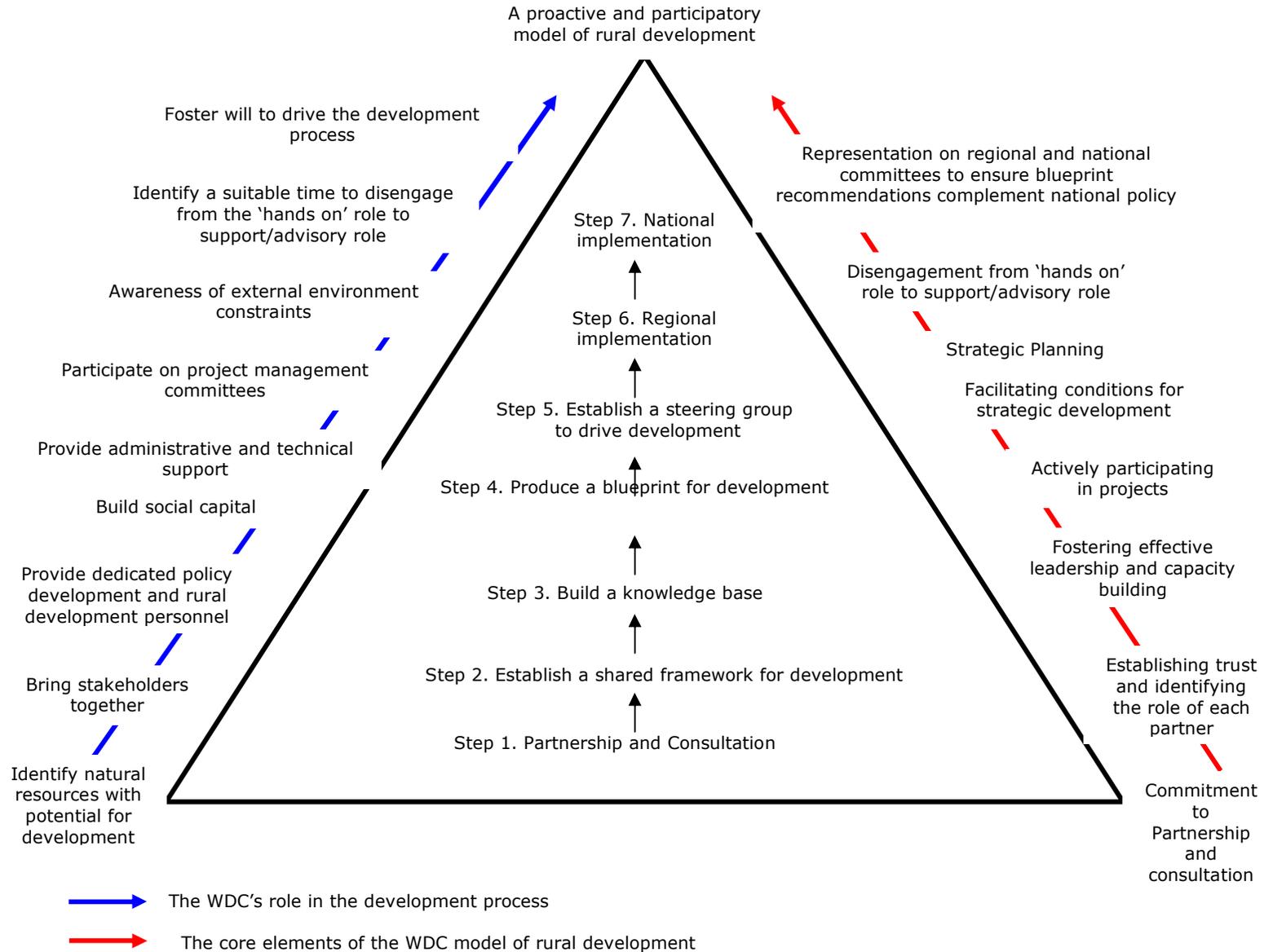
Appendix 1: The Western Development Commission (WDC) Model of Rural Development

Introduction

The WDC's approach to and experience with rural development has recently been documented and will be published later in 2006. This Appendix presents a step-by-step guide to the design, implementation and outcome of the WDC model of rural development. The WDC's role at each stage of the process is then described.

Although the WDC model is presented as a seven-step linear development process, development will seldom follow a step-by-step implementation path. Many challenges will be encountered during the implementation of the model which may involve revisiting earlier steps. The seven steps to implementing the model are illustrated in Figure 1. An outline of the core elements of the model and a description of each step in the development process is given below.

Figure 1: The WDC model of rural development



The core elements of the WDC model of rural development

The core elements of the WDC model of rural development include:

- a commitment to **partnership** and **consultation** between the public, private and community sectors
- establishing **trust** between the partners and identifying the **role** and function of each partner in the development process
- providing and **fostering effective leadership and capacity building** to the partners throughout the development process, e.g. having the training needs of personnel/boards assessed, allocating resources in budgets for training courses etc.
- **actively participating in projects** identified under strategic development programmes e.g. representation on boards and management committees, frequent communication with project personnel
- facilitating the conditions for **strategic development** e.g. identifying people who are willing to work together, achieving government and public endorsement for strategic development plans, identifying and allocating resources necessary to support partners and overseeing the implementation of strategic development projects
- **strategic planning** to ensure development projects are sustainable, innovative, achievable, do not duplicate other activities and/or projects in the region and result in an economic and social return for the Western Region
- representation on regional and national bodies/organisations to ensure regional priorities are considered in the design of **national policy** e.g. the National Organic Steering Committee and the Rural/Agri-Tourism Advisory Group.

The WDC model is distinguished by its commitment to strategic planning, partnership and sustainable development.

