

# Bringing Together Local Culture and Rural Development: Findings from Ireland, Pennsylvania and Alaska

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The developmental trajectories of communities are routinely explained by reference to economic history, human capital deficits, or the structure of local labour markets. The role of local culture in understanding community development or in interpreting empirical research has received less attention. We believe culture plays an important independent role in shaping community debate and action. Framing community as an interactional field emphasises the opportunities created when people who share interests come together to address local problems. Interaction and local culture are essential parts of community and community development. Appreciating community uniqueness and local culture helps in the interpretation of study data and clarifies development trajectories. Research from Ireland, Pennsylvania and Alaska illustrates the linkages between local culture and community development.

## Introduction

The developmental trajectories of communities are routinely explained by reference to economic history, human capital deficits and/or the structure of local labour markets (Flora and Christenson 1991; Bayliss 2004). Similarly, discussions of development are often rooted to national and/or regional levels, revealing little about the local community level and its uniqueness. Far less often is local culture afforded a significant role in understanding the community development process. While there has been some recognition of the role of culture (Caftanzoglou and Kovani 1997; Ray 1998; Braden and Mayo 1999; Ray 2001), such attention has waned in recent North American literature (Day 1998; Panelli *et al.* 2003; Bayliss 2004; Williams 2004). Further, the attention that is paid to it tends to be applied in very focused areas such as tourism and natural resource management (Smith and Krannich 2000; Kneafsey *et al.* 2001; Johannesson *et al.* 2003; Lewis and Sheppard 2005). In general, culture has been recognised as playing a key role in the European rural sociological and community development literatures (Ray 1998, 2001; Johannesson *et al.* 2003; Panelli *et al.* 2003; Bayliss 2004; Juska *et al.* 2005), yet it remains a small element in the general sociological literature.

Empirical research has also largely failed to consider the role of local culture in fostering a more complete understanding of community development. Despite

advances in literature expressing its role, culture continues to be viewed as an outgrowth of a particular region and as reflecting extant economic and other experiences. For better or worse, such a perspective suppresses culture's role in shaping community debate and action. While it was once viewed as a constraint or limitation to modernisation and development, rural culture, under the right circumstances, is a potential strength. In places where it may not be an overt strength, it can certainly condition or explain local development responses or their lack. Appreciation of this fact can contribute to new, more effective development strategies (Day 1998; Ray 1998, 2001). We suggest that, despite the understudy role of culture, it is an essential consideration for understanding local community development options, community actions and citizen responses to a variety of conditions.

### Social basis of culture

In social settings culture is often used to represent entire ways of life, including rules, values and expected behaviour (Williams 1970; Flora *et al.* 1992). Culture can reflect either a homogenous environment where the characteristics of the few are presented, or a more heterogeneous structure bringing together the characteristics of a diverse locality. At its most basic level culture is understood as encompassing the shared products of a society (Park 1950; Flora *et al.* 1992; Hoage and Moran 1998). Such products have a common meaning, reflect shared attachments among community members and accumulate over time (Park 1950; Williams 1970; Salamon 2003).

Culture consists of ideas, norms and material dimensions (Sorokin 1957; Williams 1970; Flora *et al.* 1992; Hoage and Moran 1998; Salamon 2003). Ideas include the values, knowledge and experiences held by a culture. Values are shared ideas and beliefs about what is morally right or wrong, or what is culturally desirable. Such values shape norms and rules (or accepted ways of doing things that represent guidelines for how people should conduct themselves and how they should act towards others). As Luloff and Swanson (1995) note:

Culture frames value assumptions for individuals and communities about what is right and wrong and what ought to be, as well as notions on the means for achieving these values. Culture is not determined by socioeconomic structures, but rather interacts with these structures dialectically. Culture mediates individual and community perceptions about social conditions, and consequently influences both the perception of and reasoning process involved in making choices. (p. 363)

Values and norms are often taken for granted and assumed to reflect a common understanding. Both, however, have direct origins and develop in response to conflicts or needs. At their core is a process of interaction. This process shapes the actions of individuals and social systems. As Williams noted, values and norms are "never wholly divorced from the actual conditions of human interaction from which they emerge" (Williams 1970, p. 29). Culture is a living thing and consists of elements of the past, outside influences and new locally developed elements.

