

# ASSESSING THE INNOVATIVE ROLE OF BALLYHOURA DEVELOPMENT WITHIN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

Ballyhoura Country is an authentic and unspoilt rural area of North Cork and East Limerick (Republic of Ireland). It is an example of a rural community that found itself in an economic slump during the 1990's and took innovative steps to reverse this trend (Robinson and O'Connor, 2012). Traditionally a region of smallholding farmers, Ballyhoura was once dependent on declining subsidies and had no ready economic alternative to agriculture. Small scale farms were closing down as large farms struggled to compete in European and International markets (Curtin, Haase and Tovey, 1996). At this time the Irish state and the European Union EU<sup>1</sup> began to avidly support the expansion of rural regional development (Deegan and Dineen, 2000). There was a new emphasis with regard to rural development policies with alternatives being sought to combat the decline in Ireland's agrarian base (Mc Donagh, Varley and Shorthall, 2009). Through LEADER<sup>2</sup> Programs agrarian Ireland began to embrace regional development.

Today, Ballyhoura has discovered opportunities in the same globalized knowledge economy that formerly threatened it, by embracing rural development (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013). Ballyhoura Development<sup>3</sup> (BD) sets policy frameworks and strategies in place to diversify from agriculture, new innovations and local initiatives were introduced to promote the region in terms of quality of life of its residence and the diversification of the economy, as developing diversified employment is vital to sustaining the rural economy (O'Donoghue, Ballas, Clarke, Hynes and Morrissey, 2013). BD and Ballyhoura Fáilte<sup>4</sup> (BF) were set up to realise these frameworks and strategies. This paper will assess the innovative role played by BD in developing the rural region of Ballyhoura by explaining how the organisation works and contributes to regional change. The results indicate that BD are successful in relation to implementing plans and strategies which aid in enhancing the quality of life of the local

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<sup>1</sup> The EU is a political and economic union made up of 27 member states who are located in and around the continent of Europe (Europa, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> LEADER 'Liaison Entre Actions pour le Développement d'Economie Rurale' is a Rural Development Programme part-funded by the EU (LEADER Partnership Programme, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> BD is a local development company who support the community and businesses with the diversification of the local economic base, through community, enterprise, employment support and tourism (BD, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> BF is a cooperative whose main function is to act as a commercial reservation agent and incoming tour operator (Ballyhoura.org, 2013).

residents and diversifying the economic base of the region. BD utilise a bottom-up or grass roots approach which relies on community collaboration and integration as well as funding.

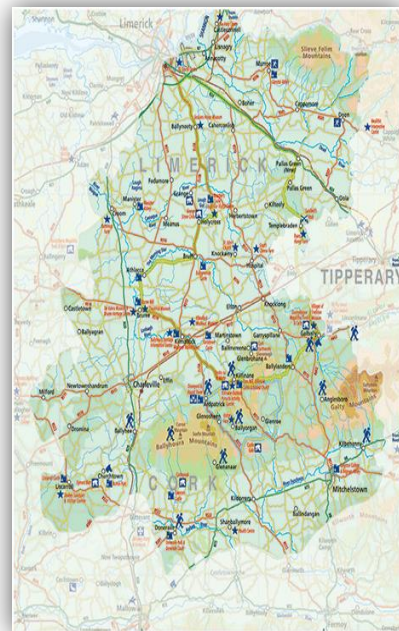
## CASE STUDY

Ballyhoura Country (See Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3) is an authentic and unspoilt rural area of North Cork and East Limerick. The story of Ballyhoura is that of a community which found itself in economic decline, a community which took innovative steps to reverse this trend of decline and become a successful rural regional hub (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013a). One of Ballyhoura's main complexity issues lies in the fact that the area is peripherally located at the intersection of two regions, namely North Cork and East Limerick. Each region has individual regional agencies who deal with economic development, services and training. There is an overlap of three local authorities and two county enterprise boards (North Cork Enterprise Board<sup>5</sup> and County Limerick Enterprise Board<sup>6</sup>).

