

Perceptions of sustainability in Ireland's small villages during immigration times: Exploring discernments of social, economic, and environmental challenges in rural Cavan and Leitrim

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Received: 23 November 2023

Accepted: June 30 2024.

Abstract: This paper examines aspects of population change in small villages of Ireland through analysis of residents' perceptions of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of rural sustainability. In addition, given the relevance to identity and well-being, it aligns these into value affinities/aversions (ruralphilia/ruralphobia) and affective bonds to places. While the paper draws on documental work and key indicators from the CSO to develop a context for the study, it is mainly based on empirical data, focusing on small villages of Cavan and Leitrim, where semi-structured interviews with various informants were conducted. Thus, this paper gives voice both to rural immigrants and to locally born inhabitants. Our research identified how some residents articulated feelings related to ruralphilia/ruralphobia and others showed how everyday challenges reveal the entanglements of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. For instance, prejudice or xenophobia are more clearly linked to the social dimension of sustainability (but can have an impact on the ability to attract foreign workers). Meanwhile, access to credit and support for rural business development are more clearly linked to the economic dimension (but have a social impact due to the scarcity/lack of jobs available or the low-quality jobs on offer), and environmental education, recycling and waste management are more clearly linked to the environmental dimension (but there will be new job opportunities if more waste management policies are implemented).

Keywords *rural sustainable development; little populated places; ruralphilia/ruralphobia; population change, migration and (re)settlement; qualitative approach; Irish countryside*

Introduction

Population changes and diversity linked to socio-economic transformations and foreign immigration is increasingly relevant in various Irish places (Creighton *et al.*, 2022), which is in line with the current global age of migration (de Haas *et al.*, 2020). During the 2000s, in Ireland, the increase in foreign immigration meant unprecedented demographic change, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas (e.g., Ó Dhuibhir *et al.*, 2011; Ulin, 2013)¹. According to the Census, the percentage of 'Non-Irish nationals' rose from 5.2% in 2002 to 13.8% in 2022 (CSO, 2022) in a national population of just over five million. In recent years a wider variety of places in Ireland are hosting foreign immigrants, including some villages (e.g., Woods, 2018). Until the 1990s, Ireland was a country of emigration (King & Shuttleworth, 1988; Walter, 2008), but with the rise of the 'Celtic Tiger', and together with the expansion of the European Union (EU), international immigration became established firmly in the country's demographics (Gilmartin & White, 2008). While internal migration and foreign immigration impacts greatly on urban and peri-urban places (King-O'Riain, 2008; Komolafe, 2008), reflecting the experience of many other modern economies (McAreevey, 2017), rural areas have also experienced inflows of international populations (Woods, 2018). This new rural immigration has occurred in areas where various challenges were already taking place, such as access to housing and increasingly restrictive planning rules on the building of new, single dwellings (e.g., Keaveney, 2009; Gkartzios & Shucksmith, 2015; Sirr, 2019).

In rural (and semi-rural) areas of some countries, including Ireland, there is a variety of human settlements, from relatively large villages (sometimes considered as small towns) to hamlets or even to isolated farmhouses or single rural dwellings with no agricultural connection (Champion & Hugo, 2004). However, in the academic literature on population studies, less attention has been paid to small settlements such as small villages or hamlets (e.g., Gillmor, 1988; Morén-Alegret *et al.*, 2021) than to larger villages and small towns (e.g., Woods, 2018; Milazzo, 2015). For decades there was almost no data on population change in Irish small villages (Gillmor, 1988), although there were calls for rural geography studies on 'immigration in small towns and villages across Ireland' (Mac Éinri & White, 2008: 162). While some studies have addressed this gap (e.g., Woods, 2018), we hope to contribute further.

This paper is part of a wider research programme on sustainability and population change in small villages, hamlets² and relatively similar human settlements in Europe that, among others, studies border regions in the island of Ireland and in Catalonia (divided in

¹ For instance, in the 2007 elections, a Nigerian-born man became Ireland's first black mayor (Castles & Miller, 2009).

² Etymologically, hamlet comes from old French *hamelet*, a diminutive of *hamel* that is connected to modern French *hameau*, which is a diminutive of old French *ham* and this, in turn, derives from Middle Low German *hamm* (Stevenson, 2007: 1196). Today in English language, 'hamlet' means small village, but Hamlet is also the main character of a universal tragedy authored by William Shakespeare where European geopolitics matter, including revenge, the social bond to a place, transactions of land and properties, generational conflicts and the role of the State (Elden, 2018; Bate & Rasmussen, 2007). Interestingly, some hamlets in Europe are facing (potentially) tragic situations and processes that may ask for revenge (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), including depopulation, ageing, land abandonment and gentrification.

the 17th century by France and Spain; Castex, 2005). The idea of sustainability focuses on finding ways of dealing with serious current threats and of planning for the future (Portney, 2015; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020). Sustainability must be seen as always sitting in the midst of ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘environmental’ considerations (Adams, 2006) and, in spite of an urban bias in sustainability studies as some publications illustrate (e.g., Portney, 2015), sustainability of villages and hamlets is crucial too (Morén-Alegret *et al.*, 2021).

In Ireland, there are various words and phrases to describe clusters within its dispersed settlement. In the Irish language, the term for village is ‘*sráidbhaile*’, which literally translates as a ‘street-town’, while smaller clustered and dispersed settlements have various terms in Irish e.g., *Clochán* or *Baile Fearainn*³. These terms do not have direct translations but can be interpreted as clusters. Small villages in the sense of the *sráidbhaile* may not have a minor service function (such as a church) but comprise a cluster of housing. Indeed, what constitutes a village, or a town can often be determined by local traditions and perceptions (West Kerry Community, 2020)⁴. Mindful of that subjectivity, the term small village is used to identify our main study areas (within the European context and taking into account the Irish statistical data provision), and in this paper is operationally defined as: clustered human settlement in electoral divisions (EDs) with fewer than 500 inhabitants. Such places with small villages are found across several Irish counties and are sites of population change (Quinn, 2021).

This paper is written in a period when the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has had almost immediate consequences in Ireland at different levels, e.g., as of October 2023, 90,000 Ukrainian refugees have come to Ireland (see: <http://irishrefugeecouncil.ie>). Taking both the historical and geopolitical contexts into account, this paper examines aspects of population changes in the small settlements of rural Ireland (such as immigration) as well as offers insights on the perceptions of sustainability among a variety of residents in small villages of County Cavan and County Leitrim. These counties belong to the Northern and Western Region of the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) and to the so-called Border Region of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Thus, Brexit is also part of the everyday and geopolitical contexts of this paper (Anderson & Wilson, 2018; Corbet & Larkin, 2019; Creamer & Hayward, 2023; Walsh & Rafferty, 2019). Consequently, the challenges facing these border counties prior to Brexit may have since been accelerated.

Bearing this context in mind, this paper builds on the conceptual framework of ruralphilia/ruralphobia and integration of a variety of inhabitants within villages (Klocker *et al.*, 2021; Morén-Alegret, 2008), using a sustainability perspective. This framework underscores that, apart from instrumentalist concerns about employment opportunities or social supports, individual affinities/aversions (ruralphilia/ruralphobia) and affective bonds to places are also relevant because they are core to the inhabitants’

³ In some cases, authors have used the Irish term *clachan* as almost equivalent to hamlet (Evans, 1957; O’Reilly, 2018).

⁴ For example, in the west and northwest of Ireland, given the lack of strong urban structure and the dominance of a dispersed settlement pattern, villages can be defined as anything from a cluster of housing in a ‘townland’ to a small urban centre with basic functions such as a shop, church and primary school.

being, identity or wellbeing (Klocker *et al.*, 2021). In addition, this conceptual framework includes both immigrants and locally-born inhabitants. In this sense, it is geographically important to study a variety of individual perceptions about rural places, including the natural environments, built environments, other people, values, cognition or aesthetics (Castree, 2000). Concretely, this paper analyses residents' perception of social, economic and environmental dimensions of rural sustainability, principally building on fieldwork carried out in small villages of Cavan and Leitrim. This work also brings to the fore possible entanglements among these dimensions (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2023). Thus, among others, we pay attention both to pragmatic views of various rural inhabitants that can be linked to sustainability and to sensory views that can be linked to ruralphilia or ruralphobia.

In the following section, an overview of sustainability, ruralphilia/ruralphobia and human population change in rural areas is offered, followed by consideration of international immigration in rural Ireland, indicating reasons why studying County Cavan and County Leitrim is relevant. In addition, we present our methodological approach before going on to examine the main geographical characteristics of County Cavan and County Leitrim and a variety of local perceptions about their small villages, drawing from our primary and secondary data. Finally, some conclusions and reflections for further research are suggested.

