

2014-03-01

A study of the Social and Community Impacts of the Gathering in Counties Kerry and Westmeath

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Mottiar, Z., Quinn, B. and Ryan, T. A study of the social and community impacts of the Gathering in counties Kerry and Westmeath. , School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, DIT, 2014.

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Funder: The Gathering, Fáilte Ireland



MEASURING



A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY IMPACTS OF THE GATHERING IN COUNTIES KERRY AND WESTMEATH

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Project funded by The Gathering, Fáilte Ireland

MARCH 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report investigates the social and community impacts of the Gathering in Counties Kerry and Westmeath. Data were collected from local communities, event organizers and key informants in each county using on-line surveys, focus groups, interviews and surveys. The key finding is that the Gathering has had a significant positive impact on communities in the two counties. This impact can be seen in terms of strengthening community spirit and civic pride, building connections both within and outside local communities, enhancing skills of community members, the development of a strong sense of place and memory, and the identification by communities of the tourism potential of their area.

It is also notable that while this was a national tourism project, actually only 8% of those who organized events were from the tourism sector, the research shows how as it developed the Gathering became as much about communities as about tourism. While the research does not identify many negative effects it is notable that only 27% of community respondents attended any Gathering events and 45% believed that the Gathering did not affect the average person. The research provides many interesting insights which are useful in terms of reflecting upon the impacts of the Gathering overall and in the event of planning any future Gathering project.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Gathering encouraged the development of events that otherwise would not have been organized.
- It enhanced skills, capabilities and organizational structures of many existing events.
- 96% of event organisers believed their event to be a success
- The Gathering encouraged self-reliance and capacity building among many communities and encouraged them to focus on tourism.
- 53% said that the Gathering has helped 'create a vision for their area that wasn't there before'
- 47% of community respondents think there will be a long term positive impact
- 27% of community respondents attended a Gathering event and 15% had friends or family visiting as a result of the Gathering.
- 73% of community respondents believed that the Gathering made the community more aware of the importance of tourism.
- 8% of event organizers were from the tourism sector.
- The Gathering 'gave ordinary people a platform to do extraordinary things'.
- The Gathering resulted in a 'pride of place' and 'self-belief'.
- There was a strong family emphasis to the Gathering: 'it was families who really benefited... it brought them together'

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1. INTRODUCTION AND STUDY DESIGN

1.1. Introduction

The Gathering was a significant tourism initiative which had specific objectives at the outset in terms of attracting international tourists. 'However as *the project gained momentum throughout the year, it became much more than that. With over 5,000 events organised by families, communities and other groups in every part of the country, this truly was a 'People's Project'* (Miley, 2013) and it became clear that this project was also going to have social and community impacts. This project aims to identify and analyze the social and community impacts of the Gathering and the longer term benefits, if any, that will last beyond 2013.

In recent years, events have emerged as a growing sector of the tourism and leisure industries and can have considerable economic, socio-cultural, environmental and political impacts on local areas and host communities (Lassila et. al., 2013). Recent times have seen growing attention being paid to their role in developing social capital and in fostering innovation in tourism development (Quinn & Wilks, 2013; Lassila et. al., 2013; Fernandes, 2013). Events can serve as resources for 'community organizing and citizen participation, to develop and/or strengthen local partnerships and increase communication between community residents' (Fernandes, 2013: 14). As explained by Fernandes (2013), such social networks and associated norms are characteristics of social capital that have an effect on the productivity of the community.

An initiative like the Gathering has the potential to contribute to the development of social capital and to encourage local capacity building. The objective of this research is to identify, analyze and measure the social and community impacts of the Gathering in two counties in Ireland. The counties under study are Kerry, a county with a long established reputation as a leading tourism area and Westmeath, a county less strongly associated with tourism. Overall, the research seeks to ascertain the type and nature of social and community impacts generated by the Gathering and to examine the nature of any legacy benefits that will extend beyond 2013.

1.2. Research objectives

1. To analyze whether the Gathering has had an impact on issues like community spirit and civic pride in local areas
2. To examine the ways in which communities reached out to their diaspora networks and to assess the extent to which these connections can be sustained
3. To examine the ways in which the Gathering has enhanced the capacity of communities to develop local tourism initiatives
4. To ascertain what sustainable, longer term benefits have been created by the Gathering in local communities
5. To give voice to those involved in the Gathering at local level regarding issues such as the impact of the Gathering on their local community and local tourism offering; the effectiveness of the operational structure and funding supports created by the Gathering; and the generation of long term benefits and how these can be maximized.

1.3. Research Methodology

This section outlines the county selection process and explains the research design. The research methodology had four phases and adopted a mixed methods approach.

County Selection:

The project focuses on two counties, the first county selected for study is Kerry, an example of an area with a very significant tourism history which attracted 826,000 overseas visitors in 2012, the fourth largest number of international tourists (after the counties of Dublin, Cork and Galway) (Fáilte Ireland, 2012). As well as being a developed tourism destination it has extensive diaspora networks and a long history of inbound VFR (Visiting friends and relatives) tourism. Since 1959, Kerry has actively fostered diaspora connections through its internationally renowned annual Rose of Tralee festival. Not surprisingly, Kerry had a large number of Gathering events, some 229 in total. Westmeath is the second county studied. It is not traditionally recognized for tourism, receiving one of the lowest numbers of international tourists in 2012. While there has been some tourism development, this is a county which continues to face challenges in attracting tourists. In spite of

this, 83 Gathering events were organized during 2013 so it will be interesting to see what impact this has had in terms of placing the county on a stronger tourism footing.

Research Process:

The research involved four phases (figure 1) including:

Phase 1: Secondary Research investigating the extent of overall Gathering activity in the two counties

Phase 2: Capturing data from key individuals at regional / county level

Phase 3: Capturing data from Gathering organizers

Phase 4: Dialoguing with local communities



Figure 1: The Research Process

1.3.1. Research Phase 1: Secondary research investigating the overall Gathering activity in the two counties

The research process began by establishing an in-depth knowledge of, and contact details for, all of the Gathering activities that took place in the two counties. Details about public/community meetings held in the two counties, the numbers involved in the training and supplementary training courses administered under the auspices of the Gathering as well as details pertaining to the mentoring and information clinics held in the two counties were accumulated. Minutes of meetings, websites and data supplied by Gathering Co-ordinators and Fáilte Ireland were key in this phase of the research.

1.3.2. Research Phase 2: Capturing data from key individuals at regional / county level

Phase 2 adopted a qualitative approach to glean information from key individuals heavily involved in shaping, leading and managing the Gathering initiative at county level. Individuals targeted were surveyed by telephone, using a semi-structured questionnaire comprising a variety of closed and open-ended questions and using a number of scale questions. In total, 16 interviews were conducted during November 2013, 10 from Kerry and 6 from Westmeath. The individuals interviewed included the Gathering Co-ordinators in the two counties, representatives of the Gathering Steering Groups and encompassed key figures working in the local authorities, local Chambers of Commerce, local development companies, LEADER and more generally involved in economic and tourism development at the local and county levels.

1.3.3. Research Phase 3: Capturing data on county wide Gathering activity

Phase 3 involved administering an online structured questionnaire to the full population of Gathering event organizers in the two counties. The design of the questionnaire was shaped by the findings of Phase 1 and 2. The questionnaire was mailed by the Gathering office in Dublin to the e-mail list of event organizers, N=350. After a reminder was sent, the number of completed questionnaires was 73. This is a response rate of 21% which is in keeping with response rates to online surveys internationally. The level of response probably reflects the fact that this population was frequently surveyed throughout the Gathering year and so there was a sense of fatigue. Analysis of the responses shows a good geographical spread between the two counties, with 65% from Co. Kerry and 35% from Co. Westmeath, and within the counties. Sixty four percent were new events, and 36% had been in existence prior to 2013. While 44% had received funding from the Gathering, 53% had not. Respondents represented a broad range of event types including family gatherings,

new local events and more established festivals and events. Overall, the data are representative of a variety of types of events spread across a broad geographical area within the two counties.

1.3.4. Research Phase 4: Dialoguing with local communities

Phase 4 involved a series of focus groups organized in different towns and villages in the two counties. This provided the opportunity to dialogue with communities on the ground to learn about how the Gathering has made a difference and may continue to make a difference, not only to tourism development but to strengthening communities in terms of civic pride, social connectivity, and sense of community. Focus groups were held in January and February 2014 in Tralee, Killarney, Dingle, Mullingar and Athlone. Each focus group comprised of between 4 and 9 people and members were a mix of Gathering event organizers, community leaders and interested community members. In total, 33 people were involved: 16 in Westmeath and 17 in Kerry. Each focus group lasted between one and one and a half hours and during this time the groups teased out issues relating to the social and community impacts of the Gathering.

In addition to focus groups, a short community survey was administered in Killarney, Tralee and Dingle, Athlone, Mullingar and Castlepollard/Fore. In total 251 surveys were administered. While the numbers surveyed were too small to be statistically representative, this tool gives voice to a wider range of community members and as such is extremely useful in informing the findings of the research. It should be noted that 51% of respondents were from Co. Kerry, 56% of all respondents are female and as shown below in figure 1 they came from a broad range of age categories (figure 2).

