

Mapping Frontiers, Plotting Pathways: Routes to North-South Co-operation in a Divided Island

Study Day 2 - Regeneration and Identities on the Irish Border

**Canal Stores, Clones, Co. Monaghan
19 April 2005**

REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The study day was convened at the suggestion of Professors James Anderson and Hastings Donnan (of Queen's University Belfast) to investigate the issues of identities and regeneration on the Irish Border between Counties Monaghan and Fermanagh. The format of the day was to convene workshops with community activists from around the Clones area to discuss the following issues:

1. Cultural and political identities on both sides of the border.
2. Social and economic regeneration and cross-border cooperation.

The study day opened with a welcome by Professor James Anderson. He spoke about the Mapping Frontiers project and how the study days are an important vehicle in ascertaining the views of local people on how the Border affects them.

It was agreed that participants would work in one of two focus groups before coming together for a final plenary session.

OPENING SESSION

Professor Hastings Donnan introduced the identities workshop by observing that we all have multiple identities, and noting how the identities we emphasise can shift from context to context. Everyday identities that we take for granted can sometimes become a dangerous liability as we move from one situation to another. Furthermore, identity is not something that is fixed and self-evident, but is something that must be negotiated and established in every interaction. He also stressed that identity is important not merely at individual but at community level. It was hoped that the workshop would examine the idea of Irish borders and boundaries of all kinds, including those of parish, townland and neighbourhood, as well as those of gender, religion, culture and politics.

Dr Eoin Magennis of the Centre for Cross Border Studies introduced the workshop on regeneration, highlighting that the aim was for an exchange of views and information on how local people considered the Border to have impacted on regeneration over time, and what they felt the priorities were for future efforts in this area. The interpretation of regeneration was to be a broad one, to include social issues such as health and community well-being, as well as economic regeneration issues such as transport, tourism and enterprise.

WORKSHOP REPORTS

Workshop (A): Cultural and political identities on both sides of the border

Professor Donnan proposed to conduct the focus group through six key themes, although he pointed out that some overlap between these was likely.

1. Difference and Similarity

In what ways do people where you live differ (or are the same) from one another? What are the important differences/similarities from one another? Are some of these differences/similarities more important than others? What differences do these differences make to cross-border co-operation? How do they affect participation in cross-border institutions and activities?

Responses:

- It was felt that where a person lived was important, e.g. Dubliners regard Clones people as northerners, while people in the North think of them as southerners. It appeared that nationality and religion are the two major identifiers in this part of the Border region.
- One speaker felt that the EU was important to the question of identity. Regarding ethnicity, it was agreed that the idea of people from different ethnic backgrounds coming to live in the Clones area would cause some disquiet or surprise.
- Another very important factor is where a person comes from: for example, a concept met with everywhere is that of the “blow-in” settling in the neighbourhood, although it was agreed that even someone from 20 miles away could be regarded as a foreigner. “Blow-ins” make it harder to “place” a person and gather information on their family.
- It appeared that the most important identity, or the one people look for first, in this area is the national identity. One participant felt that the national identity was much more important in County Armagh.
- Factors of less relevance to identity include class and location. An example cited was that of funerals, which are attended by folk from all over the town and neighbourhood.
- One speaker said that Protestant denominational identity is very important, since Protestants can be left out of the main identity associated with the town, which in turn creates a border. For instance, a question about one’s favourite Gaelic football team can be a code towards other inquiries (and the speaker felt that conversation about Gaelic games excluded most women in any event). He considered the widespread GAA culture in Clones somewhat exclusive on occasions.
- As regards one’s town/village identity, it was noted that Clones is a place very aware of its history and heritage, proud of its local rivers, etc., and that local folk are willing to assist visitors. One speaker, of English background, spoke of the distinction between town/country but said that the country area would still identify with its local town.
- Do any of these identities impact on cross-border co-operation? It was agreed that its location, within ½ mile of the Border, was an asset and that there was good co-operation on historical matters; one participant noted, however, that the Clogher Historical Society still retains its Catholic identity despite efforts to change this general impression. Another speaker believed that there had always been a fair degree of liaison with Newtownbutler and Roslea in Fermanagh.