The WDC model of rural development: main steps

There are seven steps to implementing the WDC model of rural development (see Figure 1). These are:

- **Step one:** bring together stakeholders from the public, private and community sectors for inclusion in a **partnership** and **consultation** process.
- **Step two:** establish **trust** by facilitating the development of a shared framework for development and identifying a vision, objectives and strategies for the development of specific sectors of activity.
- **Step three:** build a knowledge base by conducting sound research, analysis and consultation, to determine strategic priorities and recommendations for the development of a specific sector of activity.
- **Step four:** produce a blueprint (Figure 3) for a specific sector of activity which recommends policy changes and presents an action plan for development.
- **Step five:** **foster effective leadership and capacity building** by establishing a multi-agency steering group (Figure 4) and/or facilitate private sector led **strategic development**

and **planning** for each sector of activity, to oversee and manage the implementation of the recommendations set out in a blueprint for development.

- **Step six: actively participate in projects**, implement recommendations set out in a blueprint for development at regional level and identify a suitable stage in the development process in which to **disengage** from the more ‘hands on’ support offered to the steering groups to a more supportive role.
- **Step seven:** ensure blueprint recommendations are taken into account in the preparation, development and ongoing implementation of **national policy**.

A step-by-step guide to implementing the WDC model of rural development

Under the terms of the Western Development Commission (WDC) Act 1998, the purpose of the WDC is to promote, foster and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region. The WDC’s model of rural development was designed in response to a need to foster regional partnerships, develop strategic projects and achieve local, regional and national support for developing the Western Region.

Step one: establishing a partnership and consultation process

Partnership is essential to the achievement of rural development. The first step in the WDC model involves identifying the main stakeholders in the public, private and community sectors in the Western Region and at national level, and inviting them to engage in a partnership and consultation process. Stakeholders should represent key experts in their field and/or development agency personnel who are willing to work in partnership with other stakeholders to achieve co-ordinated development.

In order to start the process, in consultation with experts and agency personnel in the region, a number of sectors with potential for development e.g. Manufacturing and Services, Natural Resources, Tourism, Information Technology (I.T.) and Marine were identified. The WDC recognised that although there was potential for development of each sector, a more co-ordinated approach was needed to design strategic development priorities and agree shared objectives for future development.

Stakeholders, representing particular sectors of activity, and agencies, which were involved in the development of specific sectors in the Western Region, were invited to come together to plan for future development. WDC personnel facilitated this process by encouraging partners to work together to achieve development. For a description of how the WDC established a partnership for the organic agri-food and rural tourism sectors, see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

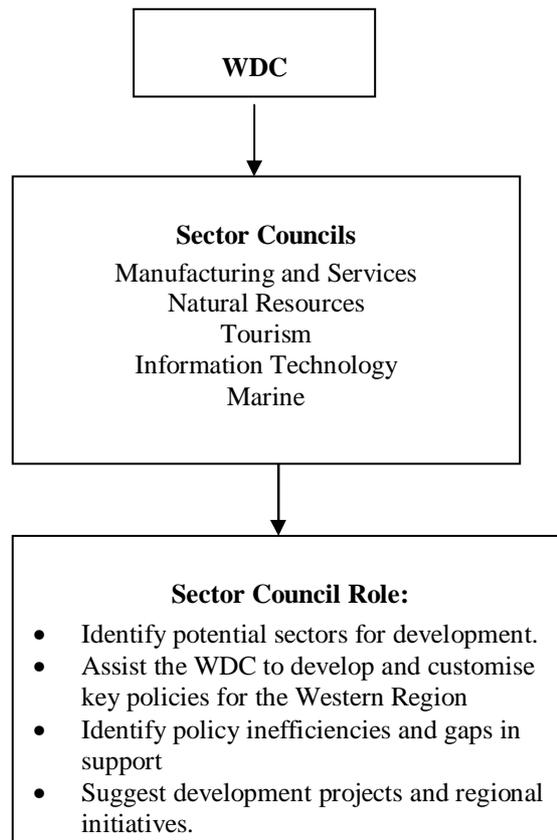
Step two: establishing a shared framework for development

The identified partners were then grouped into sector councils representing different sectors of activity. By identifying and agreeing a framework for development, the role and function of each sector council is established and strategic proposals are agreed for future development. This is achieved by determining: a vision for development, objectives for development, and how to achieve development.

This ‘buy-in’ from the partners at the outset, reduces the chances of conflict arising at a later stage of the development process. The partners were organised into sector councils (Figure 2) in accordance with their sector of activity and area of expertise. A representative from the private sector chaired the sector councils. The sector councils were envisaged as consultative bodies on specialist sectors of activity and, were therefore, not designed as permanent structures or separate organisations for development.

For a description of how the WDC, in partnership with the rural tourism and organic agri-food sector councils, designed their framework for development refer to Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

Figure 2: WDC sector councils: role



Step three: establishing a knowledge base to produce a blueprint for development

The next step in the development process involves establishing a knowledge base to determine the context and future development of each sector of activity and to produce a blueprint for development. This is achieved by initiating a participatory research and consultation process.

For a description of how the WDC, the agencies and other stakeholders responsible for tourism development and the organic agri-food sector, began a process of building a knowledge base for the respective sectors refer to Appendix 3 and Appendix 2.

Step four: producing a blueprint for development

Following the participatory research and consultation process undertaken in Step three, a solid knowledge base is established for each sector of activity. Because of the participatory nature of this process, at this stage of the model implementation, the partners have agreed a shared vision, objectives and strategies for development which are then incorporated into a blueprint document (Figure 3).

The success of the participatory process ensures ‘buy in’ from each partner involved in the development process, so that each partner contributes to, and agrees to implement, the recommendations set out in a blueprint.