Sustainability, ruralphilia, ruralphobia and human population change in rural areas: approaching the case of rural Ireland

The idea of 'sustainability' dates back 55 years, when a new mandate was adopted in 1969 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN (Adams, 2006; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020). Shortly thereafter, sustainability emerged as a key theme of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (1972). It was explicitly coined as part of a narrative that economic development was possible to achieve without generating environmental damage. The concept grew from the nature conservation movement (e.g., IUCN) recognising wider issues involved in creating a healthy planet, including the role of humans (Juniper, 2015; Morén-Alegret *et al.*, 2018). Sustainable development involves the notion of 'integrality', interconnectedness and unity (Adams, 2006; Becker *et al.* 1997; Espiña, 2011), covering both material and non-material needs. The idea of sustainability has an explicit temporal dimension as it focuses on planning for the future and finding ways of dealing with serious threats (Portney, 2015; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020). Sustainability must be seen as always sitting in the midst of 'social', 'economic' and 'environmental' considerations, with any dominion of one single dimension over the other two dimensions, for example as 'social sustainability' only, losing this holistic appreciation (Adams, 2006). In other words, for sustainability to be realised, people, places and production should be aligned with mutual benefit, and challenges need to be considered by including all three dimensions (Kates *et al.*, 2005; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020, Arora Jonsson *et al.*, 2023).

Sustainable development is a vague term that is in vogue today mainly through the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs⁵ (Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020), but that can be conceptually clarified by exploring ‘how residents interpret, and incorporate concerns about, the places in which they live and the world around them’ (Vallance *et al.*, 2011: 347). This consideration is central to our research because it ‘speaks to the traditions, practices, preferences and places people would like to see *maintained* (sustained) or improved’ (Vallance *et al.*, 2011: 344).

Sustainability in the Irish context has been examined from a broad range of perspectives including, among others, commuting (Horner, 1999), urbanisation, spatial policy and planning (McCafferty, 2019), gender and rurality (Shortall & Byrne, 2009), landscape and scale (Buttimer, 1998), land use studies (Gkartzios & Scott, 2013), physical geography (Sweeney, 2011), and tourism studies (Dunne *et al.*, 2020; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2010). Meanwhile the government’s 2018 *National Planning Framework* (NPF) aims to tackle the trend of unplanned and unsustainable urbanisation that had been apparent for over five decades, breaking the pattern of ‘business as usual’ (McCafferty, 2019). Additionally, and following the financial crisis post 2008 which generated high levels of vacant and derelict housing (Kitchen *et al.* 2012), in September 2021 the Irish government announced the *Housing for All* plan which set out housing plans to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2021). It includes some plans for rural housing such as a fund to service sites and refurbish vacant properties in regional towns and villages and new rural housing guidelines (still to be published as of December 2023⁶) to give certainty for development of one-off homes (Government of Ireland, 2021: 15).

Sustainability in rural Ireland is impacted by climate change (McGloughlin & Sweeney, 2011) and wider environmental, social, or economic issues (DECC, 2022). Rural Ireland has long been recognised for its valuable landscape and biodiversity (Sweeney, 2011), although a dispersed human settlement pattern impacts on that landscape. For instance, the reduction of links between agriculture and farming with rural housing (Keaveney, 2009; Sirr, 2019) together with a relatively permissive rural housing policy resulted in uncontrolled housing growth in some parts of the country during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years. This has compromised environmental protection, giving way to the so-called Irish ‘spatial anarchy’ (Gkartzios & Shucksmith, 2015).

Thus, apart from instrumentalist objectives at national, European or world level, place-sensitiveness is also necessary to design and implement sustainable development policies (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018), and knowing the feelings and perceptions of residents about local sustainability can help to inform academics and policymakers. Among the possible feelings, one can find *philia* (or *phobia*) to specific places, which can be related to *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), understood as the affective bond between people and place or landscape. Borrowing from this concept of *topophilia*, *ruralphilia*/*ruralphobia* refer to individual affinities/aversions and affective bonds to villages or other rural places, and these bonds are relevant because they are core to the inhabitants’ being, identity

⁵ See: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁶ See: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-12-06/109/#pq-answers-109>

or wellbeing (Klocker *et al.*, 2021). Affective dimensions are highly significant for both locally-born and immigrants' integration, despite being sidelined in most existing population settlement policy and research (Klocker *et al.*, 2021). In line with considering sustainability as a tri-dimensional concept, both ruralphilia/ruralphobia can also be considered as having social, economic and environmental dimensions that, in addition, can be linked to social, economic and environmental/habitat integration (Morén-Alegret, 2008).

Buttimer (1980) applied these bonds between people and places to the Irish context, exploring the lived worlds of people in place as well as notions of insider (inhabitants) and outsider (observer) understandings of rurality. In this sense, it is important to be aware of language barriers between insider's and outsider's views on place (Buttimer, 1980): the words used to describe places looked at from the outside are nouns (housing, land use, activity flow, political boundaries) but the meanings of place to those who live in them have more to do with verbs (living, doing), so to 'discuss' place we have to freeze the dynamic process at a moment to take the picture. The insider views can include understandings of rural places among both locally-born and immigrant inhabitants, while the outsider views include some policy-makers and developers (Buttimer, 1980). These concepts of ruralphilia and ruralphobia are also relevant because sharing reflections and feelings based on experience can offer commonalities not only between immigrants and natives but also between insiders and outsiders (Buttimer, 1980; 1985) thereby also helping to achieve welcoming places and spaces (Moralli *et al.*, 2023)⁷.

Population changes and rural international immigration(s) in Ireland: the case(s) of electoral divisions with fewer than 500 inhabitants

The population of Ireland was reduced by a sustained exodus for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (included mass death during the mid-1800s due to famine) and has yet to return to population levels registered in the 1850s (Creighton *et al.*, 2022), which was estimated at over 8 million inhabitants in the island as a whole. That human exodus especially affected Irish rural areas (Simon, 2015). In human population terms, 'Ireland has undergone unprecedented change in the twenty-first century in terms of its demographic composition' (Ó Duibhir, Mc Daid & O'Shea, 2011: 9). This includes some parts of rural Ireland (Walsh, 1991; Ó'Cinneide & Keane, 1983; Woods, 2018). These population changes are connected to natural causes or factors like ageing or decreasing fertility rates (Kiss, 2022), but can also be specially related to migration movements like return migration (Hannafin, 2016) and foreign immigration (Gilmartin & White, 2008; King-O'Riain, 2008; Komolafe, 2008; Mac Éinri & White, 2008). The 2022 Census of Population was the first to record growth in all counties in the State (CSO, 2023).

According to the Census, the percentage of 'non-Irish nationals' rose from 5.2% in 2002 to 12.2% in 2011 of the total population. Following a slight decline (11.6% in 2016)

⁷ See: <https://www.leitrimsculpturecentre.ie/whats-on/exhibitions/topophilia-landmarks-ii>

due to the global economic crisis (2008-2015), the 2022 census indicates that ‘non-Irish nationals’ comprise 13.8% of the population (CSO, 2023). These proportions of non-Irish are in the context of a rising population overall, with the 2022 Census of Population marking a historic high for the State, recording a population of over 5.1 million people, the first time the population has exceeded five million since the census of 1851⁸.

These demographic changes have transformed the cultural, economic, and social landscape of urban Ireland (Ó Duibhir *et al.*, 2011). However, one may wonder what is occurring in rural Ireland and, particularly, in the 1288 Electoral Divisions (EDs) with fewer than 500 inhabitants in 2022 (CSO, 2022) or in the 1386 EDs with fewer than 500 inhabitants in 2016 (CSO, 2016); see Figure 1. As with all rural geographies, overall population increase can often belie the reality of marginalisation and decline at smaller scales. In Ireland, while immigration has been increasing for several years intercensally, broader spatial patterns continue. For instance, the west and northwest of Ireland continue to have pockets of population decline, where rural youth are likely to leave for education and/or employment, and older populations dominate (Kelly *et al.*, 2021).