**Figure 1.1: Ireland Map**



**Figure 1.2: Ballyhoura Country**



(Ballyhoura Development, 2012)

**Figure 1.3**  
**Ballyhoura Facts**

- Location: North East Cork/South East Limerick
- Area: 1,879 sq. km.
- Population: 78,191 (Density 41.8 persons per sq. km)
- Social Organisation: 54 local communities
- Settlement Patterns: Dispersed 13 Towns
- Secondary Schools: 17
- Primary Schools: 84
- University of Limerick
- Tourist population: 544,710 (Ballyhoura Development, 2012)

## Background

The rural region is 1,879 sq. km with a population of just over 78,000 as outlined in **Figure 1.3**. Traditionally a region of smallholding farmers Ballyhoura was once dependent on dwindling subsidies from CAP<sup>7</sup> and had no ready economic alternative to agriculture and had reached an economic low in 1990, (Hartseen, Goode and Huigen (2000; 125) noted that there was a lack of diversity in the rural economic base which was the kernel of the rural development problem in Ballyhoura, there was a vicious circle of rural decline with three dimensions;

1. The decline in the traditional economic base which in turn had contributed to high levels of migration and population decline. This had a knock on effect on the demand for services which in turn had led to the closure of shops and pubs, leaving a more derelict landscape.
2. The deterioration in infrastructure provision, roads needed to be upgraded and maintained and there was a lack of public transport within the region.
3. The decrease in the quality of life of Ballyhoura residents, there was a need to encourage young people to stay in the area (Hartseen *et al.* 2000; 125).

To alleviate the economic decline BD focuses on implementing strategies to improve the quality of life of the regions inhabitants and to diversify the economy.

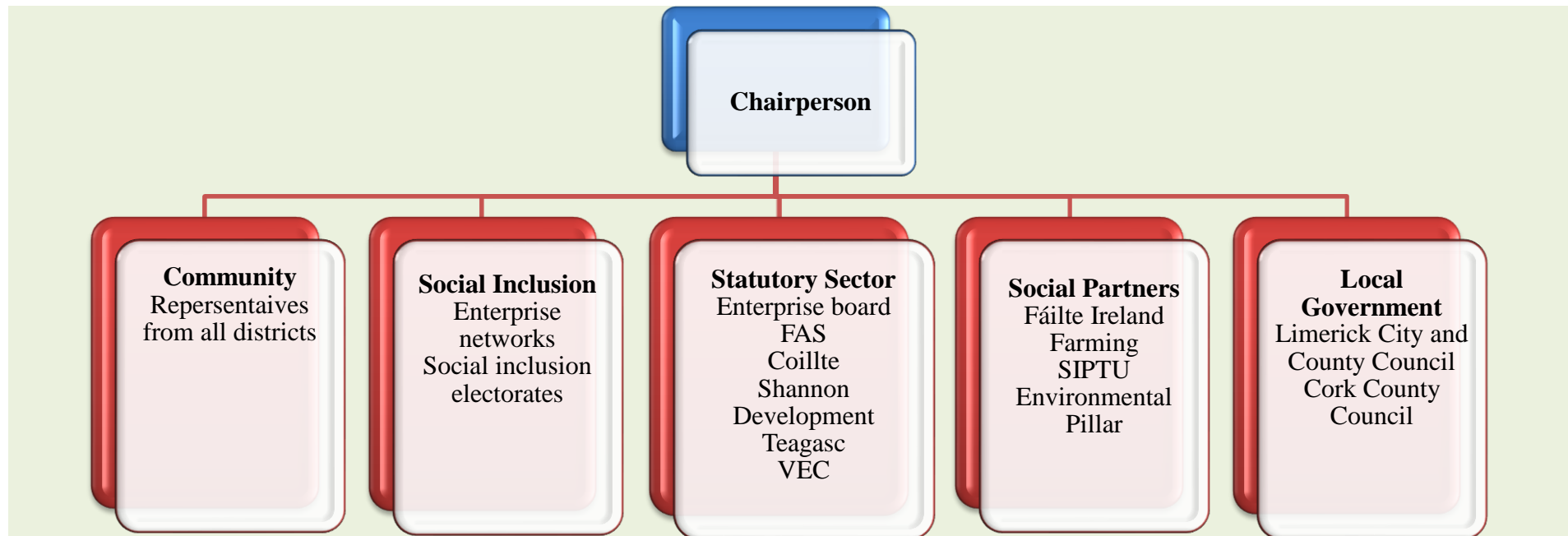
## Ballyhoura Development (BD)

