# INTERNATIONAL RETURN MIGRATION AND RURAL SUSTAINABILITY: IRISH EVIDENCE

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**Abstract:** Population loss through outmigration is recognised as being a major contributor to rural social and economic decline internationally. Against this background, return migration assumes particular importance. Much research on return migration focuses on the economic and social reasons for return. This paper situates these factors within a transnational framework in which links are maintained by the migrant with compatriots in the destination area and the area of origin and return visits are usual. Ireland's migration history makes it an appropriate context for a study of return migration within a transnational framework. The research is based on a sample of 68 returned migrants who left and returned to a place of less than 1500 population in Ireland, in various years between 1947 and 2012. The results illustrate that positive images of growing up in Ireland and a sense of community, kept alive through transnational practices, were influential in stimulating return but that the timing of the event was often facilitated by economic circumstances in Ireland. Contributions were made to local social and economic sustainability but tensions were also present, arising from a need for re-adaptation by the returnees and the communities to which they returned.

**Key words:** Return migration, transnationalism, rural areas, Ireland

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Outmigration is well recognised as being a major contributor to demographic, economic and social decline among rural populations (Stockdale, 2004). Return migration therefore assumes importance as a method of offsetting decline and promoting sustainability of demographic, social and economic structures, particularly when the returnees are in the economically active age groups (Cassarino, 2004; Stockdale, 2006). An extensive social sciences literature conceptualises first-generation return migration to the country of birth (Gmelch, 1980; King, 1986; Cassarino, 2004; Dustmann & Weiss, 2007). Return is recognised as being influenced by the relative economic conditions in the area of origin compared to the area of destination and the personal and psychological capacities of the migrant to adapt to a new environment (Cerase, 1970; Hammerton & Thompson, 2005). In the past decade, increased attention has been given to return migration within a transnational framework (Conway et al., 2009; Vertovec, 2009; Faist, 2013). A widely cited definition of transnationalism is provided by Portes and his co-authors, as being associated with "high intensity of exchanges... and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis" (Portes et al., 1999, p. 219). Such contacts include frequent communication by letter, email and other new information and communication technologies, visits home, and visits by friends and relatives to the migrant in the host society. In developing countries, on-going remittances to family left behind are an important part of transnational links. Transnational practices, as above, although not including return visits (which are central to transnationalism per se) are also recognised. The maintenance of contact in the various waysoutlined means that the migrant lives between two societies and has up-to-date information about social and economic changes in the area of origin (Khagram & Levitt, 2008). This hybrid existence and information base may help in planning and facilitating return (Faist, 2013). Conway et al. (2009), for example, have identified repetitive visiting among youthful Trinidadians overseas as contributing to the permanent return of

some, arising from the continuation of personal contact with relatives and the accumulation of knowledge about the place of origin.

According to Cassarino (2004), return need not be permanent within this framework. It occurs because sufficient benefits are collected overseas and conditions at home are favourable. The establishment of external links may, however, facilitate increased circulation, as noted by Chapman and Prothero (1983) with reference to national and international migration in developing countries. Furthermore, notwithstanding the maintenance of close links with family and friends in the area of origin, re-assimilation in the home society is not always accomplished with ease (Ralph, 2012). Evidence from Ireland suggests that this is particularly the case when return takes place to a rural area, following an extended period of time spent in an overseas urban environment (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008).

This paper seeks to establish: (i) the impact of the links maintained with the area of origin, by migrants from small villages and rural areas in Ireland (population less than 1500), on the decision to return from large urban areas overseas; and (ii) the implications of return for social and economic sustainability in the areas of origin. The reasons for outmigration from and return to rural Ireland have been documented in the past, as have experiences in re-integrating on return, through case study research in particular locations (Gmelch, 1980; McGrath, 1991; Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008). It is also known that Irish migrants maintain close links with their compatriots overseas and their families at home. However, return migration from large cities to rural areas of origin has not been investigated within a framework of transnationalism, in the way that is done here. The paper is based on research relating to sixty-eight migrants who returned to a wide range of places throughout rural Ireland. It identifies broad trends, not evidence for particular villages as such. Before describing the methodology followed and the results, Ireland's appropriateness is discussed as a context in which to investigate the impact of return migration within a transnational framework.

