

# **CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN IRELAND IN A TIME OF RECESSION**

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For the past 10-11 years, since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, we in Ireland have been experiencing what I would characterise as a 'golden age' of cross-border cooperation. This is largely thanks to the EU and its funding body in Northern Ireland, the Special EU Programmes Body, which in that period has given out over €2.5 billion in assistance to around 23,000 cross-community and cross-border projects in Northern Ireland and the Irish border region.

But those good times have passed. The Republic is experiencing the deepest economic depression of any country in the Western world, and the North is waiting for inevitable and large-scale public spending cuts as the similarly huge UK public debt starts to be paid back next year. This means that any hopes – remote even at best of times – that the governments in Dublin and Belfast might take over funding North-South cooperation where the EU left off, have totally disappeared. At the same time media and public interest in the Republic in Northern Ireland and North-South cooperation have reached their lowest point for over 40 years.

My own Centre for Cross Border Studies has been both a product and a main beneficiary of the huge upsurge in support for and interest in North-South cooperation following the Good Friday Agreement. In the 10 years since its foundation, the Centre and its associate bodies have completed over 70 cross-border research projects; organised nearly 60 conferences and seminars; provided the secretariats for all-island university, college of education and spatial planning organisations (the latter the International Centre for Local and Regional Development, the ICLRD, which is linked with NIRSA here in Maynooth); trained civil servants in cross-border cooperation; and set up innovative public websites to disseminate cross-border information and to provide assistance for cross-border commuters. Earlier this year we were funded by the EU INTERREG IVA programme – managed by the Special EU Programmes Body – to carry out five new research, training and information projects: on reviving the border region economy, cross-border hospital services, cross-border planning services for local authorities, cross-border mobility information and cross-border impact assessment.

But things are going to be much harder in the future. Already the North/South bodies (in tourism, trade and business development, waterways, fisheries, food safety and minority languages) are feeling the chill winds of government cutbacks from Dublin, with DUP ministers in Belfast – who never wanted these bodies in the first place – only delighted to oblige in like measure. EU PEACE programme funding will probably end after 2014 and cross-border INTERREG funding (which now also funds cooperation between the two parts of Ireland and western Scotland) is likely to be at a lower level after that date because of demands from the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe

Here are seven requirements which I believe are essential for continuing successful cross-border cooperation work during the present and future recessionary period, which I believe could last for the best part of a decade.

## FUND-RAISING

It goes without saying that innovative, hard-working, idealistic NGOs like the Centre for Cross Border Studies and the ICLRD (its spatial planning sister organisation) just could not survive without the hard grind of constant fund-raising. The Centre has succeeded – to a significant extent through successfully accessing EU programmes like PEACE and INTERREG but also through bidding for government contracts – in increasing its turnover more than fivefold since 1999. But now is the time for consolidation, even survival. I know that I will be banging on funders’ doors in Brussels, London, Washington, Dublin and Belfast on a regular – something it feels like an endless – basis for many years to come.

## INVOLVING UNIONISTS.

We in CCBS have worked hard to be absolutely even-handed in our dealings with the two communities in the North, conscious that for Unionists the concept of cross-border co-operation can be a threatening one. We emphasise the importance of working in practical areas where there can be ‘mutual benefit’ to the people of the two jurisdictions, and to the people of the two communities in the North. We have tried particularly hard to involve people from a unionist background – all our schools projects, for example, have been 50/50 Protestant/Catholic, with our latest such partnership project – the Education for Reconciliation project (with the City of Dublin VEC as the major partner) – involving secondary schools from as far apart as Irish-speaking areas like Arranmore Island and Gweedore in Donegal and unionist East Belfast and Newtownabbey. Similarly the ICLRD, in its current research on sustainable communities, studies Protestant working class communities in Antrim and Enniskillen alongside comparable communities in Derry, Sligo and Cork.

## LEADERS AND CHAMPIONS

Leadership is a key issue. The passion and commitment of a chief executive in this kind of practical peacebuilding work gets transmitted to staff. One area I work particularly hard at is networking with key influencers in politics, the civil service, education and business. Leaders of cross-border cooperation projects will have to work twice as hard at this kind of networking in the near future just to stay in the same place.

My colleague Liam O’Dowd, Professor of Sociology at Queen’s University Belfast, emphasises the key role of what he calls “active champions of cross-border co-operation, with experience of working in, or with, both jurisdictions and with personal networks which span the state, private and community and voluntary sectors”. There aren’t many of these people around. If funding is forthcoming, the personal cross-border networks they have built up will become a strong source of support for future cooperation work at a time when public and media interest in North-South cooperation – particularly in the Republic – is very low.

## POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXTS

Obviously government strategic support and funding for North-South co-operation is a *sine qua non* for this kind of work. But it also needs the support of officials at operational level. And this is not always forthcoming. It will come as no surprise that there are people in the Northern system who are particularly reluctant to engage in cross-border co-operation (this is particularly so where a DUP minister is in charge of a government department).

But officials in the South are often not much more enthusiastic, particularly in the last couple of years as their attention has turned to serious problems closer to home, in the economy and the public finances. To use the phrase of one cross-border tourism promoter quoted by

O'Dowd, the “reactionary constipated culture” of so many government departments when it comes to supporting cross-border cooperation initiatives is only reinforced at times like these.

So building relationships with officials in central government departments becomes even more important – albeit more difficult – in times of economic recession and crisis. I have heard a senior Irish Government official – one of the relatively few who is genuinely interested in and committed to North-South cooperation – say that one problem with the cross-border local authority networks like the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the North West Region Cross Border Group is that nobody in Dublin knows what they are doing.

## NATURE OF PROJECTS

It is not particularly insightful to say that those cross-border projects which succeed in becoming sustainable are those which find a niche for themselves – providing a service or fulfilling a need which is not otherwise offered. Thus the Centre for Cross Border Studies fulfils that role by providing cross-border research, training, information and management support services. Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) does it by providing a range of pilot medical provision plus ‘doctors out of hours’, disability, training and other services to the health authorities in Northern Ireland and the Southern border region. ICLRD does it by providing research services and support to senior planning officials in both parts of the island: its annual conferences have become ‘must attend’ events, with the 2009 conference in Letterkenny being addressed by the chief planning officers of England, Scotland and Wales. The Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) – which the Centre also manages – has unleashed a real outpouring of creativity in colleges of education and other teacher education providers in both jurisdictions by funding over 50 research projects, exchanges and numerous other innovative initiatives in that previously undynamic sector. Greenbox offers a unique cross-border eco-tourism product in Cavan, Leitrim, Sligo and Fermanagh.

As times get tougher, and money gets shorter, cross-border project promoters will have to prove more than ever that their work is cost-effective and is creating innovative new services that wouldn't otherwise have been provided in the two jurisdictions.

## NEED FOR INSTITUTIONALISATION

Personal networks between champions of cross-border cooperation or the existence of a cadre of hard-working cross-border workers (as outlined in my previous point on leadership) can only take co-operation so far. Their commitment can't be sustained over the medium and long term without effective institutionalisation. Individuals take on too much; burn out; or find it difficult to move to the next stage when proper organisational and management methods must take over.

Similarly there is only so much cross-border co-operation an individual or a small organisation like the Centre for Cross Border Studies can do. Sooner or later much cross-border activity will have to be ‘mainstreamed’ and ‘embedded’ into the routine work of government departments, semi-state agencies, local authorities and other institutions if it is to continue. At the moment this just does not happen. With the Republic facing huge public finance cutbacks for the next four to five years (or even longer) and EU PEACE funding likely to run out after 2014, it is even less likely to happen in the future. I am afraid that there is a huge question mark over the sustainability of large elements of current North-South cooperation work in the present and future economic climate.

## NEED TO DO THINGS THAT MAKE SENSE (AND RESEARCH)

This is linked to my earlier point about the nature of projects. Even at the height of the cross-border cooperation ‘golden age’ of the past decade, it has been difficult to engage people who are not directly involved or not instinctively interested in the other Irish jurisdiction or in North-South co-operation. This remains one of the biggest challenges for those of us actively involved in this area (and particularly those in the South) – how to persuade new people to think about doing the things they normally do on a one-jurisdiction basis on a cross-border basis...because it makes sense to do so, because it brings benefits to the people of both jurisdictions at a time when resources are limited and governments are extremely stretched trying to make those resources effective.

In order to do that – to persuade governments and people that evidence-based policy making on a cross-border basis makes sense – we need to start doing far more research into why and how it makes sense. Does it make sense to plan for cross-border hospital services in the cross-border region? (The Centre for Cross Border Studies is carrying out a research project on this at the moment.) Does it make sense for border towns to work together in areas such as tourism, sustainable development and joint services (as the ICLRD has recommended in its recent study of Newry and Dundalk)? Does it make sense to organise against animal health hazards coming from overseas (like foot and mouth) on an all-island basis? Does it make sense to have a new cross-border higher education institution serving the North West? Currently there is little well-funded, in-depth research to find out in which areas practical North-South co-operation makes sense. In the future – and particularly in a future where Departments of Finance will be laying down ever more rigorous ‘Value for Money’ spending criteria – we will have to do much more of the kind of sensible, well-researched, evidence-based cross-border co-operation which really brings benefits to ordinary people.

Thank you.