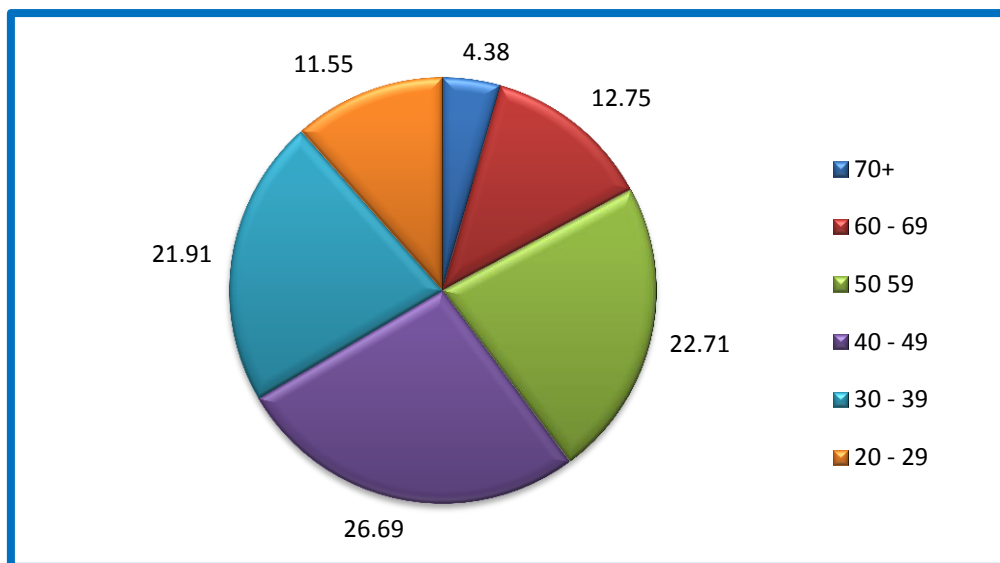


Figure 2: Age groups of community respondents N=250

2. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

2.1. Civic pride and community engagement

The event organizers survey found that 96% of event organizers, when asked, believed their event to be a success. This ‘success’ was founded in communities getting involved and working together to achieve an outcome. All the different phases of the research identified the positive impact that the Gathering had on local communities. In the focus groups, statements such as ‘the Gathering put a lot of smaller places on the map, it gave them an identity, set a footprint for themselves’ and ‘it was a success as ordinary people were given a platform to do extraordinary things’ highlighted the success of the Gathering. Repeatedly, event organizers spoke of how ‘the whole community rallied behind us when they saw things happening’ and of how ‘it gave ordinary people an opportunity to come up with different initiatives, gave them a purpose, opened up their minds’.

‘It gave ordinary people an opportunity to come up with different initiatives; gave them a purpose; opened up their minds’

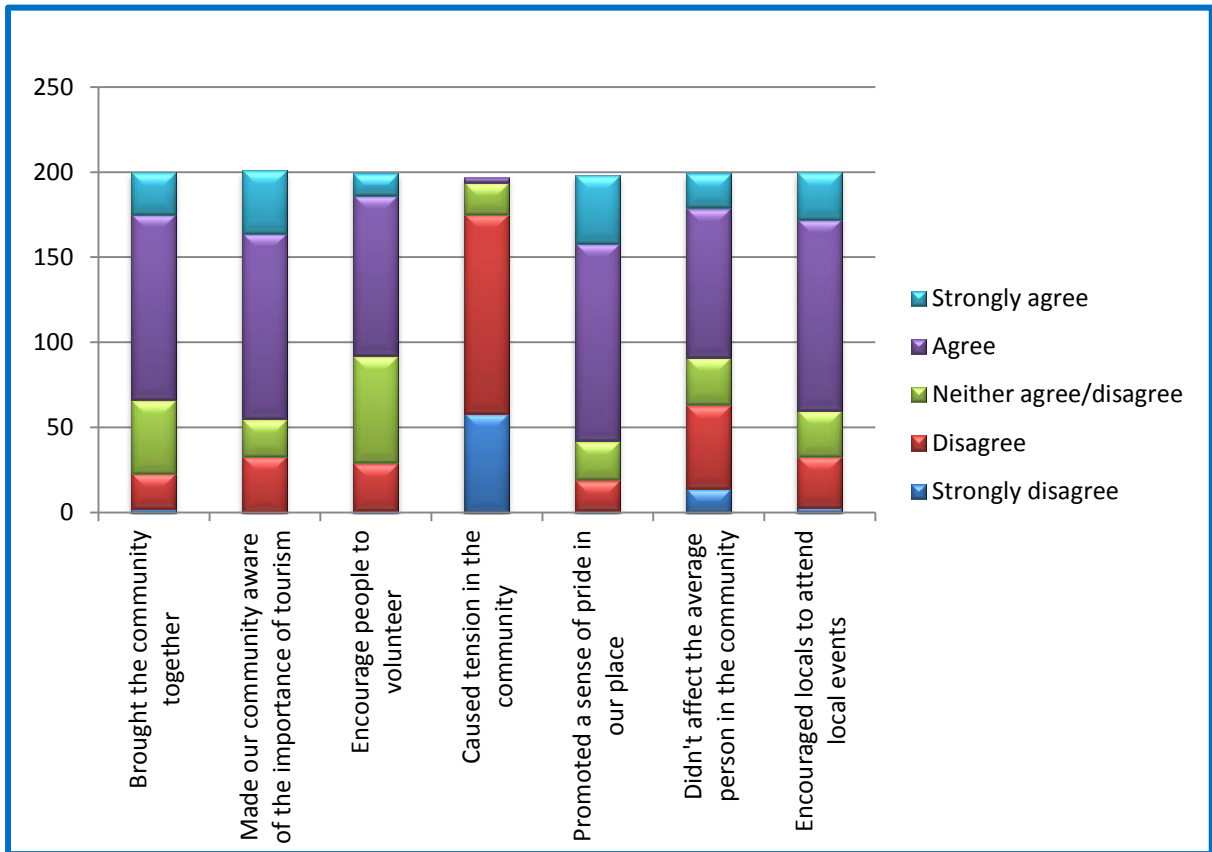


Figure 3: Event organizers’ opinions on how the Gathering impacted their local community N=63

One of the key findings of this research is the role that the Gathering has played in terms of creating a sense of pride in place among the communities studied. In the focus group in particular this was highlighted with recurring discussions about how the Gathering resulted in ‘pride of place’ and ‘self-belief’. Eighty four percent of the community respondents and 87% of the event organizers agreed or strongly agreed that the Gathering created a sense of pride in place. Interestingly there is no significant difference in responses according to county with 84% of respondents in Co. Kerry and 72% in Westmeath responding positively about a sense of pride in place. Many people attended local history and cultural events and learnt more about their local places and this reinvigorated their positive feelings towards the area. As one focus group participant said ‘it gave people an acute awareness of local history and culture’. From a tourism perspective this can be capitalized on. As one participant in the focus group noted, ‘communities within the area are perhaps seeing opportunities they hadn’t before, the potential to be more involved in tourism. They are recognizing that they have an offering.’ As a sense of pride in place develops it is easier to identify potential attractions for tourists. As explained in the narrative below, the Gathering resulted in more positive perspectives on local places. This was also evident in another part of Kerry where one focus group participant spoke about how the Gathering ‘raised a new importance to who you are and where you come from and there is now a value attached to knowing your sense of place’.

‘It gave people that acute sense of local history and culture’

‘Yes there were some excellent Gathering events which have improved the sense of historical family links in Westmeath’

A RENEWED SENSE OF PLACE IN TARBERT CO. KERRY

In Tarbert a committee was established to identify events that would be run as part of the Gathering. It was agreed to concentrate them between the 9th and 18th of August and to call it the Tarbert Family Gathering Festival. Some 32 local organizations were involved in the organizing. As a village from which many younger members of the community had emigrated especially in recent times, there was an influx of these emigrants home over this period. Many people ‘got to know each other as a result of the Gathering’. It was noted that ‘older people might not have met newer people in the area, even though Tarbert is small, but the Gathering made this happen. ‘All events were free so every man, woman and child took part in some way’. As well as bringing communities together and bringing back diaspora it created a perspective on the village that hadn’t been there before. It made the community more positive about their place and instead of it being somewhere that many of their family members had to leave to find work, one focus group participant talked about how it made the current community realize that ‘we are just minding the place as caretakers for the people that have gone’. This positive sense of place is likely to play an important role in further local development.



Strongly informing this sense of ‘knowing your place’ was a strong sense of remembering. Another important finding of the study is that the Gathering prompted people to remember elements of their shared past that had been forgotten, overlooked or even deliberately set aside. Numerous events were premised on remembering and recovering elements of the past. This came through very strongly in the focus groups where event organizers explained how they had set about trying to commemorate significant people (e.g. Hugh O’Flaherty in Killarney), remember and acknowledge momentous events (e.g. the assisted emigration to New York of the impoverished population on Lord Lansdowne estates in Kenmare in the late 1840s; the evacuation of the Blasket islands in the 1950s); ancient history (the early Christian landscape in Fore); traditional skills (lace-making in Kenmare, boat-building in Dingle) and working practices. This process of remembering was profoundly important in fostering emotional connections with place for both the descendants of those who had been affected by the historic events and for those who live in the place.

