

# NEW HORIZONS FOR THE BORDER AREAS: FROM GOOD INTENTIONS TO GOOD PRACTICE IN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

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## Introduction

This paper will examine the significance and progress of cross-border cooperation and development in Ireland in the decade after the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>1</sup> Signed on 10 April 1998 and brought into force on 2 December 1999, the Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement) has commonly been hailed as the crowning achievement of the reconciliation process. Whatever its flaws and shortcomings, it has certainly opened up new opportunities for, and confirmed a new logic of, peace-building and reconciliation in the region. Prior to this landmark agreement, Irish cross-border cooperation had been gradually emerging in the wake of the first provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire in 1994. This increased cooperation, it was hoped, would establish a new ethos of trust, reconciliation, and solidarity between and within estranged and fractured communities. Over the decade or so since the establishment of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, such cross-border cooperation increasingly has become the concern of many disciplines, including political science, economics, education, sociology, anthropology, and history. Geographical concerns have also played a major role in the process, and as such a spatial approach can be enlightening when tackling cross-border issues. In addition, understanding the current status of border communities will be significantly enhanced by an overview of the historical background of the border areas prior to the ceasefire. Analysing these diverse factors, this paper shall assess the degree of progress achieved in cross-border cooperation in Ireland, as well as the new perspectives reached in the border areas. The central question in this regard remains whether the good intentions that guided the reconciliation policies at the top level have led to good practice at the ground level between and within fractured communities. To these ends, the case of the Blackwater partnership shall be analysed as an example of good practice

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1 The EU defines cross-border cooperation as neighbourly cooperation in all areas of life between regional areas straddling borders, therefore involving two types of administration and local or regional bodies, which, in the case of Ireland, entails both British and Irish authorities.

that may serve as a guiding model for other cross-border areas in Ireland and Europe.

### **The Border Areas North and South**

The Irish Border, the only land frontier in either the Republic of Ireland or the United Kingdom, runs for a total of 360 kilometres (224 miles) from Lough Foyle in the north to Carlingford Lough in the east. Overall, this border area accounts for 15% of the population of the island, incorporating the district council areas of Derry, Strabane, Omagh, and Fermanagh in Northern Ireland and the counties of Cavan, Monaghan, Donegal, Louth, Leitrim, and Sligo in the south. The 1921 division of Ireland into two distinct political units on the basis of a sectarian rationale, separating the predominantly Protestant population of the six Ulster counties from the predominantly Catholic population of the rest of Ireland, had been considered the only means to containing and reducing conflict.<sup>2</sup> The partition, however, has institutionalised division and further fractured the communities adjacent to the border, as the two populations, as well as Catholic and Protestant communities within both populations, have been alienated from one another by a thirty years' conflict.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1970s, a substantial number of watchtowers, bases, and checkpoints were installed all along the northern side of the border, their presence contributing to a climate of tension, unease and fear among the border communities. Indeed, during the Troubles the Irish border was the most militarised area of Europe, west of the Iron Curtain (Harvey et al. 60), and isolation and peripherality have defined the situation of the border areas over these years of conflict.

In the decades since, little contact has existed between neighbouring villages and communities, owing in part to the increasing number of blocked and bombed roads. The psychological impact of partition on the border people has led to what Anke Strüver has termed "borderscaping" (12), referring to the way people construct psychological borders in a self-centred approach to their territory, which signifies an inability to see beyond the border. The concept of "peripherality" can also help to explain the marginalisation of the territories strad-

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2 According to Kevin Rankin, partitions are set up "to contain and resolve conflict by separating hostile ethnic groups and meeting national demands by endowing them with a state structure" (5).

3 However, partition alone does not achieve homogenisation. Post-partition India and Pakistan are still heterogeneous and the border areas in Ireland contain significant minorities that have become increasingly frustrated with the dominance of one group over the other.

dling the border. As the centres of power and decision-making, London and, to a lesser degree, Belfast developed the region down to the borderline, while Dublin developed the region up to the same line from south. With most of the high-level economic activities and innovations located in these capitals, the border areas had poor accessibility to resources and sources of investment. Furthermore, economic experiences differed greatly north and south of the border, and the two contiguous regions have drifted apart over the years. As a result, the border has generated what is referred to as a “back to back” evolution and development, with no common perspective. Consequently, deprivation indices, such as levels of unemployment (particularly youth unemployment), poor educational qualifications, skills shortages, and the dependency rate, have been particularly high in the border areas. Other such problems include dependence on agriculture, poor transport infrastructure, and over-reliance on European funds.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the border areas have been locked into patterns of low productivity, low efficiency, and low entrepreneurial activity during the thirty years’ conflict.

