SERVE Social Case Study for Eco Village, Cloughjordan

Case Study No. 1

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LIT – Tipperary- Development Unit
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Background to SERVE

The SERVE project is funded under the EU CONCERTO Programme and aims to develop a sustainable region in North Tipperary, Ireland, through the implementation of actions in the field of sustainable energy. Actions include energy upgrades for existing dwellings, installation of renewable energy heating systems, help with the sustainable development of an eco-village in Cloughjordan and the part funding of its development of a district heating system.

Case Study background information

The name of the householder interviewed for the purpose of SERVE eco village case study no. 1 is Una Mac Namara.

She lives in ‘The Village’, Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, Ireland in a two (+ attic) storey terrace house. Her timber framed house has natural insulation which consists of biobased spray foam and lime-hemp internal and external render. It is an A rated standard house with a heat recovery system which was designed by Michael Rice and built by Aidan O’ Brien of Ecobuild. The area of the house is 192 square metres (1550 square feet). Una does not have an allotment or grow her own food however she is a member of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm scheme and she has some fruit trees in her garden.

Una is 60+ and is a retired primary school principal. Prior to moving to Cloughjordan's eco village Una lived in a terraced house in Dublin. She is an active member of the eco village community and sings in the local choir. She also is a very artistic person and has a keen interest in environmental integrity and protection. Una shows a deep knowledge of global social equity issues and the benefits of sustainable development as a proactive path forward.
While living in Dublin Una was first exposed to the eco village concept at the 'Cultivate Centre' in Temple Bar through a form inviting membership to The Village project. She joined 'The Village' in 2005 and is currently an active member of a number of eco village groups, Village Education, Research and Training (VERT), Land Use (LUG), Sustainable Project Ireland Ltd (SPIL) and also Navigation. She also conducts regular tours of the eco village for visitors.

Motivation and reasons for moving to Cloughjordan eco village

Una's main motivation for moving to the eco village in Cloughjordan was environmental.

“...my motivation for moving to Cloughjordan and becoming part of an eco community was primarily environmental eco values (sic), I have been thinking about these for a long time”
She has been very aware of global issues faced by our modern society such as carbon dioxide (CO$_2$) emissions, climate change and natural resource destruction which all motivated her to make a lifestyle change.

Una acknowledges that these global issues and her eco values gave her impetus to make a lifestyle change “carbon dioxide emissions, influence on climate and particularly the influence on the destruction of the forests, the seas, the wildlife, the animals... Therefore this motivated her to “...join with others to do something more than the bit of recycling I had been doing myself.”

Her reasons for becoming part of the eco community were based on working with others who shared common values and vision for the care of the earth and humanity.

“...the community has vision, a sense of purpose, continuing ongoing research, new ideas, working together with other people with the particular motivations and reasons for working for care of the earth and care of humans...both are inter-related.”

She further recognises a need to share and use global resources equitably and sustainably. The following statement gives an idea of some of the concerns and reasons why Una became part of the eco village.

“I am aware of the north – south unequal divide ... multinational corporations, the arms trade, the waste of natural resources and finances and also huge farming cooperatives growing food for beef and cattle for feeding in the first world, and the green revolution ... where local farmers particularly in the third world are not be allowed to have their own seeds and are sold seeds that are genetically modified and do not last beyond a year.”

She identifies herself as a ‘doer’ and wanted to actively participate in a more sustainable and innovative life style rather than just talking about change. Therefore another reason that encouraged her move happened initially in Dublin through the ‘Cultivate Project’. She was inspired by their energy, creativity, shared vision and drive to achieve a more sustainable way of life.

“when I came to the group initially in Dublin there was a sense of it felt right to do (sic), I felt there was great energy, there was a sense of a common vision, a common purpose ... a common philosophy, there was an enthusiasm ... their emphasis would not be on material
values or on material things and there was a great sense of creativity and moving forward with others building the first eco village in Ireland...”.

Main benefits of being part of the eco village community

One of the main benefits of being a member of the eco village community is having a common perspective and a shared way of life.

