

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AFTER THE NORTHERN IRISH CONFLICT

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It is now over 15 years since the first IRA ceasefire; eleven and a half years since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, signed by the British and Irish governments and the warring parties in Northern Ireland, effectively brought to an end 30 years of conflict; and two and a half years since the head of the most militantly pro-British unionist party, Rev Ian Paisley, and the former senior IRA commander, Martin McGuinness – after nearly 40 years of trying to bomb Northern Ireland into a united Ireland – completed the virtuous circle by sitting down in government together as first minister and deputy first minister of a regional government.

Economic and Political Cooperation

It has been a long journey (I was a 21 year old student working in the civil rights movement when the conflict started – now I'm four years from retirement). And cross-border cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been an integral part of its extraordinary conclusion. Some say that, along with the reform of policing, it is one of the real success stories of the Northern Irish peace process. Last year I spoke to a group of officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin about North-South cooperation in Ireland. And as I listed the achievements of the past decade, I realized just how extraordinary it is: in that summer of 2008 the Irish Taoiseach or prime minister was promising that hundreds of financial services jobs would be farmed out from Dublin to Belfast (this was before the present massive financial and economic crisis in the Republic started to bite); the Irish Government was proposing to spend nearly €600 million in roads in Northern Ireland; there was a newly-opened all-island single electricity market; North-South trade had doubled in the previous decade; Northern Irish firms were queuing up to join Irish government trade missions....and this was only on the economic front.

On the political front the ancient antagonists of Rev Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein (the party of the IRA) were meeting regularly and cordially to discuss and oversee North-South cooperation in everything from transport to trade, education to inland waterways, health services to food safety, and tourism to agriculture, while specially established North-South bodies staffed by over 700 officials from both jurisdictions were jointly implementing their decisions. Much of this cooperation has been relatively superficial, and has had little impact on core services in the two jurisdictions. Nevertheless – as I said to a neighbour of mine as we walked along the picturesque Grand Canal in Dublin one day – given the bloody events of the past 40 years, it was the stuff of miracles that Ian Paisley's party now had a say in how the

Republic's canals were run, while the Irish Government was funding a new road between Belfast and the ultra-loyalist (i.e. strongly pro-British) port of Larne.

European Union role

At the same time, the European Union was pumping money into Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. For much of the past two decades the EU – mostly through the Belfast-based Special EU Programmes Body, itself one of the eight inter-governmental cross-border bodies set up under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – has given out an enormous amount of money to an astonishing range of projects in that small, distant, relatively under-populated part of Europe: over €2.5 billion to around 23,000 infrastructural, economic, environmental, educational, training, social, cultural and other projects. This has been mainly through two programmes: the PEACE programme, a dedicated fund to assist Northern Ireland and the Irish border counties, and INTERREG, the wider European cross-border programme. The primary aim of a large proportion of the funded projects has been either to lower inter-communal barriers between Catholics and Protestants inside Northern Ireland, or to lower the economic and social barriers between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

My Centre for Cross Border Studies is both a product and a beneficiary of this European largesse, and has been to the forefront of both researching and developing this cross-border cooperation. Since our foundation in 1999 we have carried out 70 cross-border research projects ranging from teacher education to local government, health services to sustainable development, animal disease to telecom technologies, ICT to services to migrant workers; we have organized nearly 60 cross-border conferences and seminars; we have provided the secretariats for three new all-Ireland networks bringing together universities, teacher training colleges and spatial planners; we have trained over 140 government and local authority officials in cross-border cooperation; and we have created major publicly accessible databases providing cross-border information for researchers and policy-makers (www.borderireland.info) and practical information for cross-border workers and commuters (www.borderpeople.info). Our latest package of research, information and training projects, funded by INTERREG and grouped under the common title INICCO (standing for the Ireland/Northern Ireland Cross-border Cooperation Observatory), covers regenerating the Border Region Economy, cross-border spatial planning, cross-border hospital services, cross-border citizens information, and measuring the impact of cross-border cooperation.

Opportunities

So we have had a decade of great opportunities for cross-community peacebuilding between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and cross-border cooperation between North and South in Ireland. Have we used them well? The evidence points to greater progress on lowering barriers *between* Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland than overcoming barriers between the nationalist (and overwhelmingly Catholic) and unionist (and overwhelmingly Protestant) communities *within* Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland first minister Peter Robinson – for 35 years Ian Paisley's first lieutenant – has said on numerous occasions that relationships with the Republic have never been better. Cross-border business and trade have never been higher, exemplified in its most dramatic form every Christmas season by the sight of hundreds of thousands of shoppers from the Republic flooding north for cheaper goods caused by the weakness of the pound Sterling. The security threat from the remaining IRA dissidents – small but still significant – is held in check by excellent cooperation between the two police forces. The inter-governmental cross-border bodies outlined above have sometimes had to cope with squabbles among the coalition of ancient enemies that forms the regional government

of Northern Ireland – but their 700 officials continue to work quietly and in the main effectively across the border. Fuelled by the generous EU funding outlined earlier, community and voluntary groups have been particularly active in making connections across that border, although the volume of this work is less now that the funding is running out.