‘It’s about showing ourselves off to the world’



Figure 4: Dr Michael J. Carney (92) returns to the home he left many years ago on the Blasket Islands¹

From a tourism perspective, of importance here is the fact that the Gathering raised the profile of important local traditions, and ‘all the locals became more aware of their heritage’ as one Kerry focus group discussion elucidated. Similar discussions were heard in Westmeath with participants saying that ‘people want to see our heritage and we’re not even touching it, we don’t realise how much we have to offer’. In the context where ‘most visitors don’t have a chance to talk to locals’, the Gathering also helped people grasp the idea that events and activities can attract the interest of both locals and visitors simultaneously, and that the ‘history and stories of the local people would be very useful to bringing people in’.

¹ Source: <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/The-Gathering-in-Pictures.aspx>

LACE-MAKING IN KENMARE

Throughout the country, the Gathering gave impetus to initiatives aimed at remembering local traditions, lifestyles and working lives. In Kenmare, the organizer of the Kenmare Lace Festival explained how they had been thinking of creating a festival or a book to remember and celebrate the lace-making tradition in the town. The Gathering 'gave them the push' and local agencies supported their efforts to the full. The town organized a lace-making festival and produced a book detailing the different types of lace made in different parts of the country. Core to this activity was generating and disseminating awareness of the traditional practice of lace-making among the local population. As explained, 'locals became more exposed to their heritage in the process' and the organizers specifically created free and informal opportunities for people to experience lace-making and staged festival events in different kinds of venues around the town in order to broaden access. Simultaneously, the event was reaching out to the lace-making community around the world and hopes to continue its activities through workshops and staging the festival again.

KENMARE AND THE GANGS OF NEW YORK

Sometimes places and communities have painful histories which can be difficult to remember. In Kenmare, in the late 1840s, the impoverished tenants on the Lansdowne estate were offered assisted emigration to the USA. Thousands of people from the workhouse in Kenmare left Ireland, settling in Five Points, New York. At the initial meeting held in Killarney to generate ideas for the Gathering, the idea of organizing an event to remember these emigrants arose. It was called the Gangs of New York, echoing the name of Martin Scorsese's Hollywood movie (starring Daniel Day-Lewis) about the Irish gangs in Five Point. According to the organizer, the Gathering created an opportunity to tell a story that had never properly been told. It created an opportunity for interested people who had never been involved in committees before to get involved. The Gangs of New York succeeded in attracting back many descendants of the original emigrants. In the process, the organizers managed to link up with several different banks and sources of genealogical information such that the town is now very well placed to become a key centre for genealogical tourism. Genealogy is a process, and the individuals behind the event are conscious of maintaining their new connections with their diaspora by continuously researching and building awareness of the various stories associated with Kenmare's emigration story. This means that the town can continually renew its offerings to visitors. The event was conscious of spreading awareness of Kenmare's history among current Kenmare dwellers. For example, it organized a lecture about Kenmare in the 1860s that attracted an audience of 250. The significance of the Gathering here was that it created an impetus for an event that 'empowered local people by giving them information – they then share it – and get prouder of their place in the process'. This was a Gathering activity that was profoundly important in fostering and deepening emotional bonds with place for both locals and visitors alike, and is an example of an activity, which if supported and fostered into the future, can provide meaningful interactions between tourists and residents.

Very significantly, the findings reveal the extent to which events in communities throughout the counties under study are founded on voluntary endeavor. Repeatedly, especially in focus group and key informant findings, the immense value of volunteers was apparent. The Gathering tapped into this volunteer resource and added to it. Fifty three percent of community respondents thought that the Gathering encouraged people to volunteer, while 13.1% of those surveyed on the streets said that they had had some sort of voluntary involvement in a Gathering event. Almost 61% of community respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the Gathering had helped to bring the community together. In terms of attending Gathering events, the community survey found that 29% of Kerry and 25% of Westmeath respondents had attended at least one Gathering event. For those who didn't attend any events, common responses were that they hadn't time, they had no interest or they hadn't heard about anything being held in their community.

2.2. Reaching out to families and the diaspora

The above discussion leads on to what was perhaps the outstanding contribution of the Gathering: the connections with the diaspora that it engendered and the profound implications this had for families all over Ireland with extended families overseas. Thirty nine percent of event organizers claimed that friends and relatives overseas and the diaspora were their main target audience for their events (figure 6). For some respondents, the impact on the family was much more important than the impact on tourism or the community more broadly. In fact many felt quite strongly that the focus of the Gathering was actually all about family, this was explained clearly by one focus group respondent who claimed that 'predominantly the focus was ... reaching out to family and friends linked by name and blood'. This was also evident in the community surveys as respondents' claimed that the Gathering 'was good for families', and that it was families 'who really benefited ... it brought them together'. The Gathering gave 'them a reason to get together' something that they felt they 'so often delay', most importantly they felt it gave families the impetus to get together something that they felt 'was good'. This was mirrored in focus group discussions and key informant interviews with comments such as 'people who hadn't met in years ... it just prodded people to engage with people they hadn't been in contact with in a while, particularly people overseas'. Another explained how the Gathering

'This is us, our history, our people doing it ... we feel for those who can't come ... we feel them away from us'

'it was really about communities and inviting friends and relatives home then tourism was a by-product benefit from that'

provided ‘good, honourable connectivity for the diaspora’. Families, one key informant explained, ‘... really grasped the Gathering by the horns, they brought family home and because of ... family and community involvement it worked very well’. This key informant went on to explain that it was seen by local families as an ‘opportunity to bring their loved ones home *en masse* and to have a celebration ... to bring them together rather than individually’. In small communities in both counties there were ‘a good few family Gatherings’ that ‘brought back people who hadn’t been there for years’. The benefits and impacts of these events were felt to have been enormous, quite a lot of which, one focus group respondent explained ‘are non-monetary’.



Figure 5: Old friends meet again at the Kinnegad Gathering, Westmeath²

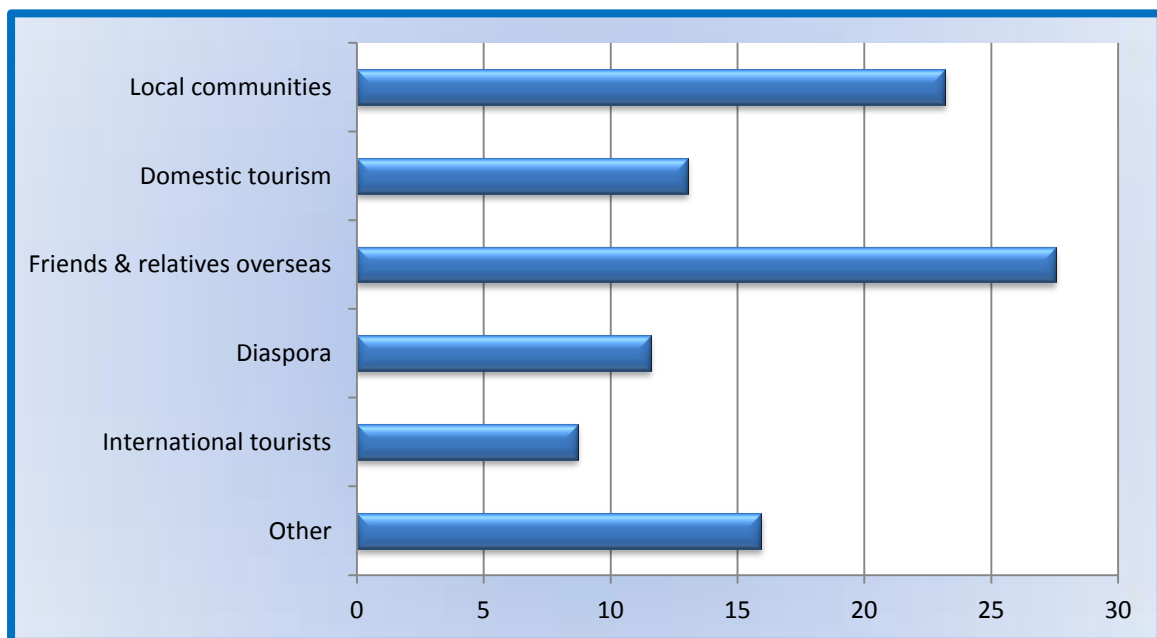


Figure 6: Event organizers’ main target markets

N = 69

² Source: <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/The-Gathering-in-Pictures.aspx>

This focus on the diaspora was evident in events such as the Goldsmith Literary festival in Westmeath whose 2013 theme was based on a quote by Oliver Goldsmith about the emigrant wanting to come home *“Such is the patriot’s boast, where’er we roam, his first, best country ever is, at home.”* (The Traveller, Oliver Goldsmith, 1764). Similarly, the Boatyard Gathering in Dingle (see narrative below) ‘reignited connections’ between people who hadn’t spoken to each other for 15-20 years. ‘People met and reconnected’ (former employees and colleagues) and ‘these connections will probably continue’. This was a particularly important event as organizers felt that ‘the people working at the boatyard never realized their importance and were never acknowledged or rewarded’ however ‘the Gathering helped this’. In Westmeath, the GAA reached out internationally to bring five generations of members together to celebrate an event that was described as a meeting of ‘the offsprings that never met’. The impact of this was clear as one Westmeath focus group respondent explained the Gathering led to ‘reunions and meeting old friends’ which, he claimed ‘lifted everyone’s spirits’. Similarly a community respondent explained that ‘it created awareness of the need to reach out to emigrants’. This respondent had a strong sense that ‘ordinary’ people were behind it and that these people saw the need to bring emigrants back and the Gathering provided the perfect opportunity.

