

## **REMARKS AT THE NESC ‘SHARED ISLAND, SHARED OPPORTUNITY’ CONFERENCE**

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The Shared Island initiative was launched by Taoiseach Micheál Martin in October 2020. It has the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement at its core and its aim is to enhance ‘cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island’ by engaging with all communities and traditions across this island.

In many ways it builds on the Declaration of Support, Paragraph 3, Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: ‘We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands’.

The idea of the Shared Island envisages strong North-South cooperation. For its part, North-South cooperation is a multi-faceted thing. It has an institutional character, political traits, an economic context, and is informed by a cultural perspective and civic spirit.

The experience of North-South cooperation since 1998 has gone from a brief period of intensity immediately after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, to a period when it was interrupted and slack in the years that followed. An element of drift set in as Northern Ireland settled into a period of relative peace. Over that period, the hallmarks of North-South cooperation have been:

1. Efforts to progress the border economy and the all-island economy – with some concentration around the Belfast-Dublin corridor. Although trade between North and South has increased substantially since the Protocol, recent analysis of the growth in all-island trade integration shows that the scale of Ireland’s trade with Northern Ireland, relative to its trade with other countries, is still less than what would be expected of two jurisdictions located adjacent to each other. Moreover, all-island trade and business is currently more important to Northern Ireland businesses than it is to their counterparts in Ireland. Trade between Cork and Northern Ireland is estimated to be limited in scale.
2. In 2017, the European Commission [Task Force for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations with the United Kingdom under Article 50 TEU] prepared a mapping exercise as part of the Brexit negotiations, and identified 156 areas of North-South cooperation. This included many diverse forms of cooperation including: InterTradeIreland; the all-island free travel scheme for senior citizens; the all-island pollinator plan; and cross-border GP out of hours service to mention but a few examples. This list also notes links between schools, between health systems, and cooperation on tourism, transport, energy, etc. Some links are more advanced than others, but it is clear that across many policy areas there are mutual benefits when it comes to North-South cooperation.

3. In addition, there exist informal links and exchanges between North and South – based on all-island sports associations, shared cultural projects, artistic collaborations and personal networks.

So what are the core achievements of North-South cooperation to date? Three points:

1. North-South cooperation is perhaps best characterised as being economic, administrative and technical in nature. It includes the all-island economy, although the parameters, breadth and expanse of all-island economic activities is arguably territorially and sectorally clustered. Much of the cooperation is based on contact and collaboration between agencies, North-South implementation bodies, between civil servants, government departments, representative organisations, health systems, etc. This type of cooperation is welcome and significant. It serves the mutual interests of citizens on both sides of the border and those from all communities. It represents the hard edge of North-South cooperation so to speak.
2. The softer edge of cooperation, however, which is focused more on grassroots relationships, informal exchanges and personal networks has been less evident and less sustained. By way of example, the rate of North-South student mobility has waned in recent years, and more particularly, we also see less of it here in Cork than in Dublin or other parts of Ireland. What is significant, however, is that softer forms of contact are no less important than their hard-edged equivalent. It is where mutual respect can be nurtured; where an exploration of identity can take place, both Britishness and Irishness; and where understanding (and reconciliation) can potentially be found. Softer forms of cooperation have the potential to be agents of social change, improving relations and underpinning mutual respect between North and South and between the different traditions on this island.
3. I would also suggest that the further you move away from the border – the thinner/weaker the links between North and South are. Connections – physical and otherwise – between cities and people across the entirety of the island are not advanced. It is easier, quicker and often cheaper to travel to any number of UK/European cities from Cork than it is to get to Belfast or Derry. Thinner links are often a consequence of physical distance; but that physical distance creates a tricky psychological distance. It not only limits opportunities for engagement, it allows unhelpful prejudices, myths and misunderstandings to develop.

Let's not forget either that the Brexit vote threatened to further undermine the capacity for North-South cooperation. Agreement on the Protocol – which maintains an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – helped to create the conditions for sustaining and growing North-South cooperation. This did, however, necessitate a border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK for the purposes of trade. That development has created pronounced political difficulties for unionism in particular, and has prevented the full implementation of the Protocol. The atmosphere of uncertainty created by these difficulties is adding to tensions in Northern Ireland, and creating difficulties for relations between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland.

North-South cooperation really is challenged by the realities of Brexit – and that is concerning in a context where North-South cooperation has a role to play in nurturing partnership, equality and mutual respect between the two parts of the island.

The NESC Comprehensive Report is a significant piece of work. It covers all sorts of issues, areas and policies where cooperation deserves to be considered and reflected upon. It makes a whole series of recommendations about how cooperation can be nurtured and progressed in this post-Brexit period. Some of these ideas are picked up in the [Cork and the Brexit Effect](#) report launched recently in UCC by Taoiseach Micheál Martin. It is encouraging to see that similar themes get an airing in both reports.

Let me conclude by saying that today is an opportunity to have an important conversation about the Shared Island. Having a vibrant sustainable and successful all-island economy and North-South cooperation underpinned by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is no less crucial to stability and prosperity in Cork than anywhere else on the island of Ireland.

That is fundamentally why today's event is so significant. It gives us an opportunity to feed into a discussion about how Cork and this region can contribute to and take advantage of the Shared Island initiative.