### **From Borderscaping to a Cross-Border Vision**

Cross-border cooperation is a relatively recent trend in Ireland, the idea gradually appearing in the wake of the first provisional IRA ceasefire in 1994, tentatively with the Temporary Cessation of Hostilities of April 6, and more substantially in the aftermath of the ostensibly permanent ceasefire of August 31. The purpose of cross-border cooperation, which was part of the general discourse concerning conflict resolution and peace-building, was “to reverse the trend and see different, even opposite cultures interact with one another in a positive way” (Maher & Basanth 15). In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, which established the North-South Ministerial Council and North-South Implementation Bodies to effectuate cross-border cooperation in policy and programmes on a variety of issues, the objective was to increase contact between communities in order to restore the border space on both social and economic grounds. To these ends the processes of reconciliation and reconstruction, equally important for the regeneration of the border areas, are intrin-

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4 The problems of the border areas in Ireland are similar to those of the Mezzogiorno region in southern Italy, which, in contrast with the northern Italian regions, is confronted with the consequences of underdevelopment.

sically linked.<sup>5</sup> The first steps in these dual processes were to restore the visibility and attractiveness of the border areas, before building up contact on both cross-border and cross-community bases. This could be achieved only if the barriers of mutual ignorance and incomprehension between the two economic spheres were reduced or, ideally, removed. To strengthen links between the two administrations and labour markets a new dynamism had to be infused through innovations, the hope being that such joint initiatives would eventually lead to economic and social cohesion.

There have been a number of actors in the development of cross-border cooperation at European, intergovernmental, and local levels. The EU, for example, has been a major driver in the process of internationalising the problems of the border areas. Since the beginning of the integration project, cross-border issues have ranked high on Europe's policy agenda, with EU-funded programmes injecting substantial funding into the border areas. The INTERREG Community Initiative, which was adopted in 1990, was intended to prepare border areas for a community without internal frontiers. INTERREG III specifically concerns cross-border cooperation between adjacent regions and aims to develop better relations through common development strategies. The *EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation*, or *Peace I*, followed by *Peace II*, was launched in 1995 to focus on issues relevant to the healing of communal divisions and to position cross-border cooperation in Ireland to the fore. One of its measures, "Promoting Pathways to Reconciliation," focused directly on community relations projects. The *Special European Union Programmes Body* (SEUPB), which will lead to *Peace III*, is intended to manage and oversee various EU cross-border programmes, with support in Ireland from the National Development Plan for Ireland and the Northern Ireland Structural Funds Plan.

At intergovernmental level the *North/South Ministerial Council* was created within Strand II of the Good Friday Agreement. The Council brings together Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government on matters of mutual interest, on both all-island and cross-border bases. The areas of cooperation for the implementation of cross-border policies were identified as Agriculture, Health Policy and Research, Rural Development, Education and

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5 As one member of the Cavan group said, "The whole process of reconciliation can only succeed if socio-economic reconstruction and development forms part of the building of a constructive civil society." Cavan Family Resource Centre Group, interview quoted in Maher & Basanth (106).

Social Issues, Environment, Tourism and Transport.<sup>6</sup> In the economic sphere, the IBEC/CBI Joint Business Council, a partnership between the *Confederation of British Industry* in Northern Ireland and the *Irish Business and Employers Confederation* in the Republic, has endeavoured to improve trade and business links in the cross-border areas. In 2000 the Council was given new momentum with a special focus on helping small and medium companies develop business linkages in an improved business environment and infrastructure.

Progress has also been made through a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which either have been set up or given a new momentum over the last decade. Examples include the *Border Minority Group* (BMG), the *Centre for Cross-Border Studies*, and *Cooperation Ireland* (formerly *Cooperation North*).<sup>7</sup> A cross-border consortium has also been established, made up of *Cooperation Ireland* (CI), *Community Foundation for Northern Ireland* (CFNI), the *Area Development Management*, and *Combat Poverty Agency*, an intermediary body responsible for administering funds under the EU Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The common function of these organisations is to encourage, support, and promote, community initiatives.