- As the parish of Clones crosses the Border, does this have any impact on cross-border co-operation? It was agreed that the re-opening of local roads was an import step in reversing the damage done to the local economy due to people from other towns no longer coming to Clones to socialise or to shop. The Troubles and checkpoints had changed Clones fundamentally and a number of businesses had closed down.
- Two local “heroes” were mentioned: Barry McGuigan and Eugene McCabe, the author.
- The overall conclusion is that one’s ethnic or national identity is of greatest importance to local people.

2. Borders and Boundaries

What borders are important to you? What are the borders that affect your life? How do they have an impact on your identity/identities?

Responses:

- One speaker referred to “borders of the mind” with regard to the Irish Border, i.e. the idea of its causing minds to be closed.
- It was noted that the closing of the Border had caused the death of Clones’ musical heritage and that music could equally bring people together as much as lead to cultural divisions.
- Another participant referred to “drinking borders”, inasmuch as men largely drink together as do women.
- Parishes and townlands are the oldest “borders” in Ireland and it was felt that the concept of parish or townland identity was still important, especially in rural areas.
- As regards the impact of these borders on identities, it was agreed that the border between Cavan and Monaghan, often marked by something as inconspicuous or inconsequential as a hedgerow, was so invisible that it is necessary to create an artificial border between the two counties and emphasise small differences. This leads to a certain mickey-taking on both parts.
- Another obvious example of the impact of a physical border is that of the farmer whose lands traverse the Border itself, meaning that he or she crosses the Border many times each day.
- Moreover, the parish of Clones is cut in two by the Border in counties Monaghan and Fermanagh, and roads to and from it wind in many directions.

3. Landscape and Identities

How are your identities marked in the landscape? Which signs in the landscape are significant for you? How has this changed through time? How does it change as you travel along and across the Border?

Responses:

- Identity is often marked through churches and meeting-houses, of which there is a large and very diverse number in County Monaghan, clear evidence of the influence of the Plantation. Identity is also shown in the landscape itself, through hedgerows, coppices, farmyards and farming methods, and through remains of antiquity. One contributor expressed a belief that Protestant farmers kept their hedgerows tidier than their Catholic neighbours.

- It was noted that going for a walk in Cavan is more limited than in Monaghan due to hedges and ditches, and that walking across the countryside is more difficult because of farming and bogs.
- It was felt that the landscape has changed a lot in recent years, through housing developments and building of individual houses. They were seen to diminish a person's attachment to their own village or townland and mean that people don't get to know each other as well as they did even in the recent past.
- One contributor agreed to the suggestion that the closure of mills in an area where scores existed up until not long ago, and its affect on the landscape, must have impacted on local people's sense of identity.
- The question was put whether the landscape on the southern side of the Border was much different to that on the north. Some felt that it was very different, with fields more likely to be consolidated and houses more scattered, but others did not agree that this was the case.

4. Feelings about Transitions and Thresholds

How do you feel when you cross the Border? Where and when do you begin to feel like this? Do you have any particularly memorable experiences of crossing the Border? To what extent do these feelings and experiences of the Border depend on your religious and national identities?

Responses:

- One contributor said that there was a different "feel" to the north, e.g. the road signs.
- Two participants, who are English, made interesting observations. Both agreed that, while the north was more like Great Britain, they had felt a little alarmed on early visits to the north, for example seeing armed police as a matter of course even in the present ceasefire period.
- Another participant said that streets were cleaner in the north.
- It was noted by others that going north caused the inconvenience of having to find Sterling £ notes and that a slight sense of anxiety can occur in areas marked by Protestant flags. Others considered it interesting to go north and see some nice buildings.
- An example was given of how, during the Troubles, the Border generated fear in Border parishes and a consequent "switch-off" of attitudes towards, or interest in, the north, i.e. the Troubles was a northern phenomenon that stopped at the Border.
- Several people commented that sometimes the Border can be an advantage in regard to the price of goods.
- One man said that "car bonding", whereby the southern government required a car to be inspected each time a person went north, had been a nuisance in the past but was no longer in effect.
- As regards a sense of anticipation over crossing the Border, it was felt that this has declined as the Border is much more open now and because it's much less dangerous to cross, especially if you live near it. One female participant said that there is no longer any need to take a detour across fields, to avoid security patrols, when heading north.
- Another woman said that she crosses the Border every day and thinks nothing of it. However, she never shops in the north.
- A man from a Border Protestant group said that he had often crossed the Border to visit his family and had never any fear of doing so, although he

used to avoid going through certain areas or localities where particular events were taking place.

5. Cultural and Political Identities

To what extent is cultural identity tied to political identity? In what ways are cultural and political identities brought together? Northern views and southern views on the Border: similarities, differences? How has people's sense of their own and others' identity changed in recent years?

To explore these questions, Professor Donnan presented a slide-show of a dozen or so images with a connection to the wider Border area and asked for opinions on what and where they were, and what they signified to the members of the focus group.

6. Hierarchy of Identities

Some identities may be more important to us than others, at a particular time, place or context. But what comes to the fore and when? In what contexts are particular identities relevant? What identity or identities are we most passionate about?

Responses:

- There was insufficient time to explore these questions in detail. However, it was hoped that some of the points made earlier by members of the focus group would be relevant to this topic.

Workshop (B): Socio-economic regeneration and cross-border cooperation

Key questions

Eoin Magennis distributed a list of themed questions to guide discussion and began by pointing out the range of levels at which cross-border cooperation in the regeneration field was already taking place. These include the intergovernmental level, that is between government departments and health boards, for example (CAWT); through local government partnerships (e.g. Monaghan County Council and Dungannon District Council), the border corridor groups, such as the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN); community sector partnerships and sectoral level groupings. Key questions were raised as applicable to all of these activities, including:

- How have motivations and challenges involved in regeneration co-operation changed?
- What is the link between co-operation in regeneration and reconciliation between and within communities?
- How can sustainability of capacity, capabilities and momentum be ensured moving forward?
- Are there significant differences in experiences of pushing regeneration forward on the northern and southern sides of the border?

Key points

A thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion took place in the group. Many points arose worth noting; however a key point made repeatedly concerned a lack of strategic focus for efforts underway at local level to improve co-operation across

the border, and take full advantage of opportunities for regeneration. Key concerns included:

- Tensions and lack of alignment between the institutional levels of representative democracy (i.e. MPs; MLAs; TDs and local councillors) and local regeneration activists in the community; it was felt that participatory democracy was not being achieved. While much visionary work has been achieved through organisations such as ICBAN, some concern was expressed as to how participatory such entities actually were and therefore how their work could be sustained.
- The lack of political progress on the bigger picture at national level both north and south led to an acute sense that the bigger framework for action was absent, and that this prevented local cross-border efforts at regeneration from reaching their full potential. Comments were noted around the need for a North/South consultative forum to create a space for discussion that would include civil society, on how meaningful cross-border cooperation should be planned and delivered.
- That the needs of the border region were not being taken into account at the national policy-planning level; this creates a sense of alienation within border communities who are acutely conscious of their peripherality from Belfast and Dublin, and even in some cases from their respective county administrative centres. Concern around the avenues for input into the policy-process were discussed; doubts were expressed around whether even organisations such as ICBAN who were keenly aware and articulate of area development needs, were able to feed through to the policy level. The lack of joined-up thinking in the preparation of both national spatial planning documents was cited as a clear example of an absence of recognition of particular needs within the border region i.e. planning stops at the border. However an attempt to define what the border region “looked like” i.e. where it stopped and started, would be necessary to underpin such “informed” policy decisions. This was recognised as a difficult task.
- The existence of a sense of insularity and lack of an outward-looking focus; however some discussion took place around whether such a sense of insularity was not particular to border areas, but could also be observed in local areas in, for example, County Cork.

