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The Case of Ireland's County Donegal: Stimulating Rural Labour Markets via Training, Tourism and Nurturing Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship

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1. Introduction

Even casual observers can detect some of the ways that employment conditions are being transformed throughout the industrialized world. It was not many years ago that an individual would- or could- use word of mouth to find an opportunity to start a career within an organization. Then, in turn, that worker would slowly accumulate seniority and advancement opportunities within that same place of employment. Of course, that stereotype, of spending a whole career working for one employer, was true for only some workers, and that system was not without barriers, instability, and injustice. Nonetheless, recent transformations have created additional uncertainties for individuals in

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many occupations, industries, and locations. Due to its inherent characteristics, current conditions are often especially challenging for those in rural locations today. Rural individuals often have to live with fewer local employment options, and fewer convenient opportunities to acquire education, skills, and/or work experience to break into good quality employment. As a result, rural regions potentially face a problem of aging and declining populations and a downward cycle if out-migration leads to lower economic activity which, in turn, provides incentive for more to leave.

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic responses that local governments and public sector institutions and organizations can do to help communities and citizens stem the tide of these seemingly unstoppable labour market waves. In particular, we discuss the actions that have been undertaken in Ireland's County Donegal, based on a case study of that region that the first author has been undertaking since 2009. In addition to observational analysis, findings in this paper are based on several semi-structured interviews conducted within the region, as well as surveys from Letterkenny Institute of Technology (Lyt) students, and pilot surveys gathered from tourists. Because issues and activities within County Donegal have been studied to see its possible applicability to regions within Canada, many of the cited sources are from Europe (and Ireland in particular) or Canada¹. County Donegal is worthy of a case study because its stakeholders, like so many elsewhere, are having to face the challenge of trying to ensure the economic vibrancy of their home.

This interdisciplinary paper utilizes academic themes and sources from management, rural studies, tourism, geography, educational studies and sociology. That said, this is primarily an industrial relations study. As such, we consider employment accessibility and quality, the importance of work within peoples' lives, and the interaction between environmental changes and the actions (and responses) of local stakeholders. We focus on the role of education and training, and direct and indirect job creation, and their relationship with out-migration. The tourism industry receives specific attention because of its importance in Ireland generally, and its prospects for employment growth within County Donegal. Tourism growth is also a frequent goal of small-scale social enterprises that tend to emerge in rural areas². In the next section, some background information

¹ All authors of this paper are Canadian-based, and primarily study economic conditions in Canada.

² See, for example, J. Defourny and M. Nyssens. Social enterprise in Europe: recent trends and developments. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 2008, vol. 4, n. 3, 202-228.

on County Donegal will be provided, followed by methodology, findings, and discussion.

2. Background Information

One point of clarification is required at the beginning. We have not formally defined 'rural' or 'remote' for the purpose of this paper. Instead, in the interview process, we sought the opinions of participants. In all cases, the interviews participants from County Donegal, whether or not interviewed in the capital of Letterkenny, directly or indirectly described the region as being rural. There are always some definitional challenges when trying to determine boundaries between what is urban versus rural versus suburban, and opinions vary. Immediately adjacent to County Donegal's Northwestern border is the city of Derry, having a population of approximately 100,000³. As such, that corner of County Donegal is more accurately described as being suburban, since daily commuting to Derry City is practical, notwithstanding cross-border complications. .

According to 2011 Irish Census figures, the population of Letterkenny is just under 20,000. As a whole, County Donegal has a population of about 161,000 people, but due its large area, its population density is only 33 persons per square kilometre, which is among the lowest of the 32 counties on the island of Ireland, and is also low on an absolute basis⁴. When looking at the location of the county holistically, some basic challenges leap to mind. One, neither the Irish nor Northern Irish rail systems enter County Donegal, and much of the intercity bus network only travels to Donegal town and/or Letterkenny to points outside of the county. In more remote areas, transportation is provided by independent operators on a small-scale basis. Two, given its location in the Northwest corner of the island, County Donegal is arguably the most isolated county within the Republic of Ireland, and is several hours drive away from the capital city of Dublin. Three, its shape and coastal location means that much of County Donegal is physically separated from other counties. Even Letterkenny is more than 30 kilometres west of Derry City, and 50 kilometres north of Donegal Town (near the southern boundary of the

³ Ireland and Northern Ireland, 2014.

⁴ See Government of Ireland. 2015. Miscellaneous 2011 census data and reports downloaded on 4 September 2015 from www.cso.ie/en/census2011reports; V. Du Plessis, R. Beshiri, R.D. Bollman, and H. Clemenson. Definitions of rural. Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin. Statistics Canada, 2001, vol. 3, n.3.

county)⁵. In terms of larger cities, County Donegal is approximately four hours driving distance from Dublin, while Belfast is roughly three hours away. On the whole, then, and notwithstanding the central core of Letterkenny and the areas adjacent to Derry City, there is a distinctly off-the-main-route ‘feel’ within this jurisdiction. Thus, without implying any negative connotations with the use of the term, we categorize all of County Donegal as being effectively rural, which is consistent with the way our interview participants typically describe it⁶.

In our recent research⁷, we explored how access to local education and employment are key factors affecting how young people decide whether to stay or out-migrate. In this paper, we considered the role of government and post-secondary educational institutions within County Donegal, and whether that would or could impact out-migration. In terms of public administration, Ireland has a powerful central government, but also with councils at a county level. Thus, we pay more attention was paid to actions of the Donegal County Council, as opposed to the Irish (Central) Government, because the former is necessarily focused on local issues. Within the county, there is one ‘third level’ (i.e. college or university) educational institution: the Letterkenny Institute of Technology. Although post-secondary students can commute to adjacent counties, the main choice, for those within County Donegal who seek to acquire third level education, is to attend Lyit or to out-migrate to a different location. Lyit’s main campus is located in Letterkenny, and a second smaller campus is located in the small marine and fishery-oriented town of Killybegs, which is in a more remote coastal location about one hour southwest.

Lyit has a total about 3000 students, which is a relatively modest number, but nonetheless offers a range of programs in the health, physical and social sciences. For students, Letterkenny is an affordable location since basic accommodation is fairly plentiful and fairly inexpensive. While this community has struggled economically in recent years, that makes its services affordable and accessible to students. Because of its modest size,

⁵ Letterkenny Guide. 2015. <http://www.letterkennyguide.com/> (accessed September 4, 2015).

⁶ For a much more definitive exploration of the concept of rurality, see Du Plessis, Beshiri, & Bollman, 2001.

⁷ E.g. G.B. Cooke, S.L. Mann, and J.K. Burns. Education and employment choices among young rural workers in Canada and Ireland: A tale of two studies. In Vodden, K., Gibson, R. & Baldacchino, G (eds.), *Place Peripheral: Place-Based Development in Rural, Island and Remote Regions*, 2015.

the city is walkable, and yet transportation to campus is good. Killybegs is also inexpensive, but intercity transportation is limited. Also, due to corporate and technological changes in the commercial fishery, there are fewer local employment options for students and others than in the past. We also note that the Killybegs campus was known as, and is still often referred to as the Killybegs Tourism College before its recent affiliation with Lyit. Tourism has been a fledgling industry within County Donegal for many years. However, the region has attracted proportionately fewer tourists than most other regions within Ireland and Northern Ireland, due to its more remote location and more limited transportation. Also, the county has been relatively less successful promoting and developing its attractions in a way that appeals to domestic and international visitors.

Turning to the country as a whole, Ireland had been a poor cousin within Western Europe for much of the 20th century, at least partially resulting from insular economic policies. That changed in the 1970s as Ireland joined the EEC (the forerunner of the EU), and consciously began to entice foreign multinational manufacturers to generate domestic employment⁸. Nonetheless, Ireland generally continued to struggle until the late 1980s⁹. However, after its government policies shifted towards open markets, low tax rates and a heavy emphasis on developing human capital, the fortunes of the country changed quickly and dramatically¹⁰. While some analysts point to the Irish Government's pro-business policies and/or European aid funds, one of the other catalysts for the economic renaissance is the emergence of a social partnership between labour, employers, and governments to proactively position Ireland for financial success and high employment and wages¹¹. This partnership resulted in an environment in which low corporate taxes were retained, thereby stimulating economic and employment (and wage) growth, but also social payouts for unemployed and underemployed people rose too, roughly in lockstep. As will be discussed later, this is relevant to us because the key to economic vibrancy is to get income into as many hands as possible to allow it to circulate throughout a community.

