

Lot 29:1 (Mayo Islands) South West Mayo Development Company

'Grow Community' – Clare Island Community Polyunnel.

SICAP Theme:

Grow Community – Clare Island Community Polyunnel, SWMDC SICAP Mayo Islands' case study is **Goal 1** project.

Thematic area

Promote community engagement and stronger communities

Target group

Island communities (LCDC emerging needs group)

In a nutshell ... summary

The Mayo Islands (Lot 29-1) is a unique and diverse Lot, containing nine inhabited islands off the coast of county Mayo. These islands are spread across Clew Bay and along the Atlantic coast. Each island has a distinct character with associated needs and challenges.

This case study focuses on Clare Island, the largest and most populous island in the Lot, and its polyunnel project, which has developed significantly in 2020 with SICAP support. This project is particularly worth highlighting in 2020 as it illustrates the precariousness of food supply lines to the islands and the impact of COVID restrictions on a fragile island community.

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Background – what is the problem that SWMDC was trying to solve and why?



Clare Island (Image courtesy of <http://www.clareisland.ie>)



Clare Island Community Polytunnel

The Clare Island Community Polytunnel is in existence since 2014 and is managed through the Clare Island Community Employment (CE) scheme, sponsored by Cliara Development Company. The Community Polytunnel is on a site which was donated to the community project. It is close to the school, the church, and the Post Office/Shop. It is central within the community, accessible to locals and visitors alike. Primary school children help in the polytunnel with projects that complement their learning.

In 2020 the polytunnel, and its fresh locally grown produce, which enabled the growing of fresh produce in the community, helped to ensure fresh vegetables for islanders during COVID19. However, the polytunnel needs to withstand strong weather conditions, and is fortified by ropes and netting to ensure that it does not tear, break, or blow away. By 2020, the covering for the polytunnel was overdue for replacement, and this is where SICAP support was so valuable.

The Community Polytunnel site consists of a small section of outdoor beds for flowers and herbs, raised beds, and the polytunnel itself. The weather conditions on Clare Island, as on any other offshore island in the Atlantic Ocean, makes growing a constant struggle. For households without polytunnels, the option to grow fresh fruit and vegetables is very limited.

Inside the Community Polytunnel there are vegetables, herbs, plants, and bedding plants growing. The produce from the polytunnel enables islanders supplement their weekly groceries with green herbs, salad, and vegetables. The flowers are used in window boxes and welcome boxes around the community centre, the abbey, the church, school and waiting area, to help with the Tidy Islands Competition efforts, and to make the island as attractive as possible for visitors and locals like.

In March 2020, COVID19 quickly took hold in Ireland, and restrictions to movement were brought in and enforced. These restrictions posed significant challenges for islanders, and new systems devised quickly to ensure that each household on Clare Island had access to essential groceries. Caroline Healy, the SWMDC SICAP Islands Development Officer, worked with Cliara Development Office to create these new systems. No-one travelled to the mainland, and groceries were ordered centrally

from Westport on a weekly basis, before being transported to Roonagh pier, outside of Louisburgh, to the ferry, and then into households.

The community polytunnel became another means way of ensuring that fresh, nutritious vegetables are available to all in the community, thus reducing the ‘food miles’ incurred in transporting vegetables to Clare Island and reducing the reliance of islanders on produce from the mainland.



Clare Island Community Polytunnel raised beds.



Clare Island Polytunnel with the CE participant Lindsey McCabe and Ingrid Foley from Leitrim Organic Centre.

What did SICAP support look like and what added benefit did it provide?

Each year, Caroline Healy oversees a Small Grants Scheme for the Mayo Islands under SWMDC SICAP. In 2020 a small grant was of €484.00 approved to purchase a new polythene cover for the Clare Island Community Polytunnel.