BD was set up in 1989 to manage rural development and social inclusion programmes in the Ballyhoura Country region. As is evident from **Figure 1.5** the company does not have a complex structure, it is divided by sectors namely community, social inclusion, statutory, social partners and local government who all work cohesively to drive through the goals of the company, this structure endorses democratic governance (Heywood, 2011). BD is as a local development company who are area and client focused. The company has charitable status and is limited by guarantee.

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<sup>7</sup> CAPs main objective is to increase agricultural productivity and stabilise markets within the EU (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2011).

**Figure 1.5**  
**Structure of BD**



FAS are the Irish national training and employment agency (FAS, 2013)

Coillte is a commercial company who seek to enrich Ireland through managing its natural resource (Coillte, 2013)

Shannon Development is a regional development agency (Shannon Development, 2013)

Teagasc is Ireland's agricultural and food development authority (Teagasc, 2013)

VEC is Ireland's vocational educational committee (VEC, 2009)

Fáilte Ireland is Ireland's National tourism development organisation (Fáilte Ireland, 2013)

SIPTU is Ireland's services, industrial professional and technical union (SIPTU, 2013)

BD is funded by the Irish Government under the NDP 2007 - 2013<sup>8</sup> and part financed by European Union Structural Funds<sup>9</sup> (EUSF) such as National Strategic Reference Framework<sup>10</sup> (NSRF) 2007-2013, which is Ireland's National Strategy for using EUSF and sets out the direction for investment by the European Social Fund<sup>11</sup> (ESF) and the European Rural Development Fund<sup>12</sup> (ERDF) (Department of Finance<sup>13</sup>, 2012). The company works closely with the local community, social partners, public bodies and the elected members. The aim of the company is to support the community and businesses with the diversification of the local economic base, through community, enterprise, employment support and tourism. This in turn will improve the quality of life of those who reside in the region (BD, 2010). BD assists both individuals and communities through various programmes which are resourced by LEADER<sup>+</sup>, the National Rural Development Programme<sup>14</sup> (NRDP) and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme<sup>15</sup> (LDSIP). Funding through these programmes covers a range of activities across enterprise, food, community, tourism, heritage, environment and recreation with support for research and development, training and direct project funding (BD, 2008). BD's aims and strategies are outlined in **Figure 1.6**.

**Figure 1.6**  
**Aims and Strategies of BD**



In relation to the improving the quality of life of the local community BD has set a number of strategies in place as outlined in **Figure 1.6** including education, community planning and development, community services and facilities and volunteering ,which should be based on harmonious and sustainable development (OECD, 2010). **Figure 1.7** highlights the goals and actions

<sup>8</sup> NDP sets out plans for economic growth in Ireland (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>9</sup> The EUSF standardises wealth in the EU (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>10</sup> NSRF sets out the policy context within which the funding available to Ireland is utilised (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>11</sup> The ESF alleviates poverty and standardises living conditions across the EU (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>12</sup> The ERDF provides assistance for community initiatives (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>13</sup> Department of Finance role is to manage the Irish governments finances (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>14</sup> The NRDP sets out to diversify the rural economy and improving the quality of life across rural regions (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

<sup>15</sup> The LDSIP promotes economic and social inclusion (Robinson and O'Connor, 2013b)

related to planning/development and community services and facilities. To release the goals outlined in **Figure 1.7** a sub structure was developed which comprises of community representatives and a TUS<sup>16</sup> steering group. Under the RDP 2007-2013, support can be offered for training, analysis and development and capital development in the region. A community development team have been set up to work directly with the community and provide support across a diverse range of projects. These teams often assess local conditions and initiate activities which are in line with the regional development vision (Robinson and Green, 2011). The RDP therefore acts as umbrella strategy within the context of regional economic strategies (Kakee, Hull, Miller and Woltjer, 2008). The aim is to strengthen and enhance the fabric of the community while ensuring social inclusion. Social inclusion needs to be a specific policy agenda and should include representatives from the community (Combat Poverty Agency, 1998) as is the case with Ballyhoura.

