Capturing the impact of DARD's Rural Community Development Support Service

This case study illustrates how *Measuring Change* was used to pilot an outcomes framework for the Rural Community Development Support Service and help inform the development of DARD's approach to social impact reporting.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) provides funding through the Rural Community Development Support Service (RCDSS) to promote the community development infrastructure of rural areas. While monitoring mechanisms had been established to assess outputs, DARD was interested in developing a new Impact Reporting Mechanism to capture the broader outcomes of the RCDSS.

How was *Measuring Change* used?

1 Defining change

The RCDSS operates in eight districts across Northern Ireland and one of the contract deliverers - County Down Rural Community Network (CDRCN) - was selected to participate in the pilot exercise. CDRCN and its partners are responsible for delivery of a plan for the Newry, Mourne and Down District. The plan includes delivery outputs, targets and impact actions against key output criteria set out by DARD for the programme.

CENI worked with DARD and representatives from the CDRCN-led partnership to develop a theory of change and associated set of high-level outcomes for the programme.

This reflected that a key goal of the NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-13 is tackling rural poverty and social isolation. In contributing to this goal, RCDSS seeks to promote community development infrastructure in rural areas by ensuring that groups and individuals are able to access effective support services to develop themselves.

CENI proposed that the output criteria set out in the programme and in the Newry, Mourne and Down District plan could be rationalised into three outcome themes:

- Improving the capacity of **local groups**
- Improving the capacity of **individuals**, farmers and farm families
- Improving **relationships** within and between rural communities.

Theory of Change for RCDSS

DARD Output Criteria	Outcome Themes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-term outcome	Goal
1. Supporting access to NIRDP 2. Assist engagement with Social Economy Sector 3. Developing capacity and leadership 4. Service for the Unionist Population	Group Capacity	Groups are more: 1. Informed 2. Capable 3. Sustainable	Improved Community Development Infrastructure	Tackle Poverty
	Individual Capacity	Individuals are more: 4. Informed, skilled		
	Community Relationships	Communities are more: 5. Bonded 6. Bridged 7. Linked		Reduce Social Isolation

Adopting this theory of change, CENI identified seven high-level intermediate outcomes for the programme against the three outcome themes. Achieving these intermediate outcomes, it is considered, would improve the community development infrastructure of rural areas which, in turn, should contribute ultimately to the goal of tackling poverty and reducing social isolation.

Outcome Theme	Intermediate Outcomes
Local Groups	1. Increased awareness among local groups about support, resources and funding opportunities under the NIRDP
	2. Improved capacity of groups in terms of skills and capabilities
	3. Enhanced sustainability of groups including resilience to adapt to changing circumstances
Local Individuals	4. Improved capacity of individuals / farmers and farm families to access resources and support under the NIRDP
Relationships	5. Bonding: improved relations within community
	6. Bridging: improved relations with 'other' communities
	7. Linking: improved relations with decision-makers/statutories

It was proposed that the focus for outcome reporting and evaluation should be on how contracts are performing against these intermediate outcomes. This required the development of illustrative indicators, specifying what activities and outputs would indicate that the outcome is being achieved.

The CDRCN contract also included the criterion to *'deliver a community development service for the Unionist population'*. Given the very specific nature of this criterion, an amended version of the 'generic' framework outlined above was developed which focussed on the needs of Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) areas, particularly with respect to relationship-building.

2 Capturing change

To assess the CDRCN contract's progress against the outcomes, it was first necessary to establish a baseline position and then estimate progress or change over time from that baseline position.

The CDRCN contract covers the entire Newry, Mourne and Down District. It was felt that this was too large and diverse an area to produce overall baseline and change estimates. Therefore, it was agreed that District Electoral Area boundaries could be used as the area unit of measurement for the exercise.

Two District Electoral Areas were selected within Newry, Mourne and Down. CENI facilitated stakeholder panels in each area, engaging contract staff, statutory partners and local beneficiary groups to produce agreed estimates using a 0-10 scale on how they rated the:

- **Priority** of each outcome for the area
- **Difficulty** of achieving the outcomes
- **Baseline** position against each outcome at the start of the programme
- **Change** or progress made since then

Key points from the panels' discussion were also recorded, providing important context and supporting evidence to interpret the estimates produced.