“...for me I love having a shared vision it gives me a sense of purpose...”

Living in the eco village is both an active and educational experience for her; it gives her the opportunity for life-long learning and is by no means a stagnant existence. She is always being exposed to new knowledge, experiences and learning about the world around her and experience strong social cohesion with the eco village and Cloughjordan as a whole. She is very much a part of a living, working environment yet also has her own personal space.

“I am nearly busier than when I was working, I am learning everyday from people here. They decided to have a 100 houses and 30 live/work spaces, they wanted a big number of people so they would have a variety of skills, expertise and experiences (sic). So that is what I am enjoying...”

As there is a broad range of knowledge and expertise in the eco village Una has gained valuable learning on topics such as permaculture, gardening, transition towns etc. She therefore is exposed to new visions, ideas and hands-on learning from different individuals within the community. She enjoys the community spirit within the eco village and its inclusiveness and support.

“There is a great friendliness I would say; there is great support from the neighbours. Everybody talks about their houses, their design or their children who are going to school and we are inundated with various emails. I love being part of various groups because I feel I know what is going on and I like to know what is going on, I like to have some influence on what is going on...”

She also values the linkage with the Cloughjordan village and is involved in Tidy Towns and beautifying the area. She also loves the community’s ethos of an edible landscape, green
corridors for wildlife and planting to encourage wildlife, insects and birds. These are all benefits to her quality of life and social cohesion.

She also appreciates the supportive nature of the eco village for example if someone is sick or even if someone just needs something from the nearest provincial town of Nenagh the other members of the eco village will offer their support, care and assistance.

“...If I were short of something I won’t mind asking my neighbours ... we have a meitheal (Irish) once a month ... which might involve the whole community, we come down to community garden or community area and dig, weed and plant as is needed. Over many meitheals about a thousand trees have been planted and staked all around the eco village. It was a great team effort. For one of our cluster meitheal we made soup here for everyone and luckily we had a dry day and it was a lovely gathering ... we are supposed to give 100 hours voluntary work for the year...”
Main issues/challenges encountered experienced as an eco village community member

One of the main challenges Una identifies is the current Irish economic downturn which is impacting both the eco village as a whole and individuals personally within the eco village.

“...people haven’t been able to sell their own houses and get mortgages and can’t move here so it has forced us maybe more so than might have been in the agenda to have a low cost build... the financial problems have hit us so we have to look at reducing site prices, we have a loan to pay back. We do not want to be dependent on larger banking institutions. We have a scheme called ‘Loanstock’ whereby members’ loan amounts to SPIL at a low or no interest. We used this method to pay for our tree grant to Coillte for our 17,000 tree saplings and planting. Members were asked for whatever they could loan - €100 or €500, or €1000 until the grant of €20,000 - €25,000 was paid...”

However, even in the face of financial stress Una acknowledges that the community tries to work together to achieve their common vision of a sustainable society. As she identified herself as a ‘doer’ and with such a broad array of knowledge, skills and expertise the generation of ideas can be overwhelming and sometimes her personality kicks in and she wants action. However, the eco village works on the philosophy of consensus decision making which takes time and can be frustrating for a hands-on/action motivated mind.

“I am a doer and there is so much talk going on and so many ideas and sometimes the ideas are left by the wayside ... so I am inclined to say just do it. It took two years for the infrastructure to be put in which I think should have been in place in a year...”

In regard to consensus Una again finds by default of her own personality that she may be frustrated at times by the decision making process however she is happy overall to work with the eco village members to find common ground.

“...sometimes I feel would they just make a decision, would they listen to what we’re saying - if we are not happy about something then that is it (sic)...”
Another challenge for Una was leaving her friends and work and relocating to Cloughjordan however she admits it was an easy transition as she had great support from the other eco village members prior to, during and after her move.

“I suppose it was a big change but I didn’t realise it was such a change ... from no definite paid work, challenge from moving from friends in Dublin, challenge from selling the house and moving to a new area, but it was more gradual, it didn’t seem a huge difficulty...”