Specific points made relating to **regeneration** included:

- The burdens of different bureaucracies, including legal, fiscal and monetary systems for business and enterprise.
- Ongoing fragmentation of effort at the local cross-border level, e.g. many successful tourism projects were noted, however the lack of a strategic focus that, for example, a statutory agency in the sector would bring, was pointed out.
- The clear need for evidence that both governments were planning long-term for the development of the border region. Mainstream intervention was noted as necessary to sustain regeneration activity in the future. The symbolic importance of such intervention was also highlighted, and the need to move beyond a reliance on European support, recognised. The very positive experience of, for example, the Slieve Beagh partnership, was discussed at length, and its hugely positive impact on confidence levels within communities was noted. However concerns were raised that the volume of voluntary work required to bring about such change is not sustainable: communities recognise also that EU funding cannot continue at current and previous levels. The clear point was made that mainstream

recognition of the benefits of local cross-border regeneration activity was now urgent.

- The institutional “mismatch” between administrative functions, responsibilities and resources on either side of the border was noted as an obvious, yet very real impediment to progress.
- Differences in the political cultures of both jurisdictions were also noted, i.e. a heightened sense and practice of the *political* was felt to pervade local public policy-making in the counties of the Republic; ironically, this was felt to be less the case in the Northern border counties.
- A growing realisation that the context of regeneration would change greatly over the next ten years, particularly with regard to the development of the central and eastern member states of the EU. Current forms of production in the border counties, such as poultry and other forms of agriculture and tourism, would come under increasing competitive pressure and securing *economies of scale* in all such activities would be critically important in the future - this would ensure sustainability.
- The difference between the all-island and the more specifically cross-border approach, in terms of business co-operation, was noted. It was pointed out that InterTradelreland was much more successful due to its bigger North/South approach to business co-operation than previous interventions at a more immediate cross-border level had been.

Specific points relating to **reconciliation** included:

- The potential that inclusive regeneration activity (where dialogue is at the centre) has for reconciliation; the question of inclusivity and participation was noted as needing to be addressed at all levels, i.e. who is not around the table.

FINAL PLENARY DISCUSSION

The discussion was chaired by Mr Andy Pollak, Centre for Cross Border Studies and a summary of each focus group’s findings was delivered by the rapporteurs:

- Identities - Angela Graham, Drum Development Association
- Regeneration - Josephine Treanor, Clones Community Forum.

When this was complete, the chair and others raised the idea of identity, and pride in one’s own locality, acting as driving-forces in economic development.

One speaker referred to the need to integrate hundreds of Border organisations or groups, what he termed a “necklace of development”, as part of a coherent strategy to improve economic development.

Andy Pollak wondered if cross-border networks, for example local historical societies or the Knockatallagh/Brookeborough Arts Group, were a useful vehicle for breaking down barriers and for fostering reconciliation, particularly since they are examples of engagement taking place and of the net being widened so that the same faces are not seen at all cross-border initiatives.

Others wondered if the time wasn’t yet quite right for folk to be comfortable with going to the likes of a musical event in an Orange Hall or to a Gaelic games match.

At least one contributor voiced frustration at the slow progress of the Ulster Canal project, whereby both economics and the political impasse in the North are the

excuses used for its having come to a stop. He firmly believed that cross-border co-operation shouldn't always be predicated on the cost factor.

A speaker from a Border Protestant group considered engagement within communities south of the Border just as important as cross-border work.

Tourism was another means of fostering cross-border co-operation and is a good example of work pressing ahead even when all-Ireland institutions remain to be established.

It was noted, too, that delays to the creation of such agencies were often used to stymie progress on cross-border activities and that pressure needs to be applied to keep them on their toes if, and when, they begin to operate. *InterTradelreland* was cited as a model organisation in the field of cross-border co-operation.

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April 2005.