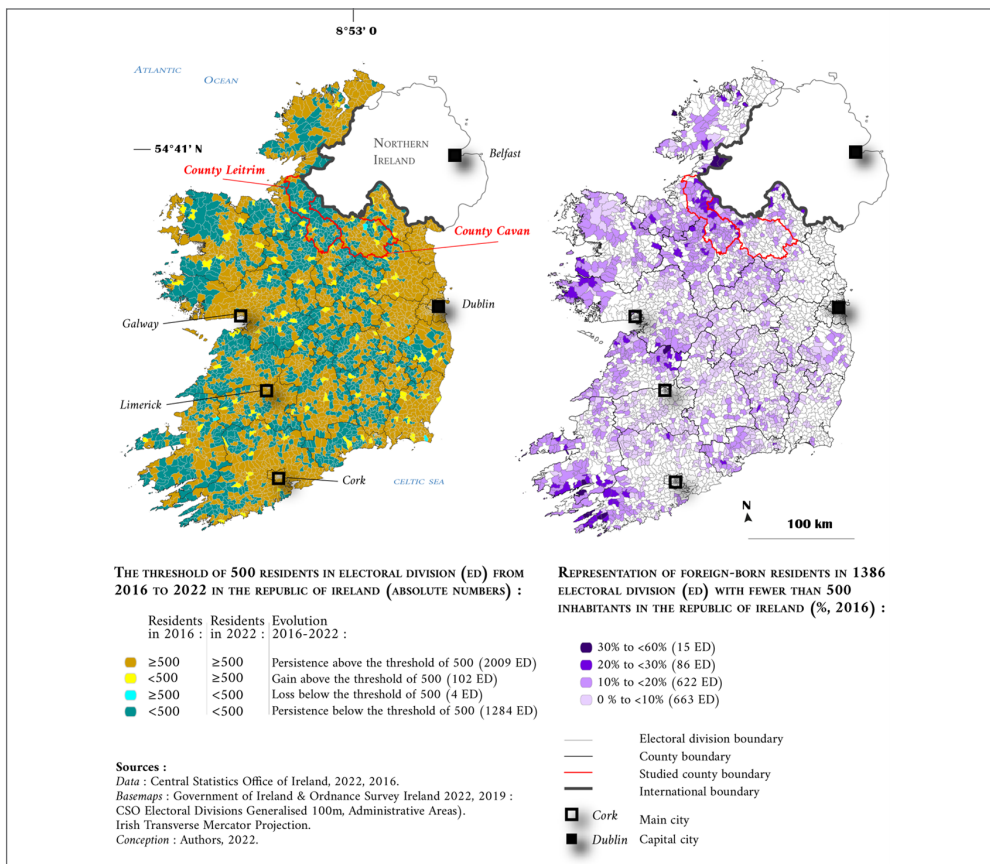


Figure 1. Resident population evolution in EDs of Ireland with fewer than 500 inhabitants from 2016 to 2022. And percentage of foreign-born residents in EDs of Ireland with fewer than 500 inhabitants, 2016.

⁸ Some non-Irish in 2002 have become citizens in the intervening period. According to CSO (2023), only during the period from 2013 to 2020, a total of 96,630 non-Irish people acquired the Irish citizenship.

Rural immigration in Ireland is a much more varied phenomenon than just middle-class internal migration movements from urban areas to the countryside (Boyle *et al.*, 1998) or middle-class international immigration (Winter, 2024). In Ireland, rural immigration is characterised also by both internal and international blue-collar and return rural migration (Ní Laoire, 2008; Gilmartin, 2015) as well as, in some cases, the immigration of foreign low wage workers (Woods, 2018). For instance, there are international emigrants who left rural Ireland to spend some years in London, New York, San Francisco, Sydney, or Perth and later have returned and re-settled in Irish villages with fewer than 1500 inhabitants (Cawley, 2020). Among them, one can find return immigrants who (re)enjoy the so-called rural idyll (relaxed atmosphere, slower pace of life, peace, and quietness). They also experience tensions arising from longer bureaucratic procedures, lack of services for children, lack of autonomy or privacy, scarcity of retail shops and public transport services are also experienced by some international immigrants (Cawley, 2020). In addition, international immigration in rural Ireland has been studied in larger human settlements, like Gort, County Galway (e.g., Woods, 2018). However, as is illustrated on the right of Figure 1, in 2016, there were 723 Electoral Divisions, EDs, with fewer than 500 inhabitants with at least 10% of foreign-born residents (i.e., 52.1%, out of the total 1386 EDs in Ireland). Among EDs where foreign immigration is relevant, one can underline some where there are small villages in Co. Cavan and Co. Leitrim, but that have been under-studied from human geography, except in historical terms (e.g., Cherry & Scott, 2014; Kelly & Scott, 2016). Thus, this paper listens to a variety of current rural voices of Ireland during multidimensional immigration times. This is a moment in history that includes a wide variety of rural immigration movements in some Irish counties: internal and international immigration, foreign and (return) national immigration, refugees and economic immigration, among others.

For some authors, rural Ireland is changing 'at breakneck pace' (Hickey, 2018: 4). What are the perceived challenges in 2022 for social, economic and environmental sustainability among inhabitants of small villages in Cavan and Leitrim? And what about their affective bonds to the places of residence or work?

Methodology, methods, and techniques

This paper contributes to a humble human geography that is motivated to improve, develop and question how we share co-produced knowledge (Saville, 2021), providing original results from rural research projects carried out from collaborative European perspectives on small villages in two relatively under-researched Irish counties: Cavan and Leitrim. This paper draws from statistical, documental, and cartographical work for context, but is mainly based on empirical data, including semi-structured interviews.

Statistical analysis is based on data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the European Statistics Office of the European Union (EUROSTAT). Documental work was carried out following a three-fold approach: a) searching for publications on rural Ireland population changes and sustainability in specialised bibliographic and journal databases

(e.g., Scopus and Web of Science, WoS); b) browsing the websites and print editions of national newspapers (e.g., *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, *The Irish News*, *The Irish Farmers Journal*) and regional newspapers that can be found in rural newsagents of County Cavan and/or County Leitrim (e.g., *The Anglo-Celt*, *Leitrim Observer*, *The Northern Standard*); c) accessing material from Irish libraries, bookshops and museums. In addition, specific cartographical work was based on recent CSO data (see Figures 1, 2, and 3⁹) as well as contextual cartographic work with population data from EUROSTAT. This included cartographic displays on an on-line Geographical Information System (GIS-web) that informs about the evolution of the population from 1961 to 2011 in EDs with fewer than 500 inhabitants of the Irish border region¹⁰.

In 2018 and 2022 fieldwork was carried out in several rural Electoral Divisions (ED) with fewer than 500 inhabitants of County Cavan and County Leitrim. This involved taking photographs¹¹ and conducting semi-structured interviews with residents. Complementary fieldwork was carried out in other parts of Ireland, including Dublin (e.g., interviewing informants from Ireland-wide organisations), Co. Monaghan, Co. Louth and Co. Meath¹². The selection procedure for places to conduct interviews involved both study of population figures and field observation (Mahon, 2005).

Regarding interviews, this paper does not try to assess attitudes of support or refusal/intolerance towards sustainable development challenges (e.g., Gkartzios & Scott, 2013) or towards population changes (e.g., Creighton *et al.*, 2022). We explore perceptions about those challenges and changes expressed by a variety of rural informants. Thus, we consider both differentiations between the three main dimensions of sustainability (social, economic, and environmental dimensions) as well as their inter-relations or entanglements (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2023). This is complemented with the exploration of various affinities (or aversions) that rural informants have with small villages, which can be linked to ruralphilia (or ruralphobia).

Giving voice is one of the main objectives in qualitative research (Ragin, 1994). Interviews were more conversations than interrogations, but they were guided by an interview script that included topics related to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Sometimes informal conversations continued after the formal interview took place. We interviewed and gave voice both to inhabitants born in Ireland and born abroad (mainly in other European countries) as well as to a variety of both rural women and men, putting into value the 'lay discourses' of residents (Mahon, 2005). We attempted to ensure a spread of ages among informants by interviewing young, middle aged and elderly people (the minimum age for being interviewed was 18 years old and the eldest interviewee was 79 years old. There is an approximate balance

⁹ These maps were created by the second co-author, with support from the corresponding author.

¹⁰ See: <https://atlantis.uab.cat/hamlets>

¹¹ Pictures were taken in 2018 and 2022 by the corresponding author and, in the next sections, illustrate some of the issues commented during the interviews..

¹² As background, this paper is also enriched by previous visits of the corresponding author to various parts of Ireland (in 2016, 2015, 2014, 2003 and 1996) as well as the various Irish research experiences of co-authors.

between older/younger than 40 years old (8/6), Irish-born and international immigrants (7/7) as well as between interviewed women and men (8/6). Interviewees were linked to a variety of economic (sub)sectors, including commerce, farming, forestry, industry, and tourism. Interviewees were mainly found thanks to previous documental work (e.g., through various organisations that that were found in directories, regional newspapers, and websites), spontaneous encounters during fieldwork (e.g., in shops, restaurants, pubs, community festivals, tourism offices, civic centres, farm markets) and snowballing. Interviews took place outdoors and indoors, including civic centres, shops, pubs, gardens, restaurants, hotels, offices, or farms. To preserve anonymity, the toponyms of the specific small villages where each interview was conducted are not mentioned. In 2022, a total number of fourteen interviews were audio-recorded mainly in four small villages of Cavan and Leitrim: Blacklion, Butlersbridge, Dowra and Redhills. This exploratory article focuses on the qualitative analysis of these interviews conducted in 2022 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Types of interviewees in 2022 by organisation, birth place, age, sex and nationality

Code	Type of Organisation	Birth place	Age	Sex	Nationality	Main county of residence in 2022
NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA	Grocery shop & GAA	Ireland	19	Woman	Irish	Cavan
NAT-76-man-shop	Transport sector shop	Ireland	76	Man	Irish	Cavan
IMM-40-man-shop	Farming sector shop	Abroad	40	Man	Foreign	Cavan
IMM-29-man-restaurant	Pub & restaurant	Abroad	29	Man	Foreign	Cavan
IMM-44-man-restaurant	Pub & restaurant	Abroad	44	Man	Foreign	Cavan
NAT-61-woman-shop&tourist office	Craft shop & tourist office	Ireland	61	Woman	Irish	Cavan
NAT-49-woman-shop	Grocery shop	Ireland	49	Woman	Irish	Leitrim
IMM-60-man-pub	Pub	Abroad	60	Man	Foreign & Irish	Cavan
NAT-19-woman-farm&shop	Farm & grocery shop	Ireland	19	Woman	Irish	Leitrim
NAT-19-woman-farm&restaurant	Restaurant & farm	Ireland	19	Woman	Irish	Leitrim

IMM-79-man-engineer&sports	Engineering company & sports club	Abroad	79	Man	Foreign	Wicklow
IMM-55-woman-forestry&association	Immigrant association & entrepreneurial society	Abroad	55	Woman	Foreign	Dublin
IMM-48-woman-tourist office	Tourist office	Abroad	48	Woman	Foreign	Meath
NAT-18-woman-hotel&GAA	Hotel & GAA	Ireland	18	Woman	Irish	Louth

In each interview quote below, the following details are provided: place of birth (native/immigrant), age (years old), gender (female/male), and the main activity or activities. Interview data were entered in Excel and were qualitatively analysed, using content analysis. This helps to identify key themes and sub-themes (Cawley, 2020).