In order to develop integrative frameworks for successful regional development inclusivity and endogenous development is key (Helming and Vellema, 2011). To achieve this, an outreach office has been set up in each of the five districts in the region. BD secure LEADER and NRDP funding towards capital expenditure support such as development of local enterprise facilities, the application of new technology for local enterprises in areas such as marketing, community capital, upgrading community facilities, the enhancement of local culture and the protection of both the natural and built environment and community grants for plans which enhance community infrastructure, such as town renewal plans. It is therefore evident that LEADER funding focuses on local resources and enables the mobilisation of local community activities (Smithson, Stough and Nijkamp, 2011).

**Figure 1.7**

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<sup>16</sup> TUS is a community workplace scheme for the unemployed (TUS, 2013)

## Quality of Life: Planning and Development/Community Services



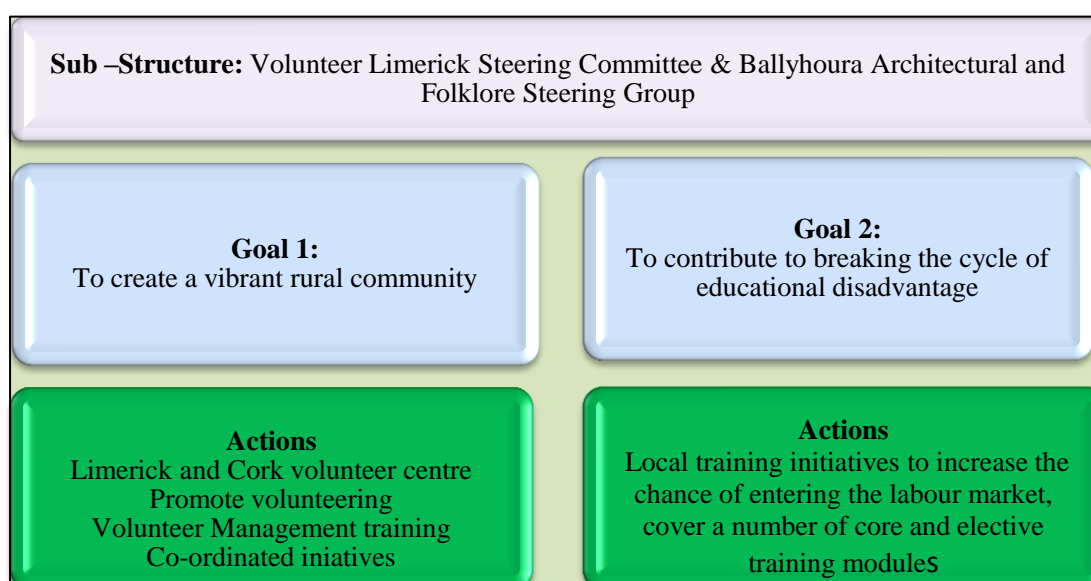
With regard to the improving education and promoting volunteering BD has set a number of strategies in place as outlined in **Figure 1.8**. Through bottom up regional development new momentum is given to the local community. Opposite to the top-down or centred approach the regional development paradigm based on the bottom-up model evolved from the weaknesses related to classical regional development theory (Ateljvevic and Page, 2009). The top down approach is often associated with sub standardization and does not have an emphasis on the locally based industry driven approach (Jackman, 2005). The bottom-up model on the other hand encourages entrepreneurship and innovation at grass roots level and seeks to empower the local population (Freidman, 1992) and sees regional development as a vehicle to increase the local potential through capacity building (Bull and Baudner, 2004). In essence it decentralises decision making to a local level allowing for sustainable regional development (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003). Training and education facilitates this and empowers people to actually think about their future (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD<sup>17</sup>, 2010). This in turn will unleash the human capital required for regional development.