Figure 3: A blueprint for development

A blueprint represents an action plan along with a timeframe for the implementation of achievable development strategies for a particular sector of activity. Typically, a blueprint outlines the rationale for focusing on a specific sector, its potential for development, the policy context, the consultation process, an action plan with recommendations for policy makers and an agreement from each agency/partner as to their role in implementing development proposals.

Consultants are employed to conduct the research and consultation process and to produce the blueprint. This ensures that the blueprint recommendations are accepted as objective and a realistic portrayal of regional priorities. Secondly, this facilitates the formation of, and commitment to, a successful partnership process.

The WDC have produced five blueprints for development since 1999. These include:

1. *Blueprint for Success: A Development Plan for the West 2000-2006* (WDC, 1999).
2. *Blueprint for Investing in the West: Promoting Foreign Direct Investment in the West* (WDC, 1999).
3. *Blueprint for Tourism Development in the West: An Action Plan for Rural Areas* (WDC, 2000).
4. *Blueprint for Organic Agri-Food Production in the West* (WDC, 2001).
5. *To Catch the Wind: The Potential for Community Ownership of Wind Farms in Ireland* (WDC, 2004).

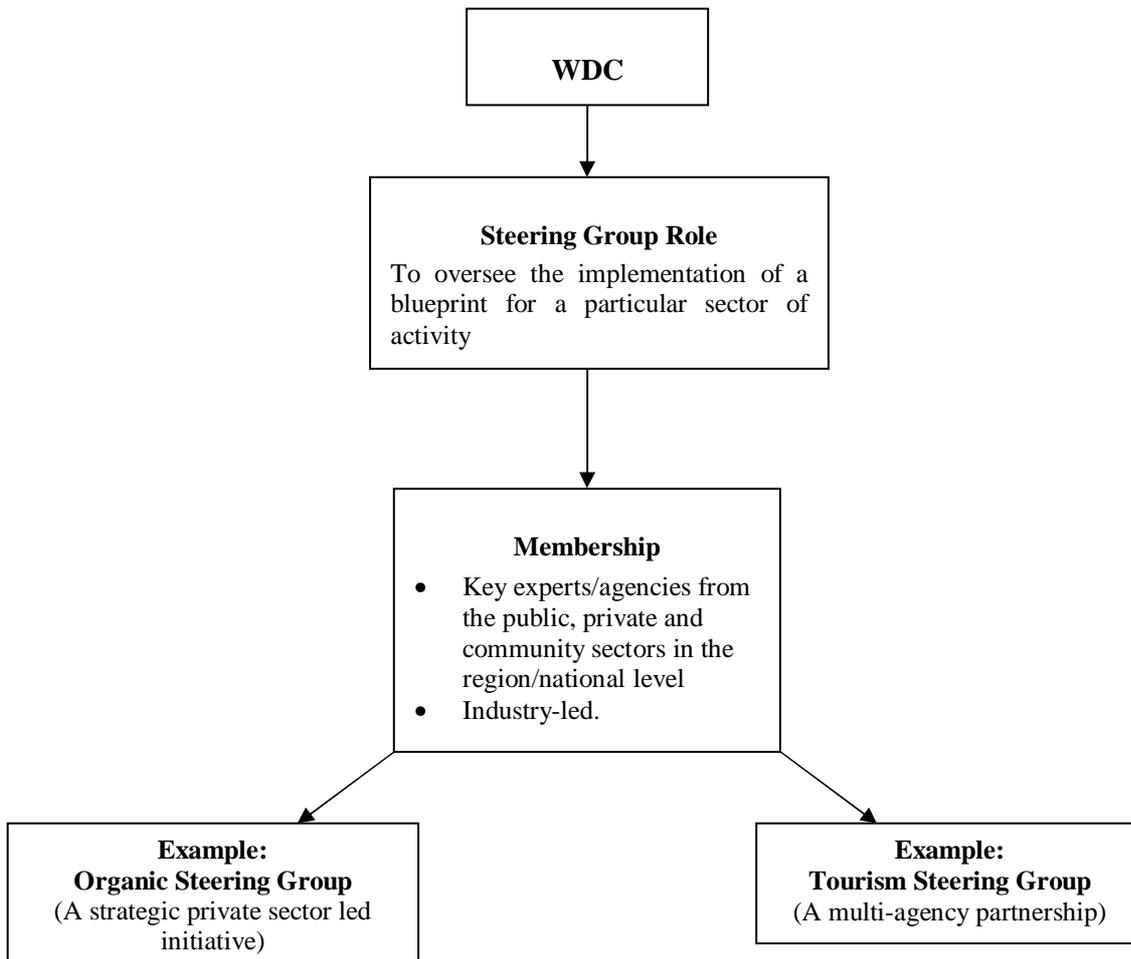
For a description of how a blueprint was prepared for the rural tourism and organic agri-food sectors, refer to Appendix 3 and Appendix 2.

Step five: establish a steering group to drive development

Once a blueprint is published, implementing the recommendations outlined in the report requires co-operation and commitment from a number of agencies and partners in the public, private and community sectors. The ‘buy-in’ received from the main stakeholders during the design, research and consultation phase, should ensure that when a blueprint is published, the main partners are already on board and the implementation process is ready to begin. Such was the case for the organics sector (see Appendix 2).

The implementation process begins with the establishment of a steering group to drive the development process. The role and membership of the WDC's Steering Groups is outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4: WDC steering groups: role and membership



A description of how the WDC established a steering group for the rural tourism and organic agri-food sectors is outlined in further detail in the following Appendices.