Conor Brady, a former editor of the country's main newspaper, the *Irish Times*, summed it up well in 2005, when he wrote: "The cold denying silence that fell upon the island in the 1920s has all but ended. Right across public life – in public services, in business, in NGOs, in voluntary organizations – the deadly, deafening silences and the stopped-up channels of communication have been replaced by dialogue, cooperation and a realization that everyone gains, and nobody loses, when people and organizations work together. Of course it does not all flow from the Good Friday Agreement. There have been decades of on-the-ground work put in by clubs, volunteers, schools, organizations, churches and so on. But what the Agreement has done is to make it possible, acceptable and necessary for official Ireland, North and South, to get on with the everyday business of life – together."ⁱ

Measuring the Impact

Despite these complimentary words from a leading journalist, it is not easy to measure the impact of all this cross-border activity on the post-conflict landscape. In fact, it is notoriously difficult to quantify the impact of such post-conflict peace and reconciliation initiatives, since they are inevitably long-drawn-out processes based on slowly improving relationships and patiently increasing understanding. Many of the interim evaluations have been positive. For example, an authoritative 2005 study of the Irish border region found that the PEACE programme had "done much to underpin the peace process by providing close cooperation between civil society organizations and political leaders at local level. The programme validated work between ex-combatants and promoted their social and political reintegration. Cross-border work won increasing acceptance, was seen to be a norm and became less threatening to the loyalist (i.e. Protestant and unionist) community."ⁱⁱ

Similarly, the conclusions of a research studyⁱⁱⁱ by a team of political scientists and psychologists from University College Dublin and Queen's University Belfast among 130 families and over 1,000 young people in the Irish border region in 2004-2006, exploring changing inter-generational attitudes towards identity and nationality in that region, were very positive. The researchers concluded that present British and Irish government and EU policy "to encourage cross-community and cross-border contact is on exactly the right lines, and should be extended. This is the way in which lasting change can be provoked in enough individuals to percolate through entire communities." They warned, however, that this would be a long-drawn-out process and "it would be counter-productive to demand immediate and measurable results from cross-community and cross-border initiatives." Unhappily, far from being extended, financial constraints at both EU and national government levels – with the Irish government being forced by the present recession into probably the most drastic spending cuts of any EU government – have led in the past couple of years to such programmes being cut back.

Certainly the number of people involved in these EU-funded projects is impressive. The head of the EU Special Programmes Body in Belfast, Pat Colgan, said at a conference organized by the Centre for Cross Border Studies last year that 450,000 people had benefitted from EU funded projects over the period from 1995 to 2008 (that includes both cross-community projects *inside* Northern Ireland and cross-border projects with the Republic of Ireland), of whom 130,000 had participated in cross-border activities. This is in a region of around 2.5 million people.

The EU's role has been vital in underpinning this great volume of cross-border work between Northern Ireland and the Republic. In the words of Queen's University Belfast sociologists Liam O'Dowd and Cathal McCall, the distinctiveness of the EU's contribution to this work lies "in the extent to which it seeks to deterritorialise the [Northern Ireland] conflict, i.e. to build cross-border networks of cooperation around issues of common interest. In this sense, it seeks to move beyond bounded territory to the creation of a cooperative transnational space."^{iv}

Challenges

However the challenges to peacebuilding in Ireland through cross-border cooperation remain great. This kind of work is slow, painstaking and expensive, and its impact must be evaluated across decades rather than the two or three year timespans of many EU-funded projects. Irish politicians, with their focus on the short-term electoral cycle, find it difficult to understand the importance of sustaining peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation over the vital longer term. Political leaders in France and Germany after the Second World War were more far-sighted, initiating and continuing to support an ambitious programme of Franco-German youth exchanges (starting in the 1950s) with the long-term aim of effecting a fundamental change in the way the future citizens of those two formerly warring nations would view each other. Evaluations have shown that this programme made a substantial contribution towards promoting good relations between the two countries, but this was only discernible after a generation of young people had been given the experience of participating. The lesson for Ireland is clear: if cross-border programmes, particularly in education and youth and community development, are to make a serious contribution to reconciliation on the island of Ireland, they must prepare for the long haul.

So far cross-border cooperation as a successful contributor to the Northern Irish peace process has been widely recognized. But the past decade and a half have been in many ways the 'golden age' of such cooperation, with huge interest and support at home and abroad for the mould-breaking 1998 Good Friday Agreement and its implementation; extremely generous EU funding; and a cash-rich Irish government that has also been able to devote significant resources to North-South cooperation. We are now entering a period when these factors will lose much of their import: both international and Irish interest in the Northern Ireland political situation and North-South cooperation on the island are now at a low point, with most people believing the continuing deep problems of political instability and communal division in Northern Ireland have been solved; the EU's PEACE programme will effectively run out in 2013-2014, and its INTERREG programme will be turning its attention to other European borderlands further east; and the Irish Government, stricken by the worst financial crisis in the history of the state, will have more pressing problems to deal with closer to home. Within Northern Ireland too, the political atmosphere is not conducive to maintaining a high level of such cooperation, let alone increasing it, with the largest unionist party in government anxious to minimize its extent at every opportunity.

This is the main challenge for cross-border cooperation in Ireland over the next five-ten years: how to sustain the very significant work of the past decade in a harsher political and economic climate, and, if more favourable circumstances emerge, to expand it into new areas such as health, higher education and spatial planning^v. For in these areas research, including research by my Centre for Cross Border Studies, has shown that such cooperation can bring significant practical benefits to the people of both Irish jurisdictions.

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^{iv} 'The Significance of Cross-Border Cooperation for Promoting Peace and Reconciliation', by Liam O'Dowd and Cathal McCall. Paper presented at conference on 'Cross-Border Cooperation and its Application in Different Political Models', San Sebastian, 2004.

^v For example, *Comprehensive Study on the All-Island Economy*, InterTradelreland, 2006; *Removing the Barriers: An Initial Report on the Potential for Cross-Border Cooperation in Hospital Services*, Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2007; *Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland: Development of a Framework for Collaborative Action*, International Centre for Local and Regional Development, 2007; *North-West Gateway Higher Education Strategic Alliance Scoping Study*, Indecon International Economic Consultants for Letterkenny Institute of Technology and University of Ulster, 2009.