‘It opened up the gateway to discovery – people discovered new strands of their family tree and other events will stem from this.’

RENEWING OLD ACQUAINTANCES AT THE BOATYARD WORKERS REUNION IN DINGLE CO. KERRY

The Boatyard Workers Reunion in Dingle, Co. Kerry ‘reignited connections’ between some people who hadn’t spoken to each other in 15-20 years, despite the fact that some still lived in the same area. Former employees and colleagues ‘met and reconnected’ and ‘these connections will probably continue’. This event also held great significance, as one focus group respondent explained ‘the people working at the boatyard never realized their importance and were never acknowledged or rewarded ... the Gathering helped this’. As part of the event organizers ‘sent out a call for old artifacts and replicas’ associated with boat-making and were inundated with support from the community. The event involved an exhibition of old photographs as well as talks and open discussions on bygone days. It succeeded in acknowledging the important role that these colleagues had played in the local economy and in recreating links that had been lost for many years.



Linking with family and the diaspora will leave an important legacy as respondents felt that it had ‘helped strengthen family bonds’ so ‘people will come back as they have reconnected with people and also the area’. Focus group respondents felt that ‘lots of them (the diaspora) came to visit and this will continue’ they spoke of ‘lots of groups that are in constant contact with those that visited’ which they felt ‘will result in others visiting in the future as new connections are developed’. The Gathering has also impacted on a growing awareness of the importance of the diaspora and VFR for tourism development. One focus group respondent explained that ‘the Gathering got West Kerry thinking about what they needed to do to enable the diaspora to return and reconnect’, for example blending Gáeilge with English in order to open the area up to non-Irish people and to ‘let them in’. There are no formal plans in Westmeath to sustain links with the diaspora, as, according to one key informant ‘all the links were really small scale, at the level of a family’ and ‘the links created were all at the one-to-one level with people emailing and writing to relatives and friends. There was nothing larger scale and this won’t yield results into the future’. Despite this, there is evidence of continued connection with the diaspora on smaller, more local scales. Focus group respondents acknowledged that there was an opportunity where ‘family ties have been strongly attached’ and felt that ‘the memory will remain with family and encourage younger members to continue the reunion down through the generations’ and this ‘will strengthen our relationship with the diaspora’.

‘I think it gave people back their own identity ... people had left an area and lost touch and I think it brought them back to the areas they were from and restored old affiliations’

REACHING OUT TO THE DIASPORA WITH A VIEW TO THE FUTURE

A family Gathering in Milltown Co. Kerry is one example of how an event made a huge impact on a family and of how these impacts will live on long after the original event. According to a key informant the organizer ‘identified 500 people on her family tree. ‘She was highly successful in reaching out to extended branches of the family that are based in the US and unexpectedly for her, another branch that are based in Australia and they’ve all connected in to the information that she has gathered ... through the website that she set up and through social media’. This involved ‘a huge amount of work’ which she funded herself with the help of her family. She is continuing ‘to update the website and put more photographs up, and they had over 45 overseas visitors that came for that weekend, again Milltown is a small village and it certainly livened Milltown up for those three days. Huge connections [were] made there ... she wants to reach out more and for the information to be there for the future’.



The family reunion in Kerry³

³ <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/The-Gathering-in-Pictures.aspx>

FAMILY GATHERING IN WESTMEATH

The backbone of Gathering activity throughout the country was family gatherings, organized by ordinary citizens, who decided to act and to reach out to members of their extended families throughout Ireland and abroad. This study collected numerous stories of what were very simple, but profoundly important, Gathering events. One family gathering in central Westmeath was typical. Organized by a family member living in the 'home place', 50 members of an extended family, from throughout Ireland and overseas, came together for an afternoon and evening of socializing in a local hotel. Social media was hugely helpful in finding and contacting relatives and for young family members well adept to technology; the organization of such events was not particularly onerous. This organizer researched a family tree and devised a family tree crossword puzzle for the occasion. All of the older family members spoke briefly at the Gathering, sharing stories and reminiscing about family matters. Repeatedly the importance of inter-generational social engagement came through in the stories told about family gatherings. For older people, the prospect of a big social occasion and of meeting up with other family members caused great excitement. This family gathering organizer told of how her cousin rang from Northern Europe to explain that his elderly mother back in Ireland couldn't sleep because she was worried about what she would wear to the family gathering! Meanwhile, for many younger people it meant meeting family members that they perhaps hadn't known existed. Family gatherings like this created new and often useful contacts for family members across the generations, leading in this case, to a young Irish person living in the USA securing employment through a family member with whom she had made contact through this family gathering.

In Kerry, however, maintaining and growing these links is seen as a key objective and will be done as explained by one key informant 'very obviously through genealogy tourism'. Kerry County Council has been working to link with the diaspora through the GAA for a while, but it is extending its reach and the Gathering has clarified the opportunity that exists to develop genealogy tourism, particularly in less developed areas of Kerry. North Kerry for example, one key informant explained, is 'different than South (Kerry) ... it is involved in quiet tourism ... genealogy is huge in North Kerry and by bringing people back to their ancestry, looking to see where they were from, visiting graveyards and connecting, they could see what North Kerry has to offer'. As part of the Gathering, Kerry County Council launched a new initiative, 'The Friends of Kerry' which included gathering contact details of members of the diaspora attending events in the county. Collating these details was a key requirement of any Kerry Gathering that received funding and was a request of those who did not (many of which provided a sign-in book at their events). This has resulted in a database that will enable Kerry County Council to keep in regular contact with the diaspora through e-zines etc. Linking with families and the diaspora had a profound impact that in Kerry in particular will continue, as one focus group respondent explained 'from the Irish descendants abroad ... it gave them the opportunity to see what was available to them through the Gathering website and also through local initiatives by individual counties and social media and I think we are going to see the benefits of the Gathering in the future

'A great thing
is still
happening ...
the Irish
societies
overseas –
those that
didn't connect
in the past are
connecting'

particularly from countries such as Australia, New Zealand and America because channels have been opened that they weren't aware of before'. Another explained that 'genealogy was massive ... this will continue maybe in a smaller way but there is great opportunity to develop it'.

2.3. Intercultural and intergenerational links

What also became clear throughout the research was the level of intercultural and intergenerational links that came about during the Gathering in both counties. The Gathering, respondents felt, was for everyone, it was inclusive, it brought older and younger people, different community groups and cultures together, and this, it was felt, was one of its key successes. In Westmeath, one community member explained that 'it gave people an opportunity to come and get to know their neighbours' while another claimed that 'it was for all the family, young and old and school children were very involved'. The relevance of this was particularly evident as one Westmeath focus group respondent claimed that this interaction between generations 'didn't happen before' and that during the Gathering it was 'a natural thing not a forced thing'. Another focus group respondent described how 'The Gathering Athlone – A Time in Peace' event in Westmeath brought people from different nationalities and denominations together. The event was so successful that 'they asked if they could do it again' and in fact 'they are planning on doing it again'.

'This came from the roots of the ordinary Joe Soap; the inter-generational thing was great'

BRINGING TOGETHER DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES, CULTURES AND NATIONALITIES IN WESTMEATH

'The Gathering Athlone – A Time in Peace' was an important event that according to one of the organizers 'was such a great success ... as evident from the feedbacks /comments we got from the attendee and the entire Athlone community'. According to the organizer, the event, which was funded entirely by 'voluntary contributions', offered 'a renewed Christian outreach through music which is very relevant to the culture in which we live, enabling people to connect to God and to one another. It brought the whole community togetherit was so encouraging to see people interacting and engaging with one another. People were really delighted at the oneness of the community participation and many attendees are very willing to attend future events and get involved in organizing the event in future. There are on-going plans to organize the 2014 event with a focus on improving publicity, encouraging more community participation as well involving more people within Ireland and abroad in order to bring more people together in Athlone'.

In Kerry, community members also acknowledged the importance of this inclusiveness explaining that ‘it brought different generations together and gave us back our pride in being Irish’ while another declared that bringing ‘different generations together’ was ‘good as it helps build respect and understanding across generations’. The significance of this in fostering relationships and greater understanding was made clear by one particular community member in Westmeath who felt strongly that ‘it brought people together ... different nationalities getting to know each other. This is not something that we get a chance to do often’. She went on to explain the potential long-term impact of this stating that ‘it will continue to impact because people know each other better now - we have opened the door’. Another supported this, claiming that it will influence people in the long-term ‘in the sense that people will get to know that "unity is not uniformity" which means that ... the fact that we are of different cultures does not mean we are not the same’.

