



Collaborative Communities: Co-Operation among Rural Municipalities - Insights from Spain.

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This case study on the *Mancomunidades* is based on field research undertaken in Spain in 2009/2010 by Dr. Brendan O’Keeffe, a Lecturer in the Geography Department at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, and a research affiliate of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (see Appendix I). Other members of the study team include John Driscoll, ICLRD Director and Kendra Leith of the Institute for International Urban Development.

This ICLRD case study, developed in part with funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), is one of a series of international case studies on cross-border and inter-jurisdictional planning reports by the ICLRD, all of which can be downloaded from www.iclrd.org

Acknowledgements

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) would like to thank all those who have contributed to the development of the case study on Mancomunidades in Spain. The Spanish National Rural Development Network (REDR) and the Asturian Rural Development Network (READER) provided invaluable support in enabling the fieldwork for this project. The Coordinator of READER, Ms. Yolanda Diez played a very valuable role in providing background documentation, and in liaising between the researcher and the various mancomunidades. Special thanks are due to the chairpersons, directors and staff of the mancomunidades for their keen and open participation in this project, and for their willingness to share information and experiences.

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Background

This case study is on the *Mancomunidades* in Spain, where associations of local authorities, working within functional regions, cooperate among themselves to deliver services. The case study offers practical insights and best practices for the ongoing governance reforms in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

In Spain, this voluntary association of municipalities, with the core objective of providing services, offers an alternative means of promoting bi-lateral and multi-lateral cooperation among groups of local governments. Furthermore, the existence of a legal framework to facilitate this inter-municipal collaboration, and the support provided by upper tier regional government, provides a means to cluster the delivery of services within 'micro-regions' and link to larger sectoral policy and funding initiatives.

In Northern Ireland, the delay in implementing the Review of Public Administration (RPA) has resulted in an alternative programme being promoted by the local governments themselves; that being the Information Collaboration and Efficiency (ICE) Programme. In the Republic of Ireland, local government reform to assist in delivering local services is also high on the agenda of both central and local governments. For both jurisdictions, this Spanish case study offers lessons in linking central, regional and local government funding, physical assets and human resources.

This research compliments other work being undertaken by the ICLRD in the area of governance and planning reform. This research is being undertaken as part of the INTERREG-funded CroSPlan Initiative. Three other reports prepared to date by the ICLRD, and focusing on governance and planning reform in the context of the island of Ireland and internationally, include:

- *All Change But Any alignment? The Impact of the Proposed Governance and Planning Reforms Across the Island of Ireland on Inter-Jurisdictional Planning* (June 2010);
- *Regional Planning in the Boston Metropolitan Area* (October 2010) ; and
- *The Basel Metropolitan Area: Three Borders - One Metropolitan Area* (December 2010).

Together the three cases provide practitioners, policy makers and academics involved in cross-border and inter-jurisdictional cooperation with practical examples of how cooperation in local and regional development can be shaped by collaborative efforts.

Together, these case studies provide examples of how territorial cooperation in a cross-border context can support future E.U. policies which are emphasising ‘place-based strategies’ that can ‘supply bundles of integrated public goods and services’ (*EU 2020 Strategy* and the *Barca Report*). The cases illustrate a range of practices, structures and projects that rely more on a bottom-up approach among local governments that can be supported by central and E.U. funding mechanisms.

These cases are part of the ICLRD’s efforts to improve local government capacity as local councils take on an increasing role in promoting their development, in partnership with central government agencies, cross-border bodies, civil society and the private sector.

Introduction

Since the adoption of a democratic constitution 1978, Spain has progressively evolved into one of Europe's most decentralised states, and one which exhibits high levels of vibrancy in local and regional development. Most studies of devolution and territorial organisation in Spain focus on political processes and decision-making structures at regional level, and these note the generally positive economic and social benefits that have resulted from the granting of autonomy to the regions (known as autonomous communities), and in particular to the four autonomous communities of Euzkera (the Basque Country), Galicia, Catalonia and Andalusia (Committee of the Regions, 2004).

Spain offers an interesting example of advancing regionalisation, while strengthening municipal government and local democracy (GRALE, 2009). Rather than seeking to amalgamate municipalities, the central government and regional authorities have facilitated inter-municipal collaboration. Municipalities have promoted mechanisms to enable collaboration, the most popular being the *mancomunidad*. This endogenous and voluntary association of municipalities is well-established throughout Spain, and the formation of mancomunidades has accelerated over the past two decades; there are now over 950, compared to just 67 in 1975.

This study looks at the structure, formation, delineation, and roles of mancomunidades. It assesses their actual and potential contributions to territorial planning and rural development, and it considers lessons that can be drawn for the island of Ireland. Additionally, this report provides an account of mancomunidades for two regions of Spain, Asturias on the north coast and Extremadura in the west, which shares a border with Portugal. Extremadura is the most rural region in Spain, and exhibits many of the structural weaknesses evident in the more rural parts of Ireland's border corridor. Asturias has a sustained tradition in inter-municipal collaboration, and its mancomunidades are long-established relative to those in other regions. Moreover, there are parallels between the island of Ireland and Asturias in respect to issues associated with spatial planning, balanced intra-regional development and rural economic diversification.

This case is also directly relevant to the emerging collaborations between district councils in Northern Ireland and among local authorities in the Republic. Local councils throughout Ireland are increasingly seeking to form linkages with neighbouring authorities, so as to promote greater efficiencies in the utilisation of resources, while optimising service delivery. This represents a new

departure in local government on the island, and experiences from Asturias provide pointers in respect of bottom-up approaches to local authority collaboration.

Mancomunidades — an Overview

The term ‘mancomunidad’ refers, in a legal sense, to a voluntary association or coming together of municipalities where the municipalities voluntarily delegate functions and competencies to the association. Municipalities are the smallest and most localised unit of government, and the formation of a mancomunidad generally requires the participating municipalities adjoin each other. The municipalities must also agree on clear objectives and terms of operation. The new entity has an independent budget and financial autonomy from the participating bodies. The municipalities themselves continue to exist and retain competencies in line with mancomunidad formation agreements. Thus, rather than being subsumed into a superior authority, municipalities become partners in a collaborative structure.

A mancomunidad is considered as a discrete legal entity in respect of the functions ascribed to it. They may exist for a defined timeframe or indefinitely, depending on the terms agreed by the constituting municipalities. Therefore, mancomunidades represent a formal mechanism for horizontal cooperation and the attainment of inter-jurisdictional collaboration at the local level. The creation of such structures, while initiated and steered from the bottom-up, has been enabled and strengthened by legislation put in place at national level and by the autonomous communities for regional tier of government.

The bottom-up impetus towards the formation of mancomunidades has been motivated by a desire to improve service delivery to citizens by pooling resources to realise more cost-effective service delivery. Owing to their successes in this respect, mancomunidades have progressively become involved in rural development, social inclusion and territorial planning (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al, 2005). The number of municipalities participating in mancomunidades has grown accordingly. In central and northern Spain, the four Autonomous Communities of Castilla y Leon, Castilla La Mancha and Asturias have the longest traditions in the operation of mancomunidades. These associations have also developed in other Spanish localities.

A Framework for Inter-Municipal Collaboration

Spain's legislative and political contexts are conducive to promoting strong local governance and collaboration both within and between tiers of government. Article 141.3 of the Constitution provides for the creation of supra-municipal authorities, while article 148 confers competencies on the regional governments (Comunidades Autónomas) to promote local governance structures. For example, in the Autonomous Community of Extremadura located on the border with Portugal, the regional government enacted enabling legislation in 2006 and has advanced mancomunidades as important actors in rural development. Furthermore, the Regional Ministry for Rural Development acted as a facilitator in bringing municipalities together.

In some instances, most notably in Autonomous Communities of Castilla y León and Castilla La Mancha, mancomunidades have brought together municipalities from more than one province, thereby giving effect to two forms of inter-jurisdictional collaboration – inter-municipal and inter-provincial.