She had personal family commitments in Kerry up to October last year which did require her leaving the eco village on a fortnightly basis for six days which did put a strain on her on a personal level. However, she valued the friendship and support she got during that time not only from the community as a whole but also from the ‘cluster’ she is a part of within the eco village community.

“...natural friendships form... and there is the guarantee of friendship and support within the cluster and the wider community.”

**Overall satisfaction with the eco village project**

Overall for Una she is very happy with the eco village project in particular the ESCO district heating system even though she is aware of the issues with the suppliers though she was not directly involved. However, she is very satisfied with her build.

“*I am absolutely so pleased with my build ... I have no heating problems ... I am so please with my builder (Aidan O Brien) ... he was very aware of the eco charter...*”

She is also aware of planning permission issues at the start of the project but which were rectified in the end.

“...*when we were buying the land the planning permission took longer than expected...*”

She is also very satisfied with her project designers, architects, builder and installers.

“*My design, build and insulation and the type of timber seems to be so effective my space heating and hot water only costs €400-€500 per year...*”
Her only concern was the proposed reed bed system for the eco village sewage system which could not be incorporated due to the number of houses. However, she does point out that some members took proactive measures to combat this by incorporating compost toilets in their build.

“A slight disappointment for me was that there was supposed to be a reed bed system for the sewage system but because there were so many houses that could not happen...”

Una expressed an excellent relationship with and high satisfaction with SPIL (Sustainable Projects Ireland Limited). It has done all it can to make the project a success in these difficult times.

“...satisfaction with SPIL is excellent, as the members are very involved in running the various aspects of the project; we could say we ourselves are SPIL.”

She is generally happy with the organisation and structure of the eco village overall but is aware that the effectiveness of same is dependent on the people involved.

“...we generally have a common vision and we want it to work (sic).”

Una is very informed about activities not only in the eco village but also the level of engagement and integration with the local community. The eco village are actively involved in local activities such as Cloughjordan Community Development Committee, The Heritage Group, Wild Life Ireland, bat boxes, Beara Breffini Walk - O Sullivan Beara Walk to mention some. She really enjoys the Cloughjordan community spirit and felt at ease in the village from her initial move to Cloughjordan.

“...I felt very welcome immediately when I moved to Cloughjordan...I am very happy with my life here.”

She feels she has achieved not only a high quality house but great value for money in regard to building her home in the eco village to environmentally high standards. As mentioned above her heating costs are very competitive per annum and her house is warm, spacious and full of light.

“...With this timber frame house on the basic cost I nearly got twice the size of the house that I had in Dublin, so we are not comparing like with like, the cost of our sites are high and our
build is high in relation to prices now...but with a timber frame you may be getting a bigger and more efficient house...”

Una also highlights the fact that by buying a house in the eco village you get more for your money than just a house. Eco village members have access to allotments, eco village amenities and a community with a shared vision which offers great value for money.

“...if you buy into the eco village you are getting your house, you are entitled to 100m² allotment and all the amenities of the 67 acres as well as community...”

She is very happy with her choice to move to the eco village and adopt a more sustainable lifestyle and by doing so lead by example. All her expectations are fulfilled and her life is greatly enriched by living sustainably in the eco village with her neighbours and community.

...“far out weighing my expectations...I love the timber house...I am now more aware of natural products, water based paints and trying to live more sustainably...”

**Influence of eco village and predicted impact on regional and national level**

Una feels that the eco village is having an influence at a regional and national level. She acknowledges the behavioural changes she has witnessed personally in the locality and by the amount of interest nationally for the eco village in regard to courses, tours and media coverage. However, she also understands that change may be a slow process for some people.

“... It is very hard to know how influence works; I think we are probably part of a growing tide or consciousness that we need to take more care of the environment... then sometimes I am surprised when I speak to some individual of a certain age that never heard of it...”
Locally Una is actively involved in taking tours around the eco village and educating others on the environmental principles of ‘The Village’. Since the eco villages establishment the local primary school has installed solar panels and various local and national secondary schools and third level institutions visit the eco village on educational courses and tours.