⁸ B.M. Walsh. Labour market adjustment in the Irish regions, 1998-2005. *Quarterly economic commentary*, Economic and Social Research Institute, Autumn, 2006, 80-100.

⁹ P. Teague and J. Donaghey. The life and death of Irish social partnership: lessons for social pacts, *Business History*, 2015, vol. 57, n. 3, 418-437.

¹⁰ See S. Dorgan. How Ireland became the Celtic Tiger. 2006.; E. Morgenroth. Trends in the regional economic activity of Ireland: The role of productivity, in C Aylward and R O'Toole (Eds.) *Perspectives on Irish Productivity: A Selection of Essays by Irish and International Economists*. Dublin: Forfas, 2007, 66-83.

¹¹ See Teague and Donaghey, 2015.

The effect of the Celtic Tiger boom was immense, with average per capita income rising from well below to the EU average to the second highest among all members by 2004, and some of the persistent regional disparities that had existed across Ireland shrank sharply, as unemployment and per capita incomes converged¹². While all areas of Ireland shared in the boom to varying degrees, and a case can be made that poor areas actually saw the biggest turnaround, the regional gaps, in terms of unemployment incomes, are better viewed as having declined not disappeared. For instance, in the rural Border region, which includes County Donegal, unemployment fell from 19.1% to 5.1% between 1988 and 2005, compared to the Irish national average of 16.3% and 4.3%, respectively¹³. Nonetheless, some areas- and segments of the population- participated in the boom less fully than others.

While Ireland enjoyed buoyant employment for a decade, warning signs were emerging by 2005 or so. The problems came to a head in 2008 when the credit and construction-driven bubble burst in Ireland, as banking and financial problems emerged en masse across many countries. During that global financial crisis of 2008-2009, the Government of Ireland acted swiftly to cut spending and increase taxes to stabilize its banks as well as its own financial situation. While these austerity measures were painful and controversial, they did help stabilize conditions¹⁴. While the Irish recovery was underway a couple years later, the magnitude of the crisis needs to be appreciated. Between the start and end of 2008, the Irish unemployment rate rose from 5% to over 13%, and remained high for a couple more years.

Unfortunately, even during its height, the Celtic Tiger boom did not *fully* reach County Donegal. The jurisdiction continues to suffer from a relatively small and aging population and heavy reliance on government-provided income supports¹⁵, which has been the unfortunate pattern for many decades¹⁶. County Donegal has the lowest labour force participation rate at only 58%, and thus, it is not surprisingly that it also has the lowest per capita disposable income of any Irish County¹⁷. The unemployment

¹² Morgenroth, 2007; Dorgan, 2006.

¹³ Walsh, 2006.

¹⁴ see Bank of Ireland. The Irish Economy: An Overview, 2010.

¹⁵ Government of Ireland. Regional Quality of Life in Ireland 2013. Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2013., 2015.

¹⁶ See E. Shanklin. Donegal's changing traditions: an ethnographic study. Volume 8. Taylor & Francis, UK, 1985.

¹⁷ Government of Ireland. County Incomes and Regional GDP, 2009 (data). Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2012.; Government of Ireland, 2015; Donegal County.

rate among young adults within County Donegal is even slightly higher than the rate overall¹⁸, which is a potential catalyst for out-migration¹⁹. Ireland's western regions tend to have lower population density, lower per capita incomes, and lower labour market participation rates²⁰. What is unique, however, is that County Donegal has especially low population density, and is especially far from the capital region of Ireland, and its economic performance tends to be near the bottom in county comparisons. For example, Haase and Pratschke (2012) have developed a 'deprivation index' which is a composite measure that considers education levels, population changes, and unemployment rates, and thus gives one representation of socio-economic advancement. According to their index, Donegal had the lowest score of any Irish county in both 2006 (during the economic boom) and in 2011 (after the boom ended)²¹. Moreover, County Donegal is second to only to Limerick City for having the highest number of 'unemployment blackspots', which are neighbourhoods identified as having at least 35% unemployment²². The overall message is that difficult economic times have returned to the citizens of County Donegal, on average. But, as discussed later in the paper, several strategic responses are being undertaken.

3. Literature Review

Employment Conditions: Current Realities

As mentioned in the introduction, the proportion of stable, permanent, full-time jobs – with fixed hours and good and pay benefits- are disappearing²³. For many, if not most, people, 'non-standard' work has

Development Board [DCDB]. Making the Future Happen: Addressing the unemployment challenge in Donegal. Research report prepared for Donegal County Council's Research and Policy Division, 2010.

¹⁸ Donegal County Development Board, 2010.

¹⁹ See U.-D.K. Bæck and G. Paulgaard. Rural Futures? Finding one's place within changing labour markets. Orkana Akademisk: Nor, 2012.; Walsh, 2006

²⁰ See Morgenroth, 2007; Government of Ireland, 2015.

²¹ T. Haase and J. Pratschke. The 2011 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA). Introduction and reference Tables. 2012.

²² Government of Ireland, 2015.

²³ J.-Y. Boulin, M. Lallement, and F. Decent working time in industrialized countries: Issues, scopes, and paradoxes. in Boulin, J.Y., M. Lallement, J. Messenger, and F. Michon (eds.), Decent Working Time, New Trends New Issues. Geneva, SUI: ILO, 2006, 13-40.

become the new standard. Simply put, a range of non-standard work arrangements such as part-time, temporary, casual, and/or on-call hours and employment status are common in most parts of the industrialized world, to varying degrees²⁴. For instance, fewer than half of Canadian workers have a fixed, full-time schedule of a normal length, and 20% of Canadians have either a part-time and/or temporary job²⁵. Turning to Western and Northern European labour forces, the average proportion of employees working a part-time schedule ranges from an average of about 10% to over 20%, and proportions having temporary employment are only marginally lower, on average, in 2013²⁶. According to that same source, the proportion of individuals in Ireland holding part-time or temporary employment was about 23% and 10%, respectively, while 16% were self-employed.

While these changes to the design of jobs are not inherently harmful in theory, much of the new `flexibility` and variation in work patterns is employer-driven, not employee-driven²⁷. Thus, the reality on the ground is that the majority of these changes have been implemented to achieve operational objectives, rather than to address workers' needs or preferences²⁸. As such, workers in these jobs frequently struggle to get to be able to work their preferred number of work hours per day, week, or year. While it is more common to want more hours, there are also others who would work less (hours per week, or weeks per year) if the opportunity arose²⁹. Another modern reality is that many jobs do not have upward mobility in terms of access to employer-provided promotion or training. In turn, this limits workers' ability to advance within their current place of employment, or to acquire better opportunities elsewhere. The

²⁴ See also, G. Betcherman and G.S. Lowe. *The Future of Work in Canada: A Synthesis Report*, Canadian Research Policy Networks, 1997.; G. Vallée. *Towards Enhancing the Employment Conditions of Vulnerable Workers: A Public Policy Perspective*. Vulnerable Workers Series, No. 2. Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2005.

²⁵ I.U. Zeytinoglu, G.B. Cooke, and S.L. Mann. *Flexibility: whose choice is it anyway?* *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 2009, vol. 64, n. 4, 555-574.

²⁶ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. *Miscellaneous online information*, <https://data.oecd.org/emp> (accessed September 4, 2015), 2015.

²⁷ G. Bosch. *Working Time and the Standard Employment Relationship*. in Boulin, J.Y., M. Lallement, J. Messenger, and F. Michon (eds), *Decent Working Time, New Trends New Issues*. Geneva, SUI: ILO, 2006, 41-64. ; Zeytinoglu, Cooke, & Mann, 2009.

²⁸ Boulin, Lallement, & Michon, 2006.

²⁹ D. Anxo, J.-Y. Boulin, & C. Fagan, C. *Decent working time in a life-course perspective*, in Boulin, J.Y., M. Lallement, J. Messenger, and F. Michon (eds), *Decent Working Time, New Trends New Issues*. Geneva, SUI: ILO, 2006, 93-122.

effect has been more polarized labour markets and stubbornly high pockets of unemployment and underemployment, in which individuals have trouble securing any employment, and even if they do, they frequently find themselves limited to peripheral jobs with relatively low pay, benefits, security, and upward mobility³⁰. The long-term effect has been an exacerbation of income and wealth inequality across societies³¹, which has grown into a social and political issue³².