In tandem with regionalisation, there are other factors that have encouraged the formation of mancomunidades, these include:

- Local Agenda 21 programmes and the emergence of development agencies;
- EU Community Initiatives (LEADER, EQUAL, INTERREG and URBAN); and
- Regional government emphasis on territorial (sub-regional) planning.

Figure 1: Political Sub-Divisions of Spain – Regions and Provinces



(Source: Adapted from AdoraHomes, <http://www.adorahomes.co.uk/>)

The combination of enabling legislation, development programmes that address environmental improvements that cross municipal boundaries, and a greater understanding that service delivery can be improved through cooperation have encouraged municipalities to voluntarily enter into a mancomunidad. Thus, while national and regional legislation provide for inter-municipal collaboration, there is no prescribed formula, and to date, the processes of mancomunidad delineation and formation have been varied, and are characterised by a high degree of flexibility (see Table 1).

Table 1: Public Administration Structure in Spain

Level of Government	Governing Style	Responsibility
Central	Power has been de-centralised in Spain. While some commentators contend that membership of the EU and the trends towards inter-governmentalism have started to bring power back to the centre, others note that regional development policy and interventions such as INTERREG give increased scope to Spain's regions.	Foreign policy; Labour (unemployment and social security benefits); security (police and armed forces); infrastructure (national roads and waterways, ports, and coasts); fiscal and monetary policy; health and education (in regions where these responsibilities have not been devolved)
Regional (Autonomous)	17 <i>comunidades autónomas</i> ; the central government has devolved more power to some regions than others but the trend is towards gradual homogeneity; unicameral legislative body	Social programmes (health, education) in some regions; central government issues basic policy, and regional government develops it to specific needs (i.e. transportation, economic development and environmental policy.)
Provincial Deputation	50 provinces, established in 1833. Limited competencies after creation of autonomous communities.	Assist and complement municipalities; focus on limited number of services such as hospitals and provincial roads
Municipal	8,000 plus municipalities. Parliamentary style – citizens elect municipal council, which elects a mayor. The mayor appoints a board of governors from his party.	Municipal police, traffic enforcement, urban planning and development, social services, municipal taxes, civil defence
Inter-Jurisdictional Bodies	Mancomunidades (over 900) Horizontal cooperation in providing services among municipalities Comarcas —compulsory associations of municipalities under regional law. Consortorios —association of municipalities, provincial, regional and central government bodies; can also include private organisations. Metropolitan areas —local entities of local governments within built-up urban areas.	Municipal services (Table 4) Judicial and administrative functions Usually single-purpose organisations e.g. economic promotion, cultural promotion, water supply. Urban planning and the management of spaces.

(Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *Managing Across Levels of Government: Spain*. 1997 and *Local Government in Spain*, Ministry of Public Administration and Comisión de Planeamiento y Coordinación del Área Metropolitana de Madrid).

Evolution and Distribution of Mancomunidades

In a similar vein to the emergence of partnership initiatives in Ireland during the 1980s and early 1990s (O’Keeffe and Douglas, 2009), Spain’s mancomunidades represent a response to perceived gaps in the structure and remit of local government. While the Spanish state had, since the first Statutes of Autonomy in 1981, devolved power to regions and consolidated the powers of municipalities, the strength of intermediary tiers of governance was variable. Where sub-regional (and supra-municipal) units, such as comarcas¹ were strongest, for example in Catalonia, the push towards the formation of mancomunidades has been less extensive than in other regions. In the region of Aragón, the formation of mancomunidades, rather than being an end in itself, led to the fusion of municipalities into newly formed comarcas (local government districts). While mancomunidades generally involve a coming together of municipal-level actors exclusively, there have been some variations on this model; most notably in Andalucía where some also involve participation by representatives of the provincial governments (of Jaén and Almería). Thus, while national and regional legislation provide for inter-municipal collaboration, there is no prescribed formula, and to date, the processes of mancomunidad delineation and formation have been varied and are characterised by a high degree of flexibility.

Although inter-municipal collaboration has been a feature of local government in Spain since the Middle Ages, the 1985 legislation (Ley de Bases de Régimen Local) has been the main catalyst for their expansion. In 1985, there were 161 mancomunidades in Spain, which involved less than 15% of all municipalities. Today, over 75% of municipalities participate in a mancomunidad. As Table 2 shows, mancomunidades are prevalent throughout Spain, and coverage is most extensive in the north and west of the country. The variations in size and scale across the regions provide evidence of the flexibility associated with mancomunidades. Some municipalities have joined relatively large entities with up to fifteen authorities involved, while in other cases, the number of participating municipalities can be as few as three. The national average is nine².

¹ A comarca is a unit of sub-regional and sub-provincial territory. A number of the larger and more populous Comunidades Autónomas (autonomous communities / NUTS II Regions) are sub-divided into Provincias (provinces), and these are in turn sub-divided into Comarcas. Comarcas have limited competencies; they are territorial divisions (for judicial and administrative functions), rather than units of government, except in Catalonia, and their delineation is largely based on historical boundaries that pre-date parliamentary democracy in Spain.

² An interactive map of mancomunidades by province is available at:
<http://www.dgal.map.es/cgi-bin/webapb/webdriver?MIval=mancprov>.

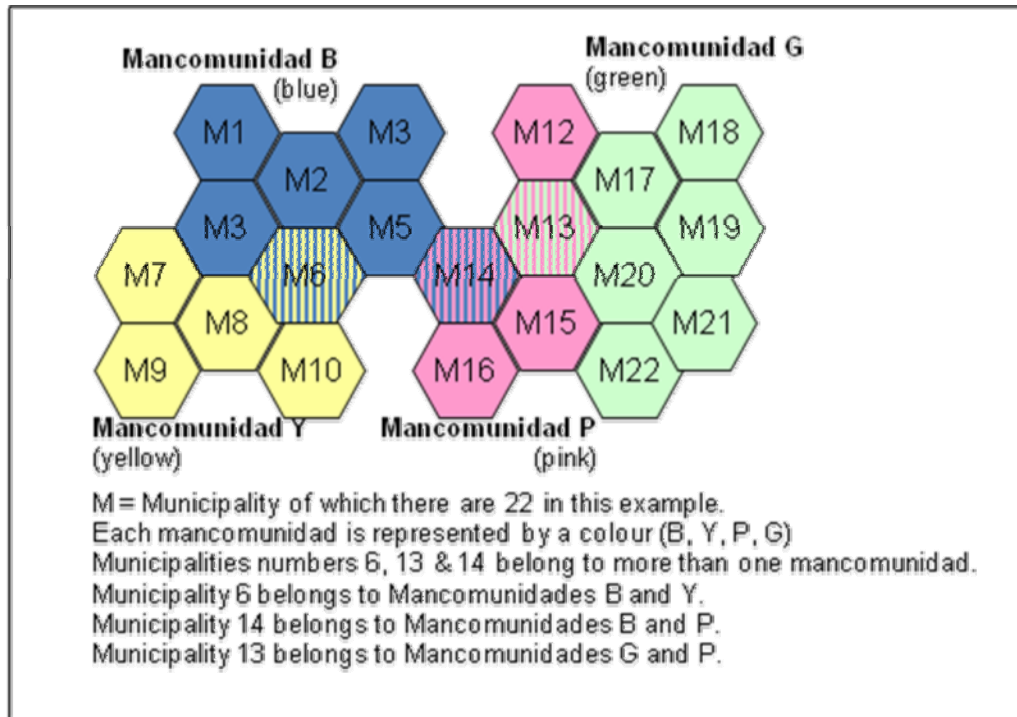
Table 2: Regional Participation in and Composition of Mancomunidades

Comunidad Autónoma (Region)	Number of Municipalities	% of Municipalities in a Mancomunidad	Number of Mancomunidades	Average Number of Municipalities per Mancomunidad
Andalucía	766	62.3	89	8.7
Aragón	729	65.8	73	8.3
Asturias	78	83.3	19	5.0
Baleares	67	62.7	7	6.3
Cantabria	102	61.8	17	5.6
Castilla-La Mancha	2,248	87.3	126	8.8
Castilla y León	915	89.2	232	11.1
Catalunya	946	38.8	59	7.1
Canarias	87	44.8	10	4.5
Extremadura	382	97.0	32	6.8
Galicia	313	68.4	42	6.2
La Rioja	183	59.0	16	10.7
Madrid	178	87.6	48	6.0
Murcia	45	68.8	10	3.7
Navarra	265	99.2	62	9.5
País Vasco (Basque Country)	247	79.8	41	10.0
Valencia	539	74.6	63	9.6
Spain	8,090	76%	937	8.8

(Source: Adapted from Figueras et al. (2005) and own correspondence with regional authorities (Gerentes de Desarrollo Rural), 2009/ 2010).