Culture provides a mechanism for identifying the external influences and local level problems impacting on the community. The ability to focus on outside

influences and act accordingly is important. Every community should be able to make informed choices about what it considers beneficial and what it considers detrimental or threatening. The ability of communities to act is vital to the success of development efforts. To achieve development goals, it is critical to identify and study local social interaction and culture, both of which provide a linkage and common sense of solidarity for people. Culture provides belonging and an arena in which residents can make a difference. Culture also contributes to exclusionary practices (Flora *et al.* 1992) and can be a drag on development efforts. Regardless of development trajectory, appreciating the role of local culture is essential.

Local understandings and interpretations of a community's history reflect past events, feeding into and partially driven by the demands, sentiments and interests of those in the present (Flora *et al.* 1992; Ramsay 1996; Hoage and Moran 1998; Salamon 2003). Indeed, local culture has both backward and forward-looking dimensions with implications for local opportunities (Massey 1994). Local societies also consist of unique social groups or fields that have their own distinct cultures. Retaining this heterogeneous structure and the representation of these group's cultures is key to successful development efforts. A locally shared culture plays an important role in shaping the definition of community problems. It also influences possible solutions and the means of addressing them (Flora *et al.* 1992).

There are cases where one culture rules the day and a homogenous cultural environment emerges. In homogenous settings one local rendition of culture is traditionally viewed as being more legitimate than others. As a result, local elites, power structures and other forces contribute to the emergence of a homogenous structure that is propagated in many settings (Mills 1956). As Gaventa (1980) notes, culture can reflect the domination of elites, produce quiescence and leave community residents disenfranchised. Such conditions do little to bring together diverse local groups to participate in broad-based community action. We believe that a heterogeneous community-based view of culture is more appropriate and effective for achieving successful local development outcomes. It is through the accumulation and application of best practices drawn from diverse local cultures that unique and comprehensive plans for culturally based development emerge.

Differences between regions and localities are often largely cultural (Williams 1970; Dove 1988; Hoage and Moran 1998; Ray 2001). Rural and community development practitioners need to consider the importance of culture in their efforts to improve local wellbeing. By paying attention to, and incorporating cultural values, traditions and related factors in community development strategies, more efficient and effective development efforts can be achieved (Dove 1988; Ramsay 1996).

Local culture provides a sense of identity for rural communities and residents. This identity provides a basis for common understandings, traditions and values – each of which is central to taking action for improving wellbeing (Williams 1970; Ramsay 1996; Ray 2001; Schmidt *et al.* 2002). Culture contributes to building a sense of local identity and solidarity. It influences the confidence of community members to come together to address specific needs and problems (Wilkinson 1991; Luloff and Swanson 1995; Bridger and Luloff 1999; Schmidt *et al.* 2002; Brennan *et al.* 2005). Local commitment among residents based on culture and common identity, regardless of economic or political conditions, serves as a valuable tool in shaping the

effectiveness of development options and local actions (Wilkinson 1991; Ramsay 1996; Bridger and Luloff 1999).

Providing a local linkage and cultural basis for development is essential (Dove 1988; Hoage and Moran 1998; Ray 2001; Salamon 2003). People are likely to take part in and remain committed to development efforts to which they are directly connected (Dove 1988). Development efforts considering or focusing on culture provide a mechanism for linking local residents to the development process. Through such efforts, local residents can encourage development that preserves and promotes their culture. Alternatively, where development is inhibited, creating an appreciation of cultural factors can help to identify means of addressing these barriers and considering culturally sensitive alternatives. This is particularly important in efforts seeking local participation, voluntarism and community action (Hoage and Moran 1998). The social basis of culture, its relationship to interaction and the types of development and local actions it contributes to are each central aspects of the role of culture in the development process.