At a government policy level, developed nations have emphasized the deregulation of trade barriers, and a push for international trade agreements, resulting in the freer movement of goods, services and capital³³. This often results in a divergence of interests between employees seeking stability and good wages and benefits versus employers seek operational flexibility and efficiencies³⁴. That said, employers and governments should not receive all of the blame. Work, and industrialized societies, are also being transformed by three long-term, and related, trends: industrial evolution, the impact of technology, and population migration. Broadly speaking, there is an ongoing evolutionary trend away from jobs in the primary and manufacturing sectors and towards service-based economics in the industrialized world³⁵. Although there are exceptions, service-sector jobs have lower pay and benefits and are more likely to contain non-standard work arrangements³⁶. Also, technological change, including automation and efficiency initiatives, has created

³⁰ S. Lee and D. McCann D. Working time capability: towards realizing individual choice, in Boulin, J.Y., M. Lallement, J. Messenger, and F. Michon (eds), *Decent Working Time, New Trends New Issues*. Geneva, SUI: ILO, 2006, 65-91.; H Rainbird. Skilling the unskilled: Access to work-based learning and the lifelong learning agenda." *Journal of Education and Work*, 2000, vol. 13, n. 2, 183-197.

³¹ Betcherman & Lowe, 1997; C.P. Green and G.D. Leeves. Job security, financial security and worker well-being: new evidence on the effects of flexible employment, *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 2013, vol. 60, n. 2, 121- 138.; R. Saunders. *Risk and Opportunity: Creating Options for Vulnerable Workers*. Vulnerable Worker Series, 7, Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2006.

³² Bosch, 2006; *Economist*, The. How inequality affects growth, 15 June 2015.

³³ Betcherman & Lowe, 1997; Boulin, Lallement, & Michon, 2006.

³⁴ See R.P. Chaykowski and M. Gunderson. The implications of globalization for labour and labour markets. In R.P. Chaykowski (Ed.), *Globalization and the Canadian Economy: The Implications for Labour Markets, Society and the State* (pp. 27-60). Kingston, CAN: School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, 2001, 27-60.

³⁵ e.g. Bosch, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. *Innovation and Modernising the Rural Economy*. 2014.

³⁶ I.U. Zeytinoglu. Flexible Work Arrangements: An Overview of Developments in Canada, in Zeytinoglu IU (ed) *Changing Work Relationships in Industrialized Economies*. Philadelphia, US: John Benjamins Publ, 1999, 41-58.

upheaval in a number of industries, which has lowered the need for large numbers of manual workers and increased the need for a smaller number of highly-skilled, highly-educated workers³⁷. Those trends have, in turn, contributed to the ongoing population shift, across many industrialized nations, from small, rural communities to, or adjacent to, large urban centres³⁸. While one wave of migration occurred during the industrial revolution of the 1800s, the ongoing migration to cities remains unabated. People do not just move for work. Many continue to move voluntarily for what they perceive to be better access to services, education, and different lifestyles³⁹.

It is also important to look at differences within the labour force. For older individuals, the economic uncertainty, while undesirable, might merely mean staying employed even beyond the normal or hoped-for retirement age, possibly in part-time or part-year work⁴⁰. But, due to their experience and possibly seniority, they might be able to manage that transition to retirement fairly smoothly. For others feeling more vulnerable, it could mean jumping at employment opportunities whenever they arise, whatever the quality⁴¹. When jobs are less than full-time and full-year, the effect, all else equal, is that annual work hours decline, as do annual incomes. In response, some people must hold multiple non-standard jobs concurrently, or during the year, to get enough hours to make a living⁴². For example, a worker might hold full-time seasonal employment in one industry, perhaps during summer, but also rely on a part-time job throughout the year. As a whole, and notwithstanding regional and jurisdictional differences, workers in contemporary labour markets tend to feel a sense of unease about the changes that are

³⁷ See Bosch, 2006; Johnson & Scott, 1997.

³⁸ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. Trends in Urbanisation and urban Policies in OECD Countries: What lessons for China? 2010b.

³⁹ X. Tang. Career Choices for Current Post-secondary Students in Newfoundland and Labrador. Unpublished report, Memorial University of Newfoundland, MER Program, 2009. ; G.B. Cooke. High Fliers versus Upstream Swimmers: Young rural workers in Canada and Ireland, in Youth Unemployment and Joblessness: Causes, Consequences, Responses: 151-168. Association for International and Comparative Studies in the field of Labour law and Industrial Relations (ADAPT). Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2012, 151-168. ISBN (10): 1-4438-4056-4 & ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4056-4.

⁴⁰ Lee and McCann, 2006.

⁴¹ Green & Leves, 2013.

⁴² E.g. Vallée, 2005; G.B. Cooke, J. Donaghey, and I.U. Zeytinoglu. The nuanced nature of work quality: evidence from rural Newfoundland and Ireland. *Human Relations*, 2013, vol. 66, n. 4, 503-527.

occurring⁴³, and many feel a sense of instability that spills over into one's life outside of work creating emotional and financial stress due to the lack of certainty⁴⁴.

While older workers might defer retirement plans, the options can be quite different for younger workers. As newcomers trying to gain a foothold in labour markets, young workers are especially susceptible to being stuck in non-standard jobs⁴⁵. Cynics could even argue that young adults who have a non-standard job are relatively lucky, since the unemployment rate among young adults has consistently been higher than the overall rate⁴⁶. Put bluntly, completing high school is no longer sufficient to have a reasonable chance at a good quality job. Also, a relative lack of experience is an additional hindrance. Even young people with high levels of ambition and attained education can find it difficult to break into good quality employment that allows them to use and development their skills⁴⁷. At the other end of the spectrum there is also a group of disengaged individuals who are neither in training/education programs nor actively participating in the labour market.

To recap, conditions have deteriorated overall, and yet the polarization of conditions-for the lucky few versus the rest- has seemingly grown. While the ways that work has been transformed has worrisome implications for everyone in the labour market, there can be additional concerns for those in more rural and remote locations in particular. Again, the characteristic that differentiates suburban locations from those that are truly rural is having some degree of remoteness from large urban centres. Suburbanites can, by definition, commute comfortably to an adjacent urban centre. As such, their situation is relatively similar to their purely urban counterparts. For those truly living rurally, where commuting to work to an urban centre is infeasible, local labour markets are critical.

⁴³ Boulin, Lallement, & Michon, 2006.

⁴⁴ Bosch, 2006; Vallée, 2005.

⁴⁵ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. Off to a good start? Jobs for youth. 2010a.

⁴⁶ E.g. R. Perciun and M. Balan. Youth Labour Market: Characteristics and Specific Issues. *Internal Auditing and Risk Management*, 2013, vol. 30, n.1, 31-42.

⁴⁷ M. Culliney. Going nowhere? Rural youth labour market opportunities and obstacles. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 2014a, vol. 22, n. 1, 45-57.

Rural Employment: Policy Options

On average, rural labour markets are less diverse, and more reliant on traditional industries⁴⁸. The industrial mix continues to evolve in many industrialized nations, towards service-based economies. This can be especially problematic as jobs in the primary sector (like fishing, farming, mining, and forestry), which have historically sustained rural communities, continue to decline⁴⁹. While these jobs frequently involved hard work and provided low wages, they also provided wide scale employment in even remote locations, as well as a way of life and sense of identity⁵⁰. With the declines of those sectors, rural individuals have had to transition to new fields and occupations, and potentially have to adapt by piecing together an income from multiple sources during a typical year. This could include periods of seasonal employment, followed by a mix of part-time employment, self-employment, freelancing, short-term government created work schemes and income supports, or periods of unemployment⁵¹. Given those economic realities, it follows that per capita income levels in rural areas are lower, on average⁵². This is often compounded because education levels are lower, and opportunities for skills upgrading and education are more limited⁵³. Yet, as mentioned above, if acquiring valued skills is a gateway to good quality work, then a harmful cycle can be created in which (primarily young) people move away from rural areas for better job opportunities, leaving shrinking and aging communities. In turn, that lowers the economic and social vibrancy of the communities, and can lead to business closures, loss of employment, and further out-migration⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ M. Brezzi, L. Dijkstra, and V. Ruiz. OECD Extended Regional Typology: The economic performance of remote rural regions. OECD Regional development Working Papers, 20011/06, 2011.

⁴⁹ E.g. OECD, 2014.

⁵⁰ see D.A. Smith, K. Vodden, M. Woodrow, A. Khan, and B. Fürst. The last generation? Perspectives of inshore fish harvesters from Change Islands, Newfoundland. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien*, 2014, vol. 58, n. 1, 95-109.; M. Corbett. Rural education and outmigration: the case of a coastal community. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 2005, vol. 28, n. 1&2, 52-72.