The following diagram (Figure 2) seeks to represent the way in which mancomunidades are constituted – usually by a clustering of adjoining municipalities. As the diagram also shows, a minority of municipalities may belong to more than one mancomunidad, with membership generally being motivated by similar socio-economic profiles, a common or shared landscape and complementary development objectives. In the cases of dual or multiple mancomunidad membership, a municipality may collaborate with its neighbours to deliver one particular service, while it may collaborate with another set of municipalities to deliver another service.

Figure 2: Indicative Structures of Mancomunidades



In rural development, municipalities may work together on spatial planning or in promoting social inclusion actions. This is particularly the case in Asturias, Navarra, Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha and in the Basque Country (Galdos Urrutia, 2005). Indeed, over 10% of all municipalities in the Basque Country belong to three or more mancomunidades. Participation in multiple mancomunidades is more prevalent in rural areas, and in the case of the Basque Country, Galdos Urrutia (ibid.) observes a positive correlation between the low population density and the number of mancomunidades in which a municipality participates.

The Functional Remit of Mancomunidades

Mancomunidades provide an extensive range of local services that are either compulsory on the part of local governments or undertaken on their own initiative. Their over-riding goal is to improve the quality of services for the citizen, and to provide greater efficiencies relative to what is possible when a municipality acts alone. The types of services provided at the level of the mancomunidad vary – another indication of flexibility. The most common areas of action are sanitation and health, education, employment promotion, maintenance of public spaces (parks, gardens and cemeteries), water distribution and conservation, waste collection and management and electrical connections.

Table 3 outlines the activities in which mancomunidades are involved. Many of the functions listed in the table are classically identified with local government, such as infrastructure provision and area planning. Several studies have commented on the absence of any homogeneity or clear patterns in the types of activities or combinations of activities in which mancomunidades engage (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al, 2005).

There is a logic regarding cooperation among both compulsory and voluntary services. In regards to compulsory services, a large number of mancomunidades are involved in solid waste collection, waste treatment, water supply, fire protection and social services. For 'voluntary' municipal services, mancomunidades cooperate in the areas of education and culture, tourism, technical services and urban planning (Álvarez-Gómez, 1999). These services lend themselves to cooperation given the need for capital investments and/or professional expertise that are beyond the reach of an individual municipality, especially in rural areas.

Interestingly, it has been observed that mancomunidades are moving towards developing common policies and strategies in the areas of economic and social development, and that a majority of them are actively involved in initiatives to protect the environment, heritage and landscape³. They also note that mancomunidades are effectively responding to new and emerging social issues and challenges, and in this respect, regional governments influence (usually incentivise) the extent to which mancomunidades assume a social development role. This viewpoint is also supported by Galdos Urrutia (2005), who uses empirical evidence from the Basque Country to catalogue how increased efficiencies in the delivery of one service lead mancomunidades to assume responsibilities for a greater range of services.

³ Figueras et al. (2005), 164.

Table 3: Major Categories and Activities of Mancomunidades

Category	Types of Activities / Deliverables
Citizen protection and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security and civil protection • Fire services
Public services and social welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sanitation and health • Education • Delivery of social assistance • Promotion of education (life-long learning) • Employment promotion • Undertaking and cemeteries
Waste, water and sanitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste collection • Water purification and distribution • Maintenance of services – cleaning, lighting, electrical services, drainage, gardens and public spaces
Environment and spatial planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment and landscape – protection and regulation • Housing • Spatial planning and urban design
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic infrastructure and public works • Transport and mobility • ICT • Abattoirs, markets and supplies
Productive sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture – farming, fisheries and forestry • Industry • Energy • Mining • Tourism • Commerce • Economic and social development
Culture and heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of cultural expression • Physical education, sports and recreation • Heritage, the arts and local history • Social inclusion and citizen participation
Advisory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic information, studies, research and technical assistance • Consumer protection • Collection of financial and budget data • Delivery of administrative and other delegated functions

(Source: Figueras et al. (2005; 162)).

Economic geography and the physical topography also affect the strategic orientation of mancomunidades; thus tourism features among the main objectives of mancomunidades in coastal locations. By the same token, rural restructuring has strongly influenced the agenda of mancomunidades in Castilla la Mancha, Extremadura and Galicia, and in these regions, rural development has emerged as a centripetal force (Álvarez-Gomez, 1999). Figueras et al, (2005: 170) attribute the variations in the spatial distribution, remit and orientation of mancomunidades to

their ‘voluntary nature’ and to the degrees of latitude that have been afforded them by their respective regional authorities.

When a municipality decides to become part of a mancomunidad, it agrees to cede particular functions to the larger body. Directors of mancomunidades state that participation infers an “obligation to work together and to collaborate” (*interviews*). It also involves the sharing and pooling of personnel, teams, facilities, and financial and other resources. As one mancomunidad manager stated “there is no alternative, but to take decisions in common, regardless of the relations between municipalities or the personalities involved” (*Interview, April 2010*).

When asked to identify the areas in which mancomunidades have been most effective, managers of mancomunidades point to infrastructure projects (road and water), the roll-out of broadband, the sharing of machinery, bulk-buying and environmental protection.

While experiences have been almost overwhelmingly positive, mancomunidades have faced challenges, including insufficient finance to undertake particular projects, a lack of capacity on the part of some mayors and historical rivalries between some communities. Furthermore, not all mancomunidades are active. In the summer of 2004, it was estimated that around 300 mancomunidades had not sent in their budgets within the last five years (Alvarez, 2007). This is attributed to political disagreements, lack of momentum or financing after an initial service is provided and the fact that when a legal institution is no longer working in Spain, it is often not formally dissolved.

Mancomunidades as Micro-Regions – The Delineation of Territory

Throughout Spain, there is considerable variation in the delineation of mancomunidades and in the sizes of catchment territories. In regions where mancomunidades are long-established (generally over ten years), physical landscape features and historical relationships strongly influence the shape and size of mancomunidades. However, municipalities which have sought to come together in recent years are increasingly seeking to establish themselves according to functional territories, which are perceived to have shared socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

The recent process of mancomunidad formation in Extremadura (see following case studies) reveals that both historical and contemporary factors influence the territorial composition of mancomunidades. An example is the Mancomunidad Vegas Altas, which has a clearly-defined and distinguishable physical geography, based on the Vegas Uplands. This shared geography is viewed as binding municipalities together into an integrated functional area (Junta de Extremadura, 2007) which is characterised by economic uniformity and levels of connectivity, with the market town of Don Bedito serving as a focal point for rural communities.

Municipalities have generally been reluctant to join structures that have more than twelve partners, as doing so would represent a dissolution of local power; the fewer the number of municipalities in a mancomunidad, the greater the degree of local representation and influence. However, experiences to date suggest that mancomunidades should not be too small as to lack critical mass for the promotion of development initiatives. While interviewees were reluctant to give definitive figures, all claimed to be content with the current scale of their mancomunidad, which ranged in size from 11,200 to 83,000 people (the higher number of residents being considerably in excess of the national average of c. 20,000 persons).

Financing

With regards to local government financing, the Spanish Constitution promotes financial autonomy among regions and local governments. Revenue sources for municipalities typically include local taxes (42%), income from self-owned assets (8%), transfers from central government and Autonomous Communities (40%) and other financial income (10%)⁴.

