

BALLINA ECO DISTRICT





IN SHORT

Using sustainability drivers described in a report by the Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland ¹ at the local level, a community group in Ballina, Ireland reduced their ecological footprint by 28%. They achieved it through meaningful measurement of consumption and the power of storytelling to reinterpret technical messages. This footprint measurement and the subsequent storytelling gave a sustainability uplift to local norms, and the strong, committed local participation through bringing people together has led to big reductions in resource, waste and energy use.

STORIES AND TRANSITIONS

Ireland currently has the third highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the European Union, with agriculture (22.9%) and transportation (21%) being two of the largest sectors. Although resource efficiency is a key element for reducing environmental impact, it is also clear that top-down environmental, economic or technology-driven solutions will not be sufficient, which points to the clear need for a change in mindset and habits of the population. This became particularly pertinent given the political context of increasingly centralised power in recent years which constrains local governments to undertake initiatives, meaning such bottom-up action will need to be led more and more by community based organisations such as that in Ballina.

Ballina is a commuter settlement with a population of around 2,000 in County Tipperary, Ireland. Starting in 2004, a five-year project was undertaken by a researcher in a local university ² to work with the local community in order to reduce their ecological footprint in a way that both empowered and united them as a community. The methodology chosen was co-creation of measurement activities using stories and messages, in order to give meaningful and motivating examples of transitions to more sustainable lifestyles.

They opted for this –methodology due to concerns over the misplaced focus of previous schemes on energy or water savings, which had little impact and relied on information provision and soliciting feedback on current policies, leaving recipients feeling unengaged and unmotivated to adopt new behaviours. Engagement can be encouraged, research has found, by making use of local knowledge and the complete involvement of citizens, as well as recognising, embracing and addressing the diversity of interests, building local capacity and including citizens in assessments and management where possible. The project followed this approach throughout its five-year duration, split into clear yearly cycles.



PROJECT CYCLE

The project started each spring with an ecological audit based on the ecological footprint metric but focused on energy, transport, water and waste. The participants themselves implemented the methodology used to calculate the ecological footprint of settlements. Following this footprint survey, workshops were hosted by a local school as well as community groups to help the participants work through and calculate ecological footprints, as well as discuss and fully digest the figures and impacts of different types of their consumption – such as waste generation, transport arrangements, and household energy consumption. This approach ensured co-production of a community ecological footprint where the participants had ownership of the process and outcomes. Following these annual workshops, a series of focus groups of around 20–30 participants were hosted by the school and community groups, focusing on low carbon lifestyle practices and solutions. The focus groups were attended by those living and working in the community, with the school-based meetings being primarily attended by students, and the community-based meetings attended by the general public.

The workshops and focus groups were both highly interactive and aimed at catalysing dialogue and recording stories. Technical jargon was avoided through translating theoretical or technical concepts into everyday terms and narratives, which meant the facilitator needed to be aware of the contextual meaning of the stories, thoughts and images and how participants' values and experiences can impact their stories. Through this active listening participants were led to articulate their stories using their own narrative and values, such stories being of the learning type based on their own experiences.

The co-produced ecological footprint and solutions were disseminated through short presentations to the community groups and the school, and an annual competition was launched aimed at reducing the community footprint with prizes being in line with the sustainability theme. One example of a winning entry was the slogan "Why use a litre of petrol to buy a litre of milk?", aimed at decarbonising local transport. Stories/narratives were then disseminated through a variety of local community channels including newsletters, local media, project outreach materials, schools, award ceremonies, and workshops and focus groups, before the project would end for the year with wrap-up activities.

USING STORYTELLING

The mode of storytelling was used as stories are seen an effective tool for engaging and influencing, gathering and evaluating information, reframing and providing insight, as well as reducing jargon and developing a common understanding. The stories come in many different forms, such as hero, horror and learning. The hero stories tend to be expert-led and driven by a simple technology solution with the focus being on technology and efficiency. Horror stories focus on the feelings of powerlessness caused by coverage of climate change by the media and the negative consequences of creating guilt and fear. Learning stories are focused on local actors and modelling actions, involving complex and more nuanced solutions regarding both social and technical aspects, and may also present failures.

Participants used storytelling to capture their low carbon lifestyles and behavioural changes. Combined with the ecological footprint metric these were developed into brief statements or case studies which were very useful in placing sustainability in daily contexts, to acknowledge the participants' role, and to provide advice and guidance for all. These stories were developed in both workshops and competitions. Most of the stories developed were learning stories centring on the experiences of the community, which then led to case studies illustrating and reminding residents of the stories and which were low carbon guidance in their own right. Example case studies were given in three categories – energy, transport, and waste. One of them read as follows:

Case Study: Carr Family, Derg Marina. Prevention, Reduction, Composting. By buying fresh fruit and veg, mostly at the local farmers market in Killaloe, Marie prevents packaging as she brings her own bag or uses a returnable carton from one of the stalls. She also believes that composting has reduced her landfill waste volumes dramatically. The Carr's waste volumes are a quarter of those of many of our households and they believe this is very easy to achieve.

Over the course of four years the project has measured significant reductions of 28% in the ecological footprint in the target community.

ENABLERS

The primary enablers of the project were the meaningful measurement of the ecological footprint and stakeholder engagement, which were enabled by the skills and knowledge of the facilitators. By placing a primary focus on the recipients in ensuring they were fully integrated through facilitation, as well as emphasising collective action, the project was able to achieve its aims. The use of community bridging organisations to ensure proper co-creation and collaboration were critical to recipients becoming collaborators and taking ownership of the project. Schools were also considered as a critical actor in the project as 78% of respondents to their survey believed that the school participation assisted in their greenhouse gas emissions reduction. Other enablers were access to resources such as meeting facilities and the use of storytelling as a tool for change. The low cost of the project has also been cited by the implementers as a key enabler for both implementing it and facilitating scaling.



MEASUREMENT AND IMPACT

The implementation team adapted how they measured ecological footprint by concentrating on transport, energy, water and waste, which makes the concept of consumption more tangible for the participants. Surveys were conducted once a year and asked respondents to detail their energy (electricity, gas, oil, coal and peat); travel (car, bus, train and flights (long/short haul)); water use and waste (including landfill and recycling). It was distributed to all occupied households in the area, of which 31–35% responded in full. Measurement of the settlement's EF was carried out by the settlement itself, which involved strong co-design and co-creation in the methods adopted.

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The EF measurement has been scaled out to 95 communities, but not at the same level of depth and engagement as seen in Ballina. In general, only snapshot ecological footprint calculations have been possible due to funding challenges noted by the implementers, but ideally, deeper, wider engagement would have been preferred. Although the project was relatively inexpensive, funding support is needed to properly facilitate it and particularly for measuring ecological footprints. However, the project appears to have managed to scale deep within the district, and evidence of more sustainable mindsets through drops in footprint have been noted.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

This research project has produced strong evidence that modelling through meaningful measurement and storytelling, facilitated by discourse-based approaches, can contribute to sustainable lifestyles. Further research is needed, but with 95 communities in Ireland having had their ecological footprints calculated with relatively little government funding and at low cost through a bottom-up movement, and with the methodology being employed being low cost, easily transferrable and in-line with the current understanding of the value of co-creation for persuasion and behavioural change, the case of Ballina shows great promise for sustainable lifestyles. The research was supported by the Irish Research Council.



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One planet one earth