⁵¹ e.g. Cooke, Donaghey, & Zeytinoglu, 2013; D. Gray and A. Sweetman. A typology analysis of the users of Canada's unemployment insurance system: Incidence and seasonality measures. *Essays on the Repeat Use of Unemployment Insurance*, 2001.

⁵² OECD, 2014.

⁵³ Corbett, 2005.

⁵⁴ E.g. D. Gillies. Learning and leaving: education and depopulation in an island community, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 2014, vol. 44, n. 1, 19-34; B. Jentsch.

As the above literature describes, working conditions are changing, and for many, deteriorating. Moreover, those residing in more rural and/or remote regions often face additional challenges, and tend to have fewer good quality employment options, and fewer chances to upgrade their skills to better their prospects. As explored in the background information section, those experiences have also occurred within Ireland's County Donegal. The question is: what are the strategic policy responses? Fortunately, this is a topic that (rightly) has received attention from researchers and governments, and several policy options have been proposed. Yet, financial realities facing governments means that there is a need to prioritize resources and policy responses⁵⁵. Two related options emerge: i) post-secondary education and skills development, ii) and income support via social programs and/or stimulating job creation. The reality is that young people are the most likely to out-migrate from rural areas, although older citizens sometimes do so as well, if local employment conditions are poorer than available elsewhere⁵⁶. Thus, addressing job employment quality and quantity is the obvious policy lever, while providing access to educational institutions and ensuring cultural vibrancy are also relevant factors.

For long-term labour force participation, employment, and success, rural education levels need to be raised⁵⁷, because it allows new skills to be learned, but also more self-confidence to be gained, thereby enhancing employability of citizens, including discouraged ones⁵⁸. In fact, governments need to stimulate a desire among the population at large, to embrace lifelong learning⁵⁹. The idea is that, if labour markets are going to continue to change, so too must the skills sets, and comfort with change, among workers. It's also important to remember the different issues facing subgroups of citizens. At the one end, there are ambitious youth who might attend a local post-secondary institution, but only if sufficiently attractive programs are available. Else, they will leave for better programs elsewhere⁶⁰. Governments would be wise to try to retain

Youth migration from rural areas: moral principles to support youth and rural communities in policy debates. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 2006, vol. 46, n. 3, 229-240.

⁵⁵ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. *Better skills. Better jobs. Better lives. The OECD Skills Strategy*. Paris, OECD, 2012.

⁵⁶ See Culliney, 2014a.

⁵⁷ See Donegal County Development Board, 2010.

⁵⁸ V. Smith. Review article: Enhancing employability: Human, cultural, and social capital in an era of turbulent unpredictability. *Human Relations*, 2010, vol. 62, n. 2, 279-300.

⁵⁹ Rainbird, 2000; OECD, 2012.

⁶⁰ Cooke, Mann, & Burns, 2015.

more of its local youth for the long-term by ensuring that local institutions offer academic programs that provide the credentials sought by (local) employers⁶¹. Conversely, there are long-time labour market participants who want or need new skills to change career paths, or to find a new job if their old one disappeared. Governments also need to provide sufficient funding so that a range of vocational training options are available to help workers of all ages to upgrade their skills, and to try to coax disengaged citizens back into the labour market⁶². Thus, programs must be practical, accessible, affordable, at convenient times, and also coordinated with local transportation options⁶³.

Being unemployed has substantial impacts on the morale and wellbeing of individuals, but also represents a lost opportunity at a community level⁶⁴. When individuals are not meaningfully employed, whether they are looking for work, or discouraged and not currently considered to be in the labour market, or underemployed, policy makers have an obligation to try to rectify the situation. But, Ireland has an open economy, and has succeeded partially due to its ability to attract and retain foreign corporations. So, governments need to prudently implement policies that strike a balance so that employers can be competitive and efficient, while at the same time providing sufficient tax revenues to be able to offer social supports where needed.

A review of the literature suggests that two prongs are critical. One, the more people employed, the better. Thus, a goal of full employment should be the goal, even if that means sharing work⁶⁵. It also means helping to get discouraged and disengaged individuals into at least some level of paid employment, and all of the benefits that accrue from being active and self-

⁶¹ OECD, 2010a; G. Schmid. Non-standard employment in Europe: Its development and consequences for the European employment strategy. *German Policy Studies*, 2011, vol. 7, n. 1, 171-210.

⁶² E.D. Looker. Regional differences in Canadian rural-urban participation rates in post-secondary education. *Measuring the effectiveness of student aid (MESA) Project Research paper 2009-03*. Toronto: CAN: Canadian Education Project, 2009.; OECD, 2006, OECD, 2012

⁶³ Culliney, 2014a; M. Culliney. The rural pay penalty: youth earnings and social capital in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2014b, vol. 17, n. 2, 148-165.; Cooke, Mann, & Burns, 2015; Saunders, 2006.

⁶⁴ T. Boland and R. Griffin. *The Sociology of Unemployment*. Manchester University Press, UK, 2015.

⁶⁵ Betcherman and Lowe, 1997.

reliant⁶⁶. Two, it means having policies and income supports in place so that workers who lose (non-standard) employment qualify for benefits and are able to have a reasonable level of security and stability in times when paid employment disappears⁶⁷. Although it can be controversial, governments also need to be willing to contemplate some direct job creation, even of a short-term nature, to help those in need⁶⁸. Certainly, this is something that many people expect of governments, rather than to leave employment purely to the private sector.

According to the OECD, regions need to find local solutions involving community stakeholders, rather than imposing broad top-down policies involving blanket public funding allocations⁶⁹. In other words, it is impractical, with current austerity budgets, to expect to spend public funds received via top-down allocations. Instead, local governments and local stakeholders need to reflect, analyze, and to prioritize to select the local business opportunities that have promise and are worthy of receiving public funds⁷⁰. That potentially requires social enterprises or entrepreneurs interested in social goals to try to fill the void in rural and/or remote areas where for-profit opportunities are limited⁷¹. Tourism can provide some economic diversity, and is a logical choice for County Donegal because of the aforementioned tourism college and well-established markets (and potential customers) elsewhere in the country. More broadly, tourism is frequently thought of as an industry with employment potential for rural areas seeking economic diversity and job creation. Since rural regions are inherently 'away from urban', they can be seen as being more pristine, relaxed, and having wide open spaces to enjoy. The tourism industry also has the added benefits of having low barriers to entry for hard-to-employ people, because the industry is associated with a range of occupations⁷², including many are rather low-paying, and even of a seasonal nature⁷³.

⁶⁶ See V. Gash. Bridge or trap? Temporary workers' transitions to unemployment and to the standard employment contract. *European Sociological Review*, 2008, vol. 24, n. 5, 651-668.; Boland & Griffin, 2015; OECD, 2014.

⁶⁷ see Saunders, 2006; Bosch, 2006; Green & Leeves, 2013.

⁶⁸ see Bæck & Paulgaard, 2012.

⁶⁹ OECD (2014).

⁷⁰ OECD, 2014.

⁷¹ See Defourny & Nyssens, 2008.

⁷² R.D. Elkin and R.S. Roberts, R.S. Crafting a destination vision, in *Travel, Tourism, and Hospitality Research: A handbook for managers and Researchers* (Ritchie, J.R.B., and Goeldner, C.R., eds.). Wiley and Sons: US; 403-412, 1994.

⁷³ G.B. Cooke, J.K. Burns, and D.K. McManamon. The Case for Public Investment in Cultural Tourism in Gros Morne National Park (GMNP). Technical report funded by,

While these jobs can be seen as undesirable to some, an expanded tourism industry created opportunities for young people, and older people, to ease into, or out of, the labour market, or for discouraged workers.

If the tourism industry is targeted for growth by stakeholders within County Donegal in particular, the challenge is to figure out what the specific attraction or attractions should be, and which potential customers are the most logical ones to target. Potential visitors want to assess what they can see and do in new areas. So, a rural area needs to get the message out, and promote their attractions. An investment in tourism can benefit locals too, if it means that cultural, historical, social, and/or natural attractions and events are developed for both groups (i.e. tourists and locals) to enjoy⁷⁴. A rural area is unlikely to be able to attract tangibly more visitors unless it develops its attractions, events, and facilities (i.e. accommodations, restaurants, etc.) for tourists. Put simply, there are no shortcuts. To spur on rural tourism, governments need to take the lead and to make prudent capital investment to make it easy for visitors to come, spend, and be satisfied⁷⁵. That means biting the bullet and spending capital funds to improve the physical infrastructure like roads, transportation systems, and high-tech networks.