## 2. IRISH RETURN MIGRATION IN CONTEXT

Ireland was a country of net outmigration from the 1840s until the early 1970s when net immigration was recorded for the first time in more than one hundred years (the population declined from some 8 million in 1841 to less than 3 million in 1971). Outmigration was particularly marked from rural areas. Return migration took place, however, even in periods when net outmigration was at its height. Thus, it is estimated that approximately one-quarter of the Irish population in the early 1960s had once lived and worked outside the state (Jackson, 1969). Based on questions in the census of 2011, the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2012) has compiled data on the return of Irish-born persons, who lived outside the state for one year or more, for decennial periods from pre-1950 to 2000 and for 2001-2006 and 2007-2011. Substantial numbers of returnees (in excess of 30 000) were registered for all periods, except pre-1951 and 1951-1960 when economic opportunities were limited in Ireland. Attrition through death must also be taken into account for earlier periods as should the internationally observed tendency for long-distance migrants with children and grandchildren overseas to remain there (Hammerton & Thompson, 2005).

Return was associated with employment growth, arising from new industrialisation, during the early 1970s (Kirwin & Nairn, 1983). Almost 117 446 migrants returned, between 1991 and 2000, and some 75 000 in the following five years, again during periods of rapid economic growth (Sweeney, 2008). The number of returnees was sizable also between 2007 and 2011 (in excess of 47 000 people), notwithstanding the commencement of recession after 2008 (Lunn, 2012). Lunn (2012) attributes these numbers, in part, to the return of children with parents. Young people who had held short-term visas overseas, in Australia, for example, or who had travelled or studied abroad were involved also (Glynn et al., 2014). Britain and the USA (United States of America) remained important migrant destinations but European Union member states emerged after 1970. Return from 'other countries', such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and countries of Asia and Africa, increased since the 1970s also.

Using an in-depth biographical approach, Ní Laoire (2007, 2008) investigated the circumstances surrounding return and re-adaptation to life in western and south western Ireland during the 1990s and the early 2000s among a sample of 33 returnees from British and US cities. They included a range of occupational types, all were aged in their thirties and forties at the time of interview and a majority were married. Ní Laoire (2008) found that return migration was framed within classical counter-urbanisation discourses relating to a rural idyll, intermixed with family and kinship relationships and a desire to bring up children in Ireland. Jones (2003), based on research in western Ireland, also found that many migrants cited non-economic reasons for return but suggested that economic circumstances

facilitated their capacity to put their aspirations into practice. The narratives relating to the experience after return among Ní Laoire's (2007, 2008) sample revealed, on one hand, loneliness associated with coming back to an area from which the migrant may have been absent for an extended period of time and, on the other hand, 'being known' and subject to gossip in small communities. Ralph (2012) has also identified evidence of reluctance among some non-migrants in Irish urban and rural areas to afford a true sense of 'belonging' to recent returnees from the USA.

Whilst these and earlier studies document aspects of return migration to rural Ireland, they do not situate the analysis within a transnational framework, where links are maintained with a rural area of origin, in the way that is done here.

## 3. METHODS

Census data are helpful in establishing patterns of return and may be related to changes in key economic indicators over time but they do not explain fully why outmigration and return take place. Personal interviews are necessary for this purpose. Interview data for the reported study were obtained from a convenience sample of returned migrants. The sample was sourced through second year university geography students, who were studying migration as part of an academic module. The students were required to interview a family member or friend who had migrated from Ireland as an adult in the past, lived abroad (outside the island of Ireland) for one year or more, and returned either permanently or for a period of one year or more before re-migrating (and possible re-returning). They could use their own experience, if it fitted the criteria. An interview schedule was developed and made available to the students. Some interviewees had re-migrated and received and returned the schedule by email; others were interviewed by Skype. Incomplete schedules were not used in the analysis. Careful review of all information took place to ensure that students were not sharing interview data with each other. The students were also required to write a short essay, contextualising the interviewee's experience of migration and return with reference to academic sources.