Education and training act as an instrument of regional development and is an important step in bringing about change; it creates awareness and consciousness for those involved (Pareek, 2005). Human resource development is an element of regional planning and development and actions set out in **Figure 1.7** are put in place to stimulate demand for work related education and training in order to overcome social exclusion (Atalik and Fischer, 2002). Due to this BD endorse many local training

<sup>17</sup> OECD's promotes policies that will increase the economic and social well-being of people worldwide (OECD, 2012).

initiatives including a vocational training opportunity scheme for those who have been unemployed for over six months, there are ten different courses to choose from including web design and booking. The aim is to re-educate people in the community so that they can re-enter the workforce, in essence to empower residents and improve the competitiveness of the region (Pike, Rodriguez-Pose and Tomaney, 2006). Volunteerism can cement a bond within a community (Gibson and Connell, 2012) and help to create a vibrant rural community, in line with goal 1 in **Figure 1.8**.

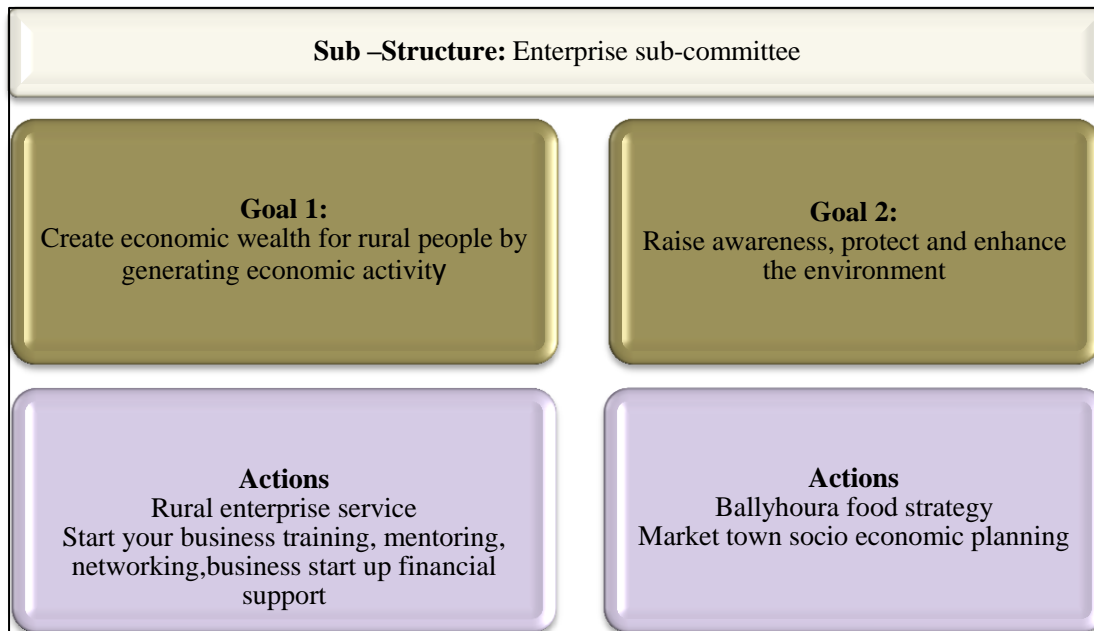
**Figure 1.8**  
**Quality of Life: Education and Volunteering**



In relation to the improving the economic diversification of the Ballyhoura region BD have set a number of strategies in place as outlined in **Figure 1.6** including employment, enterprise, the environment, heritage and culture, training and tourism and recreation. **Figure 1.9** highlights the goals and actions related to enterprise. Developing enterprises in rural areas can strengthen the region's economic performance; it directly influences the local population's quality of life by creating jobs, increasing discretionary income and increasing the standard of living of the local community (Fink, Loidl and Lang, 2013; Giaoutzi, Nijkamp and Storey, 1988; Pike *et al.* 2006). As is evident in **Figure 1.9** BD advocate the development of enterprise, they aid interested parties in obtaining funding for analysis and enterprise development such as assessing the potential of projects, funding for training to enhance the knowledge content of the economy. BD also supplies infrastructure investment such as the Kilfinane Education Centre, Ballyhoura Forest Homes, and Church town Rural Conference Centre. It has been asserted that expanding and investing infrastructure will provide a platform for economic development in the long term (Banister and Berechman, 2000; Sotarauta, Horlings and Liddle, 2012).