4. Methodology

Research Design

This paper emerged from a much larger study comparing the employment conditions, lifestyles, and degree of life satisfaction of rural individuals in Ireland and the two Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Ontario. After the conclusion of the original study research continued to explore a few emergent themes of interest: i) employment and education issues

and prepared for, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2013.

⁷⁴ D.L. Constantin and C. Mitrut. Cultural tourism, sustainability and regional development: experiences from Romania. In *Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Local development* (Girard, L.F. and Nijkamp, P, eds). Ashgate: UK, 2009, 149-166.

⁷⁵ See G.B. Cooke, D. Hanlon, K.W.J. Vardy, J.K. Burns, S. Parveen, and D.K. McManamon. *Adding Cultural Tourism to the Natural Assets of Gros Morne and its Environs: A Follow-up Report for ACOA*. Technical report funded by, and prepared for, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014.; B. Prideaux. Creating visitor attractions in peripheral areas, in *Managing Visitor Attractions: New Directions* (Fyall, A., Garrod, B., and Leask, A. - eds.). Butterworth Heinemann: UK, 2003, 58-72.

facing rural youth, ii) business development and sustainability issues, and iii) the current and possible role that the tourism/hospitality industry plays in rural areas. Data collection of this phase began in September 2010, and continued into 2015.

The original focus on older rural individuals was due to the presumption that these individuals have potentially reached a stage in life in which their work and life priorities have changes, or at least crystalized. More specifically, these workers might be more willing and able to cope with the locally available employment options. In contrast, young rural individuals were of interest because, due to their career stage, they potentially need to focus on finding a path to good quality employment. On the other hand, these younger workers potentially face additional barriers to that type of employment, and thus, we wanted to see how and what they are deciding to do, if anything. This involved interviews with a range of young rural adults, but also surveys of students both campuses of the Letterkenny Institute of Technology (Lyt). Then, since the availability and quality of local employment was found to be a key aspect of rural living, the focus of the follow-up study was expanded to include interviews with business people and community activists and representatives to explore the issues revolving around operating a social or for-profit enterprise. Particular attention was paid to the tourism/hospitality industry because, again, it is viewed widely as being a possible growth opportunity for many rural areas.

Data and Analysis

As mentioned in the introduction, we use a case study approach in this paper to explore the strategic responses that local governments, public sector institutions and organizations, and grassroots community groups within County Donegal are taking, or could take, to respond to the transformation of work. A variety of sources of data have been used: i) semi-structured interviews with a variety of citizens, activists, students, and other stakeholders within County Donegal, ii) surveys with post-secondary students at both Lyit campuses, iii) pilot surveys from tourists within the County, and iv) observational analyses by the first author.

Between February 2009 and April 2015, the views of almost two hundred participants have been examined via semi-structured interviews within the broad 'comparative employment' research program across all jurisdictions of interest. Of that total, 34 participants from County Donegal have been interviewed, and of those, 14 are young adults. A rather flexible protocol was used during the interviews, so that the participants could share views

on either the local economic conditions, employment options within the region, local lifestyles and quality of life, whether people typically commuted to work outside of the region on a daily (or longer) basis, discussions about who was able to acquire 'good quality' employment in the region, personal or family employment histories (if the participant wished), and possible public policy options, if the participant wished to share any. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted by one interviewer and one participant. In a small number of cases, couples or friends opted for a paired interview. Plus, for the initial set of interviews in 2009, a group format was used when participants were sought via local newspaper advertisements to attend at a pre-arranged date and time. Otherwise, a snowball sampling approach was used to find participants, once an initial community contact was made. To ensure that we accessed a suitable mix of younger and older individuals, as well as community activists and representatives, and business operators, we also used purposive sampling⁷⁶. Generally, the individual interviews lasted around 45-60 minutes, whereas the paired or group interviews lasted up to two hours, with a second interviewer as note-taker. The interviews were not digitally recorded. Instead, the interviewer(s) recorded handwritten notes during and after the interviews. It is also worth reminding readers that the interviews began in the first half of 2009, which was in the middle of the global financial crisis of 2008-2010. That crisis hit Ireland particularly hard, and yet the country has recovered rather strongly by 2015, albeit with some struggles in the interim. We raise this point simply to stress that the bulk of data collection occurred in the aftermath of a very serious economic downturn, and that presumably would have affected the responses of participants.

In 2012 and 2013, students were surveyed at Letterkenny Institute of Technology (Lyit). A total of 330 usable surveys were collected. Students were surveyed at both Lyit campuses (i.e. Letterkenny and Killybegs). Students were accessed by seeking permission from instructors to survey their students before, during, or after class. All students present in the classroom were given copies of the survey with an attached cover letter. Students were asked to fold the survey in half and to place into a circulated oversized envelope to ensure that individual surveys could not be linked to individual students. Although the completed surveys are best described as a convenience sample, they are thought to be roughly

⁷⁶ See J. Creswell. *Research design: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications: US, 1994.

representative, and include students with majors in business, tourism/hospitality, health sciences, & other studies. The short survey consisted of questions asking students about their hometown, why they chose to attend Lyit, and then where they prefer, or expect, to live after graduation, as well as their priorities/goals. In this paper, only simple descriptive statistics are presented, along with some sample findings from open-ended questions which were asked to get more detail understanding of the life and work and location preferences of the respondents.

Small scale surveying of tourists was undertaken in 2012 and 2013 as a pilot study. Although the planned full study was not subsequently undertaken, the 'pilot surveys' provided additional context in this paper, because they reveal some of the thoughts of visitors to the area. As discussed in the literature review, tourism is thought to hold promise for rural areas as a possible way to expanded economic activity, or at least to diversify local economies. A total of 76 tourist surveys were collected in County Donegal, of which 58 were deemed to be usable. Visitors were approached at the Tourists Information centre in Donegal Town and Killybegs with the permission of local management, and were also approached at the Diamond (i.e. town square) in Donegal town, which is where intercity busses in and out of the county depart and arrive. Participants were asked about attractions and events that they have visited, their satisfaction with their visit, and also were asked about changes or improvements that they would like to see, as a way to assess current economic impacts as well as growth potential for the industry.

In addition, informal discussions with academics, bureaucrats, business owners, and citizens within the jurisdiction, over the past six years, also informed us of the economic and employment realities within County Donegal⁷⁷. Thus, many of these discussions have been synthesized into some observations and analysis as it pertains to the local economy. This also includes observing tourist counts/levels at attractions at various times of the year.

⁷⁷ Special thanks is offered to Mr. Don McNeill of the Ulster Canada Initiative (UCI), and to Ms. Patricia Faherty of Seawinds B&B in Killybegs for the guidance, contacts, and information that each has provided over the past several years. Without that kindness and patience, we would not have been able to understand and explore County Donegal's people, features, opportunities and challenges.

5. Case Study Findings

Findings are sorted into tourist surveys, Lyit student surveys, community interview results, and finally, observational analyses. First, it is necessary to point out a logistical problem about different levels of government when assigning credit (or blame). As mentioned earlier, our attention has been on Donegal County Council (DCC) in this paper. Yet, the DCC does not operate independently of the Irish (central) Government. But, for the sake of convenience, it is presumed that the DCC plays, and has played, a key role with the local implementation of nationally implemented funding and programs. As a result, we give credit to the DCC for government policies that technically originate from the Irish Government, even though this is an oversimplification.

Tourist Surveys

From the pilot surveys, we found that almost two-thirds of the visitors had travelled to County Donegal for the first time, and three-quarters of the visitors were from outside of Ireland. This is important because this initial visit sets expectations for the future. A higher number of repeat visitors would or could indicate that expectations had been met on previous trips. While we found that an impressive 92% of surveyed participants were either pleased or very pleased with their visit, there was one warning sign. Only 51% of visitors were pleased with the physical infrastructure for tourists. These results tell us that tourists are finding a visit to County Donegal to be a rewarding experience, but that it takes more effort than it should.

The other observation pertains to the distribution of the surveys, not the answers per se. Our small number of completed surveys (i.e. 58) is a reflection of the limited number of tourists at seemingly key sites within the county. While we were admittedly trying to survey visitors during the heart of the off-season, we were surprised to find a complete lack of visitors at several attractions even on weekends⁷⁸, even though there are sizable tourist levels elsewhere in Ireland in these 'off' months. By our calculations (i.e. 18% of 7.0MM), there were more than 1.1 million overseas visitors to Ireland during January to March in each year since

⁷⁸ This occurred at Glengesh Pass, Slieve League, Mamore Gap, Grianan of Aileach, and the Baltany Stone Circle in winter in 2012 and/or 2013.