‘It had people talking to each other who otherwise wouldn’t be’



Figure 7: People of all ages taking part in Gathering events in Kerry and Westmeath⁴

⁴ <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/The-Gathering-in-Pictures.aspx>

2.4. Enhancing the capacity of communities to develop local tourism initiatives

A central aim of the Gathering was to engage the people of Ireland to invite ancestral friends and relatives back to the country. As such, a clear objective was to develop international inbound tourist flows and to stimulate local interest in this endeavor right across the country. Certainly, this aim was achieved. As one key informant in Kerry explained: ‘the number of small events run by community groups that brought visitors to the county without any funding assistance was amazing. Although each might have only brought 10 – 20 additional visitors when totaled, it runs into thousands’.

THE GATHERING PROVIDED AN IMPETUS FOR ACTION: THE HAIRDRESSING SCHOOLS COMPETITION IN CO. WESTMEATH

The Gathering inspired a bewildering variety of events and sometimes it was just the impetus that was needed to spur people into action. The International Hairdressing Schools Competition in Athlone was an example of this. Its organizer was too late learning about the Gathering to apply for funding but she decided to go ahead and organize this event anyway. In contrast to many other events, this one was strongly linked to business development: the organizer was keen to support the development of the hairdressing sector and staged a competition that attracted competitors from Cork as well as Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Malta and Denmark. The participants who travelled ranged in age from 17 to 70 and included not just the competitors but their teachers, families and supporters. Expertise and skills were shared and countless contacts were made, with young Irish hairdressers now expected to receive return invitations from competing countries. The event was organized in such a way that it consciously aimed to expose visitors to the best of what Athlone had to offer in terms of hospitality, culture and natural attractions. While during the day it staged an educational programme and ran the competitions, in the evenings it brought the visitors to different parts of the town as part of its social programme. The organizer would now like to expand the competition although this would mean staging the event in an urban centre larger than Athlone.

It was clear that while the Gathering was devised as a tourism initiative with an overt economic remit, for the study participants it was much more than that. As one key informant explained, ‘many people considered it as a community action rather than a tourism action’. In one of the focus groups it was commented that ‘Fáilte Ireland wanted to bring more people here to make money for businesses

but community made a conscious decision that the Gathering is not just for people abroad it was for community'. As another participant said, 'it was initially intended to boost tourism but it expanded and everyone had a different spin on it'. One of the key informants stated that 'Fáilte Ireland wanted international visits but on the ground we didn't care if the visitor comes from Wexford or Washington'. In fact, most of the event organizers did not come from the tourism sector at all. In Counties Kerry and Westmeath only 8% were from the tourism sector. Accordingly, there was a broad range of reasons why events were organized (see figure 2 below). These included attracting more tourists as well as friends and family to visit but also doing something to help the country, and also organizing something for the community, for example, celebrating an aspect of local life, commemorating aspects of heritage, or bringing people once connected back together again (e.g. school, sport and work-place reunions). One event organizer explained how the 'Tarbert Family Gathering Festival set out to provide events free of charge to families from at home and abroad'.

'At the start it was all about bringing in money but it became about much more'



Figure 8: Reasons why events were organized

N = 69

It would be anticipated that a major tourism initiative like this might have impacted on communities' views about tourism and this was a key area that the research sought to address. In this context a key finding was that 53% of events organizers agreed or strongly agreed that the Gathering created a

vision of their area that wasn't there before, while 56% believed that it encouraged them to focus more on tourism. In terms of the communities, 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Gathering made the community more aware of the importance of tourism. Interestingly, this figure differed significantly by county: 62% for Westmeath and 80% for Kerry. This may reflect the relative importance of tourism in both counties.



Figure 9: Event organizers opinion's on how their event impacted on their community

The findings revealed many reasons for optimism that the events created for the Gathering will continue into the future. Almost 66% of event organizers had organised new events, and 74% said that it was either 'very likely' or 'likely' that their event would run again. The fact that almost 73% of organizers had prior experience of running an event suggests that the Gathering was tapping into existing expertise and capacity. Thirty per cent of the event organizers surveyed had availed of the training offered by the Gathering and for these, the skills most frequently learned related to marketing (general and social media) as well as communication and PR (figure 4). Importantly, 81% said that they were 'highly likely' or 'likely' to use these skills again.

Almost 66% were new events and 74% claimed it was 'very likely' or 'likely' they will run again

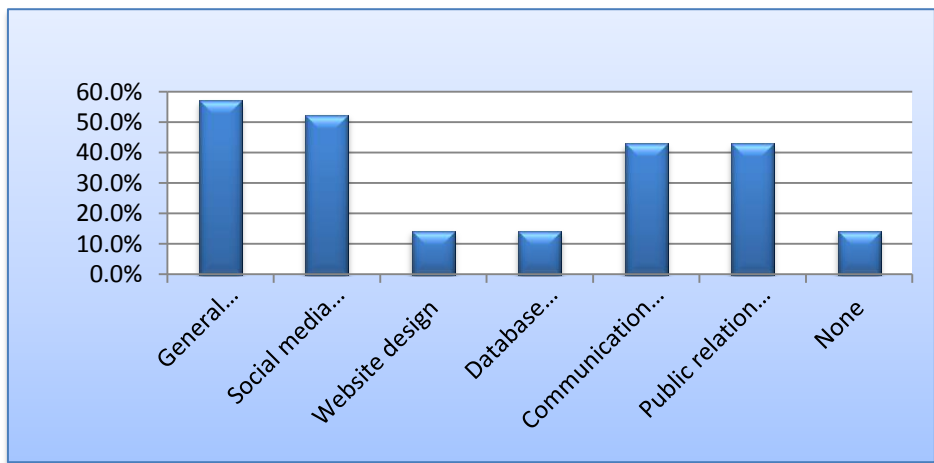


Figure 10: New skills learnt by those who attended the Gathering training sessions N=21

In some instances, the intervention of the Gathering brought activities to a new level. The findings suggest that sometimes communities had not realised that what they had was of interest to visitors, but after the Gathering, 'different areas are seeing opportunities to be involved in tourism, realising that they have an offering, no matter how small, and outsiders are interested'. Others already knew that they had a resource of interest to people (both locals and visitors alike) but it was the Gathering that created the stimulus to develop the resource into something approaching a tourism product. Frequently, study participants, especially in Kerry said 'The Gathering gave us the push', the Gathering gave them a reason', the Gathering gave things a kick-start'. In Kenmare in County Kerry, for example, the strong history of lace-making was made more visible and tangible through Gathering activity; in Fore in County Westmeath, the Gathering acted as a catalyst for the development of a looped walk and associated information revealing the story of the townland's early Christian landscape. More generally, the widespread connections made with the diaspora strengthened interest in developing genealogical tourism in Co. Kerry. In places where successful, established events were already in existence, the Gathering encouraged people to come together and develop further events. This happened in Killiorglin, Co. Kerry, long known for its Puck Fair. Subsequent to developments associated with the Gathering, it now has additional events in its calendar.

'Irish people began realising what they had at home'

In terms of organisational capacity, as one focus group event organizer participant from West Kerry explained, the Gathering brought awareness and recognition of their event to a new level, helping them to reach a different audience segment. He went on to explain that it had also caused them to reflect and review what they had, and had forced them to set up a proper committee and become more formal in their operations. The opposite was also found: one event organizer in Westmeath explained that their event would not run again because of a lack of organisation capacity and because of a lack of local interest in the event. However, more generally, it seemed that the Gathering was 'an opportunity for people who had never been involved in committees before to get involved'. Repeatedly, respondents in the focus groups and on the streets highlighted the positive and constructive 'can do' attitude of the Gathering in contrast to the negativity and despondency of recent recessionary times. It seems that the Gathering was particularly timely in this context: 'the country was feeling at a low ebb, and people wanted to latch on to something'.

'This will continue maybe in a smaller way but there is great opportunity to develop it'

While the findings point to the capacity-building function of the Gathering in both counties, this evidence is much stronger in the Kerry data. In Westmeath, the sense of self-reliance and the willingness to take control of the opportunities presented were less apparent. As one key informant explained, while ‘people came up with great ideas (at the initial community meetings)... they had not realised that they themselves would actually have to implement them – there were huge misconceptions about this’. This assertion was echoed several times in focus group contributions and in community responses with participants suggesting that some other person / agency needed to take action to solve a problem visible to them. Within the Westmeath data there were occasional negative voices (often residents who originally came from outside of the county), critiquing the failure of people to appreciate the strength of their resources, the lack of organisational capacity of individual events, and the lack of a collaborative approach among the business community. The difference between the two counties must be interpreted in the vastly different tourism traditions characterising each area. It was abundantly clear in a myriad of ways that in Kerry, tourism is an enormous economic priority, a firm focus for the local authority and an embedded aspect of lifestyle that ordinary citizens, especially in South Kerry, are well accustomed to. Equally obvious in Westmeath is the sense that in relative terms, tourism occupies a much more marginal position. There was a clear awareness that the county occupies ‘the hole in the doughnut’ in touristic terms and that rural areas like Westmeath are only moderately accustomed to engaging with tourism. The inclination to suggest that a lack of funding was problematic and the tendency to look to external agencies to source funding seemed much more prevalent in Westmeath than in Kerry. So too was the tendency to critique state agencies involved in tourism.