“...about influencing into the local community a local primary school has got solar panels on their roof, I think they have rain harvesting.”

Some behavioural changes in local businesses are adopted for example the local cabinet maker’s research has incorporated environmentally friendly non toxic products into the wooden work-top in Una’s kitchen.

“... the local cabinet maker has become aware of not using varnishes... he uses water based paints. In time I think when we have more personnel ... we will have more courses and more children may be coming on school tours... we are building the enterprise centre and green industries will be located here, Cultivate’s Convergence Festival, The CSA Farm’s food seminar and The Green Businesses at the recent Cloughjordan Festival were all means of learning, change, cooperation and spreading the word.”

Some members envision the eco village becoming a place where people may come to celebrate weddings, birthdays and other milestones in life.

“...the cabin may be a place where people come to celebrate milestones in life and develop skills and crafts related to sustainability.”

She is happy with the media coverage. The visit of the Irish President (Michael D. Higgins) on 6th June 2012 gave the eco village additional publicity on the national stage. There have been many national television programmes dedicated to the eco village as well as local and national newspaper and radio coverage.
Una feels that the eco village’s membership with GEN (Global Eco-Village Network) has given Cloughjordan eco village great contacts and publicity in Europe. Through GEN, and its education programmes, eco villages throughout Europe share their experience. Cloughjordan will host a European education course in October. European engineers and local government representatives have visited the eco village in Cloughjordan. The eco village actively promote themselves however Una is respectful of the power of advertising.

“...we have a website, we use facebook and other social media ...you cannot advertise it enough but also you have to be careful of overkill...”

She very firmly believes that the eco village could and should be replicated either within the SERVE region or outside the region. She highlights that replication is one of the main objective of the eco village remit along with integration.

“...it is a model to be replicated...a lot of what we are doing has trickled into the local community particularly with the SERVE project...we have got an award for the greenest community in Ireland just a few weeks ago.”

**Suggestions on improving the eco village’s structure, organisation and activities.**

Una acknowledges that the eco village is a very complex project and a much bigger project than people originally thought. Therefore one organisational suggestion Una put forward is to possibly shorten the length of time it took for the houses to be completed by using a set number of building templates.

“...maybe in the design and building the houses there could have been 6 templates for the design of the houses... to some that would be limiting but it might have got the building done quicker...”

The structure of the eco village is evolving all the time and a ‘Navigation group’ has been established within the community to help identify and mitigate the risks and challenges to the future viability of the project.

“.... ‘Navigation group’...it is preparing for the future and the challenges it will bring.”
She believes that the eco village is working toward improving its structure continuously. She feels that the proactive leadership in the community would benefit if all the members were responsible and accountable for the amount of voluntary time they contribute to different village projects. For example each member must volunteer 100 hour per year to complete various tasks within the eco village.

“...Voluntary work is carried out on the ‘self organising’ basis, where initiative and cooperation are more important than the ‘command and control’ mode of operation...a little bit more structure may be necessary in the accounting system...”

Una feels that the development of a wind farm for the eco village would be of great benefit financially for the community.

“...in the future wind farms will be developed for own electricity...”

She is interested in the farm and its development. There is discussion of the use of horse power as a replacement for tractor power in the future and she would be very happy to see this kind of innovation.

“...instead of using a tractor on the farm I think they may use horses on the farm...”

**Suggestions on improving the promotion of the eco village**

She is currently very happy with the eco village’s efforts to promote themselves and their project externally through media and educational programmes. She feels they avail of every opportunity possible and is very happy with their activities.

“...I think people are making every effort they can and taking every opportunity...”

**Conclusion**

Una is deeply concerned with the global social, environmental and economic equity challenges. She moved to the eco village to live a more sustainable life style and to bring balance to her life. She is an advocate of the eco village ethos of sustainable development and resilient communities. She actively and willingly shares her knowledge and skills with visitors and promotes the eco village model for sustainable living in the 21st century.