

A Profile of Ireland's Uplands

AN ALL-ISLAND STUDY HIGHLIGHTING THEIR STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Executive Summary

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Promoting sustainable management of the Uplands

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
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A Profile of Ireland's Uplands: Main Findings / Executive Summary

Context and Dynamics – policy, economy and agriculture

Irish uplands are more rural than are uplands across the European Union (EU) as a whole. Yet, on this island, as across the EU, uplands are increasingly affected by urban polarisation, and are increasingly perceived as having a 'particular appeal'; many upland areas are attracting retirees, home-based workers and growing numbers of persons who seek to live in a more attractive environment. While the demographic and economic injections being experienced by some upland areas are welcome, the development trajectory of our uplands cannot simply be associated with, or sustained by, urban spillovers or trickle-down effects. Instead, the development of uplands requires distinctive and integrated territorial approaches that are clearly supported by cohesion policy and are underpinned by participatory governance, as outlined in the most recent OECD policy pronouncement on rural development (OECD, 2018).

Uplands perform vital ecological services that are essential to the wellbeing of our wider society. These include water storage and flood attenuation. Uplands are also important natural habitats, and the preservation of upland landscapes is essential in maintaining and promoting biodiversity. Europe's uplands, and those on the island of Ireland in particular, are associated with high nature-value farmland. Uplands' abilities to deliver ecosystem services are, however, under threat from climate change and land abandonment. Maintaining vibrant upland farming communities is important, not just in socio-economic terms, but also in respect of conservation and biodiversity. Moreover, it is necessary to link landscape conservation to community development, as articulated in the European Landscape Convention, and to promote synergies between upland and lowland communities.

The linkages between uplands and lowlands are manifest in the multiple roles uplands play in supplying public goods to all. These include, inter alia, the provision of recreational spaces, and in Ireland, traditional hill-farming has been integral to the supply and maintenance of the landscapes, ecology and cultural heritage that attract visitors. Family farming and farmers' participation in walks' schemes are positively associated with keeping Ireland's countryside attractive and open. Maintaining the maximum number of family farms in Ireland's uplands has to be integral to public policy. The rollout of green infrastructure, and its embeddedness within spatial planning, as articulated in the National Planning Framework (2018) represent supportive mechanisms for the benefit of upland communities and visitors alike.

EU policies, and in particular the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), impact significantly on Irish uplands. Recognising that technological interventions cannot alter the production capacity of uplands, EU legislation provides for particular supports to upland farmers, while EU cohesion policy strives to eliminate territorial inequalities across Europe. Ireland is progressively embracing the EU approach towards the alignment and enhanced coordination of policies in respect of spatial planning, and the rollout, over the coming years, of the Regional Economic and Spatial Strategies (RSES), under the aegis of the National Planning Framework (NPF), will have implications for upland communities. As EU and national policies move away from being reactive and compensatory, and become more focused on enabling places to better realise their development potential, responses need to be flexible and adaptable in light of the diversity of conditions in upland areas. At the same time, they need to highlight the benefit of collaborating across Europe's uplands. As this profile clearly illustrates: Ireland's uplands are diverse; yet they share common features, and inter-upland collaboration is an important ingredient in enabling their development. Governance arrangements must provide for local

stakeholder inputs, based on decentralisation and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), while enabling inter-agency collaboration in tandem with inter-territorial and inter-jurisdictional collaboration. In the Irish context, in particular, there is an urgent need to increase the visibility of the uplands in spatial planning.

As well as being diverse, upland areas are dynamic. They are undergoing changes in terms of landscape, as evidenced, for example, by de-stocking and afforestation in the 1980s and 1990s and latterly by the construction of windfarms. Among the most significant economic and demographic changes is the reduction in the number of upland farmers. National Farm Survey data (RoI only) reveal that the number of Irish hill farms is declining at a faster rate than the number of farms overall. The consolidation of upland farms is associated with the expansion of improved pasture at the expense of more natural types of vegetation. Hill farms are more dependent on CAP payments than are other farms, and despite farmers' willingness to supply ecological services, payments that are associated with high nature-value farmland represent a shrinking proportion of farm subsidies. Thus, to date, public policy in this regard, has failed to converge with policy and public good imperatives in other areas, notably in ameliorating climate change and arresting biodiversity loss. Indeed, incentivising the supply of ecological services is consistent with sustainable tourism, thus promoting an alignment between hill farming and the broader rural economy.