Step six: regional implementation

One measure of the success of this approach to rural development is the successful implementation of innovative and sustainable development projects on the ground e.g. the Green Box. The implementation process begins with a number of prerequisites:

1. having dedicated WDC personnel to work in partnership with the steering groups and regional co-ordinators to manage and oversee the implementation process
2. identifying innovative partners and inviting them to participate in the design and implementation of development projects
3. adhering to the shared vision, objectives and strategies for development as set out in a blueprint for development

4. developing strong and effective managerial and leadership capacities and structures to implement change at regional level
5. identifying and securing resources needed for successful implementation of development strategies.

For a description of how the WDC and its partners have implemented successful regional development projects refer to the following Appendices.

Step seven: national implementation

The WDC is a statutory body with responsibility for feeding into national policy for rural development. One of the successful outcomes from adopting a partnership approach to development is that recommendations and actions for particular sectors of activity are formed from a participatory research and consultation process. This process is comprehensive, democratic and a realistic reflection of regional priorities and it is for these reasons that proposals are used to influence policy decisions. Many of the blueprint recommendations published by the WDC assist in formulating policy decisions at national level.

For a description of how the recommendations proposed for the organic agri-food and rural tourism sectors at regional level have influenced policy making at national level, refer to the following Appendices.

Conclusions on the WDC model of rural development

The WDC model is a proactive and participatory model of rural development. Underlying the WDC model is a commitment to the principles of partnership, consultation and sustainable development. Implementing the WDC model of rural development is possible across many sectors and regions in Ireland and further afield. A commitment, at the outset, to the core elements of the model will ensure its successful implementation. This commitment must be accompanied however, with a very active and 'hands on' role by trained and dedicated development practitioners, combined with the establishment of a thorough research and knowledge base by policy personnel. This commitment helps to ensure that policy feeds into practice and practice feeds back into policy.

Each step in the development process requires a mix of knowledge, skills and resources to ensure a successful transition to the next stage in the implementation process. In the following section, the WDC's role in implementing each step of the model of rural development is outlined, to bring to light the knowledge, skills, resources and partnership required during each stage of the implementation process.

The WDC role in implementing the model of rural development

Introduction

The WDC plays a very ‘hands on’ role at each stage of the development process. It works to ensure that a successful partnership and consultation process is established and that ‘buy in’ is achieved for development proposals. It also tries to ensure that steering groups have the necessary leadership and strategic vision and that there is sufficient private sector support and inclusion. Each step in the development process requires a unique mix of skills, knowledge and resources and this section outlines the WDC’s role in ensuring successful implementation.

The WDC’s role

The WDC’s role in implementing the model of rural development is outlined below under each step of the development process. However it should be noted that the development process is actually quite fluid and does not follow a clear and easy path, consequently the WDC has to adapt its involvement in the process as necessary. Indeed the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and tackle unexpected challenges is key to the role of the WDC in rural development.

1. Establishing a partnership and consultation process

The WDC’s role in the initial stage of the development process involves:

- identifying stakeholders (key experts/agencies in particular sectors of activity) and inviting them to come together to design, implement and monitor strategic development programmes
- consulting with these stakeholders to identify sectors which the WDC could develop and add value to – sectors which can build on the strengths of the Western Region and can have an impact on future regional development
- facilitating the establishment of a sector council for each sector of activity and the design of clear terms of reference (this is facilitated by WDC regional development executives, see Figure 5)
- facilitating the partners to agree a shared vision, objectives and strategies for development
- establishing the WDC’s own role in the partnership process i.e. to facilitate and support the development process and determine the role and function of each partner
- an awareness of external environmental constraints which may impact upon the development process e.g. national policy changes.

Figure 5: The WDC's regional development executive

The WDC's regional development executives play a very 'hands on' role in the development process. By engaging with the main stakeholders, who are involved in many development projects, the regional development executives ensure that strategic and sustainable development projects are implemented in the Western Region.

The WDC's regional development executives are responsible for:

- regular liaison with steering groups, and private sector led strategic partnerships, who are responsible for implementing development projects
- building a successful partnership approach to regional development between the WDC and various national, regional and local bodies
- conducting scoping, investigation and feasibility studies of sector opportunities in areas such as manufacturing, tourism, food and renewable energy
- proposing innovative and sustainable regional strategies within sectors that build on the strengths of the region, in partnership with other stakeholders
- offering support, encouragement and guidance to partners and projects e.g. building the capacity of project members, identifying and allocating resources in project budgets needed to successfully implement development projects, ensuring a strategic focus is maintained throughout the development process, facilitating recruitment processes etc.

2. Establishing a shared framework for development

It is necessary to establish a common framework for development and the WDC assists in this by:

- researching rural development policy and regulations, models of best practice, governance structures and successful institutional frameworks for rural development in order to provide the necessary background information
- identifying successful participatory methodologies for driving development
- designing and agreeing, in consultation with each sector council, a framework for development.

3. Establishing a knowledge base to produce a blueprint for development

The WDC's role in establishing the necessary knowledge base is as follows:

- trying to ensure 'buy-in' from the members of the individual sector councils during the design, research and consultation phase
- providing up-to-date information to the sector councils on the current policy context and proposed developments at national level

- designing, in partnership with the sector councils, terms of reference for a blueprint for development and also for the consultant/s employed to produce the blueprint
- putting projects out to tender, selecting consultant/s and providing administrative and financial support to facilitate the research process
- liaising with the consultant/s and providing support during the consultation process e.g. helping to set up the regional and community workshops, acting as facilitators on the ground, issuing requests for submissions etc.
- offering effective guidance, facilitation and leadership support to the members of the sector councils.

4. Producing a blueprint for development

Following the research and consultation phase a blueprint for development is produced. The WDC plays the following roles during this stage:

- ongoing public consultation to develop the strategy and action plan
- facilitating the partners to agree an action plan for development
- providing administrative and financial support for the publication of a blueprint
- personnel commitment throughout the research and consultation process to ensure that once a blueprint is published the implementation process is ready to begin.

