

Coastal Communities Network - CoCoNet
INTERREG IIIA Final Report

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<http://coconet.ucc.ie>

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Executive Summary

This report examines the role of local communities in promoting Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) in the INTERREG IIIA study area, including the coastal counties of Ireland and Wales bordering the Southern Irish Sea. Researchers in University College Cork and Cardiff University undertook the research project.

The research team utilised a working definition of ICZM as:

....a process that brings together all those involved in the development, management and use of the coast within a framework that facilitates the integration of their interests and responsibilities. The objective is to establish sustainable levels of economic and social activity in our coastal areas while protecting the coastal environment. ICZM is central to the ecosystem-based approach.

Coastal communities involve members of the public, representatives from business and industry, local government, NGOs, those with legal responsibility over some aspects of the coast and other interested parties. Wales has a strong record of involving all of these stakeholders in coastal management initiatives. Many lessons have been learned and numerous outputs have been achieved with positive impact on the coastal environment and awareness of coastal issues in Wales.

In comparison, while local partnership models are well developed for tackling social exclusion in Ireland, there has been limited success in the application of this or other approaches to the process of ICZM. This report assesses contemporary practice in community involvement in the management of local coastal resources and identifies the factors that limit success within the shared INTERREG IIIA region. To achieve this, the research draws on three main data sources: background research and policy reports, detailed case studies and input from stakeholders obtained via three organised CoCoNet workshops.

The policy context for coastal management is driven by the EU Recommendation on ICZM. This recommendation was developed in recognition of the declining status of coastal zones across Europe, e.g. resource depletion, over development, habitat loss, vulnerability to climate

change, coupled with an awareness of the benefits of adopting an integrated approach to coastal management practices. The result is that policy makers in Ireland and Wales are faced with developing national policies that will provide for the needs of coastal communities at the local level.

National policy formulation will be challenged by the fact that local partnerships and community organisations operate in different spatial environments and social contexts. Thus, there is a need to improve understanding of how coastal communities can participate in coastal management, commencing with a basic necessity to describe what is happening on the ground. The CoCoNet project has identified the general trends in community approaches to ICZM in the INTERREG IIIA region as:

- Community approaches are primarily local initiatives, with little support from central government
- There is a lack of coordination in approaches to ICZM in the region. Many projects function independently with little opportunity for the systematic transfer of learning and good practice. This is particularly problematic in Ireland where there is a fundamental lack of networking opportunities for coastal practitioners, managers and researchers
- The potential for influencing policy is limited by a lack of participation in the decision-making process at regional, national and local levels
- The approaches to coastal management and structures of local partnerships are highly variable, with a high dependence on individual champions, usually from community groups, local authorities or academic institutions
- There is a lack of awareness of the ICZM process within the region, to the extent that a small number of coastal communities are engaged in local coastal management initiatives without familiarisation with the principles of ICZM per se
- Locally based coastal management projects are heavily dependent on short term, local sources of funding for their activities, which jeopardises the sustainability and success of these initiatives

This research examined in a more detailed way coastal management practices in a selected number of case studies from within the region. In total 15 case studies were identified for review. This was not a conclusive list, but is sufficient to indicate the significant integrated management efforts underway among coastal communities, despite the limiting factors that are described. The Initiation forces (driving factors and initiators); Implementation (focus, funding, function, nature, structure and location); and Impacts (outputs and outcomes) of projects differ from one to the next. However, the general approach to community-based coastal management within the region is characterised by action-centred programmes dependant on highly motivated individuals, with a genuine desire to achieve sustainable development and promote awareness of the coastal environment.

The final chapters of this report highlight the importance of networking for facilitating the transfer of good practice and new knowledge among coastal stakeholders and practitioners. A national coastal network is particularly needed for Ireland to influence policy and to raise political awareness about coastal issues. The high levels of attendance at the CoCoNet project workshops showed considerable support for such events from local authorities, statutory agencies and coastal community groups. The CoCoNet project has completed groundwork in networking and building capacity for the INTERREG IIIA region, but this should be built upon expediently to ensure that the levels of momentum and goodwill encountered are maintained.

Already, a follow up INTERREG IIIA project is under development to focus on the need to raise awareness of the coastal environment. The widespread circulation of the Wexford Declaration, the principles of which were agreed upon by CoCoNet workshop participants, has thus far facilitated awareness raising. The Declaration was formulated to address the two key issues to emerge from the study, namely a lack of public awareness of coastal issues and political apathy towards coastal management.

The Wexford Declaration calls on governments to support the empowerment of local communities, including local government, to secure local sustainability of the coastal and marine environment. A number of recommendations were provided to achieve this aim, including the encouragement of collaborative working, the benefits of which have resulted in the production of this final report.