Mancomunidades are financed by the obligations of the participating municipalities with the amount determined by population (Font et al, 1999). This has presented challenges to the association when their members lack sufficient revenues to meet their financial obligations.

⁴ Rounded values based on graph on public income structure in *Local Government in Spain*, Ministry of Public Administration.

Governance

Political representation in the mancomunidades is based on councillors from the constituent municipalities participating in the mancomunidad assembly⁵. The municipalities in turn nominate the members of the mancomunidades, with the number of nominees usually in proportion to the municipal population, though less populous municipalities tend to be given a stronger weighting. When constituted, a mancomunidad elects its own president from among its membership (usually a mayor), as well as a vice-president and treasurer.

Through their various sub-committees, collaboration with LEADER⁶ and PRODER⁷ Local Action Groups and their technical support for civil society, mancomunidades make a definitive contribution towards the advancement of participative democracy (Álvarez-Gómez, 1999). However, the extent to which they do so varies considerably; some consult with citizens on a continuous basis, while others are inclined to view citizens as passive receivers of services, and tend to limit their consultations to evaluations and customer satisfaction surveys.

Other Frameworks for Inter-Municipal Collaboration

Other innovative forms of inter-municipal collaboration in Spain include the *Comarca* and *Consortio*. The former is based on a historical territorial division in a number of regions, while the latter represents a type of consortium, on a similar scale to a mancomunidad, though generally less multi-faceted in terms of its operations.

A comarca is a unit of sub-regional and sub-provincial territory. A number of the larger and more populous Comunidades Autónomas (autonomous communities / NUTS II Regions) are sub-divided into Provincias (provinces), and these are in turn sub-divided into Comarcas. Comarcas have limited competencies; they are territorial divisions (for judicial and administrative functions), rather than units of government, except in Catalonia, and their delineation is largely based on historical boundaries that pre-date parliamentary democracy in Spain.

⁵ In Spain, Councillors are directly elected by citizens to municipal authorities every four years.

⁶ LEADER, which began in 1991, was a European Union Community initiative to promote rural development.

⁷ PRODER, established in 1996, was a programme created to support national rural development in Spain. The Spanish government and the EU co-financed the initiative. It promotes rural development and is delivered locally by Local Action Groups, which are multi-stakeholder partnerships, similar to LEADER Groups

Comarcas are found in five regions, namely Aragón, Catalonia, Castilla y León, Galicia and the Basque Country. They are considerably larger than mancomunidades, with an average population of 82,000. They have competencies in spatial planning and they provide a framework in which municipal and mancomunidad authorities compile and implement territorial development plans (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al, 2005).

Throughout Spain, both municipalities and mancomunidades participate in *Consortorios*, which are vertical partnerships between the local, regional and national levels of government for the delivery of local services. Sometimes, consortorios include non-profit organizations and the private sector. Typically, these partnerships focus on delivery of a single service such as economic promotion, cultural promotion and water supply, but they may also deliver services related to solid waste removal and treatment and theatre and hospital management. *Consortorios* enable inter-provincial and inter-regional cross-border collaboration in addition to inter-municipal arrangements. Through their participation in *Consortorios*, mancomunidades, most notably those in the Basque Country, Castilla, Aragón and Valencia have developed extensive cross-border linkages. Thus, Spain provides a rich, if not somewhat complex tapestry of inter-territorial collaboration that can offer examples of how to promote horizontal collaboration among local governments and vertical linkages with central government.

Linkages to the Irish Context

In Spain, municipalities are similar in scale to Irish communities and in particular in rural areas when considering a village or small town and the surrounding townlands⁸. The mancomunidad experience, drawing together the interests of local communities and in garnering external resources and support, resonates with many development initiatives throughout Ireland. Although neither jurisdiction on the island has municipal-level government – a feature that marks Ireland and Britain apart from their European neighbours (Decoster, 2003), community identity is strong as people identify with their locality.

⁸ This concept of the emerging micro-regions in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland was thoroughly documented in the 2009 ICLRD study on *Rural Restructuring: Local Sustainable Solutions to the Rural Challenge*. The study highlighted how the micro-region (cluster of communities) has emerged as an effective territorial unit for the organisation of collaborative partnerships and the promotion of integrated and sustainable development.

Mancomunidades, which bring together small municipalities on a voluntary basis, are similar in scale and intent to the micro-regions of collaboration on the island of Ireland. In rural areas, municipalities are similar in scale to Irish communities – a village or small town and the surrounding townlands⁹. In the Irish context, inter-community collaboration, as typified by a number of cross-border initiatives (Creamer et al, 2008) has been a notable driver of development, and localised approaches based on a cluster of communities, termed a ‘micro-region’ have been particularly innovative in rural development.

Across Spain, the average number of municipalities that participate in a mancomunidad is nine, and while mancomunidades are present in all Spanish regions, they are far more prevalent in rural, rather than in urban areas and have an average population of just over 20,000. Interestingly, in the Irish rural context, the 1994 NESC Report on *New Approaches to Rural Development* recommended that territorial units for rural development have a population of 25,000 to 30,000. This recommended demographic and spatial scale has been largely abandoned by both governments on the island of Ireland; the new LEADER areas in Northern Ireland and the rural development areas in the Republic are considerably larger.

In the Republic of Ireland, local authorities are increasingly planning at sub-county level, as evidenced by the trend towards local area plans, and some local authorities are moving towards more decentralised approaches for service delivery. In Northern Ireland, with the postponement in the implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), both central and local authorities are exploring alternative mechanisms for promoting cooperation in service delivery among the 26 Councils. The Spanish experience with the mancomunidades and consorcios over the past three decades offers valuable insights into how micro-regional approaches may be renewed and advanced on the island of Ireland.

⁹ Municipalities represent the lowest tier of government in Spain. Across the state (from large cities to dispersed rural areas), they have an average population of 4,900. Therefore, many rural municipalities are particularly small, and several have a population of a few hundred persons.

Mancomunidades in Practice: Case Studies from Extremadura and Asturias

A more detailed look at the operation of Mancomunidades in two Spanish regions – the Autonomous Communities of Extremadura and Asturias – provides insights to different experiences in the operation of Mancomunidades.

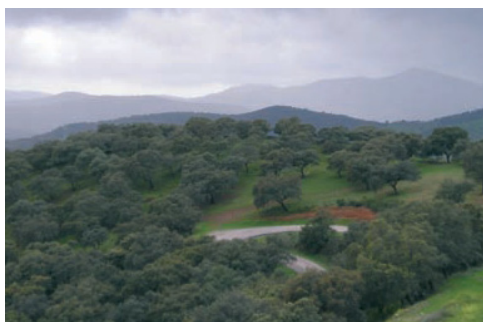
- The region of Extremadura is the poorest in Spain. Situated in the centre of the Madrid–Lisbon axis, arid Extremadura shares a frontier with Portugal’s Alentejo Region, which is among the most structurally weak of the Portuguese regions. Extremadura is overwhelmingly rural, and the region has a high dependency on agriculture.
- The ancient Principality of Asturias, on Spain’s north coast has a long heritage in sea-faring and mining. Many people in rural Asturias speak their indigenous language *Bable*, in addition to Spanish. Asturias’ spirit of self-reliance is reflected in its strong regional identity and in a long-established tradition of local government. The mountainous topography of Asturias, with its steep slopes and v-shaped valleys (similar to parts of Wales) provides a physical delineation of territory that is reflected in the demarcation of administrative units.

The Extremadura Experience

Extremadura has a population of 1.1 million, the majority of whom live in small towns, villages (*pueblos*) and rural municipalities (*aldeas*). The region of Extremadura is sub-divided into two similarly-sized provinces. The southern province of Badajoz contains the regional capital, Mérida (pop. 48,000), although the largest urban centre is Badajoz (pop. 146,000), which is located approximately 15km from the border with Portugal¹⁰. The northern province is Cáceres, with its capital (pop. 92,000) also of that name.

