The Potential for Cross Border Exchange and Learning in Respect of Change in the Community and Voluntary Sector

Report of Seminar
18th October 2013
Canal Court Hotel, Newry
1. Opening Remarks (Bill Osborne)

Bill Osborne welcomed participants and gave an overview of The Building Change Trust’s (BCT) long-term strategy. It was explained that the event falls within the ‘Creative Space for Civic Thinking’ theme and is based on an opinion piece commissioned by BCT from the Centre for Cross-Border Studies. This is the second issue raised under this theme, with a previous opinion piece by Dr Nick Acheson on the theme of Community and Voluntary Sector independence having been the other.

To summarise, BCT’s six strategic themes for the coming years (2013-2018) are:

i. Social Finance
ii. Collaboration
iii. Inspiring Impact
iv. Social Innovation
v. Creative Space for Civic Thinking
vi. Leadership
2. Presentation of Opinion Piece “The Potential for Cross Border Exchange and Learning about Change in the Community and Voluntary Sectors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland”

Andy Pollak and Brian Harvey presented their opinion piece which had been commissioned by the Building Change Trust via the Centre for Cross-Border Studies. The following are the main points made during the presentation. A full copy of the opinion piece can be downloaded from:


Challenges & Changes in NI

- Third Sector organisations seen as essential part of core government task of peacebuilding > Civic Forum
- Sector weak in challenging sectarian divisions (Acheson)
- Political parties mainly see sector as supportive partner
- ‘Drawn into remodelling welfare institutions’ (Acheson)
- ‘We have to prove that our work has benefits.’
- Actually two sectors: 1. large organisations bidding for government contracts; 2. small grass-roots groups
- Income of sector has risen, but growing dependence on government contracts instead of grants
- Expenditure cuts have affected sector less than in England
- EU and other funding declining significantly

Challenges & Changes in ROI

- V&C sector less developed than NI
  - But progress 1990s, Supporting voluntary activity (2000)
- Sudden strategic turn of 2002
  - White paper disregarded
    - Funding commitments not kept
    - Voluntary sector units not developed
    - Autonomy of voluntary sector not respected
- Community Development Programme closed
- Funding down -35% (cf. Government, -4.3%)
- Social policy institutions agencies closed
- Generally passive response, limited protest
North-South Community & Voluntary Sector Cooperation

- Evident even during the troubles
- Significant in Peace I, II (not INTERREG)
- More cross-border cooperation than N-S
- Little government backing N-S civil society activity
  - Two governments failed to progress N-S consultative forum, although part of Good Friday Agreement
- Some level of N-S working in evidence
  - E.g. Wheel/NICVA; pair exchanges; IFFI; CWC; RCN/IRL
  - But demand limited
  - Few single-organization partnerships
  - Few have policy dimension, no place for capturing learning
- Are we back to where we were in 1980s?

Some Recommendations

i. Minimise wastefulness and duplication
ii. Showcase innovation in sector
iii. Highlight successes of social enterprise
iv. Meet to discuss social finance
v. Learn from management of all-island and cross-border organisations
vi. Look at role of natural hinterlands
vii. Look at role of philanthropy
viii. A new role for local authorities?

3. Response from Panellists

The notes below are not exhaustive but rather give a flavour of the key points raised by each of the panellists.

Deirdre Garvey (CEO, The Wheel)

- Cross-border collaboration often gets forgotten e.g. Deirdre recounted that when she came into post at The Wheel her first instinct was to build a relationship with the UK-wide NCVO, rather than NICVA in NI
- Did not agree with the assertion that the CVS is essentially two distinct sectors (large voluntary organisations and smaller community organisations) – there are many different ways the sector could be broken down into categories and this is not the most helpful
• North-South collaboration is a low priority for government in both Belfast and Dublin
• ROI is very centralised in Dublin and the CVS reflects this also
• The most useful recommendations from the report relate to:
  ▪ Exchanging best practice about Social Enterprises  
  ▪ Minimising wastefulness and duplication  
  ▪ Learning about the management of cross-border organisations  
  ▪ Reconnecting natural hinterlands cut off by the border  
  ▪ Local authority reform in both jurisdictions and the potential opportunity this presents for greater cross-border work
• There is an underlying dilemma about whether organisations such as The Wheel should lead on this or rather be led by members – there is currently almost no demand for the prioritisation of cross-border collaboration as an issue from members of The Wheel

Avila Kilmurray (Director, Community Foundation for NI)

• The heyday for cross-border work was in the 1980s and has long since passed – individuals were key, as were Trade Unions  
• Some organisations such as CFNI have always had representation on their Boards from the South as well as the North, this could be a model for other organisations to follow  
• In the 2000’s the institutionalisation of the work may have sapped the energy of the cross border movement.