3 Showing Change

The operation of the stakeholder panels gave voice to the very different perspectives of staff, statutory partners and beneficiaries; this helped foster a shared understanding of issues and to explore the nature and extent of change in defined rural areas.

The data generated was analysed to show the areas' baseline position and the degree of change achieved against the outcomes to date. The graph shows the level of progress against each of the outcomes for one of the areas covered.

Progress against outcomes in one area
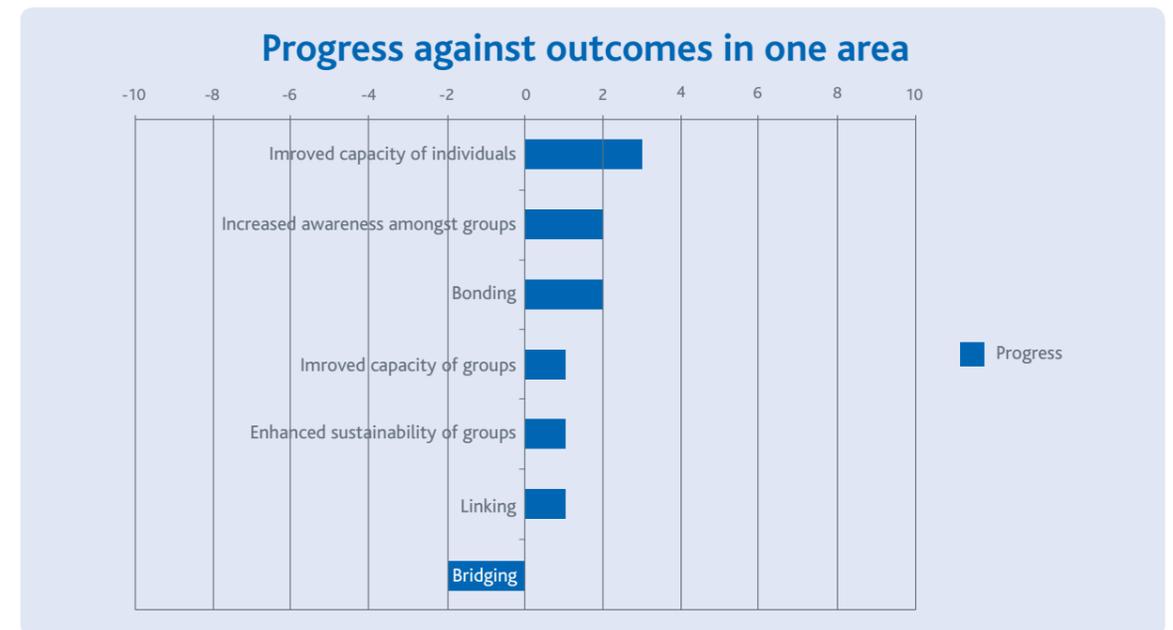
This also illustrates how change may not always be positive, as with 'bridging relationships, which have actually deteriorated. A review of the qualitative data explains this as being due to the effect of the flags issue on the area, showing how external influences beyond local control can impact on achievement of outcomes.

How did *Measuring Change* help?

- The process of developing the framework for RCDSS facilitated real collaboration between DARD and CDRCN to identify, refine and agree outcomes
- The outcomes framework helped to rationalise the programme across key themes, reflecting outcomes associated with both its 'generic' and 'PUL' strands
- The data generated through the panels highlighted issues for DARD regarding the relevance of some of the delivery criteria within the current programme
- If replicated across the other districts covered by the RCDSS, the approach would inform DARD's social impact reporting by providing a common format to:
  - Track progress of individual contracts
  - Identify diversity across districts
  - Generate learning from the programme
  - Potentially aggregate district data to indicate overall programme impact
- The approach would also assist individual contract deliverers to plan, track and review their progress against common programme outcomes

"The report on the pilot application of the Measuring Change approach has proved very valuable... the Department is now considering how we might take forward social impact reporting in rural community development and the report will form an important part of these considerations".

John Waddell, Rural Development Division, DARD