

Ireland's Offshore Islands – What is required to create & maintain sustainable offshore Islands

The Irish offshore islands are scattered along the western seaboard in the counties of Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork. They include islands in the Gaeltacht and outside of it and the total population of the islands is just 2,896. Communities, families and enterprises on the islands face significant challenges as costs of living are higher, travel is more costly and time consuming, accessing markets and other essential services is more difficult.

Islanders are overall more disadvantaged than those living on the mainland. Successive governments and administrations have accepted that this is the case and that it is desirable to maintain sustainable communities on the Islands, valuing the contribution that islanders make to the mainland economy, to the Wild Atlantic Way experience, and to the culture and heritage of the country. Specific, exceptional measures to counter this disadvantage have been recognised. The Government have funded island specific capital programmes, have provided targeted supports for islanders, made certain exceptional arrangements for islanders in mainstream programmes and developed some policies with specific mention of the islands.

Irish government policy needs to continue and broaden the range of island specific supports. It is European policy that Member States have specific island policies and that programmes, including the Cohesion policy, the Structural Funds and by extrapolation, the ERDF, are adapted to fit island needs. **It would therefore be entirely in keeping with both national and European policy for Government Departments to ensure that there are calls and arrangements in place, for distinct, specific islands strategies as part of community and rural development programmes, the delivery of Education and Health services, including support mechanisms.**

While islanders have always worked in close partnership with their local authorities and statutory agencies, it has been islanders experience over the decades that if there are not specific island policies, programmes and budgets, islands inevitably lose out as they simply do not have the critical mass to compete with other interests on the mainland. Islanders require island specific strategies, delivered by those who have understanding and experience of the particular challenges involved in developing enterprises and community projects on the offshore islands, to ensure they continue to become economically sustainable communities into the next decades.

To sustain island rural communities requires a synergy and constructive engagement between all essential services delivered i.e access and transportation, Health & Welfare and Educational Services. There is a symbiotic relationship between all elements of development on Islands.

The European Economic and Social Committee in its communiqué of the 28th March 2012 states ‘Specific Problems facing small islands clearly concludes that small island communities face specific permanent and challenging characteristics that clearly distinguish them from mainland regions. Article 174 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union recognises that small islands as a whole face practical handicaps requiring specific attention.

Furthermore the European Parliament resolution of 4 February 2016 on the special situation of Islands (2015/2014 (RSP)) classified islands as regions with permanent natural and geographical handicaps specific to the situation of islands which clearly distinguished them from mainland areas.

Oileán Mhara na hÉireann – Céard atá riachtanach chun na hOileán amach ón gcósta a chothú & a chaomhnú?

Tá Oileán Mhara na hÉireann scapthe ar chósta an Iarthar i gcontaethe Dhún na nGall, Maigh Eo, Gaillimh & Corcaigh. Ina measc sin, tá oileán Ghaeltachta agus neamh-Ghaeltachta agus daonra de 2,896. Tá dúshláin shuntasacha ag pobail, teaghlaigh agus fiontair ar na hoileain mar tá costas maireachtála níos airde, taistéal níos daoire, rochtain ar mhargaí agus seirbhísí riachtanacha níos deacra fós.

Tá sé glacaithe ag rialtas i ndiaidh rialtais agus lucht riarchána na hÉireann go bhfuil oiléanaigh faoi mhíbhuntáiste i bhfad níos mó ná mar atá daonra na mórthíre. Aithnítear i bpolasáí Rialtais go bhfuil sé inmhianaithe na pobail oiléanda a chaomhnú mar go n-aithnítear an inchur a dhéanann na hoileán i ngéilleagar na mórthíre, an tábhacht atá leo ar Shlí an Atlantaigh Fhiáin, agus an saibhreas cultúir, teanga agus oidreachta don tir in iomláine. Aithnítear san am a chaiteadh, go raibh beartais eisceachtúla ag teastáil ó oiléain chun cur i gcoinne an mhíbhuntáiste aitheanta seo, agus cuireadh cláir chaipitil ar leith, tacaíochtaí speisialta in oiriúint d'oileán agus déanadh socraithe eisceachtúla d'oileánaigh i gcláracha príomhshrutha chun a chinntíú go raibh siad in oiriúint.

Is gá do pholasaithe Rialtas na hÉireann leathnú a dhéanamh ar an treo sin i leith réimse leathan beartas sonracha oiléanda. **Is é polasaí an Aontais Eorpaigh i leith ballstáit, go mbeadh beartais & cláir ar leith ar a n-áiritear an Polasaí Comhtháthaithe, na Cistí Struchtúrtha, agus dá réir sin an ERDF, curtha in oiriúint do riachtainaisí oiléanda. Bheadh sé dá bhrí sin, go hiomlán ag teacht le polasaí náisiúnta agus Eorpach go bhfuil glaonna agus socraithe i bhfeidhm i leith straitéisí sonracha oiléanda mar chuid de chláracha forbartha pobail agus tuaithe, seachadadh cláracha oideachais & sláinte agus tacaíochtaí eile.**

Cé go n-oibríonn oiléanaigh i gcónaí i ndlúthpháirtíocht le udaráis áitiúla agus gníomhaireachtaí reachtúla, is é an taithí atá ag oiléanaigh thar na mblianta ná muna bhfuil cláir agus buiséid ar leith leagtha amach go sonrach do na hOileán, go gcailleann siad amach mar nach bhfuil an mhais criticiúil ann chun dul san iomaíocht leis an mórthír. Teastaíonn stratéisisí ata curtha in oiriúint go speisialta ó na hoileán, atá á seachadadh ag daoine a bhfuil tuiscint agus saineolas acu ar na hoileán mara chun go mairfidh siad mar phobail inbhuanaithe eacnamaíochta.

Chun pobail ar na hoileán tuaithe a chothú tá gá le sineirgíocht agus comhoibriú idir na seirbhísí riachtanacha ar fád i.e rochtain agus iompair, sláinte agus seirbhísí oideachais. Tá gaol siombóiseach idir gach gné d'fhorbairt ar oiléain agus chuile sheirbhís ag brath ar an gceann eile.

Aithníonn an Coiste Eacnamaíochta & Sóisialta Eorpach ón 28ú Márta 2012 fadhbanna sonracha na n-oileán bheaga, agus go bhfuil tréithe sonracha buan acu atá dúshlánach, agus go bhfuil an idirdheálú soiléar sin eatarthu agus réigiúin na mórthíre. Aithníonn Airteagal 174 den Chonradh ar Fheidhmiú an Aontais Eorpaigh go bhfuil leibhéal mhíbhuntáiste ag oiléain bheaga **a éilíonn beartais sonrach.**

Ina theannta sin ritheadh rún speisialta sa bParlaimint Eorpach ar an 4ú Feabhra 2016 (2015/3014 (RSP)) in n-aithnitear na hoileáin mar réigiúin a bhfuil míbhuntáistí nádúrtha agus geografach buan acu agus go mba cheart idirdhealú soiléar a dhéanamh idir oileáin agus ceanair mórhíre.