

**Report of the
First North South Consultative Conference,
Farmleigh House,
15 October, 2009**

Co-Chairs:

Mary Davis, Special Olympics Ireland
Trevor Ringland, One Small Step Campaign

Panellists:

Billy Tate, Principal, Belvoir Park Primary School
Brendan Mackin, Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre
Paula O'Dwyer, IBEC/CBI
Peter Sheridan, Co-operation Ireland.

1. Introduction

The Co-Chairs welcomed the Taoiseach and the delegates to the Conference. They outlined the role of civic society, its capacity to bring people together and the meaning of active citizenship. The purpose of the event was to bring together social partners and other groups in civil society with an interest in North/South Co-operation. Participants were drawn from a range of sectors in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The conference would seek to explore social, cultural and economic issues that have a North/South and cross-border dimension. The focus would be on identifying potential for improved co-operation for mutual benefit.

2. Opening Address by An Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen TD

During his opening address the Taoiseach made the following key points:

- Active citizenship is vital to the development of our society and communities.
- The political structures throughout this island provide an opportunity to identify solutions to shared problems to the mutual benefit of all
- There is potential for greater economic co-operation, shared responses to social issues and joint efforts to promote tolerance and understanding.
- This event provides an opportunity for civil society, North and South, to find its voice in that context.
- We need to tap into the well of civil society to advise us, North and South, on how we can work together to progress economically and socially.
- The need for social interaction is fundamental to common ownership of our shared challenges – we must foster and promote new thinking.
- The Taoiseach's officials had been asked to ensure follow-up to this event.
- The Taoiseach undertook to keep colleagues in Government and in the North informed of developments.

3. Open Forum Discussion and Panel Discussion

During the Open Forum and the Panel Discussions there was general support expressed for the initiative by representatives of organisations including ICTU, IBEC/CBI Joint Business Council, the community and voluntary sector and farming organisations. There was wide ranging debate on the vibrancy of civil society and its capacity to contribute meaningfully to the process of cross border cooperation to mutual advantage. It was noted that there are already many organisations with all-island and/or North South connections and a considerable volume and diversity of civic engagement where individuals and organisations share responsibility and tackle issues of common concern.

Particular issues highlighted included people enduring sectarianism and living in segregated communities and attitudes to Britishness needing to be addressed. A North/South Consultative Conference must provide people with the opportunity to speak – it should not take a generation to change.

A number of common themes and issues emerged during the discussions and these are outlined below.

North/South Consultative Conference (NSCC)

Participants emphasised need for NSCC to have:

- Flexible practical and clearly defined operational parameters.
- A focus on shared economic, political, environmental and social issues.
- Both add value to existing/ongoing cross border work and identify longer term opportunities for mutual benefit.
- Voices that wouldn't normally be heard and reflect the shared issues around more open and multi-ethnic society and the challenge of alienated young people and disadvantaged communities.
- Processes to engage at a range of levels: local, regional, institutional and jurisdictional.
- Specific themes that contribute to the on-going building of friendship interaction and trust between different groups and organisations, North and South.

Participants also generally indicated that they saw the role of government as being to facilitate these discussions and to provide the space for civil society to make an input to policy making.

General Environment

Contributions were wide ranging and diverse and included:

- A high level of awareness of the very significant impact a new and much more difficult economic environment was having on the work already being done by civil society North and South.
- Success, especially in this new environment, needing political engagement North and South.
- North/South implementation bodies being identified as key stakeholders
- Importance of acknowledging the range of all-island work that was already ongoing including examples of the great many specific initiatives currently underway in the business, trade union, farming and community sectors.
- Recognition that in some areas there would naturally be competition between North and South but that in certain areas active co-operation would be of greater mutual benefit.
- The psychology of the border and the challenge to think on an island basis remaining one of the biggest hurdles to be overcome in the wider community.

Factors for Success

Amongst the suggestions as to what the Conference could facilitate were;

- Helping those who wish to work together to do so including by recognising existing achievements and being realistic about what could be achieved.
- Identifying opportunities for public service provision North and South to proactively collaborate to tackle shared challenges
- Revisiting wider EU dimension and especially the work of the EU Task Force with particular reference to the support of European funding for cross-border activities in the context of moving on from Interreg and PEACE funding and their capacity to impact on the environment, equality and social and economic development.
- Supporting the continuing effort required to ensure North/South is firmly and consciously factored into the thinking of business people and policy makers.

- Encouraging sectors that have not already done so to take the initiative to reach out to their counterparts in either the North or the South and take practical steps to verify the potential mutual benefits of working directly with them.
- Compiling 'best practice' models where this is already occurring and especially in important arenas such as Education (eg issues around meeting face to face at a number of levels to balance negative impacts of segregation) or sport (where co-operation between sporting bodies began on a small scale and has now progressed to joint planning and coaching with input from ground level and engagement across communities).
- Using the new and rapidly developing capacity of the internet and social networking sites such as Facebook to bring together disparate groups and individuals virtually, both for its own work and to facilitate others.
- Implementing a shared vision where trust, mutual respect consensus building and adding value, are critical success factors.

Key Themes for Future Discussion

While being noted that considerable work had already been undertaken in particular areas of North/South co-operation such as Health and Education, a wide range of themes and issues were proposed for consideration by NSCC in the context of a shared responsibility North and South for the well being of the island and its citizens

- All-Island employment rights.
- Peace and reconciliation programmes and the building of social solidarity.
- Energy – all-island sustainable energy.
- The elimination of the black economy.
- Peace and reconciliation programmes and the building of social solidarity.
- Co-operation at enterprise level and innovation.
- Agriculture – the need to apply the smart economy to the agri-industry.
- Unemployment and poverty.
- Racism.
- Tackling sectarianism in communities.
- The Environment (climate change).
- Economic growth.
- Communities.
- Health co-operation – and an all-island approach to obesity.
- Education.
- Sport.
- Shared History.
- Arts & Culture.
- Construction industry and social housing initiatives, common housing standards.
- Innovation and the Green Economy.

- Labour mobility.
- Rural transport links.

Process

A number of delegates raised the question of how to best develop the conference's engagement with civil society North and South. The need to include all sectors of society; to have communities strongly represented and to have particular regard to equality (especially gender balance) was stressed. The need to include more young people in this initiative was a view expressed by quite a number of delegates. It was important to hear the voices of citizens and to consult on public policies.

Participation and active engagement throughout the island and outside of the Dublin-Belfast corridor was urged.

Papers previously prepared by Co-operation Ireland on a proposed structure for a North South Consultative Forum were referenced. Overall, a number of potential approaches were identified:

- Social partnership in the South.
- The National Economic and Social Council.
- The National Economic and Social Forum: annual plenary, working groups on particular issues, joint steering committee (60 members) small secretariat to support research and reports.
- The European Economic and Social Committee could provide a useful model.

While no one proposal was endorsed there was clear support for the Conference to identify a constructive and realistic process to harness the enthusiasm and good will that was demonstrated by participants.

4. Conclusion

A show of hands indicated that the vast majority of attendees were in favour of having further engagement with a North South Consultative Conference to explore specific areas for co-operation, North and South, at the level of civil society. The Co-chairs thanked the panellists and the delegates for their participation. The current intention is to have a similar gathering in Spring 2010.