The return migrant was profiled at first migration and return (gender, age, education, conjugal status) and the following were queried: the reasons for moving initially (and returning); whether migration and return were undertaken alone or with someone else; education or qualifications obtained whilst away; employment status prior to, during migration and after return; and the occupations held. The geography of migration was captured in terms of the actual place moved from, the initial destination, and any onward destination(s). Transnational practices were targeted through questions relating to return visits and media used to contact home. The arenas in which contact took place with Irish people whilst away were queried. Re-migration(s) and re-return(s) were documented using the same variables as above. The schedule included both closed and open questions. Some of the open questions sought information such as the reasons for leaving and returning, which were to be listed in order of importance; in most cases, quite specific and extensive answers were provided. Most respondents provided more than one reason as influencing their decision-making. They also elaborated on the positive and negative features associated with living overseas and in Ireland again. An opportunity was given to comment further on the migration experience and many did so.

The evidence discussed here relates to sixty-eight migrants who left and returned to a village or a rural place with a population of less than 1500 people, often considerably less. In most instances it was the same place. Forty-nine of the interviewees visited during their absence and engaged in transnational practices, such as regular contact with compatriots overseas and family and friends at home; 19 never visited but engaged in transnational practices on a regular basis. As in Hammerton and Thompson's (2005) study of British migrants in Australia, a range of transnational migrant groups and links were involved. These included long-distance migrants in the past, who kept in contact by letter and, rarely, if ever, returned because of the cost of travel, and recent long-distance migrants on short-term working visas who also did not return whilst away and communicated using modern technology. The sample also included shorter-distance migrants to Britain who maintained regular visits and contact. The quantitative data from the interviews were analysed using SPSS and the qualitative information was analysed thematically (Bryman, 2008). The evidence relates to return to a wide range of villages and rural areas throughout Ireland and illustrates some of the ways in which return migrants can contribute to the sustainability of rural society and economy. It presents broad trends, not detail relating to particular places.

## 4. SAMPLE AND MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

### 4.1. Profile

The sample consisted of 64.7% males and 35.3% females, whereas the male-female ratio among

returnees in the census is more evenly balanced. The higher return of males than of females to rural areas is explicable in large part by the opportunities available for males in the construction industry during periods of economic growth in Ireland (Lunn, 2012). Professional, managerial and technical occupational groups were under-represented and manual groups, especially skilled manual employees, were over-represented, by comparison with the 2006 and 2011 censuses of population, reflecting the rural origins of the sample. The returnees included grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and siblings of the interviewers and therefore related to migration and return over an extended period of time, ranging from 1947 until 2012. The average number of years spent away was 8.75 and the range was from 1 to 48 years; the mode was one year, reflecting the presence of one-year migrants to Australia in particular, and the median was 5.5 years. Following classical migration theory, migration overseas first took place when most of the interviewees were in their late teens and early twenties when the economic and psychological costs of moving tend, in general, to be least onerous for the individual (Sjaastad, 1962). Some 36.5% of males and 40% of females migrated overseas for the first time when they were under 20 years of age, 79.6% and 84.3%, respectively, left by the age of 24 and only small numbers migrated for the first time aged 30 or over. Almost three-quarters were single at the time of migration. Less than 20% in both instances held primary education only and related mainly to pre-1966 migrants, who left before free access to second level education became available in Ireland. Higher proportions of females than of males had second level education (62.5% compared with 40.9%) but more of the latter had third level qualifications (although the numbers involved are small and one cannot generalise from the data). Growing levels of migration among third level graduates has been associated with declining employment opportunities during recent years of recession (Glynn et al., 2014). Slightly more females than males were employed at the time of migration (45.8% versus 40.9%) and a higher proportion of females than males were students. A small number of females were accompanying spouses and gave their occupation as 'homemakers'.

The geographical pattern of migration reflects a dominance of the traditional destinations of Britain (for 51.5%) and the USA (for 22.1%) and the growing importance of Australia where one- and two-year visas may be obtained relatively easily. Some 8.8% mentioned a range of other countries. Most migrants moved to a major city (e.g., London, Manchester, Boston, New York, Melbourne, Perth).

Table 1. Reasons for first migration

| First Reason | Rank |
|---|---|
| Unemployed/seeking work | 1 |
| Gain experience/a better job | 2 |
| 'See the world', 'travel' | 3 |
| Second Reason | |
| Unemployed/seeking work | 1 |
| 'See the world', 'travel' | 1 |
| Experience of another country | 3 |

Most respondents provided more than one reason for migration in response to an open question. The first and second most important reasons cited are ranked in table 1 and highlight the priority given to finding employment, because of being unemployed or in unsatisfactory employment, followed by gaining experience or a better job overseas and a desire to travel. The emphasis placed on finding employment is readily understandable because of depressed economic conditions in Ireland prior to 1970, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980, and since 2008.

