

Connecting Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives – Meeting Notes

Date: 23 September 2021

Summary

The sixth meeting of the Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives was a presentation about the **Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA): building the capacity of community leaders and policy makers.**

Guest Co-Presenters: Norman Walzer, PhD, Professor Emeritus founder of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) and Christopher Merrett, PhD, Director and Professor of the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA)

Attendees:

Professor Norman Walzer, Professor Emeritus, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs; USA; Professor Mike Osborne, Glasgow University, UK; Professor Idowu Biao, Université d'Abomey Calavi, BENIN, Cotonou; Professor Marius Venter, University of Johannesburg, South Africa; Associate Professor Jose Roberto Guevara, Dr Mary Johnson, RMIT University, Melbourne Australia.

Apologies:

Dr Annalisa L Raymer, Lifelong Learning and Leadership, Cornell University, New York, USA; Ms Michele Murphy, Learning Region Coordinator, Derry City and Strabane Region Learning City, Ireland and Max Eastcott, Gwydir Learning Region, New South Wales, Australia.

General Discussion:

Professor Norman Walzer and Professor Christopher Merrett provided a detailed presentation about the IIRA. The IIRA was established in 1989 as a collaborative response by Government, Education, and rural communities to a number of issues at that time, for example, long term population decline in rural areas, farm foreclosures, setbacks in farm economics...

The original vision, purpose and mission are as relevant today as they were when the Institute was established:

- **Purpose:** Be major statewide source for applied policy research on rural issues.
- **Vision:** To be widely recognized for innovative research and policy applications with rural agencies to enhance rural economic development while maintaining the importance of small communities.
- **Mission:** To improve quality of life in rural areas by working with public and private agencies on key local development and enhancement issues.

A key focus is on enhancing rural economic development and the maintenance of the importance of small communities.

Smaller rural institutes linked to larger universities are sometimes vulnerable to the whims of policy and funding changes. The fact that IIRA was set up with a strong foundation; that it has had only two Directors in 33 years; that the Institute aligns with the Western Illinois University's (WIU) mission; and aligns with Academic Affairs within WIU have helped its sustainability. There is a recognition that Community Economic Development (CED) often has a long lead time before you see the larger results in the community.

The Institute has a strong focus on rural community development and has strengths in policy development, research and education and outreach. It shares its research; provides a State-wide data centre and co-ordinates non-state agency activities.

The Institute has many innovative programmes, including the Peace Corp programme where master's students are required to serve an internship in Illinois local communities.

A healthy farm economy needs a healthy non-farm economy

Assoc Professor Robbie Guevara congratulated the Institute on the application of theory and reflective practice when working in partnership with rural communities. It was noted that using A-B-C-D, that is **Asset Based Community Development** remains a very relevant way of working with local communities. This is a focus on the positive attributes and infrastructure that a community must work with, rather than a focus on deficits.

Professor Idowu Biao asked about the definition of rural in Illinois. Professor Merritt said this can be problematic as there are 19 definitions of rural. The threshold is 50,000 persons. Less than 50,000 is known as non-metro (ie, rural).

Dr Mary Johnson asked about the COVID effect. For example, in Victoria there has been a move from people located in Melbourne to buy rural properties, especially in small towns. City people are living in these properties, and it does mean that renters on low incomes are being squeezed out of the housing market.

Professor Mike Osborne noted that it was good to see an example of Local Economic Development that did take a lens of social justice seriously and he looks forward to opportunities for further knowledge sharing about this topic with PASCAL and the University of Glasgow.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY FOR THESE SEMINARS:

11 October from 1500-1650 UK time (BST)

This seminar is part of University of Glasgow's Pre-COP26 Webinar Series and is entitled ***Higher Education, Knowledge Democracy and Sustainability***

It is 11 October from 1500-1630 UK time (BST) and based on the book *Socially Responsible Higher Education: International Perspectives on Knowledge Democracy*. The webinar will focus on two themes: knowledge democracy and place-based learning. It will offer perspectives from India, Africa, Latin America, and North America. Importantly, the discussion will explore viewpoints from parts of the world often underrepresented in international debates on decolonising and democratising knowledge in Higher Education Institutions. The webinar is a joint initiative between the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility, the Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning and the Low and Middle Income Countries Research Network (College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow).

For more information go to <http://pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/pascal-activities/events/pre-cop26-webinar-higher-education-knowledge-democracy-and-sustai>

9 November – 19:30 (AEDT) The Role of Universities as a Partner in Learning Cities and Learning Communities

This seminar is part of the [Global Learning Festival](#) and will explore the different ways that universities can support the development and implementation of Learning Cities and Learning Communities in their region. It is an opportunity to share experiences on ways to build more sustainable long-term community university partnerships that benefit all actors, not least in support of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

I am very pleased that this group will be represented by Professor Idowu Biao Université d'Abomey Calavi, Benin. Other contributors include *Professor Bruce Wilson and Associate Professor Robbie Guevara from RMIT University*; ; Dr Mary Mahoney, Director of Access and Lifelong Learning, University of Wolverhampton; Jenny Thompson, Manager Library and Community Service, Wollongong City Council; and Dr Belinda Gibbons who is Deputy Associate Dean Education for the Faculty of Business & Law at the University of Wollongong,.

A formal invitation to follow shortly but PLEASE SAVE THE DATE.

[Next Meeting](#)

Date for the next meeting.

- **21 October – 9.30 pm AEST**

At this meeting Ms Michele Murphy, Learning City Coordinator, Learning Region Coordinator, Derry City and Strabane Region Learning City, will speak about ensuring that the learning opportunities that are provided to Derry City are also extended to their rural communities.