¹⁰ Like many parts of Ireland’s border corridor, the province of Badajoz has been adversely affected by back to back planning and poor connectivity. There is no cross-border rail link and main roads tend to run parallel to the border and towards the national capitals (Lisbon and Madrid), but do not traverse the border. The province of Cáceres has one cross-border train services – the night train between Madrid and Lisbon.

Images of Rural Extremadura



(Source: Red Extremeña de Desarrollo Rural).

There are 383 municipalities; of these, over 90% have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. Some are particularly small, and face operational challenges associated with low population densities and rural-restructuring stemming from the decline in traditional agriculture. Indeed, rural-restructuring and the need to promote more collaborative inter-agency and inter-community approaches to rural development have been the main drivers in the formation of mancomunidades in Extremadura. The impetus towards the formation of mancomunidades came from both the bottom-up and top-down, with The Federation of Municipalities and Provinces and the Regional Secretariat for Rural Development being the main actors in initiating and delivering the development of mancomunidades.

Today, there are thirty-two mancomunidades in Extremadura – sixteen in each province. Of the municipalities in Extremadura, 97% participate in a mancomunidad; the only areas excluded are the two provincial capitals (Badajoz and Cáceres) and their immediate hinterlands¹¹. In the three years between 2005 and 2008, Extremadura has gone from having the second lowest representation of mancomunidad participation among the seventeen Spanish regions (45% of municipalities) to the second highest.

The largest mancomunidad in terms of the number of communities involved is Sierra de Montánchez, which represents collaboration among twenty-two municipalities. This is followed by Campo Arañuelo, which has twenty municipalities, and La Vera and Villuercas-Ibores-Jara, both of which have 19. The mancomunidad with the fewest municipalities is Campiña Sur, with five, while

¹¹ At the time of writing, three outlying municipalities are not participating in a municipality, but have service agreements with neighbouring mancomunidades.

Cijara has six and Riberos de Tajo has seven. There are also variations in the population sizes in the mancomunidad areas. Populations range from almost 50,000 in the case of Guadiana to under 10,000 in four¹² of the more rural mancomunidades¹³.

As noted earlier, flexibility is a defining characteristic of mancomunidades, and the variations in size and scale that have emerged in Extremadura provide clear evidence of a flexible approach that takes local conditions and preferences into account (see Table 4). The process has been described by the President of the Federation of Municipalities and Provinces as “consensual.” Facilitated by the regional government, the municipalities agreed a formula for representation as follows:

Table 4: Allocation of Municipal Representation in the Emerging Mancomunidades

Municipal Population	No. of Representatives on the Mancomunidad Junta Directiva (Board of Directors)
Up to 1,000 persons	1 representative
1,001 to 3,000 persons	2 representatives
3,001 to 10,000 persons	3 representatives
10,001 to 15,000 persons	4 representatives
Over 15,000 persons	5 representatives

(Source: Consultations with Mancomunidades, Dec. 2009).

Local Initiative – Regional Support

In the years leading up to the formation of mancomunidades, many of Extremadura’s municipalities had been facing growing pressures to cover the costs of rising demands for public and essential services. At the same time, their income base was being eroded by rural depopulation and the contraction of the rural economy. Local government officials, elected councillors, village mayors, community leaders and rural development organisations were unanimous in their advocacy of inter-municipal collaboration (*Interviews, December 2009*), and many pointed to the experience of LEADER+ in the region, which had demonstrated the effectiveness of area-based (cross-municipal) approaches (*Correspondence, REDEX and Local Action Groups*).

¹² Los Hurdes has a population of 6,659; Valle del Ambroz 7,765; Riberos del Tajo 9,615 and Cijara has 9,496.

¹³ There are also variations in the population sizes in the mancomunidad areas. Populations range from almost 50,000 in the case of Guadiana to under 10,000 in four¹³ of the more rural mancomunidades.

Those who participated in the process are generally positive about it (*Interviews, Nov.-Dec. 2009*); they point to the positive experiences of facilitating local communities to undertake SWOT analyses and set development priorities. They note that the process of delineating the geographical boundaries was fairly “straightforward” (*ibid.*), as natural features were generally key determinants. The most protracted discussions related to the functions that some municipalities were willing to confer on the new mancomunidades.

Both the secretariat and the rural municipalities view mancomunidades as a tool in the promotion of integrated, area-based rural development. The views and experiences of the LEADER and PRODER Local Action Groups were considered important in informing the boundaries and operation of the mancomunidad model that has been put in place in Extremadura.

The regional government has been consistent in its advocacy of integrated rural development, with the President of the Junta expressing the view that the formation of mancomunidades was based on the “necessity for territorial equilibrium, so that rural, as well as urban zones would provide and maintain the same levels of services and opportunities” (statement issued 18th April 2006). The President also expressed the view that the new and emerging mancomunidades are the “vertebral column of the territory of Extremadura, and the indispensable tools for the promotion of sustainable, balanced and equal development” (*Interview with journalist, Isabel Molano*). The Secretary for Rural Development has expressed similar views, describing mancomunidades as the “engines of our rural communities” (*ibid.*). While the opposition party (*Partido Popular*) in the Extremadura Regional Parliament had expressed concerns at what it perceived to be undue influence by the governing socialist party (*PSOE; Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) in the dialogue between local councillors, it has been broadly supportive of the policies and actions of the regional government.

Extremadura’s regional government responded positively to the requests from local municipalities to support and facilitate the process of mancomunidad formation, and the Secretariat for Rural Development made personnel available to facilitate the process of enabling communities and municipalities to come together. Moreover, the Secretariat made technical assistance funding available on request to municipalities, but most came together with adjoining authorities voluntarily. In addition to working directly with the affected municipalities, the Secretariat held several collective and bilateral meetings with Extremadura’s 24 LEADER and PRODER Local Action Groups.

Role of INTERREG and LEADER Programmes

The regional government's commitment to the mancomunidades has been solidified by an annual allocation of €20million, some of which has been sourced through INTERREG¹⁴. Although the process of mancomunidad formation in Extremadura lags much behind the rest of Spain in terms of the timing of its commencement, the process itself has been rapid – approximately 2 years, and has been characterised by consensus among external–internal participants. The emergence of such a consensus and the pace of progress have been greatly facilitated by the availability of INTERREG and Agenda 21 (national exchequer) funds to enable the formulation of area-based strategies.

The Junta de Extremadura together with the adjoining regions in Portugal utilised INTERREG cross-border support to bring together Extremaduran and Portuguese municipalities to share experiences and allow inter-municipal collaboration to progress. One of the outputs of the INTERREG project was that each emerging mancomunidad developed a territorial profile. The INTERREG requirements also ensured greater popular consultation in the process, while the Agenda 21 framework ensured a focus on sustainable development. Thus, it is not surprising that environmental conservation features more prominently in the work programmes of Extremaduran mancomunidades than in many other parts of Spain. In addition to their environmental focus, Extremadura's mancomunidades are active in most of the action areas specified in table one, not least in the provision of water supplies, fire-fighting/prevention, heritage, the promotion and marketing of rural produce, rural tourism and the celebration of regional cultural expression.

Another feature of mancomunidades in Extremadura is that their catchment areas are generally aligned with those of LEADER/PRODER Local Action Groups, and there is a high degree of collaboration between both sets of agencies. LEADER/PRODER representatives frequently attend the executive meetings of mancomunidades, and the mancomunidades nominate the local government representatives to the Boards of Directors of the Local Action Groups¹⁵. Furthermore, the mancomunidades have committed to specific actions to promote participative democracy, and a number, including Mancomunidad Sierra del Segura are delivering training programmes in citizenship, community leadership and community development (*Correspondence GAL Valle del Jerte, Nov. 2009*).

¹⁴ The project '*Proyecto Ruraltrans*' has been supported through INTERREG IIIA.

¹⁵ The other board members of the LAGs are drawn from civil society organisations.