2011⁷⁹, and so it appears that the off-season is tangibly weaker (i.e. less busy) in County Donegal than average.

Lyt Student Surveys

Rather than looking at responses to individual questions, we reflect on the survey findings as a set. Lyit has successfully recruited a small number of international students to attend. That adds to the vibrancy of the atmosphere, and also the learning experience of local students. Moreover, a tangible portion of these international students indicate that they would prefer to live in County Donegal after graduation.

Turning to local students with a hometown within County Donegal or in and adjacent county, the majority expect to work within that same region after graduation. Moreover, these students typically indicated that they chose to attend Lyit because of the programs offered, the convenience, and/or the affordability because they could live close to home. The surveys further confirmed that the vast majority of surveyed Lyit students valued proximity to friends or family, and were disinclined to crave an urban lifestyle. Thus, the results suggest that Lyit is filling a niche. There are indeed a set of students who want an education, but have a strong preference for attending a nearby institution, and to stay and find employment in the area after graduation.

Among the questions on our survey, we asked students about where they expected to work after graduation, and where they preferred to work. We deem this to be an indication of what the head says (i.e. expectations) versus what the heart says (i.e. preferences) about life beyond school. We noticed, though, that among young (under age 30) Lyit students from County Donegal, a majority of those with a tourism-hospitality major are expecting *and* preferring to live outside of the county after graduation. That differs from the comparable students having a business, health or other major, where the majority do, in fact, expect and prefer to live within County Donegal after graduation. We take this a sign that these young people, who are necessarily thinking of their impending career, are sufficiently optimistic about their job prospects, on average, except for those in tourism-hospitality. Members of that latter group, though, presumably perceive that local conditions are not yet sufficiently favourable to work in tourism, compared to opportunities elsewhere.

⁷⁹ Derived from Failte Ireland. Tourism Facts 2014; Latest updated figures. August 2015.

*Interview Highlights*⁸⁰

The interviews that have been conducted within County Donegal cannot be viewed as generalizable in a methodological sense. Rather, they provide indications of the views of the participants who agreed to share their opinions. Also, we remind readers that when the interviews began in 2009, Ireland had entered a painful, deep, and fast-acting recession. A handful of interviews are presented, several of which illustrate the situation that existed in 2009 and 2010. In contrast, some of the following observational analyses describe the improvements that have since occurred.

An older male participant⁸¹, who typically held manual labour jobs such as in construction, felt, in 2009, that something more needed to be done. He felt that it was virtually impossible, in Southwestern Donegal, to get any good employment in the private sector, and certainly nothing that was permanent or full-time. There was only casual work for low pay and no benefits. He wanted governments to create more ‘make work’ jobs to get people some earned income. While he wanted to stay in the area, he was on the verge of having to look outside of the county. He thought that governments ‘are killing small towns’ by withdrawing services and funding.

One participant, interviewed in 2013, was particularly suspicious about the commitment of governments and social agencies to (truly) rural citizens. He said that people want to retain their culture and identify (and that meant staying in their home region, which in this case, was inside the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht). But, governments are focused too much on efficiency. Yes, there are programs and services within the county, but often they are provided in Letterkenny, not in smaller communities that are more than an hour away. He felt that both levels of Government talk a good game, but their policies are encouraging out-migration from smaller rural communities to larger towns and cities. During the same visit, we also interviewed a young adult female in this same small Gaeltacht community. She was quite disappointed in her local options. She is not on an academic path, but has tried to work as much as possible and to entre training programs to gain new work skills. But, she described a range of logistical problems that have hindered her. At times, she has been reduced to hitchhiking to try to get to government-provided training sessions in an

⁸⁰ The descriptions have been presented in a way to protect participant anonymity.

⁸¹ For the sake of simplicity, participants are categorized as being young (i.e. 18-30 years), middle-aged (i.e. 30-50 years), or older (i.e. 50+ years of age).

adjacent community. If she does not attend almost all of the sessions, then she will not earn the certificate and could lose her social benefits. But, as a young person without a vehicle, she could not afford to take the bus each way to the training.

Another middle-aged single male, who had lived in Ireland and overseas, said that the key was to be creative and open-minded. If you are willing, there could be chances to do a little painting or odd jobs to get a chance to make a living. Yes, conditions are bad, that is the reality. Just because it is beautiful doesn't mean that there will be steady jobs. That's the way it is here. 'You have to do what you can to survive.' He was interviewed in 2009 during the peak of the downturn, and lived in one of the larger communities in western County Donegal. In that same community in 2009, a middle-aged couple with young children outlined how much they have enjoyed the lifestyle, and tranquility, and time for friends and family since relocating from an urban centre elsewhere in Ireland. Yet, there were feeling a financial pinch since their family income had fallen sharply, and only one of the two had been able to find local employment, and it was a non-permanent position.

In contrast, a business owner indicated, during a 2011 interview, that job applicants 'are not knocking down our door' even though the local economy continued to be weak. He is co-owner of a hospitality related business catering to local and international tourists enjoying the Glencolumbkille and Slieve League area. He attributed this to a couple things. One is that some of the more ambitious folks have out-migrated, which 'is the way it always was' [before the Celtic Tiger years]. Also, he felt that because the tourist season is so seasonal, some of the remaining locals are uninterested in a job that would only last for a handful of months and is hard work. The business owner's main concern was that the region had the foundations for a good tourism industry but that the physical infrastructure (like roads and signage) was not developed enough, that there was insufficient coordination between the government and business operators, and insufficient coordination among business owners within the region to work together to satisfy customers. Thus, visitors might not be given accurate information about the attractions that exist in the area, nor the accommodations, thereby missing the opportunity to inspire them to extend their stay.

Finally, one young female participant was intent on leaving her small hometown to attend a university in a large Irish city. She was prepared for the move, and did not expect to be able to live in County Donegal ever again, given her lofty education and career goals (which were accessible essentially only in an urban centre). This is important, because there is no

practical way to convince her to stay within the region. Unlike the majority of the Lyit survey participants, this individual is adamant about leaving the county, and will do so even before entering post-secondary education. We mention this because it is important to recognize that not all locals are intent on staying. In this case, the participant had considered her options regardless of location, and then determined that leaving made more sense.

Observational Analyses

In this section, we consider some of the strategic and operational decisions that have been happening behind the scenes by the Donegal County Council (DCC) or Letterkenny Institute of Technology (Lyt). In addition, we look at some of the economic challenges existing at a community level, based on our observations and analyses since 2009.

As it is responsible for a relatively small and remote region facing economic and geographic challenges, the DCC has logically decided to look outward, and to build partnerships, alliances, and markets. They deserve credit for the actions that they have taken, as exemplified by the Spaceial Northwest Project⁸², which is a regional partnership with their counterparts in the neighbouring counties in Fermanagh, Tyrone, & Derry. That partnership seeks to facilitate and expand the business, political, and educational links and activity levels across the region. Donegal County Council has also been a supporter of the Ulster Canada Initiative, which is an informal alliance of business, political, and educational partners seeking to strengthen ties between Ireland, Northern Ireland, Canada, and beyond. The DCC is also conducting strategic planning with a cross section of community participants, via community-level forums, to look at social and economic challenges as it looks to the future. These sessions explored economic challenges, tourism facilities, and other issues.

County Donegal has a low population density, and that makes it challenging to provide social services, to retain schools and commercial activity, and to maintain the physical infrastructure in the region. To be blunt, tax dollars need to be stretched thinly. For example, the motorways between Donegal Town and Letterkenny, and between Letterkenny and the border at Derry City are modern and efficient. However, reaching the

⁸² Spaceial NW Project. Miscellaneous online information, 2015., <https://www.spaceialnw.eu> (accessed September 4, 2015).

western and northern tips of the county, such as visiting Slieve League, Glencolumbkille, the Bloody Foreland, and Malin Head, means utilizing far poorer quality roads. These four attractions originally caught our attention because they could represent the backbone of a nature-lovers tour, if there was a way to link and promote them effectively, and if there were enough 'creature comforts' for visitors along the way, and some catalyst to unite community efforts. While we pictured a small 'bottom-up' tourism initiative given austerity budgets and limited public funding, the Wild Atlantic Way's emergence in 2014 was an unexpected development⁸³.