#### **Culture, local capacity and community**

Bringing together diverse local cultures is essential to forming collective frameworks for locally based development. However, this does not entail the desire for a homogenous single culture to emerge. We believe that when diverse cultures interact, shared needs and general interests are identified which then serve as the focal point for local community action. Such coming together does not necessitate the abandonment of cultural identities or self-interest. More accurately, this bridging allows the best solutions, resources and activities of diverse cultures to be harnessed to meet general goals and needs.

Culture is a motivating factor in the creation of social identity and serves as a basis for creating cohesion and solidarity. Solidarity is often seen as the central element for uniting and motivating communities (Sorokin 1957; Williams 1970; Durkheim 1984; Bhattacharyya 1995; Schmidt *et al.* 2002; Salamon 2003). Solidarity reflects a shared identity, expected conduct and commitment to community (Bhattacharyya 1995; Schmidt *et al.* 2002). It also reflects the extent to which communities come together and offer members a sense of belonging. A commitment to common ideals and beliefs emerges through interactions that cut across different perspectives in a community (Wilkinson 1991).

Wilkinson (1991) stresses the importance of social interaction in understanding community and the community development process. Community, as an interactional field, is identified by purposive social interchanges between and among people and organisations (Wilkinson 1991). Such interactions make the community dynamic. Each locality has an array of distinct social fields whose members act to achieve unique interests and goals. The community field connects these diverse groups. While the community field is similar to other social fields, it differs in its pursuit of the entire community's general interests and needs (Wilkinson 1991; Bridger and Luloff 1999).

The community field emerges out of the context of local life and is facilitated by diverse and purposive interactions in the locality. Local culture is continually recreated

and fostered by interactions across a community field. This interactional capacity emerges among diverse audiences and promotes and retains culture. Through such broad-based interactions, culture evolves and adapts so it is not lost. The community field incorporates the best practices of all groups in an effort to facilitate problem-solving and decision-making. By doing this, local people are able to establish local and extra-local alliances while preserving the distinct and unique culture, character and attributes of their communities.

The community field co-ordinates and brings together individual fields and cultures to foster community-wide efforts. It cuts across various distinctions in communities, such as class, culture or organised groups, by focusing on the common needs of all residents. Such a community focus does not imply that structural or system level characteristics are unimportant or that community is devoid of conflict and self-interest. Indeed, the socio-demographics, the local economy, organisations, natural resources and institutions are vital to the make-up of the community and its residents (Brown and Swanson 2003; Luloff and Bridger 2003). Moreover, these structural considerations may perpetuate certain divisions in a community. However, together they serve only as the backdrop for local participation and reveal little about the motivations and ability of local people to come together. Community emerges from the conscious experiences of local citizens from multiple cultures coming together to address common needs, even if they disagree.

Where local relationships increase the adaptive capacity of people to address local problems, community agency is said to exist. Community agency is reflected in the capacity of people to manage, utilise and enhance those resources available to them (Wilkinson 1991; Luloff and Swanson 1995; Bridger and Luloff 1999; Luloff and Bridger 2003). Its key component is found in the creation and maintenance of linkages and channels of interaction among local social fields which otherwise are directed toward more limited interests (Luloff and Bridger 2003).

Without interaction, community and culture could not exist – social interaction is essential to both. However, we are not suggesting that interaction is synonymous with culture. Both are distinctly different, yet intimately linked. Interaction is the basis for the emergence, maintenance and evolution of culture. However, local cultures can inhibit interactions. Because it can both facilitate and limit the formation of close ties, associations and connections, the relationship between interaction and culture is essential in development-related work (Salamon 2003).

### **The unique role of culture in recent empirical work**

To demonstrate empirically the unique role of culture in shaping local life we draw upon data from two studies containing multiple community case studies in Ireland, Pennsylvania and Alaska. This comparison of sites and cultures is appropriate for several reasons. Research in all sites utilised the same field theoretical perspective and employed identical mixed methods data collection strategies. In each site an understanding of local culture and its role in shaping local life was essential to the interpretation of data, local community development activities and local actions and behaviour. Similarly, an understanding of these local cultures was essential to explaining and interpreting local actions.