While the need for an off-farm income has become greater across all types of farming households, this is particularly the case among upland farmers, thus underscoring the importance of local economic diversification. Relative to other farming and non-farming households, upland farming households tend to be older and less demographically viable. While these challenges cannot be denied or understated, they are not associated with shortcomings in the uplands, as much as with the shortcomings in respect of policy coherence and the absence of an uplands' policy and a comprehensive landscape character assessment. In this vacuum, the integrated approach, as advocated in the OECD New Rural Paradigm (OECD, 2018), offers a template for better policy coordination, the realisation of place-based development and greater stakeholder inputs and collaboration.

Sustaining upland farming and diversifying local economies are integral to the future of upland communities and to the maintenance of vital ecological services. Policy and practice interventions need to take account of the considerable diversity that pertains across Ireland's uplands, while also demonstrating sufficient flexibility to enable inter-territorial collaboration and joint initiatives. The fractured geography of the uplands, associated with administrative boundaries, underscores the importance of specific inter-territorial approaches, based on natural catchment areas. Interventions need to address demographics, particularly in western and northern uplands, and to ensure that sufficient infrastructure, particularly ICT connectivity, is in place to enable uplands to realise their potential. While lowlands will continue to depend on uplands for several environmental services, uplands cannot expect reciprocal economic exchange with lowlands, and they merit the requisite investments to enable them to develop endogenous resources.

Spatial Profile

This report provides a human geography profile of Ireland's uplands. It presents a series of maps and charts that portray the uplands based on a range of indicators derived from the Census of Population. The maps show each variable at Small Area (SA) level, while the charts (box and whisker plots) compare values across the upland types i.e., those with significant natural habitats and those without. The graphs also show the standing of the uplands relative to the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI). The profile is presented under the following headings:

- i. Population Structure and Attributes
- ii. Economic Status and Activity
- iii. Household Structure, Housing Stock and Infrastructure
- iv. Accessibility and Connectivity

Uplands were defined and profiled on the basis of townlands that are located at over 200 metres. In line with a methodology elaborated by the IUF and UCD, two classification schemes were applied. The first of these was used to identify townlands in which upland vegetation was dominant. As a result, a set of townlands, predominantly in the north and west of Ireland, was profiled (identified here as Upland Habitat Type 1). A second set of upland townlands, with predominantly lowland vegetation, and mainly located in the south and east, was profiled separately (identified here as Upland Habitat Type 2).

Population Structure and Attributes

Ireland's uplands, particularly those in the west, generally have an older age profile than do other parts of the island. Upland areas have a higher proportion of persons aged over sixty-five years. However, all upland area types, particularly in the RoI have proportions of persons aged thirty to sixty-four that are on a par with the all-island average. The greatest contrast between uplands and lowlands, as regards the age structure of the population, is in respect of persons aged twenty to twenty-nine years. Upland areas have notably lower proportions of these young adults, and this is especially the case in the north-west, south-west and midlands. A clear RoI-NI contrast is evident in respect of the presence of young adults; upland areas north of the border are consistently more likely to have more young adults (aged 20 to 29), teenagers and children. All NI uplands have a younger demographic than those in the RoI. Of the RoI uplands, those in Wicklow are the only set with an age profile approximating that of NI.

In cultural terms, RoI uplands (of both habitat types) have higher proportions of Irish speakers and are more ethnically diverse than those north of the border. The distribution of Irish speakers shows some association with Gaeltacht locations in the west. The proportion of non-Irish and non-UK nationals living in the uplands is almost twice as high in the RoI than in NI but it is still notably below the State average.

The dataset on educational attainment is only available at small-area level for the RoI. The figures show that the upland areas with the lowest levels of educational attainment are the Derryveagh and Bluestack Mountains, the Nephins, the Blackstairs and the Mullaghareirks. Meanwhile, the highest levels of educational attainment are in the Wicklow uplands and other uplands areas that are generally within fifty kilometres of large urban centres e.g., Cork (Nagles and Boggeraghs); Limerick (Slieve Berna and Slieve Felim); and Sligo (Ox and Dartry).

Economic Status and Activity

In the RoI, the overall level of participation in the workforce is broadly in line with the State average. Northern Ireland's uplands exhibit above-average levels of workforce participation – as measured by the proportion of the labour force 'at work'.