5. Establish a steering group to drive development

Some structure is required to drive the implementation of the blueprint. The WDC's role in establishing such structures is as follows:

- facilitating the establishment of the steering groups and preparing, in consultation with the partners, the terms of reference
- facilitating initial meetings of the steering groups
- applying for funding to implement blueprint actions e.g. to employ a regional co-ordinator for rural tourism
- facilitating recruitment processes and designing contracts of employment for programme/project personnel
- strengthening the leadership, management capacity and engagement of the steering groups, project boards and personnel.

6. Regional implementation

The WDC's role in the implementation of the blueprint recommendations within the Western Region involves:

- playing a 'hands on' role to ensure successful implementation of development strategies e.g. by assisting with the design of work programmes and the identification of innovative development projects
- providing effective guidance, facilitation and leadership to the steering groups and regional co-ordinators to ensure ongoing commitment to the development process

- assisting partners to identify and apply for necessary funding to implement their development actions
- ensuring that development programmes, projects and proposals are strategic in nature and align with proposals outlined in the blueprint for development
- representation on the management committees for strategic projects such as Atlantic Organics, the Green Box, Walking in the West etc.
- assessing the individual strengths and weaknesses of projects and identifying and allocating resources to help overcome any project deficits
- identifying the right stage at which to disengage from the more 'hands on' role and adopt a more support/advisory role.

7. National implementation

While national implementation is presented as the seventh and final step in the WDC's model of rural development, in fact, the WDC is involved in activities in pursuit of this aim throughout the entire process. The WDC pursues this aim through:

- representation on national and regional committees for rural development e.g. the National Organic Steering Committee and the national Rural Agri-Tourism Advisory Group
- ensuring that partners are represented on national committees e.g. a member of Atlantic Organics is represented on the two sub-groups of the National Organic Steering Committee i.e. the Organic Market Development Group and the Partnership Expert Working Group (see Appendix 2)
- making regular submissions to government ministers and consultation processes to ensure that the WDC's experience in regional development is considered in the design of national policy
- feeding back national policy proposals to regional partners
- promoting the value and success of private sector led development initiatives e.g. industry-led sector councils and steering groups
- creating a participatory model of rural development and demonstrating the suitability of this approach for other sectors and regions
- achieving government endorsement for the WDC model of rural development.

Conclusions

Implementing the WDC model of rural development requires a particular mix of skills, knowledge and resources, combined with effective partnership. The WDC's role in implementing the model requires both a 'hands on' and a support/advisory approach. This is achieved through the work of both policy analysts and trained regional development executives whose role it is to facilitate the development of a particular sector of activity in the Western Region and also to facilitate partners in identifying strategic projects for regional development. WDC regional development executives understand the importance of enabling others rather than 'doing for' others.

Essentially, the WDC's role in implementing the model of rural development involves identifying natural resources with the potential for development and then bringing together appropriate stakeholders in a partnership and consultation process. To bring this forward, the WDC provides administrative and technical support as well as participating on project management committees. This can contribute towards building social capital amongst the other partners in the process. The WDC also provides a linkage with developments occurring at a national level, both in the form of keeping partners informed of national level developments and also inputting the regional experience into national debates.

In the following Appendices, two case studies are presented to demonstrate how the WDC has implemented the model of rural development.

Appendix 2: WDC approach to development of the Organic Agri-Food Sector

Introduction

The WDC's approach and experience with rural development has recently been documented and will be published later in 2006. The general model is presented in Appendix 1. This Appendix presents a summary of the WDC's work with the organic agri-food sector and demonstrates how the WDC and its partners have implemented strategic development initiatives in the sector.

Establishing a partnership and consultation process

In 1999, the WDC¹ identified niche sectors in the Western Region with potential for development, including the organic agri-food sector. The opportunities which this sector presented for the farming community included:

- increased interest amongst consumers and farmers for organic produce
- a higher market price for organic products
- less intensive use of land
- better protection of the environment
- the potential to create valuable rural employment opportunities in a niche diversification sector
- suitability of the Western Region for organic production
- a history of less intensive production methods in agriculture in the Western Region.

A partnership between the WDC and the key players and experts in the organic agri-food sector was regarded as an essential first step in developing the sector. The WDC established an Organic Agri-Food Advisory Group comprising representatives of An Bord Glas, Bord Bia, an organic producer, Enterprise Ireland, Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association, Demeter Ireland Ltd, Leitrim Organic Forum and the Organic Trust.

Establishing a shared framework for development

With support from the WDC, the Organic Agri-Food Advisory Group was then facilitated to agree a vision for the organic agri-food sector, set out the objectives for developing the sector and strategies to achieve these objectives.

Establishing a knowledge base and producing a blueprint for organic agri-food development

At this time, there was a lack of comprehensive data on the sector so the WDC, in partnership with the Organic Agri-Food Advisory Group, initiated a process of research, policy analysis and consultation, to establish a knowledge base for the organic agri-food sector and to produce

¹ WDC (1999) Blueprint for Success: A Development Plan for the West: 2000-2006

a blueprint for development. Consultants, together with the WDC and the Advisory Group, undertook the research and engaged with stakeholders in the public, private and community sectors. The resulting *Blueprint for Organic Agri-Food Production in the West*² represented the first systematic analysis of organic agri-food production in Ireland. It presented a number of recommendations for the development of organic agri-food production including:

- a proposed national and regional policy framework for the development of the sector
- domestic and overseas market development
- expansion of added value processing and development of distribution channels
- research and development
- education and training
- information technology and the development of organic agri-food production.