Like elsewhere in Ireland, a 'parish mentality' and local shopping norms means that even small communities (of as little as a few hundred residents) generally have been able to retain a small number of retail shops such as a general/hardware store, grocery store, butcher, café, pub, bakery, and 'takeaway', plus a post office outlet. Thus, there is some level of commercial activity, however modest, at a decentralized level throughout the county. There are also several small factories that continue to operate, including fish processing plants, commercial bakeries, and some light manufacturing. That said, in 2009-2010 in particular, but continuing into 2015, there are empty store fronts in most town and village centres throughout the county. Since the first author visited in 2009, store, pub, and restaurant closings have been detected each year since then, indicating that some business owners held on for a while beyond the financial crisis, but could not weather the storm of ongoing economic softness and uncertainty until conditions began to improve noticeably by about 2013. We detected other visible signals of economic stress and poverty, such as the emergence of dollars stores and discount chains, second hand shops, and pop-up offices for social agencies and charitable organizations on 'main street' within many communities.

Two exceptions are Letterkenny and Donegal Town. Donegal Town, for its size, has noticeably more commercial activity (i.e. stores, restaurants, services, and customers/clients) than other communities in the area. But, as mentioned earlier, it benefits from its location at the Southeast corner of the county, and a transportation gateway into the region. Letterkenny's situation is more mixed. Its center experiencing several store closings during the financial crisis, and those vacancies have persisted or increased until today. On the other hand, there are several private sector plants and

⁸³ Wild Atlantic Way. Miscellaneous online information, <https://wildatlanticway.com> (accessed September 4, 2015).

offices, of Irish and International ownership, just outside its borders in a large and growing industrial park. So, there are good jobs in the private sector in the region, but many people aspire to the security and stability of jobs in the public sector (even if seasonal and modest paying like in a postal outlet or tourist office). However, there remains a divide, like was described in the reviewed literature, between those holding skills and having good opportunities, and others with sporadic employment patterns. More broadly, there is a noticeable east-west divide within County Donegal, with even lower population density and less commercial activity in the western (and northern) portion of the county, on average. Notwithstanding the challenges that exist in tourism, we take comfort with the potential opportunities for coastal communities that can emerge due to the Wild Atlantic Way initiative described previously.

To North American observers like us, the idea of being able to receive social benefits (i.e. an unemployment cheque) while also holding employment is surprising, but also intriguing.

Yet, in Ireland, this so-called ‘double dipping’ is allowed, and working, under the guide of so-called ‘FÁS’ contracts. These were widely available in the period following the crash of 2008, and we typically interacted with people receiving about 40 hours of paid employment every two weeks. So, those able to get on this ‘social scheme’ had the stability of guaranteed part-time hours, and yet were able to augment it with any other available paid employment too. Thus, it is a shame the FÁS programs acquired such a stigma among Irish citizens, and has been renamed and restructured⁸⁴. From examples we saw in County Donegal and elsewhere in Ireland in the wake of the economic downturn, the program was needed and beneficial at a community level. If anything, the suite of retraining/training options possible does not go far enough, given the pockets of structural unemployment and poverty in the county. We also see the non-financial benefits that can accrue when these types of partial employment opportunities exist in rural areas to stabilize family incomes, and to provide paid labour for community-run organizations to provide services.

Turning to Lyit, they face a decision as to how to compete with their peer group of institutions, while also trying to be responsive to any particular

⁸⁴ For convenience, we refer to FÁS programs to represent any ‘social schemes’ that provide short-term paid employment opportunities within County Donegal. FÁS was the official name until about 2012, when the program and government department was restructured due to allegations of financial mismanagement.

needs to local citizens. Also, as a 'technical institute' rather than university, and the only significant post-secondary institution within County Donegal, it would be fair to expect Lyit to offer programs beyond those of a 'liberal art school', despite its modest size. In short, they have exceeded this expectation. During the economic crisis, the first author saw, firsthand, how Lyit was offering several short-term vocational training programs to allow displaced workers to get immediate training to quickly try to learn new skills and change careers. These programs are in food safety and preparation, bartending, customer service, among others. It is worth noting that the facilities at the Killybegs campus are modern and comprehensive, and specializing in those sorts of hospitality-related programs. There are also several educational and health-care related programs, which are a perfect fit for rural areas, since health and education institutions are often among the most desirable (and stable) of the local employers, and it is a shame if there is a need to recruit 'outside' workers. It was also amazing to have recently interviewed a young adult living in a village north of Letterkenny. She had had a rather checkered educational and employment path to date, but was currently in a bridging program within County Donegal which was allowing her to qualify to apply to university and college programs in County Derry. Even though that would require crossing the UK border, the student had found the funding and application process to be seamless and efficient. Yet, at the same time, Lyit offers several information-technology and business related options. Perhaps most impressively is the 'Colab' located in Letterkenny, which is a massive, modern, and well-funded business incubator designed to nurture business start-ups⁸⁵. While the funding for this incubator is primary from the Irish and European sources, credit has to go to Lyit and DCC for its existence and implementation as well⁸⁶. It is an amazingly sophisticated and large operation given the modest population level of Letterkenny and County Donegal. We believe that this business incubator is likely to spur on for-profit as well as social enterprises within the region, although we cannot detect any impact yet, except anecdotally.

Turning to tourism, the region is blessed to have a set of natural and historic facilities like the Grianan of Aileach, the Baltany Stone Circle, the

⁸⁵ See Colab. Miscellaneous online information, 2015. <https://www.co-lab.ie> (accessed September 4, 2015).

⁸⁶ Lyit and Donegal County Council are separate entities, and the latter does not formally influence the latter. However, it is our view that decision-makers within these two institutions are informally and appropriately cooperating to try to address the wants and needs of the citizenry within the county and region.

Glengesh Pass, the Cliffs of Slieve League, Malin Head, the Mamore Gap, Glencolumbkille's religious sites, and the wildness of the Bloody Foreland in addition to the cultural fascination that outsiders often have with the Gaeltacht regions. But, there are simply far too many free attractions within the county. Whether one prefers isolation or crowds, commotion or tie for contemplation, the challenge for the people of County Donegal is to monetize its attractions. This does not mean charging admission fees. Rather, it means selling goods and services to visitors by filling a need or desire. The reality is that a tourist can spend a weekend visiting all corners of County Donegal without having the opportunity to spend money at the aforementioned attractions⁸⁷. Locals sometimes roll their eyes when mentioning the 'Ring of Kerry', to signal that it is overly commercial. But, County Kerry had been an area with very high unemployment, and now has a vibrant (and famous) tourist industry furnishing employment to many citizens. Second, there are not enough customers currently, even with the Wild Atlantic Way promotion. It is highly seasonal, and too seemingly weather-dependent. Nonetheless, there is new excitement about future prospects. There are also a number of community initiatives that have been implemented or are underway to attract tourists, but also to benefit local citizens. For example, in Killybegs, the Killybegs International Carpet Making and Fishing Center is essentially community-run, on a shoestring budget, to try to get more visitors to spend more time in the town as they travel to Slieve League or the Gaeltacht. That is only one example of the grassroots social enterprises to protect the culture and history of communities, and to try to generate employment and economic spinoffs. Other examples are the Aislann in Kilcar and the Dolmen Centre near Portnoo, both of which combine information and facilities for visitors and locals alike. Then, there are clusters of new tourism and hospitality businesses elsewhere in the county, including Fort Dunree, in Dunfanaghey, and elsewhere, some of which are community-owned or operated as social enterprises. But, as was raised by at least one interview participant, visitors to County Donegal are more likely to stumble upon things to do rather than to travel via well-established and promoted itineraries. This, along with the low off-season tourist counts that we observed, also meshed with our own perceptions that the industry stakeholders needed to try to stretch the tourist season, to promote a clear destination, and to try to extend the length of stay to

⁸⁷ One small exception is that a young student entrepreneur has reportedly been selling refreshments at the Slieve League parking lot at times over the past three summers.

boost revenue per visitor. It was particularly disappointing to see so few opportunities for potential customers to spend money on goods or services at attractions within the county. We saw it as a danger that natural beauty, peace and tranquillity were offered, but rather few commercial services exist at the attractions we studied.⁸⁸

Until the Wild Atlantic Way was launched, it was difficult to image what would be a sufficient anchor attraction to get large numbers of tourists to visit County Donegal, given its location and stern competition from other (more famous) locations and attractions in Ireland. As locals frequently admit, first-time visitors to Ireland often take the southern semi-circle including Dublin, Galway, Kerry, Cork, and Kilkenny, and only on subsequent visits would entertain the Northern options. That said, it is highly impressive how good the tourism offices are within County Donegal. The staff are well-trained and paid employees (as opposed to community volunteers), and, given the modest size of the tourism industry in the past, the county has surprisingly modern facilities in several communities, and they operate with relatively long hours, even in low season months.