• The distinction between the community sector and the voluntary sector is somewhat valid, although it’s more like a continuum
• The report over-emphases the role of the CVS in the Good Friday Agreement e.g. the Civic Forum was an idea of the Women’s Coalition
• There are issues hindering cross-border collaboration in both jurisdictions – e.g. clientelism in NI; in ROI there is an issue about the use of the term Ireland to refer to the Republic, rather than the whole island
• The report’s recommendations are very useful
• Should cross-border collaboration be about functional work or engagement with people?
Breege Lenihan (County Monaghan Community Network)

- CVS cross-border work has been greatly hit in recent times and now is largely being extinguished as the most accessible funding available was Peace. Small money from DFA Reconciliation Fund but CMCN has not been successful
- Co Monaghan Fund gives small grants which can make a big difference to the communities concerned. EUR 90,000 distributed to date providing small grants to about 40 organisations including childcare, senior citizens, scouting clubs, arts groups, student enterprise programmes linking with the county enterprise board, special needs groups, Monaghan Alzheimers Committee, defibrillator training for trainers and students on the DCU Access to Education Programme
- CMCN succeeded on a partnership basis first with Rosa and now CACD - 35 community buildings renovated and 35 community groups interacting.
- Difficult to maintain a true partnership approach - requirement for a lead partner
- Peace III more difficult - local authority led strand more interested in rolling out on a county by county basis not so interested in cross border and all about spend on soft options nothing to act as a carrot to get communities involved.
- Much of the learning from this work has been captured but it has not been effectively shared to date

Paddy Logue

- The best idea in the report is quotation from Kathy Walsh that without a policy dimension there is a real danger that most cross-border activity will be “interesting once-off work that doesn’t get built on and progressed” (page10)
- From the EU-funded upsurge in cross-border work in the mid-nineties the absence of a policy framework was identified as a major obstacle to developing cross-border co-operation
- The example of unsuccessful attempts to create an integrated area plan for the cross-border Northwest region in 1999 was cited as evidence of this
- A lot of hope was placed in the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) but, unfortunately it has proved to be a disappointment i.e. because it raised hopes that it wasn’t able to satisfy in the absence of a policy framework
• A trawl of recent minutes of NSMC meetings reveals plenty of deadpan and arguably unwarranted self-congratulation e.g. the Northwest Gateway Initiative which is praised for its progress on a range of initiatives, whereas those of us with personal knowledge of this project thought that it had been consigned to the lumber room of history.
• What’s good about this report is that the need for a policy framework for cross-border work; the need for mainstreaming cross-border work; and the need for determined government leadership in cross-border work are all highlighted, and rightly so. And they all point us in the direction of the NSMC whose stated purpose is “to develop, consultation, co-operation and action on an all-island and cross-border basis”.
• It is disappointing that there is no mention in this report of the NSMC despite its central role in cross-border co-operation, now and in the future.

Seamus McAleavey (Chief Executive, NIVCA)

• Not sure about the distinction between the community and voluntary sectors – big differences do exist but it is a continuum rather than two separate sectors
• People get involved in organisations, not sectors, and many are unfamiliar with this language
• North-South cooperation is about the whole island; cross-border collaboration is different and refers to areas in close proximity to the border. In this regard the report’s recommendation about reconnecting hinterlands is particularly important
• INTERREG was supposed to address the under-development of the border areas but it has not been successful
• Cross-border work tends to follow an ‘ebb and flow’ pattern – could this be the start of a new ebb?

Peter Sheridan (Chief Executive, Cooperation Ireland)

• Agree with much of the content of the report but disappointed it didn’t name and shame the poor support from government for cross-border cooperation
• In ROI the emphasis is on East-West (i.e. ROI-GB) relationships and there has been a lack of engagement with issues in the north
• Resolution of social divisions in both jurisdictions are critical to the success of the peace process
• There has been little North-South reconciliation and there is a mutual ambivalence e.g. what interest do the people of Cork and Coleraine have in one another?
• There is virtually no funding available on an all-island basis with the exception of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs’ Reconciliation Fund, however this work is essential if we are serious about creating a shared society

4. Questions and Answers

Again, the following points are not exhaustive but rather give a flavour of the issues raised during the plenary discussion:

• The North South Ministerial Council has “congratulated itself into irrelevance”; the North South Consultative Forum should have been established as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement
• Is it possible to move towards a more shared and inclusive understanding of Irish identity?
• North-South terminology is preferable to cross-border
• Should the Building Change Trust include a southern voice in its Creative Space for Civic Thinking work?

5. Group Work

Participants were asked to discuss the issues raised through the report as well as the panellists’ responses, and to highlight some practical actions that could be taken to promote effective cross-border collaboration. The main points emerging from group work are organised on the following two pages according to key themes.
A. Issues & Challenges

A.1. Policy Framework & Role of Governments
- North South Ministerial Council has no policy focus
- CVS not challenging politicians
- Basic issues not being discussed

A.2. Awareness, Attitude & Commitment
- Is appetite for all-island work greater in north?
- Are people in south aware of opportunities available through cooperation with north?
- Story of Protestants along border needs to be told
- Cavan/Leitrim have different approach to NI than e.g. Cork
- East-west / Dublin-London link is high priority in ROI and sometimes there seems to be a greater affinity to England than NI
- ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ mentality prevails

A.3. CVS Funding & Independence
- Economic crisis has had effect on willingness to challenge
- Has contract culture killed CVS independence?
- CVS pre-occupation with funding – misplaced priority?
- Funded groups tend to be more passive; unfunded groups have more independence
- Funding conditions often preclude cross-border work
- Most cross-border collaboration is voluntary in nature

A.4. Rationale for Cross-Border Work
- Needs to demonstrate focus on practical concerns
- Sometimes a two-jurisdiction approach makes more sense but we should still learn from best practice
- Border shouldn’t be barrier to exchange of ideas and learning

A.5. Local Government
- No matching up of respective responsibilities

A.6. Question of Irish Identity
- This can’t be ignored
- Southern consideration of unionists is necessary

A.7. Austerity
- Minimising wastefulness & duplication – has this not been done to death already?
- Poverty and austerity – surely an opportunity for North-South engagement and learning; what role can churches, credit unions, charities play?
B. Proposed Actions

Policy Framework & Role of Governments
• Bryson & NICVA are powerful voices
• NICVA & The Wheel need joint action plan
• NSMC should take up issue of reconnecting hinterlands
• Joint funding between NI & ROI Government departments

Terminology
• Clarity with language - frame things as ‘all island’ (3 groups)
• Distinction between border region and broader north-south
• In Donegal, Ireland is thought of in 3 parts – North, South & Donegal

Social Enterprises & Social Innovation
• Bring organisations together to show good practice; lots of potential for exchange of expertise
• Role for Centre for Cross-Border Studies?
• Social Enterprise NI organising cross-border exchange in 2014. SE’s need to trade in bigger market; build evidence base and case studies
• Young Social Innovators (Dublin) – SENI have developed relationship and plan to bring this work to NI
• Discussions around ‘Social Firms’ developing 5 nation approach – SENI representing NI
• Potential for ‘Trade Social’ website on all island basis for SE’s to market products & services
• Southern examples of SI relevant to NI e.g. GENIO, Young Social Innovators – need to engage and learn

CVS Funding & Independence
• CVS, especially individual organisations must take initiative for cross-border work
• Independent funders are effective in providing CVS autonomy

Civic Engagement
• Use IT to facilitate North-South civic engagement
• Use open spaces e.g. Credit Unions and Gaelic clubs to start local conversations about cross-border cooperation based on what people need/want i.e. not top-down

Organisation-Specific Actions
• Shelter NI looking into whether NI housing associations link with ROI as well as GB
• New INTERREG programme will involve Scotland – link NICVA with Scottish counterparts
• Acquired Brain Injury Ireland examining opportunities for partnerships north of border
• All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care interested in learning with respect to management of all island organisations

Youth
• Youth dissatisfaction – can CVS harness this?
• Lack of youth representation at this event – organisations such as Youth Action are already involved in cross-border work

Peace-building
• Provide access to learning outcomes of Peace II & III in simple terms
• Cross-community work tends not to be with direct neighbours in first instance so cross-border work can help prepare ground for this
• Disappointing that SEUPB did not attend – need to engage in relation to Peace IV

Local Government
• Formation of new councils is opportunity for CVS

Youth dissatisfaction can CVS harness this? Lack of youth representation at this event organisations such as Youth Action are already involved in cross-border work.
6. Closing Remarks Bill Osborne

Some final comments were invited from the floor to give a flavour of the group discussion that had taken place. Finally Bill thanked participants for their attendance and their active participation.
# Appendix A: Participant List

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<th>Company / Organisation</th>
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<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>Karen</td>
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