### The Network Culture

Three tiers of cross-border cooperation have been identified; namely the inter-governmental, the local/regional, and the grassroots (or community) levels. In 1995, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) was established so that local authorities on both sides of the border could develop cross-border cooperation networks. By providing the basis for contact and cooperation between the representatives of all counties directly situated along both sides of the border,<sup>8</sup> ICBAN allows for a wide range of cross-border projects to be estab-

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6 Under the Good Friday Agreement six North/South bodies were created, which operate on an all-island basis and are responsible to the North-South Ministerial Council, the *Oireachtas* and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

7 The BMG was formed in 2001 to facilitate community and cultural development within the Protestant minority community in Cavan, Leitrim, and Monaghan and to work for human rights and equality. The *Centre for Cross Border Studies*, based in Armagh, was set up in 1999 to research and develop co-operation across the Irish border in education, health, business, public administration, communications, and a range of other practical areas. *Cooperation Ireland* promotes people-to-people cooperation in areas such as business, education, the arts, and sport.

8 i.e. Armagh City & District Council, Cavan County Council, Donegal County Council, Dungannon District Council, Fermanagh District Council, Leitrim County Council, Monaghan County Council, Omagh County Council, and Sligo County Council.

lished, involving voluntary participants such as community activists and peace-builders. As a result of these mid-level initiatives a network culture has emerged over the last decade, bringing with it an extraordinary growth in cross-border exchanges between societies, parishes, schools, youth groups, entrepreneurs, teachers, and citizens. In practical terms, the creation of such networks simply entailed creating environments in which people could meet and talk to one another who otherwise would not have done so. For successful cross-border cooperation to occur, however, it is also necessary to create an environment for real interaction and communication between the intergovernmental, local, and grassroots levels, as well as good relations between citizens and the policy-makers and authorities involved.

### **Towards an Evaluation Process**

The crucial issue remains whether the principles that have governed the new policies at top and intermediate levels have led to genuine cross-border development at the grassroots level, with communities actually reaching out to each other and founding common projects. The first obstacle has been the lack of a central harmonising force. In the absence of such an agency, there has been extraordinary development of small-scale cross-border projects, which has posed a number of problems in terms of monitoring, decision-making, day-to-day project management, funding, and sustainability. The proliferation of so many small projects and initiatives has produced a very complex and patchy landscape, and this erratic development has generated duplications as well as gaps.

Another major problem has been how best to monitor and administer the distribution of funding. Initially substantial focus was placed on administration, with small-scale projects requiring a large number of staff to be administered and monitored, which siphoned off much necessary funding. The project managers used to apply directly to the EU for funding as it was then commonly agreed that the local councils did not understand the needs and aspirations of the communities and were more concerned with structural issues. EU funding was, however, granted for a specific time period, resulting in the problem that dividends, especially in the case of innovations, could be lost as soon as the funding stopped.

Cross-border work has also been hindered by social, ideological, and cultural attitudes associated with the legacy of the conflict. The political background at

the top level has been largely unfavourable to the building of trust and confidence in opposing communities. The suspension of the institutions, the ambiguities of the Good Friday Agreement, and the delays in its implementation have also created major hurdles. Surveys have provided evidence of increasing suspicion and fear towards other communities since 2000. Instead of being enhanced, the idea of reconciliation therefore tended to decline. According to Avila Kilmurray, Director of the *Community Foundation for Northern Ireland*, the major difficulty that border people have faced is “seeing the other’s point of view as valid,”<sup>9</sup> demonstrating the degree to which the mental border still contributes towards a reluctance to establish links with the other side. For Unionists cooperation can mean a united Ireland “by the back door,” while for staunch Nationalists there is a sense of having been betrayed.

However, the restoration of the institutions with the return of the devolved government on 8 May 2007 has given a boost to cross-border cooperation. On 6 December of the same year Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern, First Minister Ian Paisley, and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness launched a new website for those wishing to move across the border to live, work, or study (“Border Ireland”). Financial distribution has also been refocused so that EU funds will be delivered to local governments for redistribution, which means that project managers will have a lot less control and will have to apply through the local councils.

### **How Might Better Practice in Cross-Border Cooperation Be Achieved?**

Project officers have realised that cross-border cooperation will require greater planning, more focused management and funding schemes, and realistic expectations. The major concern is to reduce the number of small-scale projects and to administer the funding through existing administration. In this model projects need to be more modest in scale, yet cater to larger communities.