The main periods of return migration were since the 1990s when the economy began to grow (Tab. 2). The relatively high percentage who returned since 2008 (although the numbers are small – 13 people in total, 11 of whom were male), which is again a period of recession, seems surprising. It is explained, in large part, by the return of younger people on short term working visas from Australia, Canada and the USA and of students from Britain. All except one person had left Ireland since 2008. Two returned to take over farms, five found employment, three returned to college, one to finish training and two cited loneliness and the stress of urban life as motivations.

Table 2. Distribution of returnees by period of migration and return (%) (n=68)

| Time period | Migration (%) | Return (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Pre 1971 | 25.0 | 13.2 |
| 1971-1990 | 33.8 | 16.2 |
| 1991-2000 | 7.4 | 22.1 |
| 2001-2007 | 7.4 | 19.1 |
| 2008 on | 26.4 | 29.4 |

### 4.2. Transnational links and communities

According to Cassarino (2004), living within a transnational context where close contact is maintained with family and friends at home, including through return visits, is conductive to return migration. Remittances, either to support

family or for investment in property, are also a method through which transnational ties are maintained. Only one case of remitting was recorded and related to payment of a mortgage on a home. Research by Conway et al. (2009) illustrates the impacts of transnational ties in facilitating the return of young Trinidadians. Visits home whilst away, amongst the sample of interviewees in the present study, varied from 'never' for 27.9% of those interviewed, to annually for 36.8%, every few months for 17.6% and less frequently for 16.2%. Some 54% returned at least annually to their home area, providing opportunities for renewing contacts and learning about changes in local society and economy. Annual return on holiday is an established feature of life for Irish migrants to Britain (Walter, 2013). Those who never returned included migrants to the USA in the past but recent migrants to Australia on short-term working visas were of particular importance. Even among those who never returned on holiday, links were maintained with Ireland through a range of media, including letters, telephone, email, mobile phone, text messaging and Skype in forms of transnational practice, with more modern communication methods increasing over time.

Irish migrants have a history of maintaining contact with their ethnic group in overseas destinations and such contacts facilitate the transition to a foreign environment (Glynn et al., 2014). There is a network of Irish clubs in traditional migrant-destination cities which provide meeting places and venues for cultural events. Particular bars, often managed by Irish people, become social gathering places and organisations like the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association which organises Gaelic football and hurling teams and competitions), Comhaltas Ceoilteoirí Éireann (a traditional music association) and county associations (representing different counties in Ireland) have played central roles in organising events for diasporic communities in Britain, for example (Kearney, 2007-8). Most of the returnees reported meeting other Irish people in shared accommodation, at work, in pubs, and in social and sporting clubs. Such contacts, combined with cultural practices, are known to have central roles in identity retention among diasporic communities (Blunt, 2007). They are also multiple sources of information about society and economy in the country and area of origin.

### 4.3. Acquisition of 'capital' whilst away

The human and cultural capital that migrants gain, through conjugal relationships and the acquisition of experience, skills and qualifications, have implications for their impacts on returning to the country of origin (Cassarino, 2004). Many of the migrants married whilst away; thus, of 50 people who were single at migration, 36 returned with either a spouse or a spouse and a child or children. Nine returned with a child or children only, some on the break-up of a relationship. They therefore made incremental contributions to the population of the areas of return. Acquiring new work experience was ranked highly as an objective for migrating. Most held skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled occupations before and after migration and gained practical experience and qualifications in related areas such as an HGV (heavy goods vehicle) licence, a diploma in secretarial skills, new work practice as an electrician, qualification as a carpenter, a course in health and food safety, a course in hospitality and bar and restaurant management, and business skills for tradesmen. One-quarter of the total sample migrated to gain a formal university qualification in nursing, speech therapy, civil engineering and sports science, either because the degree in question was not available in Ireland or because of restrictions on the numbers admitted. One man gained a law degree and then went on to become a barrister in the USA. It is clear that personal capital and skills increased through migration and this capital was brought back to the area of origin. In many instances, economic capital was also brought back for investment in housing. Such importations of capital of different types are sources of support for the sustainability of society and economy in the area to which the migrant returns.

