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### **Lessons to be learned for our communities**

I am just back from the west coast of Ireland, where I was speaking at a conference focussed on Innovation and Partnership organised by the Irish Uplands Forum. These sort of meetings are great for two-way exchanges of information and this one was no exception.

Indeed I came away from the conference thinking long and hard about what lessons Scotland might learn from the Irish government approach to supporting upland communities to manage mountain environments sustainably.

It has been recognised in Ireland not only that valued upland landscapes are dependent on management but also that government agencies lack capacity to understand the wider needs of the uplands. This has led to a voice for the uplands often being missing in discussions over local and national policies.



To counter this, the government funded Heritage Council has supported the establishment of an Uplands Partnership Network, which already has 25 local groups up and running on the ground. Their vision is to maintain upland communities and Ireland's mountains as attractive, vibrant and welcoming places where people live, work and recreate. The network is an all-Ireland initiative comprising national government, local government, upland community, hill-farming, recreational user and ecological and rural non-governmental organisations. The focus is on agriculture, tourism, social heritage and nature conservation.

The Irish government has also been very successful in mobilising European funding to help establish and facilitate locally-led groups to tackle agricultural and environmental challenges on farmland in innovative ways. Fourteen what are called Operational Groups are being supported using European Innovation Partnership and Irish government funding, covering a wide range of topics such as improving water quality, developing more sustainable cropping systems and managing particular habitats and species more appropriately.

Importantly, three of these Operational Groups have an upland focus, in the MacGillycuddy Reeks in the south-west, the Blackstairs mountains in the south-east and the Wicklow Mountains south of Dublin. All three have a focus on re-establishing grazing in a sustainable manner to help improve habitat quality, biodiversity value and agricultural productivity. And with a combined budget of around 4.5 million euro they should be in a position to achieve a lot over the next five years. There has been talk in recent years of the need to develop an upland vision for Scotland. But without also ensuring greater government and agency support for establishing locally-led partnerships it might prove difficult to achieve any such vision in practice.

**Davy McCracken**  
**Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre**