



## **Submission from Umeras Community Development on the Just Transition Fund and Draft Territorial Plan**

Submitted by Eddie Smyth

Chairperson,

Umeras Community Development,

Umeras,

Monasterevin,

County Kildare



### **Re: Just Transition Fund and Draft Territorial Plan**

#### **Who we are**

Umeras Community Development CLG ([www.umeraspeatlandspark.ie](http://www.umeraspeatlandspark.ie)) is a community group formed to promote the development of Umeras Peatlands Park on the decommissioned Bord na Mona Ummeras Bog which is located between Monasterevin and Rathangan between the Barrow-Nore Special Area of Conservation and the Grand Canal proposed Natural Heritage Area. We have raised over 100,000 from the Just Transition Fund and Kildare Leader, co-funded by 11,500 euros from the local communities and councillors to fund design, biodiversity and strategic planning studies for the development of major new amenity for local people and domestic and international tourists.

The chairperson of Umeras Community Development Eddie Smyth approached the Irish Peatlands Conservation Council (IPCC) in July 2019 to propose a community project on Umeras Bog following confirmation from Bord na Mona that they had ceased operations there. We then approached the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Bord na Mona and this led to the formation of our community group and the development of the Umeras Peatlands Park proposal which has received 100,000 euros in funding from the Just Transition Fund and Kildare Failte for design, biodiversity and strategic planning studies. We have also raised over 11,500 euros from local communities and councillors and have overwhelming local support for the project with over 750 followers on our facebook page.

We have a vision for a just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy for County Kildare which seeks to balance the energy/economic, biodiversity and tourism/amenity benefits in accordance with the planning framework outlined in the Kildare County Development Plan and national planning guidance and EU laws. This balance means that industrial windfarms must be located in areas where they will have the least impact in the county, and we have based



our submission on good practice in biodiversity, landscape and tourism planning on the basis of the precautionary principle.

Umeras Community Development (UCD) currently has three projects:

1. UCDCLG has secured over 100,000 euros in funding from the Just Transition Fund and Kildare Leader for Strategic Planning, Design and Biodiversity studies for the development of a new peatlands nature park on a decommissioned Bord na Mona Bog. This is just one example of the potential of the peatlands to contribute simultaneously to carbon storage, enhanced biodiversity and sustainable economic regeneration. We recommend that the Just Transition Fund (JTF) supports the midlands communities impacted by the cessation of peat harvesting. This means reserving greater areas of these bogs for community projects. It is critical that some large wilderness areas are created near to Dublin which provide wildlife and people with an opportunity to get away from urban and industrial elements to enjoy peace and tranquillity.

2. Umeras Community Development is a partner in the FarmPEAT.ie Environmental Innovation Partnership (EIP) which is a results-based agri-environmental programme to pay farmers to enhance biodiversity on their farms. The Just Transition Fund needs to promote a landscape approach where former industrial bogs are regenerated and linked to new habitats on farms.

3. Umeras Community Development is part of a consortium of local organizations proposing a Peatlands National Park on the former industrial bogs of Kildare and East Offaly. The Just Transition Fund should take a bold step to allocate large areas of these industrial bogs for carbon storage, biodiversity and amenity to contribute to a just transition for the midlands region. The Just Transition Fund needs to recognize the increased potential for blue and green infrastructure to link the peatlands to other significant amenity and tourism areas creating an attraction which is important on an international scale and which will attract increased domestic and international visitors to the area. Examples in Kildare include Umeras Peatlands Park and Lullymore Heritage Park which provide destinations that are being linked to the Barrow Blueway.

We believe that the industrial bogs in the midlands represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to develop major new biodiversity areas which will provide havens for people and biodiversity. In order to grasp this opportunity we need to revise the Just Transition Fund and develop a landscape approach to our peatlands which encompasses our protected peatlands, decommissioned industrial peatlands, private peatlands (intact and cutaway), forestry on peatlands and peat soils on farms. The decommissioned Bord na Mona peatlands can become the high biodiversity bogs of the future and the management of farms adjacent to these bogs can create a mosaic of habitats to support a wide range of species.

While the concept of ecosystem services and natural capital accounting has been useful in highlighting the important environmental services provided by peatlands, including flood control, renewable energy, etc. the social contribution of the peatlands to human wellbeing has been undervalued. In addition, the contribution of the regenerating peatlands to our biodiversity crisis need to go beyond compliance with EU laws and towards the contribution peatlands can make to our Just Transition Strategy.



We would caution the Just Transition Fund not to make the mistakes which were made in Southern Spain as documented in a recent book "who owns the wind" by Dermot McDermott Hughes who is a fierce advocate of renewable energy. The massive concentration of wind farms provided no local jobs, ruined the local tourist industry and enriched a small group of bigger landowners leading to considerable resentment. The current RESS process for renewable energy which promises community benefit funds and small payments to local people will not lead to sustainable economic regeneration of the midlands. What is required is a Just Transition that balances the economic, environmental and social wellbeing of local communities and planetary wellbeing as outlined in the Sustainable Wellbeing Framework developed by Eddie Smyth and presented below (published at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14615517.2016.1271539>).



## Sustainable Wellbeing Framework: Renewable Energy Projects

### Natural Resources - Biodiversity, Land & Water Bodies

- Impact on birds from turbines and powerlines – breeding and migrants
- Investments by developers in breeding programs to offset past impacts
- Impact on fauna/flora from herding and farming
- Loss of land to projects resulting in land conflicts and pressure on remaining land
- Land tenure conflicts as users of land are displaced
- Potential elite capture of project benefits

### People's Capacities, Abilities & Freedoms to Achieve Their Goals

- Extent of poverty and vulnerability in areas where people are affected by projects
- Vulnerable people less able to cope with significant project impacts – nomadic peoples, impoverished farmers
- Differential impacts on women
- Impacts on poor people from the cost of energy

### Living Environment - Measuring Change

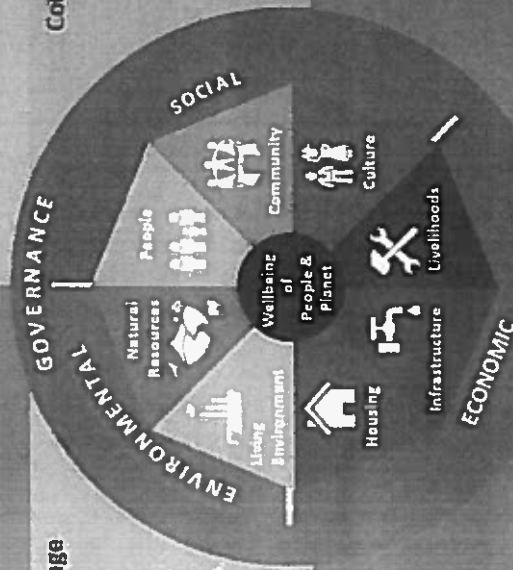
- Power generation supports climate change mitigation to meet renewable energy targets
- Quality of Environment Indicators
- Impacts of noise and shadow flicker from turbines
- Construction impacts – dust, soil, water, etc.
- Climate change/natural disaster impacts: eruptions, earthquakes, floods, erosion, water stress, etc.

### Housing - Homes & Business

- Land acquisition and resettlement resulting in loss of houses, farms and businesses
- Urbanisation and settlement patterns
- Concerns about impacts on property values

### Infrastructure - Services & Projects

- Renewable Energy: wind, solar & hybrid with associated power lines, roads, substations, battery storage & construction camps
- Other projects: roads, rail, mining, hydropower, irrigation, oil & gas, economic zones, residential developments, etc.
- Tourism projects
- Potentially improved infrastructure including roads, powerlines, etc.
- Access to utilities: water, energy, sanitation, etc.
- Public & social services: health, education, roads, markets, banking, telecommunications/internet, religious services, childcare and elderly facilities
- Quality of services and ongoing funding and maintenance arrangements.



### Community/Social Supports & Political Context

- Migration impacts on communities – influx of workers
- Conflict between local communities and developers and government over loss of land, access to energy and land tenure issues.
- Projects can fragment communities and reduce community cohesion
- Concerns about community participation/consultation in project development

### Culture - Traditions & Place Attachment

- Impacts on sacred/religious sites
- Landscape impacts
- Displacement of scheduled tribes/nomadic people from land for projects

### Livelihoods - Assets/Activities & Economic Development

- Construction employment and some operational employment – issue of how many local people benefit from jobs
- Profits for developers and taxes to local government to support local development
- Displacement of herders/farmers from land resulting in a loss of income
- Impacts on tourism projects – wildlife and cultural tourism
- Equity issues – benefit sharing – are project benefits shared equitably amongst local people?



## **Our recommendations:**

The Just Transition Funding process is providing community groups such as ours with the necessary funding to develop sustainable nature tourism clusters in the midlands. However, there is no capacity-building support to support tendering and project development. It would be useful to support a one-stop-shop possibly led by local Leader Groups who have significant experience in supporting rural communities.

The Just Transition Plan is biased towards green energy in the midlands. However, solar farms and wind farms will provide almost no local employment. There is a major opportunity to develop a corridor of nature parks linked by the blueways and greenways through the midlands which would bring tourists and regenerate our hidden heartlands with sustainable jobs.

The Just Transition Plan needs to develop a focus on nature tourism in the midlands and recognize that industrializing the decommissioning bogs will not lead to significant job creation.

The Bord na Mona decommissioned bogs, together with regenerating Coillte cut-aways on peat and supporting neighbouring farmers to restore their peatlands for wildlife is a significant opportunity to create a partnership to meet Ireland's target of 30% protected areas to address the biodiversity crisis. There needs to be a recognition that many of our rare birds such as cranes, curlew, lapwings, hen harriers, etc. are dependent on peatlands and threatened by wind turbines. We need new dedicated protected areas free of turbines for carbon storage and biodiversity with associated nature tourism benefits.

Our experience is that the main government agencies including NPWS, Coillte Bord na Mona and Waterways Ireland have limited engagement with communities. In many cases, emails go unanswered and requests for meetings are not honoured. It is as if these government agencies are afraid to deal with communities. There are claims that community groups don't have the capacity to engage with these agencies and manage projects. However, this is a chicken and egg situation – if the agencies don't support communities how will their capacity be built. Through our membership of the Community Wetland Forum we have met many groups that have inspired us to develop our projects. In developing our project, we met many of our neighbours who have skills in accounting, law, architecture, construction, farming, business, ecology, etc. who are now supporting us. We recommend that the Just Transition Team recognize that there is considerable capacity in communities but up to now government agencies have been reluctant to partner with communities. We need a new partnership model to be developed so that we can create vibrant rural communities in the midlands.

The draft Territorial JT Plan references NESC (2021) and 'the importance of recognising the historical and cultural context of places and communities in a just transition process'. Preservation of Bord na Mona Industrial Heritage – we commissioned a report (attached) to highlight the industrial heritage which is being sent for scrap from our bogs. In the wider context it could be beneficial to establish a small group of experts in Industrial Railway history to assist in quantifying the historical importance of the industrial heritage importance of railway items as the railway operations of the Bord wind down