## 5. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

### 5.1. Reasons for return

A small number of people spent their entire working lives away from Ireland but, in general, relatively short periods of time were involved. Some 32.4% returned before they reached 24 years of age, almost 30% between 25 and 29 years old, 17.6% between the ages of 30 and 34, and 20.6% were aged 35 or older. Only two of the latter were aged over sixty years, with the result that there were few retirees in the sample. The year of return varied from 1954 to 2010. The 2000s was the period of highest return, followed by the 1990s (Tab. 2). The periods of return, except post-2008 which has been discussed above, coincided with phases of growth in the Irish economy (Lunn, 2012). Positive exchange

rates in favour of sterling against the Irish punt, of at least 10% and considerably more in some years, between 1997 and 2002 (when Ireland introduced the euro), may have had some influence on the return of families and older people, by facilitating house purchase at that time. From 2002 until 2008, the economy and house prices were growing rapidly in Ireland (Sweeney, 2008), although a positive exchange rate of some 30% in favour of sterling would have moderated prices for a purchaser from Britain. Following the recession of 2008 house prices fell rapidly. No respondent cited the exchange rate as a reason for return, however, so it is difficult to relate the return of these particular migrants to the impacts of exchange rates on property prices. The reasons for return, given in response to an open question, are classified according to those cited in first and second place and they are ranked in order in table 3.

Social factors were listed before economic factors as first reasons for return, contrasting with the reasons for migration where unemployment dominated. "Missing family and friends" or "to be close to family and friends" were cited both by younger migrants who had spent one or two years overseas and migrants who spent longer periods of time away and were returning with a spouse and children. The importance of returning to family and friends resonates with the maintenance of regular contact and making return visits. Return to family and friends was associated with a remembered sense of sociability and belonging that was lacking in the host area and that was renewed through regular visits whilst away. In the words of a woman who came back with her spouse and children in 1996, having spent sixteen years in London, "London did not feel like home". A young male engineer (aged 25) who returned in 2012, after two years in Australia, said that he "missed the sense of being known" in Melbourne.

Table 3. Reasons for return migration in rank order (n=68)

| First Reason | Rank |
|---|---|
| Missed family and friends | 1 |
| Raise/educate children in Ireland | 2 |
| Employment opportunity available | 3 |
| Family obligations | 4 |
| Second Reason | |
| Employment opportunity available | 1 |
| To be close to family | 2 |
| Raise/educate children in Ireland | 3 |
| Homesick | 4 |

Return visits and close contact with family and friends also increased awareness of economic growth in Ireland, improved living conditions and employment opportunities. A microbiologist, who returned from San Francisco with his spouse in 1992, having spent nine years there, said that "previous visits encouraged return". Many respondents referred to being aware of growth in the Irish economy during the early 2000s and improved employment prospects. Some of this knowledge may have come from media reports on high rates of GDP growth in Ireland but family members were also sources of information about employment; a woman who returned in 2001, having lived in London since 1983, reported that her brother had let her know that there were many jobs being advertised. Job offers were also received. An unmarried builder, aged 55, who had worked in Coventry, England, since 1969, returned in 2005, because he was "offered a job in (his) home area", revealing the maintenance of links with the construction sector in his area of origin. Although not ranked in first place, the availability of employment during periods of growth in the Irish economy made it possible for migrants who wished to return to family and friends and a less urbanised way of life to do so. Many of the male migrants worked in the construction industry and a boom in construction accompanied economic growth between 1998 and 2008 (Sweeney, 2008). Employment for females in nursing, office work and the hospitality sector also increased at this time.

Family obligations were cited by a small number of returnees and related to caring for an elderly parent or parents, or taking over a family farm. Some younger migrants returned to continue their education in Ireland or because a work visa had expired.