Establishing a structure to drive development

Prior to the publication of the blueprint, WDC regional development executives facilitated a private sector-led strategic partnership at regional level. This was then in a position to help implement the regional organic framework proposals in the blueprint. In 2000, the Western Organic Strategic Initiative (WOSI, later Atlantic Organics) was established to do this. The WOSI included the following groups North West Organic Co-op (Co. Donegal), Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op, The Organic Centre and the Western Organic Group. It was envisaged that the regional framework for action being implemented by the WOSI could be used by the state and private sector as a ‘testing ground’ for organic agri-food policy and a model for application at national level.

The WOSI had the following objectives:

- to significantly increase the level of production and improve the quality of organic agri-food produce to meet market demand
- to develop links with the marketplace through contracts to ensure dispersal of organic production
- to improve and develop supply base linkages
- to increase the level of information, training and advice to the organics sector.

Regional Implementation

In 2002, the WOSI secured funding to help them to implement blueprint actions. There are four key results of this work.

² The background research carried out for the blueprint, which contains more detailed research findings, is available as a separate report *Background Document to Blueprint for Organic Agri-Food Production in the West (WDC, 2001)*.

1. Formation of Atlantic Organics Ltd

In 2004, the WOSI formed a company called Atlantic Organics Ltd, a strategic private sector-led partnership initiative. Atlantic Organics Ltd represents 234 organic producers in counties Roscommon, Donegal, Leitrim, Fermanagh and Derry. The Board of Directors for Atlantic Organics Ltd includes:

- North West Organic Co-operative
- The Organic Centre
- Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-operative
- A retailer
- The Western Organic Network (as observer) (see point 4 below)
- WDC (as observer)

2. Atlantic Organics Ltd Marketing and Communications Project

The Marketing and Communications Project is proactively supporting the development of the organic food sector in the region. Its objectives include: creation of greater consumer and public awareness; stimulating interest and progress in the sector via a marketing and PR strategy; targeted networking activities and initiation of linkages where appropriate; and fundraising and generation of finance. The project is funded by the EU INTERREG IIIA programme, has an office in Rossinver, Co. Leitrim and employs a full-time manager and part-time administrator. The project complements and supports the Added Value Organic Food Project.

3. Atlantic Organics Ltd Added Value Organic Food Project

The Added Value Organic Food Project is a two-year project established in 2004 to explore the market opportunities for the development of added value organic food products by utilising organic farm produce sourced regionally. The project has the following objectives:

- identify and develop a number of added value organic food products
- carry out test marketing followed by product launches
- put a strategy in place to set up local processing facilities for the production of the food products
- provide a stable market outlet for organic produce produced by organic farmers in the region
- design a full marketing and business plan that will chart the way towards a sustainable cross border producer-owned organic food business.

The project is assisting in the overall development and expansion of the organic agri-food industry on a cross-border basis and contributing to the recognition of the whole North and West as a quality food-producing region. Loughry College, Co. Tyrone has been engaged to assist the food product development process. This project has an office in Co. Derry and Rossinver, Co. Leitrim and employs a full-time Food Development Manager and part-time administrator. The project is funded by the EU INTERREG IIIA programme.

4. Regional Organic Training Programme

The Western Organic Network (WON) was established by the WOSI in 2003. Currently, there are 73 members participating in WON and four local sub-networks have been established in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon.

The WON is now separate from Atlantic Organics Ltd and a Steering Group has been established to oversee the programme. Outputs include:

- needs-based training for network members as a new mechanism to build capacity amongst producers in the sector
- a website: <http://www.westernorganicnetwork.com> and discussion forum: <http://www.irishorganicforum.com>
- inter-regional networking activities e.g. seminars, member directory and the establishment of working groups.

The programme is funded by member companies and the Training Networks Programme, which is an initiative of Skillnets Ltd.

National Linkages

The WDC and its partners have had some success at highlighting the needs of the organic agri-food sector at national level. The WDC is represented on the National Organic Steering Committee and the Partnership Expert Working Group under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture and Food. The participatory approach used by the WDC, and detailed above, is regarded at national level as being effective, particularly in mobilising all the interests and initiating a bottom-up approach. It is also recognised as being based on a realistic set of priorities for the development of the organics sector. Atlantic Organics Ltd are also represented on the National Organic Market Development Group and the Partnership Expert Working Group.

Changes have also been made to the scheme for grant aid for the organic sector making it more open-ended and accessible for small-scale organic horticulture producers.

The WDC, in partnership with Bord Bia and the Department of Agriculture and Food, hosted the first national Organic Conference in 2003.

Conclusions

The WDC and its partners have implemented a unique approach to rural development to achieve development of the organic agri-food sector. To date, implementation has resulted in the establishment of a strategic and sustainable vision for the organics sector and the successful implementation of development initiatives at regional and national level. The success of this process has depended, at the outset, on a commitment to partnership, consultation and sustainable development. This has ensured that a solid knowledge base for the organics sector has been established and that each partner is committed to the development process. The availability of dedicated WDC personnel to facilitate and oversee development has ensured a successful partnership and implementation process. Following the establishment of Atlantic Organics Ltd, the WDC has disengaged from the 'hands on' role and are now offering support and advice to the partners.

The WDC believes that this approach to development of a sector, as well as the experiences detailed above, could prove useful in the development of Ireland's Rural Development National Strategy Plan and Rural Development Programme.

Appendix 3: WDC approach to development of the Rural Tourism Sector

Introduction

The WDC's approach and experience with rural development has recently been documented and will be published later in 2006. The general model and the WDC's role is presented in Appendix 1. This Appendix presents a summary of the WDC's work with the rural tourism sector and demonstrates how the WDC and its partners have implemented strategic development initiatives in the sector.

Establishing a partnership and consultation process

In 1999³ the WDC identified rural tourism as a sector that was important for regional development. A central concern at that time was the growth of more established 'honey pot' tourist areas in the Western Region with little growth in other areas. Therefore, achieving balanced rural tourism development by dispersing tourism to more rural areas became one of the WDC's development priorities.

Unlike the organic agri-food sector (see Appendix 2), many agencies were involved in driving tourism development, and the WDC saw that by creating an opportunity to bring the agencies together, pool expertise, and share knowledge of innovative rural tourism development strategies, an integrated framework for development could be achieved. Therefore the WDC established a Tourism Sector Council which brought together private and community representatives from the tourism sector, Shannon Development, County Enterprise Board, Leader, Teagasc and Regional Tourism Authorities.

Establishing a shared framework for development

The Tourism Sector Council then set about determining: a vision for rural tourism, the objectives for developing the rural tourism sector, and strategies to achieve development. The WDC facilitated this process by encouraging partners to establish a holistic and innovative vision for rural tourism which embraced quality, community, culture and a unique rural tourism product which the Western Region could offer.

Establishing a knowledge base and producing a blueprint for rural tourism

Although there was no scarcity of documentation on the tourism sector in Ireland, it was difficult to find research on rural tourism in the Western Region. Therefore in 2000 the WDC, in partnership with its Tourism Sector Council, initiated a process of research, policy analysis and consultation to build a knowledge base for rural tourism in the Western Region. Consultants were employed to engage with stakeholders in the public, private and community sectors, to identify and document: the role of rural tourism in the Western Region, barriers to growth, future priorities, targets for growth, and actions to achieve development. Partners were encouraged to formulate a long-term shared development plan for rural tourism. This led to the publication of the *Blueprint for Tourism Development in the West* in 2000.

³ WDC (1999), *Blueprint for Success: A Development Plan for the West 2000-2006*

The following strategic priorities were outlined in the blueprint:

- the creation of a driving force for change which can give a clear strategic direction and integrate support and foster partnership between the various tourism interests
- a commitment to destination management, quality infrastructure provision, sustainability and the maximisation of the product strengths of rural areas while ensuring environmental and heritage conservation
- the implementation of a well-financed, co-ordinated marketing strategy encompassing the Western Region as a rural destination and the development of creative product packaging to meet customer needs
- creating the capacity to co-ordinate and deliver a quality product and excellent customer care through appropriate support
- a concerted effort to improve access to the West.

Establishing a structure to drive development

Following on from the first priority of the blueprint listed above, the multi-agency Western Development Tourism Programme (WDTP) Steering Group was established to oversee the implementation of the blueprint. The WDTP steering group includes Fáilte Ireland, WDC, Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Leader, North West and West Regional Tourism Authorities, Shannon Development, IT Sligo, Irish Tourist Industry Confederation, Údarás na Gaeltachta and OPW.

The WDTP was envisaged as a three-year pilot programme of innovative development activity with the following objectives:

- to connect tourism development agencies and facilitate partners to design co-ordinated development strategies for rural tourism
- to utilise each agency's resources and skills to create the critical mass necessary to drive development
- to create more targeted opportunities for rural tourism and develop a long-term perspective for rural tourism development
- to pilot and test new ideas for rural tourism.

A programme manager was appointed to facilitate and drive strategic rural tourism actions in the Western Region on behalf of the WDTP. The manager is based at the Business Innovation Centre in IT Sligo.

Regional Implementation

The WDTP are responsible for implementing the proposals for rural tourism development put forward in the blueprint. The WDTP has identified, facilitated and developed 15 rural tourism development projects. These are:

1. New West Tourism Plan 2002 – 2004
2. Green Box
3. Ireland's Western Regions Brochure
4. Walking Through Time
5. Walking in the West

6. WDTP Training
7. www.trueireland.com
8. Islands Festival Network
9. Killary Adventure and Leisure Capital
10. Leitrim Presents
11. Irish Centre for Sustainable Tourism at IT Sligo
12. Western Food Trail
13. "Tourism Matters" Radio Broadcasts
14. Heritage Attraction Review
15. Conference – Sustainable Tourism Development in the West

In turn, WDTP work stimulates private sector development by signalling confidence in the tourism sector and encouraging private sector enterprise initiatives. The following are examples of strategic tourism projects initiated by the WDTP.

1. The Green Box

Initiated in 2002 as Ireland's only integrated eco tourism project, the Green Box is now becoming one of Ireland's major niche tourism initiatives. The Green Box region encompasses all of Leitrim and Fermanagh and parts of Donegal, Sligo and Cavan. The WDTP has played a key facilitation role between the public, private and community sectors in the development of the Green Box plan, the co-ordination of applications for funding and the establishment of the Green Box Board.

Green or eco tourism is a new concept in Ireland. It is low impact tourism that uses the natural resources of an area as its product. The Green Box project aims to deliver an eco tourism destination, a conceptual and spatial 'Green Box', a defined region containing environmentally sustainable products, accommodation and attractions within a context of clean natural resources. The type of tourism and activity generated will have minimal impact on the ecology of the area, be of maximum benefit to the community and match the needs of the environmentally-conscious visitor. The key aims of the project include:

- The creation of new market ready products by enterprises in less visited rural areas
- The creation of the first eco tourism certification programme in Ireland and the adoption of the EU approved EU Flower award by accommodation providers in the area. This is essential in ensuring that proper standards are developed and maintained for all Green Box products.
- The development of a range of eco tourism packages to appeal to regional, national and international tourists.
- The delivery of real economic benefits at ground level for product providers and communities

To support and deliver on the above, €3.1 million was secured for the project and its product providers in 2004. The Green Box offices are based in Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim. Funders include INTERREG and PEACE II and support for the project is in place until early 2008.⁴ The Green Box has three main programming areas.

