

NESC Shared Island Event: Cork

SUMMARY NOTE

Aula Maxima

University College Cork

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NESC

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Development Office NESDO

Understanding Shared Island

UCC Vice President Professor John Cryan welcomed delegates to the beautiful historic venue, highlighting some of its history.

Dr Mary C Murphy, a senior lecturer in politics at UCC, provided the context for the event emphasising the importance of the Good Friday Agreement, setting out a number of achievements of North South Cooperation, and noting the challenges of Brexit.

NESC Senior Policy Analyst, Dr Helen Johnston, presented an overview of NESC's Shared Island work setting out the main conclusions and recommendations of the NESC Shared Island Shared Opportunities report. The main conclusions are: the significant support, in practice, for an all-island approach to common challenges; the urgency of all-island action and collaboration on climate change and biodiversity; and factors which shape collaboration such as a shared agenda, resources, political certainty and support, legislative and regulatory coherence, and collaborative projects.

The Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD gave a video address where he stressed the importance and relevance of NESC's research in moving from aspiration to action on the Government's commitment to building a shared island. He noted the significance of the event being held in University College Cork. Situating his remarks in the context of the Good Friday Agreement he said this was a time for reflection and dialogue. He articulated the achievements to date on infrastructure, research, dialogue and local authority initiatives being supported through the Shared Island Fund.

Shared Island Perspectives

Seamus Coffey, an economist at UCC, previous chair of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and current NESC Council member, spoke of shipping, statistics and subvention in relation to the shared island. He bemoaned the dearth of transport links between the 2nd and 3rd largest cities on the island, Cork and Belfast. On statistics he said there was a lack of comparable statistics between the two jurisdictions on the island; and on subventions he said that both economies received substantial subventions and that there was a need for a balance of payments for the island of Ireland.

Miriam Holt, the national co-ordinator of the National Collective Community Based Women's Networks (since renamed Women's Collective Ireland) outlined the role of the 17 women's network projects across Ireland, with a reach of over 36,000 women nationwide and a focus on the empowerment of women. Although they do not cover Northern Ireland there are a lot of commonalities with women's groups in the north. She outlined the potential of a shared island approach in: building trust; supporting participation; and expanding horizons, such as the development of an all-island community development strategy.

Dr Alexandra Revez, a researcher at the Environmental Research Institute in UCC, presented an overview of the Imaging 2050 project. The project comprises a transdisciplinary consortium within UCC, with a link to Queen's University Belfast, and is focused on community engagement in climate action. Part of the project involves exploring deliberative processes, with the development of a number of tools to facilitate this.

Peter Osborne, chairperson of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, provided a Northern Ireland perspective. Using the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as a basis for his remarks he emphasised the critical role of civil society in all-island relationships, and noted the important role of the EU, which was providing 33 years of funding through the Peace Programmes. He remarked that while Brexit is a threat, we need to focus on strands 2 and 3 of the GFA, and not just strand 1.

In the discussion after the presentations the following points were made: the need for overarching statistical data; and greater engagement between academics and civil society through dialogue, working relationships and sharing expertise.

Shared Island Opportunities

Dr James Cronin, an educator and historian in UCC, spoke about the TOGETHER project on collaborating across prison walls and borders. The TOGETHER project is a joint venture between UCC and Queens University Belfast, funded by the Higher Education Authority's North South Research Programme. The project is researching the impacts of prison-university partnerships, North and South, working with prisoners so that incarcerated and university students are learning side by side. Art is used to get incarcerated students to think differently about their futures, through education.

Gina McIntyre, the CEO of the Special EU Programmes body (SEUPB) which is responsible for the delivery of EU programmes in Northern Ireland, gave an overview of the forthcoming PEACE PLUS Programme. Funded by the EU, the UK and Irish Governments, and the NI Executive €1.4b will be disbursed through this programme to support peace and prosperity. The Programme has now been adopted (in July), with an anticipated programme launch in September. Under the programme there is flexibility to include partners from outside NI and the border areas in a wider functional area. The SEUPB is also trying to co-ordinate various funding streams across the island in the promotion of peace and prosperity.

Ann Doherty, the CEO of Cork City Council, drew out the connections between the two jurisdictions on the island, e.g. on health services. She spoke of the commonalities between Cork and Belfast, e.g. both have Lord Mayors. She highlighted the importance of initiatives like learning cities and healthy cities. On environmental issues she outlined common agendas e.g. with regard to the docklands, enterprises, biodiversity, circular economy, innovation. Throughout it all she emphasised the importance of 'people engagement' and building relationships.

The ensuing discussion provided an example of a group from Lough Neagh providing eels for the English market in Cork, and stressed the significance of the PEACE PLUS programme.

In closing remarks NESC Director Dr Larry O'Connell summarised some of the key issues which arose throughout the day emphasising the importance of: the shared agenda of 'saving the planet'; building 'people to people' relationships; and undertaking collaborative projects.



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