Within both jurisdictions, however, there are considerable variations. As with educational attainment, the highest values in respect of labour force participation are to be found in areas that are proximate to urban centres (Wicklow uplands, Nagles, Boggeraghs, Slieve Berna, Slieve Felim). There also appears to be a correlation with tourism activity, as participation rates are above average in the MacGillycuddy Reeks – close to Killarney, and in Connemara.

The uplands with the highest overall employment rates are those that are closest to the urban centres. These include the Wicklow uplands, Antrim Plateau and Glens, the eastern parts of the Sperrins and the uplands within 50km of Cork and Limerick, including the Boggeraghs, Nagles, Knockmealdowns, Slieve Berna, Silvermines and Slieve Felim. The spatial patterns also suggest an association with tourism, as employment rates are above average in the Burren, the Twelve Bens, Mweelrea and Sheefry Hills. Conversely, unemployment rates are highest across the Donegal uplands, the Nephins, Ox, North Leitrim Glens, and Cuilcaghs and to some extent in the MacGillycuddy Reeks and Wicklow uplands.

There are clear east–west and north–south differences in respect of the sectoral composition of the workforce. The primary sector (agriculture and the extractive industries) remains a significant source of employment in all uplands along the west coast from Sligo/Mayo to West Cork, with the highest values being in Mayo and Kerry. Farming is equally important in many southern uplands, albeit on a different scale. This is particularly the case in the Comeraghs, Knockmealdowns, Silvermines and Blackstairs. In contrast, primary sector activity is less significant in the uplands of counties Wicklow and Donegal and throughout Northern Ireland. Employment in the secondary sector (manufacturing and construction) is more significant in NI than in the RoI, with the highest values being in the Sperrins and the Mourne. The lowest values on the island are along the western seaboard. Employment in the tertiary or service sector is also more prominent north of the border – accounting for the majority of employment among those residing in the Antrim Plateau and Glens, the Sperrins and around Slieve Gullion. Service sector employment is also significant in the Cuilcaghs, but more so in County Fermanagh, than in either Cavan or Leitrim. Of the uplands in the RoI, those with the highest proportion of persons employed in service industries are the Dublin Mountains and the Derryveagh and Glendowan Mountains. The census data also record workers whose employment cannot be classified as being in one sector and those who are engaged in pluriactivity (i.e., those with a number of part-time jobs). The highest values in respect of employment as 'other' are consistently along the western seaboard – from West Donegal to West Cork (although excluding the Ox Mountains). 'Other' employment is also significant in the Wicklow uplands. The percentage of the population classified as 'retirees' is also highest in the west, most notably in the Derryveagh and Bluestack Mountains (Donegal); the Nephins, the Partrys, Sheefry Hills and Maumturk (Mayo – Connemara); and peninsular Cork and Kerry.

Household Structure, Housing Stock and Infrastructure

Across Irish uplands, one-person households are more prevalent in peripheral and western areas than in those that are closer to cities and large towns. One-person households account for more than one-third of all households across much of the MacGillycuddy Reeks, Maumturks, Sheefry Hills, Dartrys,

Cuilcaghs and Bluestack Mountains. One-person households are least prevalent in the Sperrins, Antrim Plateau and Glens, Slieve Gullion as well as the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains. The number of persons per household is enumerated differently in the RoI and NI. Therefore, this profile uses 'number of rooms' as a proxy indicator of household sizes. The census data reveal that smaller households (up to four rooms per house) are more prevalent across RoI uplands (with the exception of the Dublin Mountains and those adjacent to Cork and Limerick cities) than NI uplands. Larger houses are far more prevalent north of the border, particularly in Antrim and the Sperrins – with at least half of all houses having seven rooms or more. The only parts of the RoI with comparable levels of large houses are the Dublin Mountains and Slieve Berna.

The age of housing stock represents a useful indicator of economic and demographic vibrancy. The census data, in this respect, reveal that the upland areas with the oldest housing stock are the Mullaghareirks, Derrynasaggart and Cahah Mountains – all in the south-west; the Silvermines; the Maumturks, the southern parts of the Cuilcagh Mountains and the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains outside of settlements. The geography of newer housing stock is associated with proximity to second-tier cities (Cork, Limerick and Derry), as evidenced by new housing construction in the Nagles and Boggeraghs (Cork), Slieve Berna (SE Clare) and Derryveagh, Glendowan and Cark Mountain (Donegal).