Some key informants were very clear that the Gathering is not going to help develop tourism in Westmeath and indeed that it could not be expected to. One argued that in terms of current tourism planning, Westmeath has an extremely low profile. In marketing terms, ‘Westmeath’ does not currently exist as a concept, in contrast to e.g.’ Dublin’, ‘the West’ or ‘Kerry’. Equally, another

‘Westmeath people ... historically speaking ... they don’t promote themselves’

pointed to the question of capacity, explaining that ‘things only happen when there is already in existence some level of organisation and networking already going on’. It would seem that in the case of many of the more successful events, there was some existing level of organisation and networking already evident on which to build. ‘Structures within which people have opportunity to come together to share and support each other’ are very important, as one key informant explained. The involvement of the GAA and its members in several events is an example of this. The GAA had resources, networks, expertise, and infrastructures that aided the efforts of very many Gathering events in numerous ways.

COMMUNITY-LED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN FORE CO. WESTMEATH

Fore is a rural village in north Westmeath. It is renowned because St Fechin founded a monastery there in the 7th century and it is believed to have been an important pilgrimage site from that time onwards. Throughout the lanes and ditches of rural Fore can be found a series of ancient 'wayside crosses', perhaps historically used as 'Stations of the Cross' by pilgrims visiting Fore in past times, or used to mark the way between the mill at Fore Abbey and a grain store in neighbouring Foyran. Inspired by the call for ideas for the Gathering year, members of Fore Development Committee decided to devise an event that culminated in an animated walk along the route-way of the wayside crosses. Organizing the event involved physically uncovering, cleaning and opening up the sites where the crosses were located and the routes between. This work was based on voluntary effort and involved the Committee working with locally based historians and artists to prepare historical information and artwork. Tapping into the contemporary search for spiritualism, the event relied heavily on social media for promotion and on the day, attracted 450 participants, each of whom were able to enjoy the booklet 'A Pilgrim's Trail & Tale', produced for the event. The success of all of this activity prompted local people to organize several further Gathering events including the revival of the 'Patterns' in Fore, a reunion of local football teams (St Fechin's) from the 1950s and 1960s, and 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', a steak and country music festival. Meanwhile the Committee has secured funding to develop a 5 km looped walk based on the 'wayside crosses' trail which it plans to open later this year. All of these developments were fuelled by local effort, goodwill and shared expertise drawn from existing community and voluntary groups like the Development Committee and the local GAA club. The handful of tourism and hospitality providers in the area worked together to develop Fore's tourism potential and plan to continue to do so into the future. The significance of the Gathering is that it created an opportunity, a stimulus, and encouragement for these interested community members to advance their ideas for local tourism development.



COMMUNITY-LED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CO. KERRY

KILLORGLIN

Killorglan is perhaps best known for the Puck Fair which has a long history. When it was announced that the Gathering was going to happen during 2013 two sisters in Killorglan set up a committee to bring everyone together to try and move away from just being reliant on this one event. There are now 5 different festivals including Arts and Music and a Food festival. The community has successfully changed the calendar of events in the village and instead of having them spread throughout the year they have brought them together. One of the committee commented that 'as a result of the Gathering we learnt a lot and have some legacy events to carry forward'. The Gathering gave the community the impetus to take a step back and see how they might be more effective in their activities and it also made them more focused on tourists and this resulted in them identifying the strategy of having a more consolidated calendar of events.

AN SPUD MÓR: BALLYDAVID

The Féile an Phrata Festival is an example of an event which has been in existence since 2009 but the Gathering has had a significant impact on the festival, the way it is organized and the people who attend. It started as friendly rivalry in Ballydavid village when two rival families competed with blind tasting of their potatoes but this year the festival encompassed eight parishes on the Dingle peninsula and local schools and also attracted tourists. According to one of the organizers, the Gathering had an impact because it 'forced us to stand back and review what we had and what we could make of it' and the consequence was that 'this year it became quite a different festival'. One of the key differences was in terms of the organizing of the festival, where in the past it has been rather informally run this year there was a 'proper committee and this will endure'. As a result of the Gathering new skills were developed by the organizers and as one such person stated 'once you learn something you can't unlearn it, we now have a more structured approach'. There were also additions to the list of activities with lectures on the famine and a short drama presentation and this year schools were also involved. In addition, the festival was restructured so that the events were closer together whereas previously it had taken place over a 5 week period. The tourism element of the festival seems set to grow as a person from the US has already been in touch to say that they are growing a potato to come and compete in the 2014 Spud off! While this festival didn't emerge as a result of the Gathering, the Gathering has put it on a more formal footing and highlighted the tourism potential of the festival and this is likely to ensure its continued success.



2.5. Networks and relationships

At a community level, an important contribution of the Gathering was that it promoted networking. In Kerry it raised awareness of ‘who’s good at what; who you can rely on.... you now know who to call on next time’. One of the Kerry Animators explained that it had the effect of bringing ‘communities together around a table that possibly hadn’t done so in a number of yearsit gave people the opportunity to talk to each other and see what they could do’. The Gathering Steering Group in Kerry brought various leaders together from across the county and now there is an aspiration that this Group will continue to meet on a bi-annual basis. Undoubtedly, the networking engendered by the Gathering created a wealth of new contacts at all kinds of levels. A street survey respondent in Westmeath explained how sports clubs had developed expertise in organizing events that they can now put to good use in their fund-raising activities. A focus group participant in the same county talked of how the Gathering gave people confidence and encouraged outside of the box thinking. Similarly, a key informant explained how ‘people saw through the Gathering, that things can happen, if you plan and you work towards it’. In Kerry the Rose of Tralee festival, already a well-established festival, took things to a higher level than usual and ‘invited all the previous Roses back creating a huge international network’ this, one key informant explained was ‘a very good example of networking internationally and using the diaspora to encourage tourism and build up a profile of Ireland and Kerry in particular’. Key informants in both counties described how communities came together for the Gathering, for example, in Kerry one explained how some communities who didn’t have Chambers of Commerce ‘basically formed a group to create events so that all their businesses would benefit’. A focus group respondent from a small community in Westmeath explained how ‘people who have never worked together will see each-other’s ability and skills and will get to know each other at events and will keep in contact and relationships will be maintained’. He went on to say that the Gathering in his community forced them ‘to have a proper committee ... that will endure, it was rather informally run before’. He also described how they had connected with local businesses by providing flyers for the event and how ‘owners were delighted to have something to give visitors and were interested [in the event] themselves’.

‘Some people emerge to lead but they got support from others that wouldn’t normally come out’

‘Communities took ownership of the events and headed up different groups and societies and made sure different things happened, people that weren’t previously involved’

Focus group respondents described how ‘young people have also developed contacts that they continue through Facebook’ explaining how ‘they are now in constant contact’ with those they have formed relationships with through the Gathering. Event organizers also acknowledged how the Gathering ‘established an effective committee who can take on additional local initiatives’. Another explained how there was contact between ‘all forms of groups from community centres to GAA clubs and all in between, there would be some form of engagement’ but, because of the Gathering ‘there was certainly much closer co-operation’. In Westmeath, one focus group respondent explained, that ‘for the GAA it meant creating new links with clubs’, their ‘Pan European event in Athlone’ gave them an important ‘insight into how things are organised elsewhere ... and certainly connections were made’ which he felt would continue. Evidence of new and improved relationships was evident across public body organisations also, as one key informant involved in a public body explained ‘we always had a good work relationship with Go Kerry, Kerry County Council and Fáilte Ireland but this was enhanced by the Gathering. We usually work individually of each other whereas being on the Steering Committee enhanced our relationship’.

It was ‘an opportunity for people who had never been involved in committees before to get involved’

Not all areas or sectors embraced the opportunity for building relationships and contacts, in Westmeath one key informant explained that the Gathering did not engage the business trade in all areas. Some were involved but in general he felt ‘they did not work together to respond to this initiative’. Similarly one focus group respondent claimed that in many cases the groups that came together are groups ‘that come together for every community activity in this area. The Gathering did not engage with people who do not normally step up’. In a similar vein and while acknowledging the fact that new contacts and relationships were made as a result of the Gathering, not all respondents were sure of how the contacts made would benefit them going forward. One key informant in Westmeath, while noting that the Gathering had brought him ‘into contact with groups he had never encountered before’, explained that he can’t see how he will build on this in the future, he felt that ‘people hooked into’ each other because of the Gathering but now it’s over they ‘won’t be ringing’ each other anymore, he found difficulty in seeing any useful purpose in the future of maintaining these contacts.

In other cases however, the impact of building relationships and networks has already moved beyond the Gathering. One focus group respondent in Kerry described how during the recent bad storms a local person rang the Gathering committee in Tralee to ask them to come out to help clean

the beach and they immediately responded. This the respondent explained 'would never have happened before, no one would have come, because they would have said it was the council's job, but they all came'. Of equal importance was the evidence that existed of relationship and network building across communities as was the case with the event in Kerry, as explained in the following case.

CREATING NEW RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE GATHERING

One of the many positives of the Gathering was the numerous relationships and connections that were forged, some of which may never have happened without the catalyst of the Gathering. While a number of examples were provided by respondents, the following are two cases that are likely to have long-term impacts going forward.

Mending relationships and moving forward

One event organizer spoke of how a 'very big positive' for them was how they 'actually got working very closely with the OPW' (Office of Public Works). This, the respondent explained could never have happened in the past as relations had been quite strained as there 'was a lot of history there'. However, they had managed to 'push that aside and move forward' by co-operating together on an event for the Gathering. 'I hope going forward ... I'll make other things happen because of that'. 'That's huge ... and we hope that in time we can sit back and delight in what we made happen ... The 'OPW are now involved with our community and this will hopefully change the lives of that community. That opportunity wouldn't have happened only for the Gathering to be honest'.