Inter-Municipal Collaboration in Practice: Case Study Insights from Asturias

Asturias has some of the longest-established mancomunidades in Spain and offers insights into inter-municipal collaboration that allows a more critical longitudinal review of the performance and outputs of inter-municipal arrangements and structures. Additionally, their experiences over recent decades in dealing with issues of rural service provision, integrated local development and territorial planning offer points of reference for development actors and agencies in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The regional autonomous community of Asturias has a population of just under 1.1 million, a surface area of 10,604km² and a population density of 101 persons per km². Its capital city, Oviedo (pop. 220,644) is located in the centre of the region, while the popular seaside and maritime centre of Gijón (pop. 275,699) is the largest city in Asturias. Rural Asturias is characterised by number of traditional fishing villages and dispersed rural communities, where coal mining, orchards (cider and cooking apples) and dairy farming have been the backbone of the economy. Mining and dairying have been in decline over recent decades, and efforts are being made at the local and regional levels to promote rural economic diversification. The region's mancomunidades and Local Action Groups have been to the fore in this respect, and have had considerable successes.

Asturias is sub-divided into 78 municipalities, the most populous being Gijón, Oviedo, Avilés, Siero and Langreo. When these five urban centres are excluded, Asturias' municipalities have an average population of 5,600, with many in the more rural parts the region, particularly in the south, having much smaller populations. Indeed, 75% of all Asturian municipalities have a population of less than 5,000, and a population density of less than 60 persons per km². Of the 78 municipalities, 65 – predominantly rural, participate in a mancomunidad, and some belong to more than one mancomunidad. The region has a total of 19 mancomunidades, with a mean of five municipalities in each. Thus, the average population of a mancomunidad is on the order of 27,000 persons.

In Asturias, there is a rural predominance of mancomunidades, with almost 100% territorial coverage in the south, east and west of the region (the central area is the most urbanised). According to one mancomunidad director, the size and delineation of mancomunidades in Asturias are determined by “physical geography.” Thus, communities have been linked and defined based on the valleys in which they are located. The secretary of one mancomunidad notes that using

physical parameters to delineate mancomunidades respects the traditional catchment areas of rural towns, but can have a negative effect in that it brings smaller and more rural municipalities into the same mancomunidad as a larger urban centre. As a result, a mancomunidad can find itself dealing with too broad a range of needs and issues. In order to redress this difficulty, most of the mancomunidades formed and/or re-formed¹⁶ in recent years have tended to take both physical geography and territorial homogeneity into account when ascribing their boundaries.

Areas of Collaboration and Support to Mancomunidades

In terms of their functional remit, Asturias's municipalities show a strong economic and infrastructural orientation. According to Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al (2005), the absence of a provincial tier of government (no tier between the municipalities at local level and the regional government) led to mancomunidades emerging to fill a functional vacuum in Asturias. A review of their business plans shows that the most frequently cited objectives are:

- Improvements to Physical infrastructure and Communications (14 of 19)
- Promotion of Tourism (12)
- Urban and Village Planning (9)
- Social Service Provision (9)
- Promotion of Economic Diversification (7)
- Cultural Promotion (5)
- Sports and Recreation (5).

Inter-municipal collaboration in the areas of health and sanitary services is less evident than in other Spanish regions, and due to the moist climate, fire-fighting and water distribution are not as pressing in Asturias as in other parts of Spain, where mancomunidades have tended to assume responsibility for such functions from municipalities.

¹⁶ A number of boundary revisions occurred during the 1990s, the most notable being the fusion of two mancomunidades in the east of the region.

Typical Landscape of Rural Asturias



(Source: Manuel Suárez Calvo, Flickr).

As is the case in most of rural Spain, Asturias's municipalities express strong support for integrated rural development and the LEADER model. However, there is less evidence of joint actions involving LEADER LAGs and mancomunidades in Asturias, than is the case in Extremadura. This may be attributed in part to the fact that Asturias's mancomunidades pre-date LEADER, and were already well-established mechanisms for the delivery of local government services, while in Extremadura, LEADER emerged as a driver of mancomunidad formation, and its *raison d'être* is reflected in the work programmes of mancomunidades there¹⁷.

The regional government of Asturias has played a key role in the shaping of mancomunidades. Regionally-enacted legislation (The Law of Territorial Co-Ordination and Structuring of the 30th March 1987), has in the opinion of Fernández García (1989; 177) "served as an instrument to correct the territorial imbalances, which had affected the region in terms of population, economic activities and infrastructure". Recognising the need to redress historical inequalities, the law sets out the importance of the 'territorial' in regional development in its preamble. While the regional government at the time envisaged the formation of ten comarcas (sub-regional, supra-municipal authorities), the subsequent evolution of inter-municipal collaboration has resulted in the formation of 19 mancomunidades; thereby indicating a local preference for maintaining community-level structures and the generation of critical mass through collaboration, rather than through amalgamation.

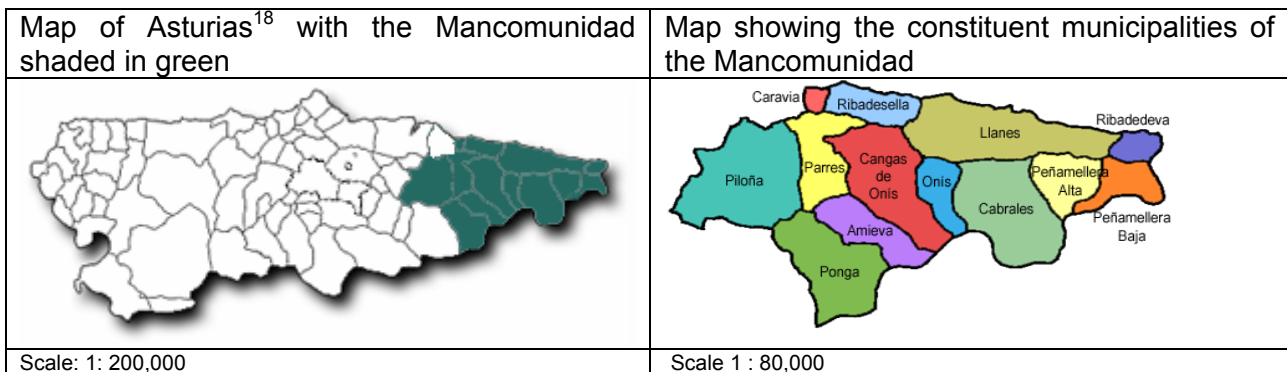
¹⁷ While this may be the general pattern in Asturias, a number of exceptions exist. An example of strong collaboration with LEADER is that of Consorcio Montaña Central de Asturias.

Mancomunidad de Concejos del Oriente de Asturias

This rural mancomunidad was formed in the early 1980s. It involves the coming together of thirteen municipalities for the purpose of “combining forces to improve and increase the services that local government provides to communities and to work together to develop the area, and promote tourism” (Press Statement issued by Mayor A. Reimóndez Cantero). Figure 3 shows the location and the composition (by municipality) of the mancomunidad.

Since its inception, the mancomunidad has enabled municipalities to pool their resources and collaborate in the provision of services including road construction and maintenance, improvements to ICT including the roll-out of broadband and waste management. In 1990, it opened a Centre for Local Development, which provides technical support to entrepreneurs and community groups.

Figure 3: Map of the Mancomunidad Concejos del Oriente de Asturias



(Source: Mancomunidad Concejos del Oriente de Asturias)

That same year, the mancomunidad embarked on the promotion of equal opportunities, and it founded an advisory service for women. This service, which continues to operate today, provides emotional and socio-psychological support for rural women including victims of domestic violence. It also provides advice to women engaged in farming, and it offers training in business skills for women entering the workforce and those seeking to establish an enterprise.

¹⁸ Asturias is 220km from east to west and 75km from north to south.