Upland and coastal areas are strongly associated with the presence of holiday homes. Data (available for RoI only) show that the highest concentrations of holiday homes are on the Corca Dhuibhne (Dingle) Peninsula and Connemara. Relative to all uplands, there are also above-average proportions of holiday homes in the Cuilcaghs and Dartrys, the Cahah Mountains and in the uplands of Donegal. Vacant dwellings, other than holiday homes, are most prevalent in the MacGillycuddy Reeks, Cahah and Sheehy Mountains, the Nephins and in the Darty and Cuilcagh Mountains.

Houses in Irish uplands (RoI data only) are less than half as likely as all other houses to have a mains water connection. The areas with the lowest levels of mains water connection are the Mweelrea Mountains and Sheefry Hills, the Cahah and Derrynasaggart Mountains and the MacGillycuddy Reeks. The highest levels of connectivity are to be found in Corca Dhuibhne and across the Donegal uplands. Uplands across Donegal also stand out as having the highest proliferation of individual septic tanks. Meanwhile, houses in the Wicklow uplands, the Blackstairs, Slieve Marcy and the Castlecomer Plateau are the most likely to have 'other' sewerage treatment systems, including reed beds, bio-cycle tanks and composting toilets.

Upland areas along the Atlantic Seaboard, specifically those in Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway and Kerry, as well as the Slieve Blooms have higher proportions of households that rely on turf / peat as their primary fuel source.

Accessibility and Connectivity

Generally, the closer an upland household is to a large urban centre, the more likely it is to have at least two cars. Thus, the uplands with the highest percentages of multiple car-owning households are the Wicklow uplands, the Antrim Plateau and Glens, the Sperrins, Slieve Berna, the Nagles, Knockmealdowns and the Comeraghs. Travel-to-work times (RoI data only) appear to be associated with intra-urban and peri-urban congestion rather than with distance from urban centres. While uplands in the north-west are at greatest distances from urban centres, there is less congestion in and around Derry-Letterkenny and Castlebar, Westport and Sligo than in and around Dublin and Cork, with the result that commuting times are shorter in the north-west than elsewhere. The areas with the

longest travel-to-work times are in Leinster, namely the Wicklow uplands, Slieve Blooms and Blackstairs, and those in County Cork – Mullaghareirk, Derrynasaggart and Boggeragh Mountains in the west / north-west of the county and the Kilworth Hills in the north-east of the county.

Broadband penetration is notably lower in upland areas than it is across the State (RoI data only). The areas with the poorest levels of connectivity are the Cuilcagh Mountains; the Nephin, Partry, and Maumturk Mountains; the Derryveagh Mountains and West Donegal uplands; the Slieve Blooms; the Silvermines; and the Mullaghareirks.

Observations

While the human geography of Ireland's uplands is very varied, there are clear spatial patterns. There are notable contrasts between Habitat Types 1 and 2. Upland areas that are classified as Habitat Type 1 (more upland habitats), which are more likely to be in the north and west, have a higher proportion of persons working in the primary sector, older housing stock and lower levels of connectivity. However, there are clear contrasts between those on either side of the NI-RoI border. Type 1 upland areas in the north have greater proportions of persons employed in manufacturing and services. They also have higher proportions of young adults and are generally better connected to urban centres.

Uplands that are classified as Habitat Type 2 are generally in the south and east of Ireland. Their profiles are strongly influenced by proximity to large urban centres, particularly Dublin, Cork and Limerick, and their demographic composition and economic activities are driven, to a significant extent, by urban overspill and urban-rural interfaces.

While uplands in NI share ecological characteristics with western uplands in the RoI, when it comes to their socio-economic profiles, they tend to be similar to more accessible RoI uplands in the south and east. It suggests that urban-rural interfaces with upland areas in NI may support stronger socio-economic outcomes than in the RoI.

Upland areas in RoI counties along or near the border, particularly those in the north-west (mainly Habitat Type 1) are influenced by and interface with Northern Ireland. Connectivity to Derry shapes the profile of the Derryveagh and Bluestack Mountains and were there to be any disruption to this connectivity, caused by Brexit, there could be adverse implications for the uplands. The spatial analysis presented here also shows the cross-border continuity, in respect of their profiles, of the Dartry and Cuilcagh Mountains across counties Fermanagh, Sligo, Cavan and Leitrim. Connectivity – both physical and social – is as significant as topography in enabling upland communities to share a common landscape and work collaboratively, and again Brexit could have a disruptive effect in this regard.

Figure 0-1: Likelihood of High Nature Value Farmland occurrence at ED level