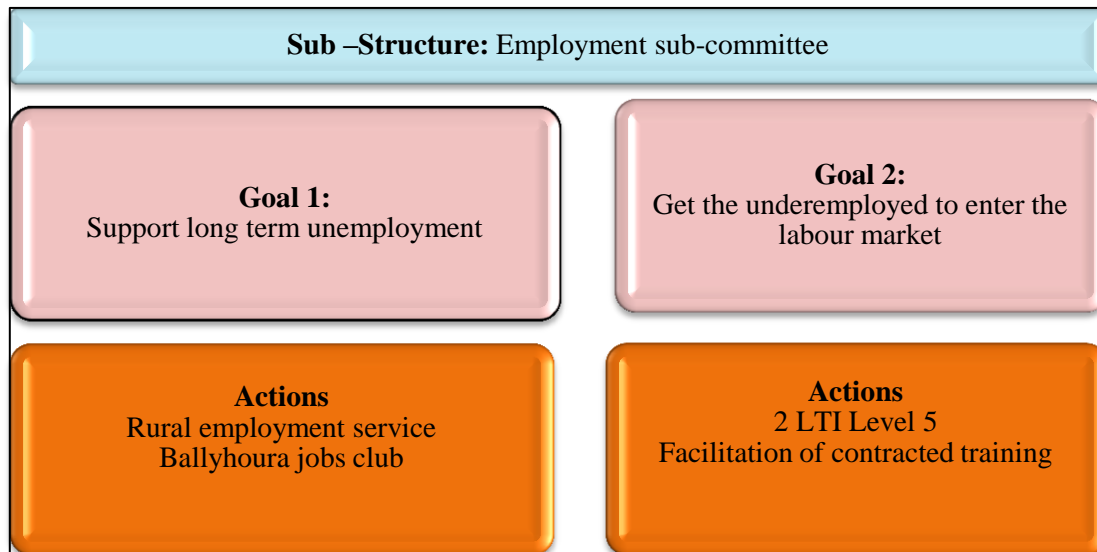


**Figure 1.9**  
**Diversification of the Economy: Enterprise/Environment**



Diversification of the rural economy is a priority for the competitiveness of a region; it involves finding new sources of employment and income for the local community (OECD, 2009; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003) as highlighted in **Figure 1.10**. BD set goals in place to support those in long term unemployment and aid them in re-joining the workforce thus enhancing the quality of life of the local residents and alleviating migration. One programme under the employment strategy is the Foroige Youth Project which provides young and disadvantaged people with necessary services. Activities under this programme include summer camps and transition classes which are linked to employment for early school leavers in the region. This sector needs to connect to the mainstream and should be seen as key human resources within the local community (Hardiman, 2004) and the ensuing employment should be sustainable and promote social inclusion (Eversole and Martin, 2005). Under the LDSIP an annual programme is run which focuses on the unemployed, community development and youth initiatives. Measures under unemployment include outreach advice and guidance, education, support for new enterprise and training. These actions should be viewed as a sustainable measure (Atalik and Fisher, 2002) under the umbrella strategy of regional development. Measures under community development include community facility upgrading and community training. These measures should be centred on achieving a fully integrated society (Kumar, 2006) inclusive all members of the community. Measures under youth initiatives include early school leaving prevention, youth work programmes. The youth within a community should feel understood and included in local initiatives as this further strengthens social inclusion (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004).

**Figure 1.10**  
**Diversification of the Economy: Employment**



Diversification of the rural economy through tourism has been advocated by governments across Europe (Baum, 2006; Bramwell, 2004) as tourism is based on local initiatives (Uysal, Perdue and Sirgy, 2012) it is rooted in local scenery and endorses local tradition and culture (Sharma, 2004). In line with the goals set out in **Figure 1.11**, BD will aid in sourcing LEADER+ and NRDP funding to obtain tourism capital for product development such as the development of visitor facilities and activities; secure tourism grants such as development and analysis projects which incorporate market research/plans or the development of prototype services or products; tourism marketing such as promotion, packaging and tourist information (Limerick County Development Board<sup>18</sup>, 2012). Capital for tourism accommodation such as funding for potential projects which upgrade existing accommodation or new accommodation is also sought. The development of the tourism industry within a community is dependent on the accessibility to capital (Page and Connell, 2006 therefore having BD to aid in sourcing capital is beneficial to the region.