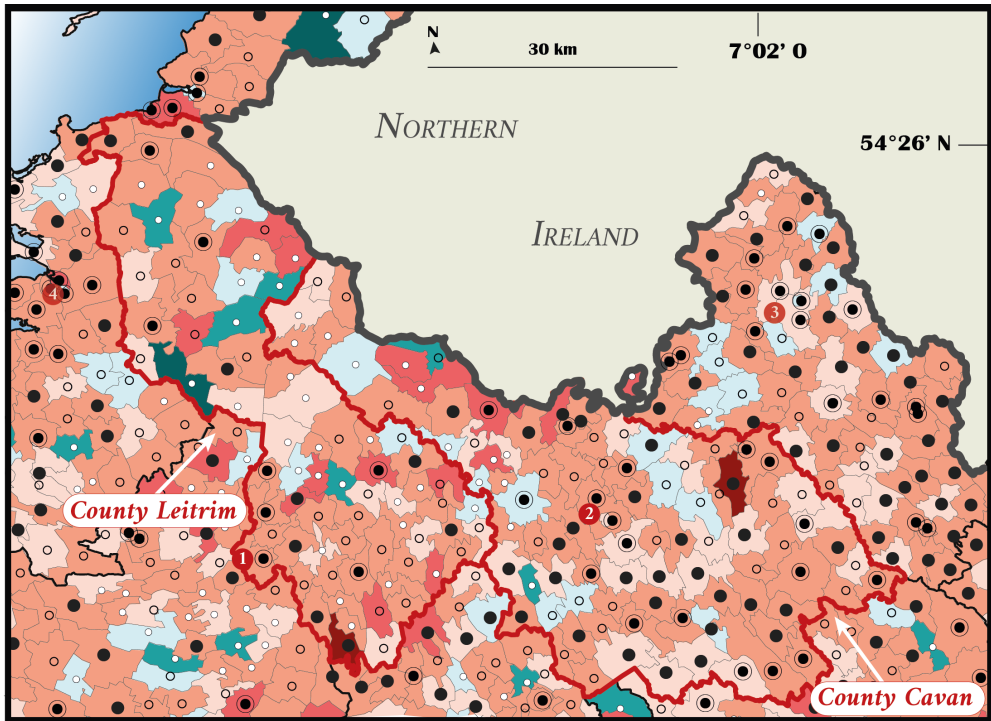
During the interviews, informants identified a number of key essential issues or challenges related to each of the three main sustainability dimensions¹³. These challenges are grouped as follows: a) *social sustainability*: youth's prospects, social housing, leisure, ageing population, rural schools, individualism, isolation, (second home) part-time inhabitants, prejudice, xenophobia; b) *economic sustainability*: rising costs of production, Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic effects, peculiarities of rural commerce, economic diversification, support for rural business development, bureaucracy and access to credit; c) *environmental sustainability*: woodlands management and coniferous plantations, public transport, planning, badgers plagues affecting farming, environmental education, recycling and waste management, among others. Wherever possible we sought to avoid isolating each dimension or allowing one of them to predominate. Inspired by previous publications on writing qualitative research (e.g., Ely *et al.*, 1997: 37), the organisation of the results does not draw strict lines among the components of sustainability but aims to highlight major emerging themes for each sustainability dimension. For example, some rural public transport challenges can somehow be related to all three dimensions, becoming inter-dimensional issues and/or an entanglement (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2023).

Exploring the main study areas: small villages in County Cavan and County Leitrim

Cavan and Leitrim are part of the Border Region of Ireland, south of the international border with Northern Ireland¹⁴ (see: CSO, 2016; 2022) and also of the Northern and Western Region of the Republic of Ireland (see: <https://nwra.ie>); see Figure 2. However,

¹³ All interviews analysed in this paper were conducted and transcribed in 2022 by the corresponding author.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.cso.ie/en/methods/informationnotfordatausersrevisiontotheirshnuts2andnuts3regions/>

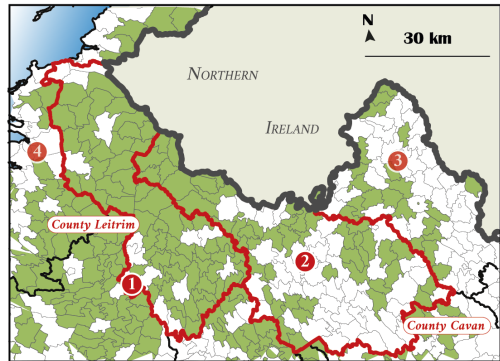


DECREASE OR INCREASE OF RESIDENTS IN ELECTORAL DIVISION (% , FROM 2016 TO 2022) :

- 35% to <50%
- 20% to <35%
- 5% to <20%
- 0% to <5%
- -5% to <0%
- -20% to <-5%
- -35% to <-20%

RESIDENTS IN ELECTORAL DIVISION (ABSOLUTE NUMBERS, 2022) :

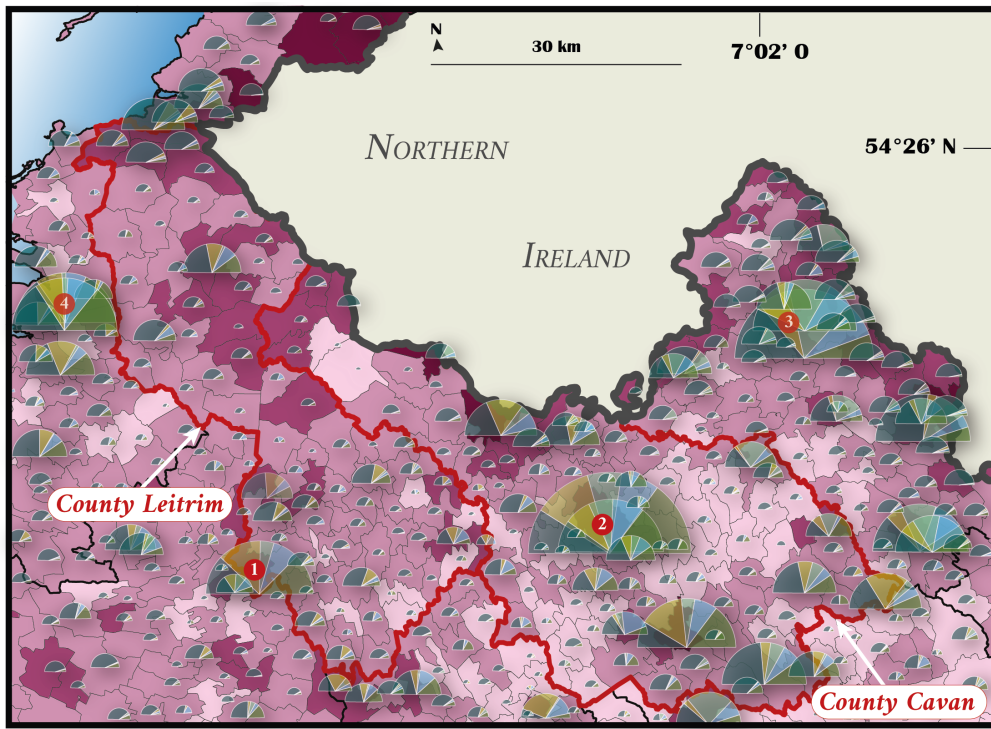
- 1 000 to <10 000
- 500 to <1 000
- 250 to <500
- 0 to <250



- Electoral division with <500 residents (2016)
- Electoral division boundary
- County boundary
- Studied county boundary
- International boundary
- County towns :
 - 1 - Carrick-on-Shannon
 - 2 - Cavan
 - 3 - Monaghan (County Monaghan)
 - 4 - Sligo (County Sligo)

Sources :
 Data : Central Statistics Office of Ireland, 2022, 2016.
 Basemaps : Government of Ireland & Ordnance Survey Ireland 2022, 2019 : CSO Electoral Divisions Generalised 100m, Administrative Areas). Irish Transverse Mercator Projection.
 Conception : Authors, 2022.