Co-operation between communities

One event in Kerry that commemorated the life of an important historical figure was the result of two communities working together to create a successful Gathering event. Whereas historically each community might have 'claimed' such an event as their own they came together for the Gathering to create an event that included both communities. As explained by one key informant, the 'two communities [came] together to do it' and that, they explained was 'no mean achievement'.

2.6. The role of organizations and leaders

A factor that came across quite strongly in the research was the important role of public bodies and key organisations in supporting local communities. This was particularly evident in the key informant focus groups and event organizer survey data. Many participants explained how important it was that local communities had received support from the top: one focus group respondent explained how in order for community effort to be successful they ‘need the support of outside professionals ... we need a little bit of handholding in developing strategy’. This support was particularly evident in Kerry where the county manager, according to one key informant took ‘a special interest’ in ensuring the success of the Gathering in the county. To support local efforts, a number of key structures and people were put in place: in Kerry Co. Co. the tourism officer was appointed to the position of Gathering co-ordinator, a full time administrator and office were made available in Kerry Co.Co. offices. In addition, a Steering Committee and several Animators were appointed and together with various agencies like Údarás na Gaeltachta, Ireland Reaching Out, LEADER and various Chambers of Commerce, amongst others, worked together to provide extensive supports at a community level. Monthly Steering Committee meetings were held at the outset and these became fortnightly meetings with working groups including Go Kerry, NEKD (North & East Kerry Development), SKDP (South Kerry Development) as the Gathering initiative progressed. One key informant explained how ‘this team was fulltime - dedicated to promoting, supporting, immobilising the Gathering - the Gathering TV, the genealogy road show and supporting the communities’.

‘Consultation with the people on the ground, where there’s no consultation on the ground you have failure. I think the Gathering had that in a big way and it needs to continue by all the public bodies’

A key informant explained how the ‘support from the Gathering office ... was fundamental’ while a focus group respondent described how it gave communities a ‘touchstone’ in the county council that helped them overcome bureaucracy. Focus group respondents spoke of the practical support provided by organizations like Údarás na Gaeltachta as being ‘vital’ and acknowledged that ‘the way information was passed to the communities and from the communities’ through the Gathering Committee office was critical to their success. Others described how the training sessions provided by Fáilte Ireland ‘gave people the start they needed’ also helping to ‘develop contacts, initiate reciprocal support, [and develop] relationships’. The importance of these supports was clarified by one focus group respondent: ‘the Kenmare Chamber of Commerce helped some events apply for funding while the Killarney Chamber of Commerce was great’. This they felt was fundamental to the success of events particularly in overcoming obstacles as ‘ways were found around things’ and that a

‘hugely supportive County Council’ was ‘very willing to help’. This support was felt throughout the county as one respondent acknowledged that the support received in south Kerry was ‘brilliant’, while another claimed that ‘the co-ordination of it was very important and the Gathering office was superb and it was so needed’. Event organizers, key informants and focus group respondents all spoke of the enormous work that the Gathering co-ordinator and Gathering administrator had done to support the events. They were recognised as being ‘very influential’ and as key leaders of the Gathering in Kerry. One event organizer commented that ‘the help we received from [the administrator] and her colleagues in the Gathering office in Tralee was fantastic and so generous of spirit, indicating that it was not just the structures that were important but the people behind these structures also.

Of particular importance, respondents felt, was the composition of the Steering Committee in Kerry, which represented a broad spectrum of organizations and sectors. One key informant commented on how; ‘it was representative of all parts of the county and this meant that things were well managed and coordinated’. Another clarified; ‘that was the beauty of the Steering Committee both from an experience and involvement in the various aspects of festival /tourism/county development there was a very wide range of people on [it] and I think that was a huge benefit ... because you got many different thoughts and perspectives being brought to the table’. In a similar vein and identifying an opportunity for moving forward with this initiative, another key informant described how ‘the Gathering Steering Committee was excellent because we brought all the tourism players, local authorities and the development companies together so we all rode in together rather than everyone funding their own different things and I think this made a difference. I think this will continue and it will probably spill over into a tourism forum ... all working together on tourism and community initiatives’.

It would appear that Kerry County Council’s efforts to provide support for communities had intentions beyond just achieving a successful Gathering in Kerry. In fact, building relationships with communities and developing community tourism initiatives was a key objective, and the Gathering provided a means for achieving this, as explained by one key informant ‘sometimes you are just seen as the people who cut the water offit was nice to be actually able to say look we actually are community people and we want to help and of course we want to promote tourism and what better way to promote tourism than to get community people actually running tourism initiatives themselves – I think that’s going to be the big benefit of the Gathering here.’ The same respondent went on to say that ‘we

‘Creating the idea that we are all working together for the betterment of Kerry ... that community tourism will be huge and that we are working with them ... rather than they working independently that they can come and talk to us ... we will all work together hopefully’

will continue the focus on tourism through the Gathering Steering Committee and we will have a stronger relationship with communities and they will be able to approach us. We wanted people to know that we are there to serve them and to help them'. The Gathering co-ordinator in Kerry felt that the profile of the council had been 'raised' as a result of their approach and that most importantly, 'their role as a body that can support communities was enhanced'.

In Westmeath the structure was not as extensive as in Kerry, however, a Gathering co-ordinator and Steering Committee were appointed. One key informant explained that while concerns regarding funding were issues initially, Westmeath County Council sent out a call for interest to their extensive database of community group contacts. All were invited to come to meetings in Mullingar and Athlone to brainstorm ideas and, according to a key respondent, 'a huge variety of diverse ideas' emerged. The Gathering co-ordinator was, according to a key informant, involved in travelling to meet various groups to talk through ideas and it was from these ideas that funding applications were formalised and approved. The role of the Steering Committee was less far reaching than in Kerry as according to one key informant it was to: 'produce a calendar of events for the Fáilte Ireland website; to allocate funding as well as to provide some publicity'. Membership of the Steering Committee changed throughout the period of the Gathering so that while the same organizations were represented the actual person on the committee changed. This differing approach taken by the counties may possibly be explained by the fact that, unlike in Kerry, there is no tourism officer in Westmeath County Council, the relevance of this was clarified by one key informant in Kerry who felt that the fact that the co-ordinator 'was in that space already and knew what needed to be done and Animators hit the ground running' was a key factor. Most of Westmeath is 'not very tourism oriented' (key informant) and the fact that according to one key informant 'they were very much hampered by lack of money' combined with the evidence that different groups and sectors did not come together in a unified approach as apparent from remarks from key informants: 'there is begrudgery and a sense of social restriction –an inner circle who control things, a sense that well 'this is my patch and who do you think you are trying to generate new business in my sector/area'; and another who claimed that 'businesses in the town don't work together at all' may all combine to provide an explanation for the less elaborately structured approach taken to the Gathering in Westmeath. Despite this, one key informant in Westmeath claimed 'it was worth all the work – in that Westmeath played its part in meeting the national target'. The Gathering in Westmeath, the informant explained was 'moderately successful' despite the fact that 'the roll out of the Gathering was too late to achieve a great deal, especially in respect of bringing in overseas visitors' (key informant).

Similar to Kerry, key individuals and the County Council were recognised for playing an important role in the Gathering in Westmeath. One key informant spoke of the fact that the Gathering co-ordinator in Westmeath had a huge role' while focus group members similarly acknowledged the work of Westmeath County Council and in particular the Gathering co-ordinator as 'key' to its success.

3. LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

3.1. Learning from the negatives

It is notable that a significant proportion of the communities in Co. Kerry and Co. Westmeath were not affected by the Gathering at all. Sixty four per cent of community respondents in Westmeath agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'it didn't affect the average person in the community' while 47% of those who responded in Kerry said the same. It is of note, however, that in most cases, these respondents when presented with a list of possible community impacts went on to note some positive impacts such as increased pride in place, encouraging locals to attend local events etc. In Westmeath, respondents explained how 'some people embraced it and they probably got something but it didn't really impact here' and how 'it depended on the community ... it depended on the locality - how strong they were and what they did. Some were better than others at getting involved and they will have had more impacts'. Meanwhile in Kerry, one respondent claimed that it had impacts on local community but 'more so in the country' and, she claimed 'it's still impacting. It really affected small rural places it got people out and about. It impacted on those that got involved'. These people she explained 'thought it was great, others were wondering what happened. It is still going on in some small communities and this will keep going'.