The research in Ireland and Pennsylvania focused on factors influencing community agency and the role of such action in community and economic development (Brennan and Luloff 2006; Brennan 2007; Brennan *et al.* 2007). The research in the Alaska communities focused on the community response to ecosystem disturbance (Flint 2006; Flint and Haynes 2006; Flint and Luloff 2007), emphasising community capacity as a key variable differentiating the communities. In all three geographic contexts local culture played an essential role in social change and community responses to local needs.

### Methods

To provide a better understanding of collective community efforts impacting on social wellbeing, multiple study sites in all locations were used. Four Irish, two Pennsylvanian and six Alaskan communities were identified for extensive on-site research. The site selection in all cases was based on a typology emphasising geographic location and variation in specific conditions from which community agency evolves.

In the Ireland–Pennsylvania comparative study, the areas close to urban centres included Tang (IR), Killoughey (IR) and Meadville (PA) and the remote rural sites were Killala (IR), Creevy/Ballyshannon (IR) and Bedford (PA). On Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, Homer, Anchor Point, Ninilchik, Seldovia, Cooper Landing and Moose Pass were selected as being representative of the environmental, cultural, demographic and land ownership characteristics of communities across the peninsula.

In each site, data were collected using key informant interviews and focus groups. Both approaches highlighted the role of local culture in development processes and outcomes. A total of 86 key informant interviews were conducted in the Irish sites (2002–2005), 37 in Pennsylvania (2002–2003) and 115 in Alaska (2003). In each community key informants were selected using criterion and snowball sampling methods to ensure that multiple perspectives were systematically included (Jackson *et al.* 2004). In other words, the initial key informants were selected according to specific criteria and asked to identify other residents, who were then interviewed. This process continued until information saturation was attained.

Three themes relating to local culture and development emerged from the analyses. The first was that the emergence of the community field bridges diverse perspectives and facilitates the articulation of shared local cultural values in the community development process. The second was that cultural norms guiding local interaction affect the development process and the last was that communities act either to protect or promote local culture, depending on the trajectory of external development efforts.

### Ireland and Pennsylvania

The impact of culture on community development was evident in the Ireland and Pennsylvania comparative research (Brennan and Luloff 2006; Brennan 2007; Brennan *et al.* 2007). These studies focused on the need for community development agents and policy interests to better understand the role of local community agency in the process of rural community and economic development.

The Irish communities of Tang and Killoughey were similar in location and population to Meadville, PA. These communities were near more urban areas and their influences, but had not experienced any major migration pressures. Tang and Killoughey were surrounded by Irish counties with substantial populations and population densities and were close to the Irish capital, Dublin (Central Statistics Office [CSO] 2002). Reflecting urban influences, County Westmeath (Tang), County Offaly (Killoughey) and Crawford County (Meadville) had population densities exceeding 40 people per square km (US Bureau of the Census 2000; CSO 2002). In contrast, Killala and Creevy/Ballyshannon, Ireland and Bedford, PA, were situated in rural areas and had population densities of less than 40 people per square km (US Bureau of the Census 2000; CSO 2002). Creevy/Ballyshannon and Killala are a considerable distance from Dublin.

*Local culture and the development process in Ireland and Pennsylvania*

In all these communities, cultural norms guided forces behind local interaction, development processes and the emergence of community. In Killala, Creevy/Ballyshannon and Bedford community agency emerged out of unique history, geography and other conditions that have long shaped local life. All were remote rural areas at the periphery of larger economic, social and political systems. Such conditions significantly shaped local cultures and allowed traditions and long-established methods for dealing with local needs to remain largely intact. While being on the periphery presented them with substantial obstacles, this condition also allowed culture to come to the forefront and expand the range of options for addressing local community problems and meeting needs.