Both levels of Government deserve significant accolades for their commitment to, and bold implementation of, the Wild Atlantic Way. There are distinct and appealing road signs around every significant intersection along the coastal route. Also, the website is professional-looking and enticing. This is a significant attempt to pull visitors to the western and northern edges/coastal roads of the county. Now, visitors to the famous Western Irish regions (i.e. Connemara or Burin or Ring of Kerry) will almost automatically also have County Donegal in mind, instead of as an afterthought. While more southern jurisdictions will benefit as well, County Donegal will benefit disproportionately from this, because there is a reason to travel to the whole route, and from tip to tip. For visitors to County Donegal, that is several hours' worth of travel, and one or more overnight stays, in most cases. That said, it is still likely that the revenue per visitor to County Donegal is lower than elsewhere in Ireland. Also, facilities are operating well below capacity. Thus, there is certainly room for more tourism, and there are waves of tourists only a few hours away, if they can be enticed to visit. At the risk of being overly cheeky, we would argue that until the Wild Atlantic Way brand was

⁸⁸ Mr. Charlie McCarron, working under the supervision of Lyit Professors Paul McCusker & Ciarán Óhannracháin, is currently exploring ways that business operators and communities can monetize the Wild Atlantic Way, and related tourism activities, within County Donegal.

launched, the two things needed for the tourism industry in County Donegal to succeed were more customers and more businesses! Now, more visitors have been attracted, and they are being pulled to the coastal areas of the county. Hopefully, enough entrepreneurs will quickly and effectively satisfy the wants and needs of these visitors. Our worry is that County Donegal will be known for its natural, unspoilt beauty and tranquillity. That is certainly desirable, but the revenue per customer needs to be increased, and the tourist season stretched, so that local businesses are more profitable and create more employment and tax revenues.

Finally, a business owner in the most northerly part of Ireland, adjacent to Malin Head, warrants a special mention. The owner of the Doagh Famine Village has almost single-handedly created a winter tourism season in the Inishowen Peninsula via his annual 'Santa's Workshop' attraction. For several weeks in November and December, and several days per week, the attraction draws thousands of annual visitors from across the island to the area⁸⁹. In addition to creating extra employment for his workers, this has spinoffs for other tourism and hospitality operators in the county. Needless to say, this sort of entrepreneurial flare, and the accompanying employment and tax revenue that is generated, is invaluable to rural regions.

6. Discussion

Labour market transformations are inevitable given this era of relatively free movement of goods, services, capital, and even labour, and unstoppable technological change. As a result, there is going to be ongoing upheaval within labour markets as companies emerge, grow, compete, and sometimes struggle or fail. It is unrealistic for workers to expect to have a steady, stable, secure job for a whole career. Rather, it is much more likely that an individual will change jobs, change employers, and even change industries and occupations over time. Unfortunately, that also means having to endure non-standard work arrangements of various types, and periods of underemployment or unemployment. While these changes affect urban areas as well, rural regions can be especially hard hit, as farming, fishing and other traditional industries struggle.

While the boundary between what is urban and what is rural (or remote) is rather elusive, it is clear to any visitor travelling from Dublin that County

⁸⁹ See Doagh Famine Village. Miscellaneous online information, 2015. <http://www.doaghfaminevillage.com> (accessed September 4, 2015).

Donegal is at least a little off of the beaten path. This is not an insult. Locals speak freely of being out of the way, off the main transportation grid, and even sometimes being left off of maps or of being an afterthought to policy makers in Dublin. The truth is that public transportation within the county is rather limited, and its citizens are used to the effort it takes to venture to elsewhere on the island, or to attract visitors to come. It is also important to grasp the importance of place to many Irish citizens. In formal interviews and in casual conversations, people talk about a 'parish mentality'. When people living on the Inishowen Peninsula or Southwest Donegal are asked whether it would be easier to have higher incomes and steadier employment by moving an hour away (but not necessarily even outside of County Donegal), typically give a succinct answer: 'that's not home'. The effect is that those who like the lifestyle, and can live with the local employment options, are very likely to stay put. Others, whether seeking a different set of social, cultural, and/or economic options are candidates for out-migration. In our view, the Donegal County Council (DCC), and other influential stakeholders within the county like the Letterkenny Institute of Technology [Lyit] (the main post-secondary institution in the area), have an obligation to steer society towards a sustainable future. These stakeholders and others need to be decisive. Persistently poor conditions can lead to a culture and tradition of out-migration⁹⁰. That is, the default becomes a plan to leave, not a plan to stay and find employment, or to create an opportunity. Using Ireland's County Donegal as a case study, we explored the strategies and actions that some major stakeholders have attempted given today's labour market transformations.

It would be an exaggeration to say that County Donegal is thriving because of the strategic prowess of its citizens, bureaucrats, politicians, entrepreneurs, and workers. Rather, the point is that several key stakeholders within County Donegal have banded together to show considerable initiative to try to respond to the economic realities. What have they done? The DCC has acted strategically by looking outward and partnering with neighbouring counties and jurisdictions abroad. They have also nurtured local industries, and have partnered with the Irish Government to bring big projects to the region, like the Co-lab business incubator in Letterkenny, and the local tranche of the Wild Atlantic Way. Lyit has also contributed by servicing three distinct client groups: i) young adults seeking a local option to earn a diploma or degree, ii) short-term

⁹⁰ Bæck & Paulgaard, 2012.

vocational training or upgrading. While these might seem like obvious client groups to focus on, too few institutions actually commit the resources to do it. Many simply ‘talk the talk’ without actually taking the difficult, but necessary, actions. Finally, County Donegal is fortunate to have several grassroots, community driven initiatives underway trying to market the area’s cultural, historical and natural offerings for the benefit of tourists and locals. While youth out-migration is continuing, and that is unavoidable during times of economic weakness, a significant proportion of young, educated people are committed to stay, according to our Lyit surveys. That commitment is a vote of confidence in the region. The economic future of the region is unlikely to be centred on farming or fishing. Instead, the local government, the local education institution, and local community groups to be the catalysts for positive change to adapt the local economy to new opportunities. Based on our analyses, this is what they are trying to do, and with some success stories emerging or on the horizon.

In this case study, we utilized several sources of information as we analyzed the situation within Ireland’s County Donegal. The purpose of this study was to explore the strategic responses that local governments and public sector institutions and organizations can do. Looking holistically at the various sources, the interview findings appear to be consistent with the ideas emerging from the tourist and student surveys, and with many of our observational analyses as well.

As a final thought, some limitations need to be mentioned. First, while we tried to consider a range of pertinent factors, the issues of community vibrancy and sustainability are highly complex. In this paper, we have focused primarily on employment-related challenges and effects. Needless to say, there are many relevant non-economic considerations which were beyond the scope of our paper. Second, for the sake of simplicity, we essentially attribute all government policy making to the local level (i.e. Donegal County Council) even for decisions and policies that sometimes should be partially or fully ascribed to the Central Government. Thirdly, we sometimes had to generalize about conditions across the county, even though the economic, employment, and social conditions vary. Suffice it to say that a young adult considering whether to stay or go faces tangibly different options if living in Letterkenny, Donegal Town, or near Derry City (and thus having easy access to local educational, training, and other supports) versus a youth an hour’s west or north in a much smaller, more remote, community. These differences also hold for community initiatives. The mathematics of running a social enterprise geared towards tourists are quite different for a coastal community versus one on the

busier and more-populated eastern-located transportation routes. Fourthly, since we are outsiders, it is inevitable that we have misinterpreted some local facts or realities, notwithstanding our attempts to be thorough. We apologize in advance for any of these errors, which are the sole responsibility of the first author.

In conclusion, it is important to return to the work transformations that are occurring. This will inevitably lead to ongoing upheaval and uncertainty for individuals. The challenge, for them, is to understand these transformations, and to try to acquire the skills, experience, and adaptability that employers will be seeking. However, we believe that public policy makers need to show leadership by establishing conditions so that citizens and communities can survive and thrive. Ireland's County Donegal provides a case study of some of the strategic options that can be taken, and its current and future struggles and successes can provide insights for other jurisdictions in the developed world.

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