'It depended on the community ... it depended on the locality - how strong they were and what they did'

'Some people embraced it and they probably got something'

In terms of awareness, while 90% of community respondents in Kerry knew about the Gathering, only 70% of those in Westmeath did. It is also extremely important to note that only 29% of Kerry respondents and 25% of Westmeath respondents attended Gathering events. Going forward, there is clearly potential to shape an initiative like the Gathering in such a way that there is more engagement for local community groups and individuals, subject to the projects aims and objectives. Suggestions as to how to do this are everywhere to be seen in the Gatherings that very effectively captured the imagination and participation of both local residents and visitors: those that focused on celebrating, remembering or creating something that had real meaning for people in different places across the country. The Gathering helped people to realize how much of interest they had to offer within their own place, it just needed to be revealed, shaped into an appreciable form and shared both within their own community as well as with visitors. For example, when asked what kind of audience events were aimed at, it is interesting to note that while 39.1% of organizers aimed to attract members of the diaspora and friends and family from overseas, 23% had actually aimed to attract people from the local community. In one of the Kerry focus groups one participant explained

how the Gathering raised the profile of important local traditions, another spoke of how ‘all the locals became more aware of their heritage’. Many study participants fully grasp the idea that events and activities can attract the interest of both locals and visitors simultaneously, and that the ‘history and stories of the local people would be very useful to bringing people in’.

The study findings revealed very little negative commentary on the Gathering and there are few discernable negative impacts at any level of analysis. In focus groups many participants did mention that the lead in time was not long enough and that if the Gathering was to happen again it would be beneficial for organizers and communities to have much more notice as this would make planning and organizing easier. When asked if the Gathering caused any tension among the community 90% of event organizers and 88% of community respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that it had caused any tension. Similarly, when statements about whether Gathering events had had negative impacts such as litter, overcrowding, social problems or disruption, less than 3% believed this to be the case.

Financial pressures were mentioned by 18% of event organizers as a difficulty and in one case they stated that a previously successful event was now in debt. In the focus groups too, some mentioned the financial pressures whereby individuals, for example, paid for brochures to be printed in the hope that they would recoup their money as the project progressed. It seems that in some cases the Gathering created pressure on groups to organize events and this created financial pressure.

‘Funding is a major issue and funding has to be more direct and easier got’

3.2. Sustaining benefits into the longer-term

In terms of thinking about long term impact, 47% of community respondents believed that there would be a long term effect. In the focus groups and key informant interviews there was a stronger consensus that the impact of the Gathering would continue, in that a number of these events would be held again next year, that the skills that had been learnt would be utilized in the future and that links made with local groups, individuals and official organizations would generate future opportunities.

However, key informants and focus group participants were generally of the view that the benefits of the Gathering could not be sustained into the future unaided. In making suggestions for going forward, participants mainly talked of the roles that communities, event organizations, local authorities, and Fáilte Ireland could play in the process. The sense was that all of these could take partial responsibility for moving the Gathering forward on a number of fronts. In Kerry, the critically

important role played by the local authority was very apparent. Kerry County Council approached the Gathering in a very strategic manner, with a very clear set of objectives in mind. It invested resources in terms of allocating human resources to the project and worked collaboratively in close partnership with a range of key stakeholders group operating in different capacities throughout the county. The evidence from the study suggests that its involvement was very effective in supporting and facilitating community engagement in the Gathering.

It is abundantly clear that the Gathering was underpinned by an enormous volunteer effort which is 'impossible to measure'. Many of these volunteers were key community activists who routinely sit on local committees and run local clubs but undoubtedly these people were supplemented by extra volunteers inspired by the Gathering. Focus group participants were clear that the work load taken on board by volunteers was such that it could not be sustained annually into the future: the voluntary effort that was so effective during the Gathering needs to be supported. Throughout 2013, various agencies like Údarás na Gaeltachta in Kerry worked to build capacity at the community level, providing supports, advice, facilities and encouragement to assist and empower communities. The positive effects of this were everywhere. Equally, the local authority in Kerry resourced an elaborate support structure for event organizers, employing several animators to oversee the workings of the Gathering. This level of involvement bore evident fruit both for community efforts but also for the local authority, which developed its own expertise and insight into how and where possibilities for further tourism development within the county can be captured. Supports of this nature are needed if the achievements of the Gathering are to be fully capitalized upon. A Westmeath key informant explained it as follows: 'Absolutely ... (the effects of the Gathering can be sustained) ... but it needs to have a countrywide office, co-ordinator, team, to enable this to continue, it needs somebody to bring this together – I can't see how it will happen otherwise'. Similarly in Kerry a key respondent noted that 'it shows what can be done ... people can get these events off the ground and run them to a high standard (it) increased that skill set and can-do attitude in small areas where people wouldn't have seen themselves as able to do any of these things. Areas that may not have thought about doing it - I think the Gathering helped them and pushed them in the right direction really. I think the support of the Gathering office all helped'. If there is an interest in maintaining the momentum of the Gathering then structured supports from relevant agencies are required.

'The co-ordination of it was very important and the Gathering office was superb and it was so needed and I suppose that comes back to my whole point about the future, can it continue – of course it can but it needs support'

Undoubtedly, the experience gained during the year was invaluable from the perspective of capacity building at the local level. As one organizer said, 'If (our village) undertook another venture, having

had the experience, the community would be well able'. Following on from the success of the Gathering events, some event organizers explained how they plan to use the knowledge and capacity they have acquired and invest it in developing another event. Others explained how their Gathering experience had brought their event to a new level and that next year's event would be up-scaled in some way. For agencies for whom tourism is a strategic priority, identifying event organizations that have built capacity through the intervention of the Gathering would be a useful exercise. It could deepen understanding of precisely how, and under what conditions, capacity building was effected and inform the development of recommendations for devising supports

The question as to whether future supports might come from county or national levels is debatable. Undoubtedly, the evidence from Kerry suggests that the local authority, as well as other agencies like Údarás na Gaeltachta, played very effective roles. However, it should be noted that one of the reasons that the Gathering worked was that it created an over-arching strategic context. The framework created by the national initiative was very important in terms of raising awareness and setting targets. It provided some 'professional hand-holding' which was very helpful; small funding allocations, which while never enough did seem to make a big difference for many events; and it also meant being part of something bigger than simply one's own event/community/county. As one focus group participant said, 'once you registered your event that was it, you wanted to give it 110%'. Frequently in explaining why the Gathering had created an impact on their community, community respondents said 'well, everyone was talking about it'; 'priests spoke about it at mass'. Even if counties were not very accustomed to participating in drives to attract tourists into their own counties, with the Gathering there was a sense that they were being asked to contribute to a national endeavor.

'Once you registered your event that was it, you wanted to give it 110%'

Undoubtedly, the Gathering uncovered new tourism potentials all over the country, most obviously in the realm of genealogical tourism. Those events that connected with diaspora established contacts, often first time contacts that can be expected to be maintained. At the individual family level, these contacts will be sustained informally and the study heard many details of plans for future family gatherings. At the community level, several events, particularly in Kerry acquired considerable new genealogical knowledge that now needs to be captured systematically and developed in a coherent way. As one Kerry key informant claimed 'everyone has now realised the potential of genealogical tourism'. This is in the context of the understanding that 'most visitors don't have a chance to talk to locals'. An important function of the Gathering was to highlight the importance of local heritage and to raise awareness and pride in local heritage within local communities. Everywhere, it seemed that people (often to their surprise) found that even very

modest events which tap into human interest and the contemporary search for experiential tourism experiences can attract visitor interest. The success of the Gathering lay in the fact that a multitude of small events like this can accumulatively attract very large numbers of visitors. Not surprisingly, there was a strong sense among focus group participants that greater support for small events was needed from Fáilte Ireland.

Event organizers themselves have very clear ideas about how the benefits of the Gathering might be sustained. People spoke of needing to keep the community involved, perhaps not through large scale events but through smaller activities. They spoke of ambitions to continue their events or to introduce something additional to an established event next year. Rather than stating that finance was the key factor in sustaining the positive benefits of the Gathering many noted the support and know-how that they gained from Animators and the County Council and how this support is fundamental and that if this could be sustained it would help their future development of activities.

3.3. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that the Gathering did impact on communities. It is to be noted that a great deal of the activity that happened in the name of the Gathering was not funded by the initiative in any way. So the success of the Gathering did not lie in the financial resources that it provided. Repeatedly, study participants said that even when funding was allocated, it was usually just a token in the overall cost context, serving to seed-fund and encourage rather than to comprehensively cover outgoings. Instead the success is as a consequence of the activity that occurred at local level by local institutions, individuals and communities.

'People went beyond the call of duty for their county'

Central to this study's findings are that the Gathering created a self-confidence and self-belief among communities and gave them power and ownership over activities in their areas. As such these were truly community driven events and this local ownership perhaps explains the positivity identified towards the Gathering. These events resulted in an appreciation of local heritage and traditions, and a recognition that others want to share in their place. As such it helped to identify a potential for tourism. Most of all the Gathering showed communities how they could rely on themselves to impact the development of their own areas.

'The impact will live on in enriching lives and creating memories'

In some cases the Gathering resulted in the emergence of new events. For those events already in existence the Gathering brought training opportunities, increased support and funding and raised a new impetus to target tourist markets. These are long term benefits which will be realized beyond 2013. As well as community impacts, individual family units and individuals themselves felt the effect of the Gathering, from families who were deeply affected by meeting extended family members, to older members of the community who were recognized for work they had undertaken in the past, to organizers who gained a sense of achievement from organizing and running events. Each of these individual effects impacts the sense of community and sense of pride in an area and this can have a lasting effect.

The Gathering has had a significant and potentially sustainable effect on communities throughout Kerry and Westmeath. The challenge now is to further nurture and develop these effects to harness the potential long benefits in terms of community, families, networks, local development and tourism.