Equally important, all were historically the providers of natural resources for extra-local entities. As resources diminished, or as less expensive sources were found, these rural areas were quickly abandoned. Both situations contributed to the emergence of fiercely independent cultures. A host of local entrepreneurial efforts reflect this. Such activities, particularly in the case of Killala and Creevy/Ballyshannon, allowed local communities to survive during the economically dire 1970s–1980s. As one Killala key informant stated:

We've always been willing to give something a shot if it means creating some local jobs and keeping our young people here. Over the years, we've had the turf and fishing co-ops and other businesses. Some have been more successful than others, but at least they were our own. We learned our lessons with those big companies.'

Tang and Killoughey revealed similar independence, even in the face of influences from neighbouring urban areas. In these communities the local Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), church and other organisations served as catalysts for interaction, provided structure and united the community. All were strongly based in local culture. This was clearly noted in Killoughey:

Our GAA club has been one of the strongest in the midlands. It's impressive in that we consistently produce such amazing hurling teams around here. Because of the teams, people know who we are and it sort of gives us our identity. Even more important, our club is always working with St Brigid's [a local church], the schools and Macra na Feirme [the young

farmers association] to get things done around here. This is really what keeps us together. If not for them, I can't imagine what things would be like here.

Historically, these venues served a multitude of purposes and represented a mechanism for providing formal and informal social support. Local informants frequently commented on that these were the basis for community development. Current efforts benefited from the already established networks, connections, procedures and channels of communication provided by existing organisations. A Creevy/Ballyshannon key informant said:

In the Irish tradition, the source of much of what gets done has been active local people doing things. Especially in rural areas like this, local people are the driving force of development.

*Community field, local culture and development: Ireland and Pennsylvania findings*

The emergence of a community field bridging diverse segments of a locality was seen in all Irish and Pennsylvania sites. These community fields facilitated shared visions of community and development processes. While each community was marked by substantial diversity (across age, race, income and length of residence), the presence of community agency and the community field allowed for local decision-making to transcend barriers. In Meadville, for example, rapidly changing demographics altered the face of the community and shaped, both positively and negatively, the local community development process. One key informant noted:

Our community has changed a lot over the last 20 years. There used to be some problems, but the community has done a good job of making sure everyone is involved in what goes on here. You can see a great amount of diversity on councils and in our organisations. It's amazing the ways that different groups contribute.

In Tang and Killoughey local religious entities and the presence of strong local GAA clubs were central to bringing people together. Both served as major hubs of interaction and comprehensive local networks, providing an informal structure from which the community field could emerge. One Tang key informant said:

The church and the GAA gave us the structure and support to bring the community together. Both are important around here and in most cases people will do whatever it takes to support them. People will also follow their lead and support what they say are important. When we were first starting the community council, we made sure to include people from the team and our local priest on the planning board.

A Killoughey key informant put it another way:

There have always been many local groups here. The community council has been brilliant in bringing them together. Last year [2003] they reopened the community centre and have been using it for meetings, parties and holiday get-togethers. The council is important too because it keeps our voices heard in government offices.

In contradistinction, in more remote rural areas such as Killala, Creevy/Ballyshannon and Bedford the diversity of the local population has remained much the same. Such

locations have been characterised by closely connected social networks (strong ties) as well as more loosely defined circles of interaction (weak ties). In these settings local networks and the prevalence of ties both strong (family, friends and neighbours) and weak (colleagues and acquaintances) facilitated interaction across different groups, leading to the emergence of the community field. While weak ties were somewhat limited in Killala, Bedford and Creevy/Ballyshannon showed a plethora of both strong and weak ties. Consistent in all communities was a concerted effort to reach out and include all residents and groups in local decision-making. In these communities the local culture also was a guiding force in processing and shaping local interaction. Local sports groups (GAA in Ireland and high school or civic sports leagues in Bedford, PA), community festivals and local religious institutions served as hubs of local interaction. Such interaction transcended long-held divisions and provided a venue for raising awareness of local issues, needs and opportunities for local involvement.