- **Capital Development Programme** – administering grant aid to the private and community sector to support them in developing market ready products. This

⁴ Funding from INTERREG and PEACE II has enabled seven full time jobs to be created to drive the project and its programmes.

programme will also support two flagship projects one in Fermanagh and one in Leitrim.

- **Product Providers Network** – networking 100 product providers and community groups throughout the region while developing Ireland’s’ first eco tourism standard.
- **Marketing Programme** – promoting and selling the Green Box and its product providers at local, regional, national and international levels.

2. Walking in the West (WITW)

WITW is an example of how the WDTP played a key role in the co-ordination of rural tourism development projects. WITW involved the WDTP, WDC, 12 Leader companies, Ireland West Tourism, the Irish Sports Council and the community sector. *Walking in the West: A Step-by-Step Guide*⁵, published in 2005, proposes a new integrated development process, that when implemented, will deliver a world class walking product, support the commercialisation of the walking product in the Western Region and increase visitor numbers.

Walking in the West aims to assist community groups and private product service providers to develop, promote and sell walking packages based on models of international best practice. The key success factors required to ensure the walking product is attractive to international walking tourists are set out in the Guide and are based on case studies of successful ventures abroad. Recommendations for initiatives to stimulate the commercialisation of the walking product in Ireland are based on these key success factors.

Walking in the West – Recommendations

- Local Walking Partnerships (LWP) for each walk within the region should be developed to include a mix of public, private and community interests. The primary responsibilities of each LWP will include the creation and implementation of a local action plan and development strategy, route maintenance plans and a marketing and sales strategy.
- Walk Managers should be employed by each LWP and the function of this role will be to facilitate networking among the community, public and private interests to ensure that the walking product is effectively managed to deliver full benefits to stakeholders along the route. The Walk Manager will facilitate access issues with local landowners, the creation of commercial services along the route, maintenance of standards, interaction with the tourism marketing agencies, handling of sales queries and creation and maintenance of an e-commerce enabled website. **It is envisaged that the Walk Manager report to the Local Action Group manager/managers.**
- At national and regional policy level, *Walking in the West* recommends that a National Framework for walking be developed to address issues such as route development, quality standards, route maintenance, marketing and sales. The National Framework is being developed under the guidance of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and will be grounded in impending Fáilte Ireland and National Waymarked Ways Advisory Committee (NWWAC) studies and the Countryside Recreational Policy which is currently being devised by Comhairle na Tuaithe. To implement the National Policy Framework, WITW recommends that a Regional Walking Strategy be developed by Regional Walking Partnerships i.e. public, private

⁵ WDTP (2005), *Walking in the West: A Step-by-Step Guide* is available at www.trueireland.com and www.wdc.ie

and community partners in each of the regional tourism authority areas (North West Tourism, Ireland West Tourism and Shannon Development).

The focus of the Walking in the West model is the application of the step by step guide to National Waymarked Ways i.e. long distance walks as opposed to smaller looped walks. This is important as the WDC and WDTP believe that for rural areas to really benefit from the walking product, walkers must be encouraged to avail of packages that include overnight stays in rural areas.

The WDTP are currently beginning the process of applying the WITW model to three pilot walks in the Region.

- The East Clare Way
- The Tochar Valley Way
- The Bluestacks Way

The process to bring the LWPs together is being undertaken for each of the three walks and training and mentoring programmes will begin in March 2006. This will ensure that capacity amongst all members of the LWP is built and the necessary components for commercialisation identified. Once this process is complete (September 2006), the LWP for each of the three pilot areas will begin the process of sourcing support for the employment of Walk Managers.

3. WDTP Training Initiative

The WDTP Training initiative is a partnership between the WDTP, Institute of Technology Sligo, six Leader companies and the private sector. The initiative is a tailor made 80 hour training programme providing tourism product providers with an accredited course – *National Certificate in Tourism Management & Marketing*. By the end of 2005 there were 100 graduates. Participants are mostly those involved in micro-tourism enterprises. A new course *National Certificate in Eco Tourism* has just been developed and will be run in the Green Box area initially, and then throughout the region.

4. Joint Marketing

In 2004 the first inter-regional brochure – *Ireland's Western Regions*, a completely new concept for tourism marketing in Ireland, which involved a partnership approach between Shannon Development, Regional Tourism Authorities, Fáilte Ireland and 12 Leader companies was delivered. This project has led to other regional joint marketing work.

National Linkages

Achieving national implementation of rural tourism development strategies represents one of the WDC's development objectives. The WDC continues to promote the interests of rural tourism and advocate the success of its model of rural tourism development at national level. The WDTP made a submission to the Tourism Policy Review Group and the Group's subsequent report setting out a 10-year strategy for tourism development contained a number of priorities which were and are being implemented by the WDTP at regional level. These included: nurturing the tourism business environment, product development and innovation, co-ordinating marketing and promotion activities, promoting environmental best practice, developing regional clusters of excellence and increasing activity in non-traditional tourism areas.

The WDTP model can be duplicated in other under-performing tourist areas of Ireland. Inter-agency partnership, a regional dimension to agency thinking and activities, capacity building, delivery of new strategic innovative tourism development initiatives that may not have happened otherwise and reduced duplication of effort across tourism initiatives in the region can assist tourism development across Ireland. The WDC believes that this model can be of use in the development of the Rural Development National Strategy Plan and Rural Development Programme.

Conclusions

The rural tourism sector in the Western Region has benefited from the approach taken by the WDC as set out above. Since the publication of a blueprint for development and the establishment of a multi-agency partnership (WDTP), many successful rural tourism development projects have been implemented. At this stage of the development process, WDC personnel still have a 'hands on' role in the implementation process. Over time, this role is expected to change to a support/advisory role for the WDTP. The success of this approach to rural tourism development lies in a commitment to the principles of partnership, consultation and sustainable rural tourism development.