The service is affiliated to the Asturian Institute for Women. The mancomunidad has secured funding from the regional government for the operation of a Youth Information Office (OIJ), which provides free and confidential information on education, training, employment, social welfare entitlements, youth programmes, culture, recreation, community development and health. With part-funding from the regional Ministry for Tourism, the mancomunidad provides technical support for the promotion of rural tourism; it co-ordinates and markets community festivals, publishes promotional materials, advertises the locality and gathers statistics on visitor numbers and experiences of local tourism products and accommodation. The mancomunidad owns and operates its own abattoir (as do most mancomunidades in rural Spain). According to its current business plan (2007 – 2013), the aims of Mancomunidad Concejos del Oriente de Asturias are:

- To promote, manage and deliver integrated and sustainable development;
- To seek, take on and participate in programmes and activities associated with employment and with sectoral and territorial development;
- To provide a platform and focal point for debate, collaboration and consensus-building among social agents;
- To animate participation and dynamism among the population and its representatives; and
- To further co-operation with other territories and entities at national and transnational levels.

In delivering on these aims, the Mancomunidad is building on the successful delivery of projects in rural tourism, broadband provision, community training, and youth development. The Mancomunidad manager identifies local people's identification with the territory as among the factors that contribute to local achievements – "People say I am from Eastern Asturias... There is a bond among the communities" (*Interview, April 2010*).

Image of the Roman Bridge in Cangas de Onis - Administrative centre of the Mancomunidad



(Source: Author)

To these ends, the Mancomunidad de Concejos del Oriente de Asturias brings together the collective efforts of 13 elected councillors in its Board of Directors and sub-committee members and the technical know-how of its officers and community groups in its catchment area. The mancomunidad is a member of the Asturian Rural Development Network, and it works in collaboration with a number of bodies including the regional government, LEADER Local Action Groups and with adjoining municipalities in the region of Cantabria.

Images of the landscapes of Asturias from mountain peaks and pastures to mining villages and towns.



(Source: Red Asturiana de Desarrollo Rural and Author)

Mancomunidad Valle del Nalón

The Mancomunidad Valle del Nalón covers a smaller (646km²), but more populous (83,000) territory than does Mancomunidad de Concejos del Oriente de Asturias; it is the second most populous mancomunidad in Asturias. Its administrative base is the town of San Martín del Rey Aurelio, which is located about 20km from the regional capital – Oviedo. Thus, the territory exhibits peri-urban characteristics.

The mancomunidad was formally constituted in 1985, with the stated objective of ‘integrating a range of services and generating a dynamic for inter-municipal collaboration.’ It brings together five municipalities. According to its president, the mancomunidad has evolved over the past two decades to “secure existing services, provide new ones... be a force for unity and political co-operation, so that we can improve quality of life and meet any challenges head on”. These sentiments are reflected in the current business plan, which describes the principal objective of the mancomunidad as to “initiate and ensure delivery of services..., based on solidarity and combining efforts and resources for the defence and betterment of the quality of life for people in the Valley” (2007; 1). At present, the mancomunidad is delivering services under twelve thematic headings. Of these, it is the sole delivery agent for seven, while the others are delivered in conjunction with regional agencies and with specific municipalities. The mancomunidad maintains a website with a particular focus on tourism information¹⁹. Table 5 outlines the areas of service provided by the mancomunidad.

The organisational structure reflects the mancomunidad’s areas of activity; it has 12 sub-committees, which report to its 25-member assembly. Its director indicates that there is a high level of interaction between local citizens and the members of the assembly. At times, there have been controversies regarding the locations of various service centres, but the mancomunidad is conscious of ensuring that no citizens are discriminated against.

¹⁹ Mancomunidad del Valle del Nalón website, <http://www.valledelnalon.es/en/index.asp>.

Table 5: Services provided (delivered / co-delivered) by Mancomunidad Valle del Nalón

Service Areas	Lead Actions
Secretariat	Co-ordination and point of access for citizens and for municipal representatives
Urban and village planning and design	Technical assistance to municipalities Promotion of good practices and information exchange
Consumer information	Training for consumers Advocacy on behalf of consumers and mediation in disputes Inspections of commercial premises
Tourism promotion	Production of publications Organisation of festivals and community events Advertising campaigns, Data collection and monitoring
Local development	Support for community and voluntary groups Liaison with the regional authority to ensure actions are focused on the valley, especially in rural areas Inter-business networking, Up-skilling and training programmes, Employment services for job seekers
Prevention of drug addiction	Health promotion Awareness-raising with vulnerable groups
Infrastructure	A shared yard and fleet of machine among municipalities, with bulk buying of materials to reduce costs. Repairs, maintenance and construction
Abattoir	Maintenance of abattoir (in conjunction with a farmers' co-operative)
Concert hall	Professional concerts Training programmes for amateur and budding musicians
Special education	Operation of a centre for special needs education (mainly adults with special needs)
Adult education	Education and training programmes for adults
Social welfare	Delivery of support in collaboration with regional agencies.

Mancomunidad Concert Hall and Music School



Environment Information and Training Centre



(Source: Author)

The mancomunidad has an annual budget of €2.7m (2009 figure) and a staff of 55 persons. Its manager, comments that “brining municipalities together is bound to be difficult, due to the many different personalities and perspectives... we have had good times and bad, and even came to the verge of collapse, but when one sees the improvements in the valley, one knows it has been worth it” (*Interview, April 2010*).

Mancomunidad Branding – logo on pooled property



(Source: Author)

Sharing Services



Extremadura and Asturias: Linkages to the Irish Context

Extremadura’s mancomunidades, which were created to help cover the rising costs of services, particularly in the rural areas, enjoy considerable local and regional support through technical assistance resources, an annual allocation of funds and personnel support from the regional government and the Secretariat for Rural Development. INTERREG funds also help ensure greater consultation and consensus, while Agenda 21 resources place a focus on sustainable development. LEADER and PRODER programmes also collaborate with the mancomunidades.

Extremadura’s mancomunidades are the newest in Spain. They seek to promote an integrated approach to territorial development and deliver services traditionally provided by the local government as well as support for rural development, heritage and environmental conservation. The recently-completed process of mancomunidad-formation provides a useful model for local communities in Ireland’s border region that are trying to create inter-community collaboration and the development of joint initiatives. Support from multiple levels of government and development agencies has been critical to the success of the mancomunidades in Extremadura.

Asturias's mancomunidades are among the longest-established in Spain, and their operations, not least in respect of rural development and territorial organisation, may offer useful insights and lessons for Ireland's border corridor. Although the mancomunidades were originally delineated by geographic boundaries, many also had to consider the territorial homogeneity of the areas. They were created to fill the gap between the local and regional levels of government. The mancomunidades support infrastructure and communication projects, tourism, urban and village planning and social service provision, among programmes. Support from the regional government through regionally-enacted legislation has played an important role in the success of the mancomunidades in Asturias.

Observations and Concluding Remarks

Over the past two decades, Spain, and rural Spain in particular, has witnessed significant and sustained growth in inter-municipal collaboration, leading to the formation of new supra-municipal authorities, while simultaneously strengthening more localised, community-based units of governance. This process has been initiated and advanced from the bottom-up, with municipalities coming together through various initiatives, such as Local Agenda 21, Comarcas, Consorcios and Mancomunidades. Of these initiatives, the mancomunidad is the most widespread. Independent reviews of the various inter-municipal collaborations (Fernández Garcia, 1989; Gutiérrez et al, 2005 and Galdos Urrutia, 2005) have provided positive accounts of how collaboration in general, and mancomunidades in particular have improved local service delivery to citizens, promoted efficiencies in local administration, broadened participatory governance and improved the competitiveness of rural and marginal territories.

Although the interfaces between mancomunidades, their constituent municipalities, local citizens and regional authorities are almost overwhelmingly positive, and mancomunidades constitute a discrete legal entity, there is a perceived lack of clarity regarding their interfacing with provincial authorities in a number of regions. Some observers have expressed the opinion that mancomunidades need to further deepen collaboration, but the dominant view among mancomunidad members and executives is that their strength lies in that they build on, rather than subsume local community entities. The lesson for the island of Ireland is that micro-regions – as spaces in which community development, spatial planning and local service delivery can take place – should be built from the bottom-up, with communities coming together to collectively set the agenda, rather than having boundaries or agendas imposed on them by superior authorities.