Killoughey, Meadville and Tang achieved substantial success in their community development efforts. This was in part due to the resources available to them in the nearby urban areas. In Ireland this success was also due to training from the Muintir na Tire community development network (a large national community development programme).

Killala, Bedford and Creevy/Ballyshannon also excelled in the community development realm. However, this development occurred despite factors that suggested that development would not happen (such as geographic isolation and limited resources). The differences in these locations and the conditions in leading to the emergence of the community field reflect their unique cultural and historical conditions, geographic location, and local development structures.

*Promoting or protecting culture in response to external development efforts:  
Ireland and Pennsylvania*

The conditions facing Killala and Creevy/Ballyshannon and the west of Ireland were very different from those currently and historically facing the American sites or Tang and Killoughey. Historically, the more remote Irish rural areas suffered extensively from British colonialism. Even during more recent times these areas remained disadvantaged and failed to keep pace with the advances experienced by communities in central and eastern Ireland. This was compounded by the population growth that geographically followed such economic development trends. Fully one-third of all Irish residents reside in Dublin and more than half live in the Leinster province area surrounding Dublin (CSO 2002). As a result, many western areas, such as Killala and Creevy/Ballyshannon, did not directly benefit from the economic boom of the 1990s. Additionally, their political representation was limited: representatives from the east, south and midlands were disproportionately appointed to national committees and cabinet posts. This led to decreased funds for western development, often in the guise of historic preservation.

Such shortcomings in support, funding and political representation helped to shape local culture and contributed to the sense of self-reliance found in many rural communities, including Killala and Creevy/Ballyshannon. This was pointedly noted

by another interviewee: "all of this [economic growth] hasn't changed a thing here. It is still up to us to take care of our own needs and our people." This was a common theme in the interviews and a telling statement about the lack of support for western Ireland at national level.

Examples of local capacity and its implications for rural areas in dealing with extra-local forces were seen in Killala during 2004–2005. During this period there was widespread protest and opposition to a proposed asbestos conversion facility located at a former industrial site (Asahi). In response to this perceived threat a massive organisation of local residents and resources emerged, which led government and private sector representatives to abandon the proposed facility.

These events reflected their capacity for effective collective action, but also a great change in local perception towards outside development. There was a time when the community actively courted extra-local development. However, the lingering impacts of the Asahi facility closing have created much scepticism and mistrust of outside and official development efforts among many locals. The loss of jobs, decisions about employment and the remaining environmental contamination of the site served as examples of the trade-offs often associated with outside developers. The prevailing perception in Killala and surrounding areas was that they had been exploited in the past and that they would not let it happen again.

### Alaska

Six Alaska communities were the focus of research on the community response to ecosystem disturbance by spruce bark beetles (Flint 2006; Flint and Haynes 2006). A key component to this response was the general level of community interactional capacity (Flint and Luloff 2007). Three pairs of communities on the Kenai Peninsula illustrate the relationship between local culture, interactional capacity and the process and outcome of community development.

#### *Community field, local culture and development: Alaska findings*

Contrasting experiences in Ninilchik and Seldovia, two Kenai Peninsula communities, illustrate how building a diverse community field helps position a community for development opportunities by creating space for local cultures to come together (Wilkinson 1991; Bridger and Luloff 1999). Ninilchik (pop. 1,025)<sup>2</sup> had an active native association representing tribal interests (20 per cent of the population) in natural resource management and development in the community. Despite a legacy of conflict and separation among residents, a community planning effort began in 2002 to improve chances for obtaining external development funds. A community plan leader described how participation was encouraged from a diverse set of community residents:

I sent letters out to every organisation in town I could think of. Every church, every quilters [group], the fair, the fire department, the library association, the kindergarten, the preschool, the charter boat association, the fish and game advisory committee, every organisation in Ninilchik. I posted signs all over town and then we had a meeting and that started the process.