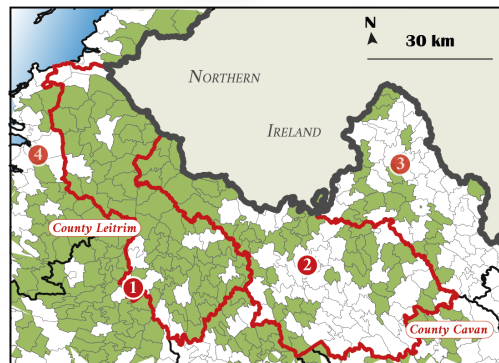
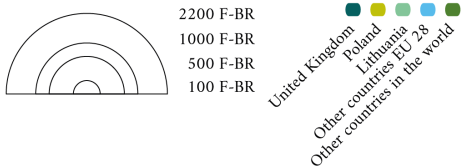
Figure 2. Population changes in Electoral Divisions of counties Leitrim and Cavan (2022)



REPRESENTATION OF FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS IN ELECTORAL DIVISION (% , 2016) :

- 30% to <60%
- 20% to <30%
- 10% to <20%
- 0% to <10%

TOTAL AND DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS (F-BR) BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH IN ELECTORAL DIVISION (ABSOLUTE NUMBERS, 2016) :



- Electoral division with <500 residents (2016)
 - Electoral division boundary
 - County boundary
 - Studied county boundary
 - International boundary
- County towns :
 - 1 - Carrick-on-Shannon
 - 2 - Cavan
 - 3 - Monaghan (County Monaghan)
 - 4 - Sligo (County Sligo)

Sources :

Data : Central Statistics Office of Ireland, 2022, 2016.
 Basemaps : Government of Ireland & Ordnance Survey Ireland 2022, 2019 : CSO Electoral Divisions Generalised 100m, Administrative Areas). Irish Transverse Mercator Projection.
 Conception : Authors, 2022.

Figure 3. Foreign-born residents in electoral divisions with fewer than 500 inhabitants in Leitrim and Cavan counties (2016)

while Cavan is in Ulster, Leitrim is in Connacht (Reverte, 2015). County Leitrim has much more electoral divisions with fewer than 500 inhabitants than County Cavan, but both counties have, until recent years, experienced population decline as shown on Figure 2, as well as societal challenges given the border location which, due to road blockades and customs checks during the Troubles, cut off a large part of their natural communities and social catchment areas. Economic decline associated with the Troubles characterised the region, and it is still in recovery from those times (Creamer, *et al.*, 2009; Creamer & Hayward, 2023).

County Cavan is increasingly identified as an attractive rural region on its own where there are hundreds of lakes, but it is a part of Ireland that has as yet not been widely recognised as a tourist destination (Stokes, 2022). Within this geographically varied context, there are some small villages that have been attracting both tourism and immigration (see Figure 3), which is in line with what have happened in small villages of Catalonia, for example (e.g., Romagosa *et al.*, 2020)¹⁵. In this regard, it can be appreciated on Figure 3 that the main geographical origins are the UK, Poland, and Lithuania. And that County Cavan has significantly more electoral divisions where foreign-born resident population rates remain below 10%, compared to County Leitrim, where the foreign-born representation is much more uniform across the territory, mainly ranging between 20% and 30%. County Leitrim has Lough Allen and its surrounding mountains at its centre, which was a timber and coalfield area for centuries (McArdle, 2015). Leitrim is Ireland's least populated county (CSO, 2022) and has 'untamed landscape' and 'authentic rural charm', which has attracted artists, writers, and musicians (Wilson *et al.*, 2022), among other immigrants. The county capital Carrick-on-Shannon is located 15km south to Lough Allen. In addition, Leitrim, in contrast to Cavan, has a short 4km coastline, where the maritime village of Tullaghan is located.

If today one browses the websites of Cavan or Leitrim counties councils (or related institutions), and LEADER Programme initiatives¹⁶, there is evidence of specific actions focused on attracting and retaining newcomers; e.g., a section of the 'official gateway to Leitrim' website (<https://www.leitrimbusiness.ie>) is devoted to informing about services available for 'Living & Working in Leitrim'. Similarly, in Cavan, the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP)¹⁷ promotes local engagements and partnerships for 'new communities' (<https://www.cavancoco.ie/living-in-cavan>).

From 2016 to 2022, Leitrim and Sligo were the counties with the smallest natural increases, and Leitrim is one of the four counties in Ireland that had the oldest populations

¹⁵ For instance, Chef Neven Maguire has turned a small village, Blacklion, into a foodie destination thanks to the MacNean House & Restaurant as well as the Cookery School that opened in 2014 (<https://www.nevenmaguire.com/>), attracting people from a variety of geographical origins. On the other hand, since 1990 in another small village of County Cavan named Bawnboy, there is an international Buddhist Centre, attracting full-time residents and temporary visitors (www.jampaling.org).

¹⁶ See: <https://www.cavancoco.ie/services/community/community-grants/leader/> & <https://www.ldco.ie/leader/>

¹⁷ SICAP is present in all counties in Ireland and is administered by the Local Development Companies (<https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/social-inclusion-and-community-activation-programme-sicap-2018-2022/>). In future studies, it would be interesting to examine these top-down funds that are implemented locally as structures for inclusion and engagement.

(together with Mayo, Kerry and Roscommon)¹⁸. However, when it comes to immigrant employment, the Northern and Western region leads Irish and EU regions with a high employment rate among the foreign-born (OECD, 2023). The National Development Plan – revised in 2021 to take into account the challenges of COVID and Brexit – and its implementation plan, the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) of the Northern and Western Region, collectively set out ambitious plans to boost resilience in the Northern and Western Region, including by growing the population to just over one million people (up from around 850000, today) by 2040 (OECD, 2023).

If we take foreign migrant candidate representation in Irish local authority 2019 elections as an indicator of local participation and engagement¹⁹, in Co. Cavan there were no migrant candidates but, in contrast, in Co. Leitrim there were two migrant candidates, although neither was elected (Lima, 2020: 7). This observation is in line with other rural counties of Ireland while ‘the largest urban areas, such as Dublin, Cork, Fingal and Limerick tend to have the highest concentration of [international] migrant candidates, revealing an important urban-rural divide’ (Lima, 2020: 9).

In the next section, results from the qualitative analysis of recent perceptions of both immigrant and Irish-born rural inhabitants interviewed in 2022 on challenges for sustainability in small villages are offered and discussed.

Results from fieldwork in Ireland and discussion

As mentioned above, the organisation of these results highlights major emerging themes for the three dimensions of sustainability in line with the UN 2030 SDGs. As we will show, these dimensions can be inter-related or entangled at times (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2023). In addition, some of the emerging themes can also be linked to affinities/aversions or affective bonds to rural places (Klocker *et al.*, 2021; Morén-Alegret, 2008), which sometimes can be interpreted as ruralphilia or ruralphobia. The presentation of results follows a thematic narrative thread.

Social sustainability challenges

In Ireland and other countries, rural ways of socialisation can be different from urban ways (Cabras & Mount, 2017). A social challenge that was mentioned by some interviewees is the difficult social integration process that several former urban dwellers face in rural villages in Ireland. In words of a 76 years-old Irish man that owns a shop in a small village :

“There are [Irish] people moving to live here in this area that came from Dublin years ago, and it did not work that well... Cavan people are different people. They

¹⁸ See: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/>

¹⁹ In Ireland, at local level, anyone aged over 18 years old and ‘ordinarily’ resident can register to vote and run in local elections, including asylum seekers in direct provision awaiting a decision on their asylum application (Lima, 2020: 7).

were used to the city life and suddenly they were in the middle of the countryside, and it did not work either for them or for the country people” (NAT-76-man-shop).

Sometimes this challenge for social sustainability among some newcomers with an urban background may take the form of ruralphobia, which is in line with previous research findings in other OECD countries (e.g., Klocker *et al.*, 2021; Morén-Alegret, 2008). In contrast to that, for instance, among interviewed rural immigrants coming from abroad, the perception that some Irish small villages are felt as welcoming places can be found too, including verbal expressions of ruralphilia –

“This is a quiet place. Everybody seems to be getting on with each other... It’s been 8 years now. I feel more than welcome” (IMM-44-man-restaurant).

“There are actually very friendly people here, they were very welcome to us when we came here, I wouldn’t change much about it...” (IMM-40-man-shop).

Thus, the social side of ruralphilia and integration is related to friendliness, quietness and welcoming attitudes, which is in line with recent international research on welcoming spaces and places (Moralli *et al.*, 2023). A variety of international immigration flows mainly from some other European countries to rural Cavan and Leitrim (e.g., including different types of economic immigration and refugees) are perceived as increasingly relevant by various interviewees. This increase suggests similarities with recent situations in other European regions like parts of Catalonia (e.g., Pascual de Sans, 2011). However, the importance and characteristics of these immigration inflows varies from one village to another, as the following quotes illustrate –

“In this village there’s also a lot of foreigners living in... I know there’s a group of Polish people living here... Some of them work here [in the restaurant as waiters and washing-up]” (IMM-29-man-restaurant).