The importance attributed to living and bringing up children in a home community points to the idyllic image of rurality held by some Irish migrants, as noted by Ní Laoire (2007, 2008); this feature is recorded also by Hammerton and Thompson (2005) among some British migrants in Australia. Thus, a farmer, who moved from a small village in western Ireland to San Francisco in 1983, where he worked as a stonemason, before qualifying as an engineer, returned in 1996, to be closer to his elderly parents but also because he wanted to raise his twin sons "in a peaceful environment where crime statistics and desolate poverty were low – as I had seen a lot of this in my years living abroad". He said that the improved economy made it possible for him to return. A woman who returned with her spouse and child from London in 1982 referred to wishing to "raise (their) child in Ireland" and to

"Ireland being a safer place". Another woman returned from London in 2001 "to be close to family back in Ireland and to have a strong social circle and environment in which to raise my child". Whilst these quotes emphasise the perceived benefits of living in an idyllic rural Ireland, they also highlight negative aspects of life in the urban areas where the migrants lived. High density housing, lack of green space and crime, which were tolerated by adults because of the economic benefits associated with employment, became less acceptable for their children. There was, therefore, an anti-urban as well as a pro-rural dimension to return.

Associated with the idyllic image of rural Ireland was the value placed on education which the migrant had received in a rural or small school and the desire to have this same experience for their child or children. A woman, who returned in 1974, having spent twenty years living in Leeds, said that her husband had bought a farm and "it seemed like the correct time to move home, as the children would be starting school". A barman who left a small village, aged 24 in 1994, came back from Boston in 2004 with his partner, because their child was of school going age and he "wanted him to go to school in Ireland". The return was made possible by the availability of employment and his wife intended to become involved in a family accommodation business. Another interviewee cited returning from London with her spouse and child, to their Gaelic-speaking area of origin in 1996, because their "eldest child (was) about to start school, and (she) wanted the children to have the Irish language". Her spouse had found employment locally so that "it was possible to survive". The cultural importance of the Irish language was central to the decision to return in this case, although financial sacrifices may have been made.

## 5.2. Contributions to rural social and economic sustainability

Return migration contributes to the demographic structure of the areas to which people come back. In the present study a majority of the returnees were in the working age groups and therefore they helped offset ageing profiles and contributed to the sustainability of population locally. It is possible that some younger people made only temporary contributions to local populations in their home areas, because of planning to continue their education or find work which may have involved movement elsewhere. Those who had children contributed to the numbers attending local primary schools and may have helped to retain schools in areas where attendance had declined and the schools were at risk of closure (Brereton et al., 2011). Many returned to take up employment opportunities that were available in their area of origin or its environs and their earning contributed to the economic capital available locally. None referred to resentment of their taking up jobs, when asked about difficulties that were experienced, which suggests that the local workforce had become depleted and that demand for certain types of labour exceeded supply. Young single people often returned to their family homes, whereas most families built or purchased houses.

Three returnees referred to establishing a business in their area of origin. One 25 year old unmarried man returned, in 1974, from Northampton in England, where he had worked in construction for eight years, to over the running of the family farm because his father was ill. He later established a farm contracting business providing services such as silage cutting to other farmers. An employed assistant mechanic moved, aged 20 in 2003, to attend a higher education institution in England. He returned to his rural area of origin, unmarried in 2007, with an honours degree in furniture design and craftsmanship, to build a house and set up his own business, but found the local people "old fashioned and stuck in their ways. Not very open minded to new ideas". After three years, by which time the economy was in recession, he migrated again to the area in England where he had received his qualifications where there was "better money and guaranteed work". A female returnee left her home village on the fringe of a regional city in 1993, unemployed at age 21, and moved to London where she worked as a waitress. She obtained a qualification in bar and restaurant management and came back with her spouse in 2003 to start her own hospitality business. Limited employment for others was provided by these returnees. Nevertheless, they provide examples of human (and financial capital in the last case) accumulated whilst abroad being used to contribute to the economic infrastructure of the area to which they returned. Other returnees who were tradesmen (in the construction sector) contributed to the range of services available locally. Many returnees, however, lived in the countryside and commuted to work in larger places.

Four interviewees came back specifically to take over the running of the family farm, in two instances because of the illness of a father who also needed care. In two other cases the family farm was being inherited. Thus, an electrician who returned with his girlfriend from Australia in 2010, having spent two years there, said that he did so because the

"family farm and property were left (to me) and provided financial security". Three single women and two married men referred to returning to care for an elderly or ill parent or parents. They made contributions to the well-being of their parents and probably helped to reduce dependence on social services.

Returnees also made contributions to local social life. When asked about what they enjoyed most about living again in Ireland younger respondents in particular referred to socialising with friends, such as "being able to go to the local pub with old friends and going to GAA matches", indicating contributions being made to the sustainability of social life in local communities. This may, of course, be on a temporary basis if they have to move elsewhere for education or employment.