The resulting community plan revealed shared values and emphasised various development objectives, including strong families, preserving natural resources, recreation for youth and residents such as a bike path, playground and ski trails, and streetlights for safety. One resident explained the long-range community plan was a necessary "hoop" required by development funding agencies and having it would help the community react to changing priorities and issues. The success of Ninilchik's planning efforts was attributed to the inclusion of diverse interests:

With the community plan, finally after years of being us and them, whether it be Natives or non-Natives or just old-timers and newcomers, the community is working together and they have a couple of groups that have included all factions. Whether organised or not, they are really getting together, so it's not "us and them" anymore, it is people working together. It has made a difference in people's attitudes and how you feel about living here. They community as a whole has really tried to work together for the good of the whole.

This new sense of co-operation shows how the development of the community paves the way for development in the community (Summers 1986). Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives in the development planning process helped to articulate local cultural values, including those shared by many residents as well as those held by smaller subgroups or social fields in the community.

Seldovia, Alaska (pop. 453), presented a striking contrast to Ninilchik. Despite similar historic and socio-demographic characteristics (including about the same proportion of Alaskan Native residents), Seldovia's efforts to co-operate on community development issues fell short:

We tried a joint economic development plan for an EDA [economic development association] grant. It was a huge step to work together but we split. It's been really horrible. It has really divided the community. Neighbour against neighbour. Kids against kids. There is a lot of prejudice now.

Unlike Ninilchik, with an integrated planning effort that worked to bring together people with diverse cultural expressions, Seldovia was unable to promote the development of a community field of interaction. Instead, cultural differences and tensions between Native and non-Native residents, as well as between longtime residents and newcomers, defined isolated circles of interaction within the community.

#### *Local culture and the development process: Alaska findings*

The way issues and problems are communicated and how people interact is part of a community's cultural identity and affects its development potential. Homer (pop. 8,920) and Anchor Point (pop. 1,979) illustrated how cultural norms and values affected local development processes. In Homer open, contentious deliberations were part of community identity and interaction, and the interviews revealed a strong sense of community with an emphasis on eclectic debate and controversy:

This is Homer. You can take any issue and roll it down the street and people will scurry and take sides. You can turn around and roll it back down again and people will scurry and change sides.

Attendance at local meetings was high and debate was common in local newspapers and radio programmes, but development progress was uncommon because no one felt any reason to resolve differences. Such conflict was ingrained in the culture of the community to the point of discouraging consensus on development issues.

A similar level of debate and open dialogue about issues was found in nearby Anchor Point, but here residents were in general agreement about development objectives, especially about the extraction of natural resources. Local cultural values emphasising "rugged individualism" and anti-government perspectives led to reluctance to incorporate the community. The residents fought off the establishment of a local government for fear it would dampen the opportunity for individual expression and action. A number of residents felt that development efforts would always fall short without incorporation, but many were willing to accept that reality. One resident noted, "If you talk government entity in Anchor Point, it's like pulling a pin on a grenade". These sentiments exemplify how cultural perspectives can influence the array of possible solutions or means of rectifying local problems (Flora *et al.* 1992).

*Promoting or protecting culture in response to external development efforts:  
Alaska findings*

Not all development initiatives originate from within communities. Small, rural communities are often influenced by external decision-making or development efforts. Whether or not external efforts are endorsed by local residents depends on their compatibility with local cultural values. Moose Pass (pop. 247) and Cooper Landing (pop. 337) illustrated how community action could be used to promote or protect local culture in response to external development efforts.

Land-use decision-making by the US Forest Service about forest access politicised previously quiet Moose Pass, situated in the Chugach National Forest. Two key issues were local access restrictions on forest trails and recently granted heli-skiing access to local area mountains. Both issues affected local cultural values about the relationship between residents and the environment:

They tried to drastically change motorised use of the forest during the winter that people had become customarily used to. That adversely affects people's lifestyles! Can you picture helicopters landing in here? Pick a mountain! Every one of them is beautiful. And it's so nice and quiet. That's why we've chosen to live in an area like this. We've put 20 years of our life and investment into home and property and now all of a sudden you want to bring helicopters in here?