“The reason they are here is because they got married here and the other partner is someone from around here... Having more people from abroad would bring different nationalities and different ways of life...” (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA).

“Not just in the village, but in the surrounding area, there have come people from England, including people who were born here and came back after a working life abroad... [and] from Eastern Europe, they came to work in a factory there, there is a steel factory up the road and a lot of foreigners came to work...” (NAT-76-man-shop).

Interestingly, the aforementioned relatively positive or neutral comments co-exist with more concerned perspectives in relation to other types of cross-border immigrants, including both supportive and xenophobic comments. Among the social challenges that emerged in 2022, the hosting of Ukrainian refugees in some Irish villages were mentioned as challenges by several interviewees –

“The Ukrainians that are here at the moment, they are learning English... The war in Ukraine is affecting us more than Brexit, the Russian war...” (NAT-61-woman-shop&tourist office).

“There should be more immigration here from abroad? Well, yes, if they are willing to work... [but due to lack of housing] the Ukrainians coming here have made the situation worse” (IMM-40-man-shop).

The far-right anti-immigrant protests that took place in various parts of Ireland in 2022 and 2023 have affected at least one small town in Co. Cavan, in Cootehill (*The Anglo Celt*, 2023). In addition, in Co. Leitrim, in 2019 (before the arrival of Ukrainian refugees), there had been anti-immigrant protests in the village of Ballinamore, where there were plans to relocate asylum seekers in direct provision (*The Journal*, 2019).

Creighton *et al.* (2022) identify three frames for understanding attitudes to immigrants and immigration in Ireland – religion, race/ethnicity and EU origin. However, among these three frames, hosting non-EU immigration (including the arrival of Ukrainian refugees from 2022) was considered a challenge for interviewees. However, religion and race/ethnicity were not mentioned as challenges for social sustainability. This could be because religious and race/ethnic diversity is less relevant in small villages than in the rest of Ireland (Creighton *et al.*, 2022), but also might be due to the lower population density and the concern for retaining a minimum number of (young) inhabitants. Historically issues around identities, social cohesion and religion have been a problem in the border region (i.e., Catholic/Protestant and nationalist/unionist identities). The lack of discussion of race/ethnicity and religion may not necessarily be an indicator of this not mattering, it may reflect a wish to be portrayed as being tolerant.

Both in small villages hosting Ukrainian refugees and in small villages where there were no Ukrainian refugees at all, in 2022 the lack of adequate housing developments and social housing were considered as big challenges by a variety of interviewees, reflecting wider housing challenges in Ireland. Older interviewees talked about having more housing in order to attract and retain more (immigrant) families with kids:

“Unfortunately, people don’t want social housing. Social housing means different people coming to the area. People don’t like change. They like to see the local people living in the area, but that’s not going to happen with social housing... The problem with social housing is that you build 15 houses and there’s only one family that is going to cause real trouble... but the means that the whole thing is not approved... so you need more houses for people, the young local people need to build houses now to have children, that means more children for the school, more children for the GAA football team... I wouldn’t be against social housing myself, but most people don’t like it. That’s the way it goes... They have to build more houses, we need more people, more population... we need young couples as well, with children... we need more houses in the village, to keep the shop supported, the pubs supported...” (NAT-76-man-shop).

“To get more people back to live in the village, there are a lot of empty premises in the village, so [public authorities should] organise it to get them occupied again, and get people to live back in the village... Some [owners] are from here and one is in America” (NAT-49-woman-shop).

In fact, international immigrants have moved into Irish village as home owners, but this can be considered as a life-style option as evidenced more widely in European rural areas (e.g., Eimermann & Kordel, 2018). This presents new challenges around adapting due to the scarcity of services offered:

“We had the opportunity to buy a house... For me it's much better to live in a village, but maybe other people like to live in the city because there it's much easier for shopping. There are just two shops in the village. I like to live in the countryside because it's much quieter and nice” (IMM-48-woman-tourist officer).

Young people interviewed talked about the lack of housing and the high cost of mortgages:

“More housing is planned to be built here, but there is not enough housing... More public transport would be necessary together with more housing for the younger generation” (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA).

“The price of mortgages is very high for young people, but I hope that it will improve... they could build a bit more [housing] in the future...” (NAT-19-woman-farm&shop).

In some small villages, new housing developments are already a reality, attracting a variety of dwellers with hope for the future, contributing to diversifying inhabitants in terms of age groups, family situations and geographical origins:

“There's a big [housing] development just across the road that wasn't here. It has been recently built in the recent year... new people. That's quite big for a small village... I think it's six dwellings, so that's a big percentage for a small village... they only moved in last week, so they are only settling down... Some are elderly people and some are quite young..., with young children, so it's very mixed...” (IMM-60-man-pub).

Among young interviewees, access to leisure activities and entertainment are also perceived as key issues, which is line with previous studies in rural areas of England, France, Portugal and Spain (Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020). These needs are considered as more or less satisfied depending on the distance and public transport connections to the county capitals. In villages located near the county capital there are not so many complaints, but critical stances and suggestions for improvement can also be found there too:

“There should be more pubs... there's just one” (NAT-19-woman-farm&restaurant).

“This is a good place for young people because there is a shuttle bus that bring us to Cavan town... and there you have almost all that you want... [However] there is only one cinema, for young people to do there's not much... and shopping-wise, there are not many shops either... in Cavan town I would suggest to open more clothes shops. There are many coffee shops but just three clothes shops in all Cavan, for my age group there are not shops... [we would like] more clubs, more clothes shops and better transport... the bus is now every two hours...” (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA).

In addition, today perceptions of increasing isolation and individualism affecting both locally-born people and immigrants of various ages and origins can also be found in rural Ireland, which resonate with Buttimer's (1980) reflection about the emotional consequences of fragmented 'genres de vie' juxtaposed in physical space but strangers in social space:

"Not many people meet in the pub, no... there's no longer live music in the pub, that doesn't happen anymore... People now drink at home, there is the off-license and people drink at home. Alcohol is so cheap in the supermarket..." (NAT-76-man-shop).

"If they [newcomers] don't want to come here [to the restaurant], nobody should force them... they stay at home" (NAT-19-woman-farm&restaurant).

These isolating dynamics were also found among some rural inhabitants, for instance, in hamlets of the Pyrenees (e.g., Morén-Alegret *et al.*, 2021). However, apart from the aforementioned difficulties for a more diverse social life in villages, there are also positive and hopeful perceptions. Several interviewees underlined the importance of the Gaelic football clubs for social life in their villages and at county level. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has several clubs in small villages of Co. Cavan and Co. Leitrim. This is a particularly relevant activity for young locally-born people:

"There is a good social life here, we have the GAA..., that's very big here, all the young people are involved in that sport. There are football fields over there... In the afternoon all the young people are there... and all the young ladies are involved as well, which is fantastic because then they all meet, you know" (NAT-76-man-shop-YC).

"There's people who travel a lot from places around to play with the [GAA] club, there's people who attend college in Dublin and come back home to play with the club, which is great to see" (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA-NC)

This is in line with what Political Scientist Peadar Kirby (2011: 161) stated some years ago: 'one of the principal institutions that continues to be a major influence for community integration is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)'. The importance for social integration of this traditional Irish sport can be related to the local importance of *colles castellers* (teams of human towers) in various parts of Catalonia (e.g., Morén-Alegret, 2005). Human tower builders combine folklore with physical activity, cooperation and competition, aiming to reach up to ten stories high. In 2010, human towers were inscribed on the UNESCO representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity²⁰.

According to Mike Cronin (2013: 171-172, see also Woods, 2018), the GAA can be more successful as a tool for immigrants' integration in urban areas than in rural Ireland. Interestingly, our data indicates that appreciation for GAA varies, depending if the immigrant interviewee has Irish ancestry or not. For instance, an immigrant born in England with Irish roots in the area stated the following:

²⁰ See: <https://castellscat.cat/en/les-colles>

“Gaelic football is the biggest entertainment and exercise and everything like that, for young and adults. The adults like it for entertainment and the young ones like it for sport, it's very big... boys and girls, there are as many girls playing as boys... the teams are composed by people from the area, so it depends on the amount of children that is born at certain time and place. If they are mostly girls that are born at certain time then the teams will be mainly girls, it varies...” (IMM-60-man-pub-NC).

In contrast, a non-white immigrant interviewee without any Irish ancestry who was also born in England appreciated the relative scarcity of certain social activities available in rural Ireland as a positive thing for avoiding that his children ‘get in troubles’, also identifying the GAA as an option (IMM-44-man-restaurant-YC). He also suggested that the quantity and variety of sports offer in rural areas should be increased, e.g., to include dancing. In this sense, some locally-born elder interviewees also articulated the importance of organizing a wider offer of physical activities for children living in villages, warning about the addiction to social media or video games:

“When you go to the villages you see that kids are not playing in the green. When we were young, there was a lot of people playing football. You do not see so many people playing football anymore, kids are home with their phones, on their laptops, that's how they spend their time. Luckily, some kids are involved in the GAA, but when they go home in the evening you do not see them. When we were small, kids were running around here [in the village] and in the fields” (NAT-76-man-shop).