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<sup>18</sup> Limerick County Development Board implements and oversees strategies in relation to economic, social and cultural development in Limerick (Limerick County Development (Board, 2011).

Importantly, BF was established as a cooperative whose main function is to act as a commercial reservation agent and incoming tour operator. Its strategic objective is to develop marketable products based on the strengths and resources of Ballyhoura Country. The objective should be compatible with environmental protection and the sustainable enhancement of the region (Hall, Kirkpatrick and Mitchell, 2005). BF supports local businesses with new product development, which is consistent with the marketing objectives of expanding tourism development (Ballyhoura.org, 2012). Together with BD, BF implement the tourism development strategy for the Ballyhoura area which places a focus on two key development areas, world class outdoor activities and authentic heritage experiences (BD, 2005). The vision of for the region is that Ballyhoura can become a first-class rural holiday destination for independent and special interest visitors from overseas, and independent and leisure visitors from the domestic market, offering access to a range of high quality recreational activities and an integrated rural heritage experience unrivalled in Ireland (Tourism Development Resources, 2003; 37)

**Figure 1.11**

**Diversification of the Economy: Tourism & Recreation/Heritage & Culture**



The region is highly proactive in utilising tourism research (as highlighted in the actions of goal 1 in **Figure 1.11**) to develop new markets and improve the quality of the tourism offering in the region. Examples of this research include;

- Ballyhoura Attractions Cluster Development Strategy Report (Tourism Development Resources, 2003)
- Ballyhoura International Walking Festival Visitor Survey (Tourism Research Centre, 2006)
- Research on Mountain Biking Trails (Millward Brown Ulster, 2011)

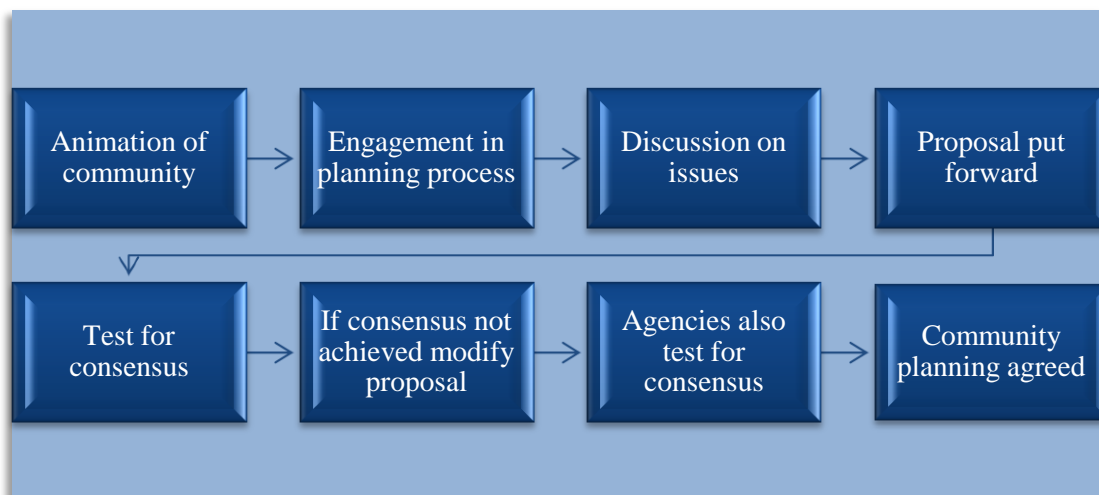
- Slieve Felim Concept Plan (URS- Scott Wilson, 2011- pres.)
- Galtee Mountains: Tourism Development Facilitation and Project Management (SLR Consulting, 2011 – pres.).

Conducting tourism research enables BD to create a destination vision which outlines the market structure and identifies the target market (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). **Figures 1.6 – 1.11** outlined the different goals and actions associated with strategies which BD have developed to enhance the rural development. The success of these initiatives involves careful strategic planning and collaboration with the key stakeholders within the community (Burns and Fridman, 2011).