The CE supervisor also requested support in up-skilling the CE staff. In response to this, Caroline sourced a suitably skilled mentor from Leitrim Organic Centre to work with the CE staff on the development of the polytunnel site. Once the COVID travel restrictions eased, this mentor travelled out to Clare Island to work directly with the CE staff. This mentoring was funded through SWMDC SICAP.

Mary Agnes O’Malley, the Clare Island CE Scheme Coordinator, provided the following insight into the benefit of SWMDC SICAP support:

The Community Polytunnel was set up 6 years ago. The project is fortunate to date to have participants who were steeped with the knowledge of planting flowers and vegetables. CE participants find working in the Poly Tunnel challenging but rewarding.

Over time, and due to location, the tunnel cover became damaged. Receiving grant approval from SWMDC has enabled us to purchase a new cover, this will get us right back on track with production. The assistance from SICAP for training adds another level of expertise to the CE staff as well as boosting their confidence.

This type of collaboration in the community is vital, making all the organisations pull together to ensure good quality project delivery.



Clare Island Community Polytunnel plastic in need of replacement.



Clare Island Community Polytunnel, volunteers hard at work

Brendan Tobin, Cliara Development Coordinator, further emphasised the importance of this support during COVID, adding

This project has enabled the purchase and repair of the Island community Polytunnel, a major source of fresh vegetables for the island community, which is proving ever more important during the pandemic.

What are the outputs and outcomes from this project?

The polytunnel produces an abundance of fresh vegetables, herbs, salad leaves and flowers. As the winter approaches, this is vital for the community, especially when travel to the mainland becomes more difficult. The mentoring support received by the CE staff has proved extremely beneficial. CE staff are now planning a compost area and to enhance the raised beds.

All groups on Clare Island are aware of the increased threat to mental health and wellbeing due to the additional isolation caused by COVID19. Opening times for community volunteers have been created to provide an opportunity for islanders to engage in meaningful activities.

Projects with the school children have been planned and are in train. The children have missed out on several months of in school projects, as well as the summer camps and events. There will be no outside facilitators this term due to Department of Education guidelines. The opportunity to do a project in the polytunnel will add much-needed variety to the children's learning.

Jane O'Toole, a CE participant working in the polytunnel, shared her experience for this case study:

Working in the community polytunnel has been a wonderful experience. Not only from the growing aspect but you have the social interaction with people as well. You have the island people calling for veg or a pot flower, maybe to plant a window box. Then you have the

tourists paying a visit. They like to sample what we grow and gain information about this tunnel and how it works. From the growing side I have learned a lot about soil temperature, soil quality, companion planting. What plants grow best in full sun and what likes shade. How to grow flowers and plants so they enhance one another.

Each year from February onwards we supply our community with salad and all kinds of green veg, tomato plants, peppers, cucumbers, marrows, and beetroot. We had a great harvest of strawberries and grapes as well as pumpkins. We also like to involve the school children in sowing seeds and learn how they grow and what the end result is. We also do a lot of flowers to enhance our community. Window boxes, potted flowers for the school, church community centre and the private homes of residents. A community polytunnel is very important for our community.

What is the future for *Grow Community*?

It is hoped that the polytunnel will continue to produce green produce for the remainder of the year. A grow schedule and rotation plan has been put in place with the assistance of the SICAP-funded tutor from Leitrim Organic Centre, and this will ensure winter salad and herbs.

St. Patrick's Primary School, Clare Island will partner with the polytunnel on a school project for the children and we hope to see long lasting benefits and projects on foot of this. It is planned that a new CE member join the project, and there will be several openings for volunteers within the community to work within the polytunnel and gain skills.

In the spring of 2021, it is hoped to have a tutor return to provide the next step in polytunnel planting and maintenance. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill towards the garden. In all senses, it is a community-led and community driven initiative. The need for the garden was identified by the community, land was donated by the community and the community comes together to maintain it. Most importantly, the community benefits from the garden as a productive activity and this was never more important than during COVID. SWMDC looks forward to working with this group under SICAP in 2021.