This perceived need for a wider variety of social activities in villages sometimes faces a lack of support from local authorities. In such situations, initiatives have to be self-organised by immigrants with support from Irish grassroots organisations. The following quote from an interview conducted in another Irish county illustrates this challenge for social sustainability that was overcome through a bottom-up approach:

“When I went to the council to know if they were going to give us funding for setting up a tennis club in the village, they told me that we did not have enough points. They meant that we did not have any problem with our youth, that they were not drug addicts or things like that. Then I told them: ‘do you mean that first young people need to inject drug in their veins and then you will help us building tennis courts?’...” (IMM-79-male-retired from industry).

Within this context, there are also self-organised Irish-wide social networks of foreign international immigrants that, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, were particularly important in rural areas. For instance, an NGO led by an immigrant woman had a big role in mitigating isolation and loneliness as well as improving skills via on-line training:

“Just before Covid-19 hit, we started on-line [language] classes in order to accommodate the people who live outside Dublin ... We have younger people than me who have the technical expertise. They organised the on-line classes and we never looked back. A few months later Covid hit, so the on-line classes were

like mana coming from the sky ... We do have a network of representatives in each county of Ireland because we are running a help line. When Covid arrived, isolation started, a lot of people were single people, sometimes they were elderly and their partner had died... so we realised that there was a necessity to establish a connection... We can coordinate it centrally (from Dublin) but we need someone there (in the county) if something happens, so we created a help line in each county or town where we have... [immigrant] people to volunteer..." (IMM-55-woman-forestry&NGO).

This key leading role of an immigrant woman is in line with Browne (2020) stating that in Ireland women continue to shoulder the majority of care work, including during the Covid-19 pandemic times. 'Migrant organisations offering training and support to migrant women are much more prevalent in urban areas' than in rural areas in Ireland (Lima, 2020: 20). This urban prevalence can also have an impact at the rural economic level.

Economic sustainability challenges

For some interviewees, a minimum number and variety of shops and other economic enterprises is necessary to maintain a village's status. The top three obstacles to attracting investment to places beyond capital/major cities can include 1) distance to suppliers and clients, 2) lack of adequately skilled labour (or difficulty attracting it to a rural place) and 3) poor infrastructure or connectivity to important hubs (OECD, 2023). The huge transformation of the rural Ireland economy is mainly mentioned by locally-born elder interviewees who have experienced the economic changes themselves, including the threats to village shops that come from big supermarket chains:

"Life changed dramatically. When I was young, here there were five shops, there was a creamery, there was a railway station, there was a blacksmith, a second-hand clothes shop... and now there is only one shop and two pubs, but one pub only opens in the evenings [*the owner is a farmer and he opens the pub at 6pm as a part-time job*] ... Life for small villages and even for small towns in Ireland has changed, people are shopping in supermarkets..." (NAT-76-man-shop).

These new commercial trends are related to changes affecting locally-born inhabitants and second-home owners or weekly commuters from Dublin (Horner, 1999; McCafferty, 2019) as well as internal and international immigrants arriving to rural Ireland (Mac Eínrí & White, 2008; Woods, 2018):

"There are a lot of people with holiday homes around here, you might see them passing through, but they aren't very good for local businesses. There's a lot of strange people living in the area... [from] Dublin, Germany and different places all over... There are a few English families who have bought houses and live in the area... There is a French man I used to know... and now there's a Spanish student in the school, so a Spanish family may have moved in here... The Germans like to travel to the Aldi [there's one near the County capital], but they do come here

too [to the village shop]. Especially the pandemic has really helped because they [foreign immigrants] couldn't travel, so they came to the local shops..." (NAT-49-woman-shop).

As mentioned above, tourism is increasingly relevant in some small villages of Cavan and Leitrim, including international tourism. In addition, some entrepreneurs and workers of restaurants are international immigrants, including a few business owners coming from abroad, but there is not available statistical data about it: 'There's an Indian family here, there's an Indian restaurant across the road' (NAT-61-woman-shop&tourist office). Some informants expressed economic ruralophilia (Morén-Alegret, 2008), for instance, in the form of rural gastronomic or outdoor activities attractiveness:

"We've got actually people, a couple of weeks ago, golfers coming from America. Yes, just to come here [to the restaurant]. It has a great reputation" (IMM-29-man-restaurant).

"We have seen customers from all over the country coming in. We've got a good reputation. We've got a lot of locals that come, but we also have a lot of customers who travel from all over the country... [and] we get a lot of tourists... to eat here we have got French, Germans..." (IMM-44-man-restaurant).

In line with recent research carried out in other parts of Ireland (Panzer-Krauser, 2022), the negative economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in tourism and hospitality services is fading away:

"Some are passing, driving from Northern Ireland to the south, or others can be coming to the church down the road, so [for instance] some could be coming from overseas, they could be driving from Dublin to Belfast to go to a wedding, and they could stop here, but a very large percentage would be locals with a five kilometers radius... on Tuesday there was a fisherman here, from England, and I had four weeks ago one from America, for fishing and golfing, but it's mainly local people" (IMM-60-man-pub).

"The other restaurant across the road, that's a cooking school as well. He opens all the week from Tuesday to Sunday and it's a very busy restaurant" (NAT-61-woman-shop&tourist office).

Interestingly, in some places, there is the perception that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, working conditions in some restaurants improved thanks to lower number of clients, e.g., IMM-44-man-restaurant.

However, while today both internal and international tourism is returning to rural Ireland, together with internal and international immigration (both of foreigners and Irish returnees; see: Cawley, 2020), growing electricity and fuel prices due in part to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is perceived as a big threat.

"During the Covid pandemic, it was nearly all locals but now there is more people... which is great to see... [tourism] come from France, America... from around Europe... this is a nice village... There is a butcher that opened last year... he came

back home from Canada a year ago or so... It's great to see new businesses around ... but now electricity prices are going up..." (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA).

"It's very bad at the moment because there is a big increase in the price of gas, fuel, electricity, food, everything is going up in price... These economic problems are happening because of the war in Ukraine... we need to generate our own electricity..." (NAT-76-man-shop).

This geo-economic threat affects various economic sectors, from tourism and shops to farming:

"Younger customers tended to travel before Covid, but Covid seems to have brought them back to local shops, we're keeping above water... but... we would need more job opportunities for people around, often you have to travel from here to work. There are local shops and a timber factory down the road, but many people are travelling to work in Carrick-on-Shannon, Cavan town or even go to Dublin to work during the week and come home during weekends. If you want to keep people local, you need local infrastructure for them... I'm very worried about all these price hikes that are coming in, with the price of electricity and the price of fuel people might stop living here because this is so far from the central places..." (NAT-49-woman-shop).

"[Economic life of farmers here] is difficult now because the cost of living has gone up. It's expensive now for people trying to feed their animals. I hope prices will come back down... the prices have gone up, the prices of fuel, to feed the cattle, electricity..." (NAT-19-woman-farm&shop).

"There's not enough land around, and the price of livestock is going up, it's very expensive..." (NAT-19-woman-farm&restaurant).

Among some rural immigrant entrepreneurs operating across the Irish border, there are complaints about the role of the Irish government, especially regarding the so-called subsidies culture and supposed lack of incentives for increasing the workforce:

"We need more [economic] support [from government]. When you see all the money that has been handed for Covid, we need more support from them... It seems that we pay taxes to feed people that is not working, and there's no incentive for young people to go to work. It's very hard to get workers at the minute. *Are you recruiting?* Not at the minute, we do not need anyone at the minute, but I know that here is very hard to get people to work... The Irish Government gives notes... *Do you think that this is different in Northern Ireland?* Yes, in Northern Ireland, government doesn't give that much... and in the south the cost of living is more expensive than in Northern Ireland" (IMM-40-man-shop).

However, instead of complaining, other older immigrant interviewees assume that their role as educators of the Irish entrepreneurial culture can be important. This can be particularly relevant for helping newcomers to economically integrate in Ireland:

"What we do [in the NGO] has to do with how to integrate in Ireland and that means how to encourage [immigrant] families to maintain their language..."

to maintain the identity and the culture, but on the other hand to do things to integrate better into the system here... and to learn about entrepreneurship... the most important thing is not to be scared of running your own business..." (IMM-55-woman-forestry&NGO).

This observation fits with other work that shows entrepreneurialism is more relevant in Ireland than in several countries of continental Europe (Power, 2004), and the perception among the general population of the ease with which a business can be started in Ireland is relatively high compared to other countries (Fitzsimons & O’Gorman, 2022). In addition, the Border region of Ireland has also been identified as having a particularly strong entrepreneurial spirit (Creamer, *et al.*, 2009).

In relation to the perceived impact of Brexit tensions and conflicts (Corbet & Larkin, 2019), interviewees expressed more concerns about (a few) economic uncertainties than about social life challenges:

“Not life, but it has affected supplies of certain products, some products seem to have disappeared...” (NAT-49-woman-shop).