International evidence and that for Ireland illustrates that return migration within a context of transnationalism is not necessarily permanent (Constant & Zimmermann, 2011). Twelve of the sixty-eight respondents re-migrated from Ireland after their return, six of whom remained overseas at the time of the interview. The transnational experience opened up opportunities for return to the area of migration with which links were maintained, as noted by deBree et al. (2010) and Ralph (2014) in other contexts. Six of these migrants came back later to their area of origin to live.

Whilst many migrants cited missing family and friends as reasons for returning to an area of origin, difficulties were experienced in settling in again. Unanticipated changes were reported by middle aged and older returnees which points to a need for re-adaptation on their part as well as on the part of the receiving communities. Some referred to a loss of friendliness in their home communities which they attributed to economic growth in Ireland, housing development and in-migration of new people. A man who had been away for twelve years in New York and returned with his fiancée in 2001 said that people were less friendly and "so busy that they never have time to stop at the side of the road any more to talk". Other difficulties were experienced more generally. The expectations of the returnees in relation to basic services and public transport, having lived in large cities, were often not met. Younger people often missed friends whom they had made when living overseas and found that many of their own age group had migrated, resulting in loneliness. Some who, for financial reasons, had to move back to live with their parents found this restrictive following the independence experienced whilst away. Some also referred to gossip and older

behavioural norms which they found irksome. A man whose marriage broke up following return and who migrated again to New York pointed out that it was possible to "make your own life and identity in New York (which was) very different from the countryside... in relation to traditional ways of living". Thus, whilst population growth may take place and contributions are made to economic well being, social tensions may arise as returnees seek to establish acceptance within the communities from which they moved in the past.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

First generation return migration within a transnational framework has been documented with reference to the Caribbean, in particular (Conway et al., 2009). This paper sought to add to the literature by discussing return migration to places of less than 1500 population in Ireland and the impacts for social and economic sustainability.

Return was found to be motivated by personal and social factors which are closely linked to living within a transnational framework: (i) enduring connections with family and friends across national boundaries; (ii) a sense of being part of a minority whilst away which served to increase the desire for familiarity associated with the place of origin; (iii) an idyllic vision of rural Ireland as a more desirable environment than a large city for children to grow up in; and (iv) a desire for children to be educated in Ireland. The role of an idyllic imaginary of Ireland combined with close kinship links corroborates earlier findings by Ní Laoire (2007, 2008). Sentiments of anti-urbanism were also expressed. The capacity to return was closely linked to the state of the Irish and the local economy for most migrants, particularly those who returned with a spouse and a child or children. Some returned on the termination of a work visa or an educational course, others out of a sense of family responsibility to care for parents or take over the running of a farm.

The impacts of return migration in contributing to the sustainability of rural society and economy emerging from the research are fivefold. First, return migration clearly contributed to population numbers in the areas of origin, some of which continued to experience outmigration. Families with children added to the numbers attending rural schools and may have help to avoid the closure of some schools. Second, incomes increased as a result of return of the economically active and expenditure took place through the purchase or building of houses. Expenditure on services may have been less than potentially possible

where service structures were depleted. Third, the range of skills available locally was enhanced and small numbers established businesses or contributed to the maintenance of family farms. Fourth, some returnees provided parental support. Finally, all referred to renewing acquaintance with family and friends and taking part in social life in the areas of return.

Because of a lack of adequate employment and income and limited opportunities to attain their career goals, some returnees re-migrated to the areas where they had lived previously, highlighting the importance of considering return within a context of circulation and transnational practices (Chapman & Prothero, 1983; Cassarino, 2004; Constant & Zimmermann, 2011). Furthermore, half of those who re-migrated came back at a later stage when employment opportunities improved again in Ireland or to support their ageing parents.

Notwithstanding positive memories of the sense of 'community' in the area of origin and the quality of education provided, difficulties sometimes arose in readapting to living in these areas. A lack of friendliness was noted because of increased work pressure and immigration to urban fringe areas. Some returnees found more traditional social mores restrictive and felt that they were subject to gossip. These tensions illustrate the social distance that emerges between many migrants and the families and communities that they leave, even when living within a transnational context. Return, therefore, requires adaptation on the part of returnees and of the reception communities, if social tension is to be avoided.

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