Endogenous sentiments similar to those expressed by local development and local government actors in Spain gained considerable currency in Northern Ireland following the announcement of the RPA in 2002, and new discourses emerged regarding the most appropriate scales to which to devolve power and responsibilities for the delivery of services including spatial planning (Creamer et al, 2011). Now that the Northern Ireland Executive has decided not to proceed with the centralisation of functions implicit in the RPA, many of the twenty-six district councils have begun to look across their respective borders, and to explore possibilities and means for collaborative actions and a sharing of services. While financial pressures are among the motivating factors towards such collaborations, there is in both Spain and Northern Ireland a general desire among

local government stakeholders, community groups and policy makers to promote subsidiarity – a principle that is also articulated in Ireland's Green Paper on Local Government (2008).

The initial roll-out of the ICE Programme (Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency) in Northern Ireland has been characterised by a notable push from district councils for endogenous ownership of the reform process, and by a “commitment to leading change... and a multi-sector collaborative approach” (McSorely, 2011: 37). In this respect ICE mirrors the processes that have led to the successful formation of mancomunidades and other collaborative processes and structures among Spanish municipalities. A challenge for district councils may lie in ensuring the support of the Executive for meaningful collaboration – as generally occurred in Spanish regions. Thus, collaboration needs to focus on local needs and development potential, rather than on the centre's need for financial rationalisation.

Throughout Spain, rural communities and municipalities have emerged as the main promoters of collaboration, and they have generally been facilitated in so doing by their respective regional authorities. As a result of forming mancomunidades, municipal authorities have achieved greater efficiencies in the delivery of services to citizens, while citizens and communities have benefited from the expansion of services, innovations in service delivery and “increased participation in planning and introducing concrete strategies” (Rodríguez Gutiérrez et al, 2005: 193). Mancomunidades can be said to confer on rural areas the ability to generate critical mass and promote territorial competitiveness.

The lowest tier of local government on the island of Ireland (counties and district councils) comprises units that are large by the standards of continental Europe. The absence of a municipal government tier outside the major urban centres in Ireland has created vacuums in service provision that have been filled by community and voluntary associations. Such groups (collectively referred to as civil society) have an admirable track record in delivering for local citizens, and in most areas along the Irish border, civil society has taken the lead in promoting cross-border collaboration, peace, reconciliation and economic diversification. The governments in both jurisdictions have recognised the importance of civil society and have committed to supporting community development and volunteerism (Secretariat of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). As community groups throughout the island of Ireland seek to expand their range of activities and attract more volunteers, the models of inter-community collaboration demonstrated by mancomunidades represent a practical reference template.

Specifically, the experiences of mancomunidades demonstrate that small-scale collaborations promote efficiencies, while maintaining closeness to the local population, and enabling local ownership and local decision-making.

The strength of civil society has been a driving force behind LEADER and other rural development initiatives throughout Ireland. Indeed, there are many parallels between Irish LAGs and Spanish municipalities in that both are essentially bottom-up, are based on collective community action and promote territorial competitiveness at the sub-regional level. While Irish LAGs traditionally tended to have extensive and direct civil society involvement, this has reduced since the Irish government laid down revised procedures for the composition of LAG boards in 2008. LAGs have also been affected by central government moves to align their boundaries with those of local authorities. Such recent changes in the operation of LEADER in Ireland contrasts with the experience of mancomunidades, where matters such as territorial delineation are firmly decided from the bottom-up.

The Spanish experience in general, and the specific case studies referred to here, reveal flexibility in approach to the development of collaborative initiatives. Authorities have clearly avoided a 'one size fits all model,' and have been content to allow local actors to determine the territorial coverage and functional remit of mancomunidades. This confers considerable responsibility on the local level. It obliges local actors to enter into agreements in a spirit of openness and a willingness to overcome any past rivalries. Local actors also need to demonstrate a commitment to sharing information and resources. There is a strong consensus among all stakeholders on the importance of strategic planning and evaluation. Both staff and elected members point to the value of undertaking a regular 'territorial diagnostic' exercise, preferably involving the maximum number of local citizens, as a basis for the formulation of a 'consensual and global vision'. Those with direct experience in promoting inter-municipal collaboration (in both case study areas) claim the best results arise when a territory is "compact, but with sufficient potential to generate development possibilities".

The evidence presented in this case study reveals many points in common between Spain and the island of Ireland. The Irish experience (Creamer et al, 2009) demonstrates the added value that can be derived through inter-community collaboration, while the material from Spain presented here reveals how public service provision, rural development and territorial planning have become more innovative, inclusive, efficient and effective through inter-municipal collaboration.

The feedback from community representatives in Spain is that rather than having been reduced in significance, the local has become more important, as municipal participation in collaborations such as mancomunidades strengthens local abilities to leverage support and to ensure that citizens and communities are afforded increased opportunities for development and self-actualisation.

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Appendix I: The International Centre for Local and Regional Development

A registered charity based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) is a North-South-US partnership established in 2006 to explore and expand the contribution that planning and the development of physical, social and economic infrastructures can make to improve the lives of people on the island of Ireland and elsewhere. The partner institutions began working together in 2004 and currently include: the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth; the School of the Built Environment at the University of Ulster; the Institute for International Urban Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh.

Each of these partners brings together complementary expertise and networks on both a North-South and East-West basis – creating a unique, all-island and international centre. ICLRDR continues to expand its collaboration with other institutions and has built up close working relationships with individual faculty and researchers from Harvard University, Mary Immaculate College Limerick, Queens University Belfast and the Athlone Institute of Technology. It is also developing its international linkages, particularly with those organisations that have an interest in cross-border cooperation and collaboration; for example, Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) in France.

What does the ICLRDR do?

- Provides independent joined-up research and policy advice on cross-border and all-island spatial planning and local and regional development issues (economic development, transport, housing, the environment, service provision, etc.);
- Offers professional education and capacity building programmes for communities and local, regional and national government representatives and officials;
- Assists local governments / communities in translating policy into ‘on the ground’ action;
- Acts as a catalyst to bring relevant public and private actors, North and South, together to work on common goals;
- Promotes international cooperation and exchanges.

The ICLRD uses a variety of strategies to undertake this work, including engaging in action research with local governments, communities and central agencies; undertaking and publishing case study research to evaluate and develop good practice models; hosting conferences and workshops on key themes; and developing and delivering training modules for key stakeholders in the physical, social and economic development of the island of Ireland.

Why is this work important?

The ICLRD's work is important in relation to four key processes on the island of Ireland:

- Cross-jurisdictional commitment to spatial planning and infrastructure projects;
- Peace and reconciliation, and the regeneration of local communities in the Border area;
- Economic competitiveness and growth on the global stage;
- Multi-level governance and compliance with planning, economic and environmental directives from the European Union.

CroSPlaN

In cooperation with the Centre for Cross Border Studies, the ICLRD has started an exciting new programme to develop a cross-border planning network. This initiative has been made possible through funding from the EU's INTERREG IVA Programme; administered through the Special EU Programmes Body. Commencing in 2009 for three years, the new network (CroSPlaN) will undertake the following activities:

- Two action research projects per year that will enhance emerging cross-border activities and expertise in the vital area of spatial planning;
- One executive training programme per year for at least 20 central and local government officials, councillors and community leaders to assist them in both delivering and supporting these activities;
- An annual conference and technical workshop; the dual function of which is to facilitate networking and address identified areas of need.

Published by International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD)
39 Abbey Street
Armagh BT61 7EB
Northern Ireland

2011



Ireland's EU Structural Funds
Programmes 2007 - 2013
Co-funded by the Irish Government
and the European Union



EUROPEAN REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT FUND



An Roinn Fiontar, Trádála agus Nuálaíochta
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation

HEA
Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

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ISBN No: 978-1-906879-06-8