“I lived in the locality and we had a shop in Northern Ireland, the Brexit went on and we decided to set up a shop here... We still have another shop in Northern Ireland, we have both... we trade in both... Well, we trade with England and sometimes is very hard to get stuff over here, but there’s no problem with the border here [in Ireland] (IMM-40-man-shop).

Thus, resonating with Anderson & Wilson (2018), everyday adaptations to the challenges posed by Brexit are of more concern for interviewees than wider geopolitical issues.

Environmental sustainability challenges

The interviewees did not perceive major environmental challenges or problems within their locality, which is in line with previous studies indicating that people in the NW region are generally quite satisfied with environmental preservation efforts compared to the EU average and higher than any of the Irish regions (OECD, 2023). Their narratives include expressions like “this is a clean county” (IMM-44-man-restaurant) and “we are already in the tidy towns network” (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA). In this sense, in Figure 4a, one can see a Bughouse hotel, a Hedgehog house as well as solar panels on the roof of a dwelling house in a small village:

This also recalls the importance of nature as an arena for integration of newcomers in Europe (Gentin *et al.*, 2019). In addition, some local or regional environmental initiatives like sustainable living competitions and the Geopark are appreciated by some interviewees, for instance, in the following terms, which can be related to the environmental side of ruralphilia (Morén-Alegret, 2008):

“People here are very aware of the environment and how to look after, even the school was involved in a competition and they won it, it was about sustainable living” (NAT-49-woman-shop).



Figure 4a. Bughouse hotel and hedgehog house as well as solar panels on a house in the background. Butlersbridge, Co. Cavan, 2022



Figure 4b. Poster supporting farming, against conifers, 2018



Figure 4c. Fields with a background of conifers, 2018



Figure 4d: Poster about 'smart meter' electricity use in Redhills, 2022

“The Geopark is very positive, there’s no negativity at all... The Cavan County Council is trying to improve the Burren Park... and the Shannon pot” (NAT-61-woman-shop&tourist office).

However, there are some suggestions for improvement that can be related to the ecological or ‘housekeeping aspect of place’ suggested by Buttimer (1980): “I guess you can have more recycling centres...” (NAT-19-woman-shop&GAA) and some interviewees who are farmers are concerned about certain plagues affecting their livestock: “the problem are the badgers... badgers are animals that bring disease to cattle” (NAT-19-woman-farm&shop).

Interestingly, there are other interviewees linked to retail commerce who commented that there is some environmental pollution linked to pig farms, but, in contrast to other regions in Europe like Catalonia (e.g., Morén-Alegret & Mendoza, 2021), this is not perceived as a big issue in small villages of Cavan and Leitrim so far:

“There are pigs, pig farms, but when you live in the country you have to accept these things, you know... he does his business and that's what it is. We are a quiet community, everybody does well with each other...” (NAT-76-man-shop).

Thus, it is interesting to note how sustainability is framed by respondents, generally in a very localised sense, normalising that there will be environmental pollution. In fact, agricultural pollution is a major challenge for Ireland (e.g., OECD, 2020).

A polemic issue that some interviewees, particularly farmers, considered as an environmental challenge is the management of the forestry plantations in some areas (see Figures 4b and 4c). This issue emerged some years ago mainly in Co. Leitrim, including protests outside the Dáil, Ireland's National Parliament, in Dublin. These protesters were farmers, residents of Leitrim and ecologist groups, criticize that there is not life beneath sitka plantations. In addition, they denounce that biodiversity is in danger because trees are sprayed with chemicals (Bray, 2019). A report commissioned by the Irish Government (Dhubháin *et al.*, 2019) found that sitka spruce is the dominant species in the forests of Co. Leitrim, accounting for 61.3% of the total forests. This is higher than the national figure, 51% (Dhubháin *et al.*, 2019). However, according to other interviewees, in 2022 the perception of conifers among some rural inhabitants has improved thanks to the employment opportunities that plantations have offered to local young people:

“It's not as bad as it was... because people are making money now on it, there's money now... otherwise young people are moving abroad” (NAT-19-woman-farm&restaurant).

“There's the crowd that wants the trees planted and the crowd that don't want the trees planted... I don't know much about the impact of having the trees planted around here, probably is not much. It's poor land, so probably the trees will grow better than anything else, it's hard to know. And for some youngsters here their jobs are with the forestry, planting the trees or wiring or spraying... they have to work... [but] some farmers don't like to see lands planted, particularly with trees... about 2 years ago there were lots of trees burnt in places...

– *Provoked or natural?*

– Nobody knows” (NAT-49-woman-shop).

The transition to a non-carbon-based economy raises some concerns among some interviewees in relation to challenges for electricity provision in rural areas:

“It's ridiculous that they want us to drive electric vehicles to cut CO2 emissions but then there will be blackouts because there is not enough electricity for the houses...” (IMM-40-man-shop).

Electricity is also an issue for other people due to the collection of data in relation to ‘smart-meter’ electricity use (Carswell, 2022), as one can see in posters displayed in some villages (see Figure 4d). In this sense, there are privacy concerns about households' data on energy consumption being transmitted to an electricity supplier because then these companies can obtain an insight into residents' habits. However, there are also

institutions advocating for increasing the implementation of smart meters in rural areas because enables energy operators to develop decentralised infrastructure to serve rural communities that would be otherwise unable to be connected to the main grid due to significant infrastructure costs (GIH, 2020).

However, other interviewees are more concerned with problems linked to the current dependence on fuels and private transportation:

“Everyone has the same challenges at the moment because of the rising costs of living, especially fuel and things like that, especially in a rural area where for transport, wherever you travel, you have to use a car to get there, and that can be quite expensive. Just from here to Cavan, yes, there’s a bus service, but that’s not always helpful either. It might suit you... but depending what you are carrying as well. And a lot of people have to commute as well for work, college and things like that. Fuel is the big thing at the moment...” (IMM-60-man-pub).

In relation also to transport, some challenges to safeness that affect some villages in particular ways are mentioned too. The attractive slow-pace of life in rural Ireland is challenged by cars driving too fast through villages:

“There are complaints about the road coming through here and passing the school. Speed-wise, it seems that cars pass too fast, and there have been a lot of accidents along this by-pass as well” (IMM-60-man-pub).

These complaints expressed in the study area should not be a surprise because, in 2019, 59% of road fatalities in Ireland occurred in rural roads, a percentage that is higher than the average in the EU as a whole, 52% (Schoeters *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusions and reflections for further research

This paper examined population change in small villages of Ireland through analysis of residents’ perceptions of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of rural sustainability. These shared experiences (Buttimer, 1980; 1985) sometimes reflect ruralphilia and/or ruralphobia (Klocker *et al.*, 2021; Morén-Alegret, 2008) and as such further develop these concepts by showing how at the same time rural residents can appreciate one aspect of rural life while disliking another. Understanding these diverse perceptions can be useful for designing place-sensitive sustainable development policies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) that can facilitate setting up more welcoming spaces (Moralli *et al.*, 2023).

In relation to the inter-relations and/or entanglement of sustainability dimensions (Arora-Jonsson *et al.*, 2023) our study has shown how complex these entanglements are in everyday life. For instance, certain forestry plantations may negatively impact on biodiversity while at the same time offering economic opportunities through job creation. Our research also highlights how some important sustainable development policies, such as the transition to Net Zero, can impact in a distinct way in the rural context as evidenced through the issues in relation to the perception of the major impact of potential electric

black-outs in disperse dwellings on the one hand and the push towards electric vehicles on the other.

At times the interconnections between the three dimensions of sustainability are less visible. For instance, prejudice or xenophobia are more clearly linked to the social dimension of sustainability (but can have an impact on the ability to attract foreign workers), while access to credit and support for rural business development are more clearly linked to the economic dimension (but have a social impact due to the scarcity/lack of jobs available or the low-quality jobs on offer). Meanwhile environmental education, recycling and waste management relate to the environmental dimension. However, there will be new job opportunities if more waste management policies are implemented.

In other words, in some small villages of Cavan and Leitrim, there are opportunities to avoid hardships that are affecting other parts of rural Europe too. In addition, in a humble way, there are also chances for some small villages to make history contributing – if most residents want it – to the projected extra one million population in Ireland by 2040 that was indicated in the 2018 *National Planning Framework* (McCafferty, 2019) or, if possible, even to return to human population levels registered in the 1850s in Ireland.

Acknowledgements:

This paper offers insights from a research visit of the corresponding author to Dublin City University, DCU, in 2022 (funded by the European Consortium for Innovative Universities, ECIU, and hosted by Dr Paola Rivetti). In addition, this paper is built upon the HAMLETS project that included the participation of three co-authors (funded by the RECERCAIXA Programme, an initiative of the Association of Catalan Public Universities and 'la Caixa' Foundation, 2017-2020). All co-authors are very grateful to two anonymous reviewers that offered constructive suggestions for improving a previous version of this paper as well as to the journal editor Gerald Mills for his helpful comments and support along the publication process.

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