### **Sustainable community/Socio economic planning in Ballyhoura**

Economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions need to be addressed to break the circle of rural decline. It is imperative that tourism planning authorities understand resident host community attitude and expectations, in order for effective planning to proceed (Burns and Fridman, 2011). BD has put a framework in place which encourages community collaboration. The framework or community action plan as outlined in **Figure 1.12** ensures that sustainability will be achieved while simultaneously integrating the local community.

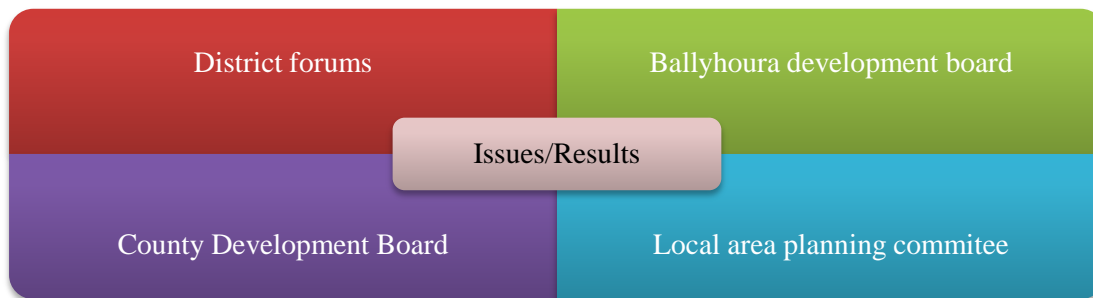
**Figure 1.12**  
**Sustainable Community Action Plan**



As a result of this community action plan all participating agencies are aware of issues in relation to regional development, the community activists can then feed the issues to the relevant actors (as illustrated in **Figure 1.13**) which in turn will influence policy, strategies and responses. Community co-operation and integration are essential to the successful integration of such plans and strategies (Jamal and Getz, 1995; 181). Community co-operation and integration ensures that tourists will be welcome as the industry grows (Guiney, 2002; 189). By embracing community co-operation as best

practice, tourism can make a contribution to the three pillars of sustainability, namely delivering social, environmental and economic benefits to the rural area (Asker, Boronyak, Carrard, and Paddon, 2010).

**Figure 1.13**  
**Result of Community Socio-Economic Action plan**



The issues and results from the action plan are relayed to various district forums, the BD board, the county development boards and the local area planning committee. BD utilise a strategic management approach which places an emphasis on involving key actors (as illustrated in **Figure 1.12 and 1.13**). These actors embody the values and attitudes which are intrinsic to a region (Audretsch and Walshok, 2013).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ireland faced serious regional problems in the late 1980's such as infrastructural bottlenecks and unbalanced development (O'Leary, 2003). In response the government tried to balance regional development as a national objective through the implementation of the NDP 2000-2006 and the NSS 2002-2020. Regional development approaches have been attracting attention due to the fact that they are seen as vehicles for encouraging economic development (Pender and Reeder, 2011).

The seven approaches of the LEADER approach strategically fit with the BD approach in that strategies and plans are area based, utilise a bottom –up approach, include partnership, advocate the use of local action groups, are innovative and integrated, stimulate networking and co-operation between areas, utilise local financing and management and delegate decision making responsibilities for funding (Smitson, Stough and Nijkamp, 2011) through BD. By utilising a bottom-up approach the community are involved in enhancing the quality of life of residents and diversifying the economic base. It is evident that promoting social inclusion is an important aspect in relation to rural development, having a strong regional structure like Ballyhoura enhances the deliverability of policies and strategies (Combat Poverty Agency, 1998). Regional culture is often overlooked as a key component in the design of regional strategies even though they are essential for regional

development success (Audretsch and Walshok, 2013) BD ensures that all aspects of regional culture are integrated in its strategic plans through collaboration of the local community. BD's community model of development is seen as best practice approach (Briassoulis and Van Der Straaten, 2000) as the community co-ordinated framework facilitates and encourages high levels of participation. This framework could be adopted by other rural regions who are interested in implementing regional development strategies through a bottom-up approach.

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