Moose Pass residents felt that such changes were forced upon them. They did not want to be barred from their traditional uses of forest trails and they did not want outsiders skiing from helicopters on what they referred to as "their" mountains. The US Forest Service land management plans threatened local cultural values. As a result, the residents reluctantly took action to protect their shared interests (Bhattacharyya 1995).

In nearby Cooper Landing the residents had a better relationship with the US Forest Service and other agencies. The residents had long participated in local development, and planning processes were seen by many as being compatible with local

interests. One resident said, "We were conscious of the looks and character of the community and wanted to preserve that". Development plans by external interests for a new resort, a Campfire camp and new Forest Service trails around area lakes were seen as "development consistent with our community and the place". In Cooper Landing community action emerged to work with external agencies and interests to promote local cultural values compatible with development efforts.

In all six Alaska communities local culture played a key role in the process and outcome of development efforts. The emergence of a community field helped articulate shared values and positioning for external development support. But, in some cases the cultural norms reflected in local residents interactions and shared values also created barriers to development. The nature of external development agendas and their compatibility with local culture also influenced the direction of community involvement and action.

#### *Summary of Ireland, Pennsylvania and Alaska community findings*

The role of the uniqueness of local culture in shaping development and local responses to a variety of conditions was evident in the Irish, Pennsylvanian and Alaskan communities. While the attitudes, beliefs, actions and opinions of the residents in three Irish and Pennsylvania communities were surprisingly similar, many social and cultural differences were also noted. Such differences stress the need for rural and community development efforts to focus on the uniqueness of individual communities when developing programmes and policies. In Alaska, for each example of local culture facilitating development objectives, there were contrasting examples where cultural factors created barriers to development. Thus, the cultural context of each community was integral to a full appreciation of development potential. Despite differences in many areas, social interaction was a constant factor in shaping community agency. Such findings support earlier research (Luloff and Swanson 1995; Claude *et al.* 2000; Theodori 2000).

Factors such as local culture, development history, geographic conditions and historical events contributed to the form and type of development that occurred. In most sites active local people and grassroots efforts, shaped by local culture, were central to community development and local wellbeing. Culture can also be seen as an obstacle to change and development. In some cases the concerted and purposive efforts of local residents led to culturally relevant development initiatives. In others the local culture limited interaction and development options. However, in all cases local interaction and culture influenced development outcomes.

#### **Conclusion**

The perceptions of people in rural areas, their economic bases and means for their development will need to be more closely considered in future policy efforts (Flora and Christenson 1991; Brown and Swanson 2003). This is particularly true when considering the changing and diverse character of rural communities. Local culture plays a central role in shaping community development, local character and options for responding to community needs. Ignoring culture's critical role may hamstring

development efforts, rendering them little more than short-term solutions for endemic rural problems.

The research presented here emphasises the unique ways in which the local culture and context shaped or constrained community development, action and citizen involvement in local decision-making. It also showed the utility of understanding local culture in interpreting data and empirical findings. Using an interactional approach to community development fostered insight into the role and place of culture. Further, its use meant conceptualising development so as to highlight the importance of establishing and enhancing social relationships.

Culture and attachment to it can be used as a motivating factor in opposing anti-agency activities such as extra-local development and exploitation (Bhattacharyya 1995). Culture can be used to motivate community members and can serve as a tool for policymakers and others interested in encouraging local level development. Culture can be seen as presenting both the means and ends of development. By emphasising the wealth and diversity of their cultural heritage, rural areas may be able to develop activities that enhance social and economic wellbeing. Because of these relationships, rural development specialists need to understand and capitalise on the strengths of community culture and solidarity.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to the recruitment of outside industry in the 1970s, particularly the Asahi Synthetic Fibers factory.

<sup>2</sup> All population figures were derived from the 2003 Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) database which was deemed more accurate than the US Census, which had very low sampling rates in some communities. The PFD is a means of distributing annual oil revenues to eligible Alaskans, meaning that there is a substantial incentive to be on the list (Reed and Brown 2003).

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