What is needed, according to Fr. Sean Nolan from the Blackwater Regional Partnership, “is to move away from the language of peace, which can become obsessive, off-putting and counterproductive.”<sup>10</sup> Fr. Nolan contends that activi-

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9 Quoted in Logue (64). Avila Kilmurray, who helped found the *Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition*, took part in the negotiation talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement.

10 Interview with Fr. Sean Nolan, the primary architect of the cross-border project Truagh Development Association, 17 July 2007.

ties should be more informal, related to people's needs and concerns and not framed in a complicated and elaborate programme. He asserts that

the types of programmes that the government agencies come up with are valid, but they do not get down to the people because they are too intellectual. The ordinary people don't want that. What is needed is to engage with ordinary people in ordinary ways.

According to Fr. Nolan the biggest challenges are:

How you can reach out to the ordinary people across the cultural, social political or religious divide. What opportunities does the community want to pursue and to avoid? Where does the community want to be in ten years? Also how does the environment fit into the equation?

Clearly, cross-border programmes require a thorough understanding of the community's objectives and needs. Owing to the broad variety of programmes it is now commonly agreed that an evaluation should be undertaken to differentiate successful programmes from unsuccessful ones to avoid squandering funding on programmes that do not deliver. Additionally, more regular funding is required for the programmes that have delivered.

### **The Blackwater Area Regional Partnership: An Example of Good Practice**

There have been a number of examples of good practice in cross-border development, including the Blackwater Regional Partnership. This partnership can be rated as a 'work in progress' which has already delivered, the best performance indicator being the range of contacts created between people who previously would not have met or interacted.

The Blackwater valley is a micro-region located on the border at the main intersection of the North/South (Letterkenny-Dublin) axis and East/West (Belfast-Sligo) axis and covering regions of County Monaghan in the Republic and of the three northern counties of Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Armagh. The area was confronted with challenges generated by inter-community alienation resulting from road closures during the Northern Ireland conflict and by the many traumatic experiences undergone by its inhabitants. In spite of a high level of heritage, the area had a very poor national image, which reflected on a dramatically low level of self-confidence among the population.



In 2000, the Blackwater Catchment Scheme,<sup>11</sup> a co-operative of three local authorities (Armagh City and District Council, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough, and Monaghan County Council), was established under INTERREG II with a focus on the Blackwater River and the communities served by the catchment. This scheme was intended to act as a development agency through partnership with the Local Authorities, the voluntary sector, and the private sector. The primary aim was to address the negative effect of the border on the area and to reverse this trend by developing heritage tourism on a cross-border basis, thus contributing to the economic regeneration of the area. There has also been a commitment from councillors, officials, and voluntary sectors to increase contacts between the border communities and to maximise opportunities for economic and social interaction.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the project has been evident, with the scheme generating a new perception of the environment and establishing a dialogue between people from different denominations and backgrounds. Through a network of approximately twenty-five people, the project has managed to break through into the communities and involve an ever-increasing number of people. The crowning achievement has been the Blackwater Valley Learning, Cultural, ICT & Peace Centre, built in 2005. The centre incorporates a crèche, a pre-school, a primary school, and the lifelong learning centre, which provides a forum for debate and dialogue for the inhabitants of the area, the local and county representatives, and for people from business and economic circles. The Truagh development partnership in County Monaghan has been particularly proactive in making the lifelong learning centre a focus of interest through community learning adult education. The Centre's purpose, under the management of the Northern Ireland organisation Workers Education Authority (WEA), is to give people the tools and techniques necessary for cross-community and cross-border reconciliation.

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11 The Blackwater Catchment incorporates the Blackwater River and its tributaries. The project officers have used the Ravella Bridge over the Blackwater River as a symbol of the link between the area of Aughnacloy in South Tyrone and Truagh in North Monaghan.

12 The areas of development and cooperation have been identified as the environment and common heritage, tourism, trade and business, education and skills. Besides the enhancement of the environment, the series of activities include seminars and talks on the history and literature of the area, community leadership, and website construction.

## Conclusion

The aim of cross-border cooperation over the last decade has been to reverse the history of mistrust and to counteract communication gaps between the two regions. The deepening of North-South links has been successful in making these two regions less peripheral and less isolated from each other. The Good Friday Agreement and the new structures implemented under Strand II created an impetus for people to feel concerned and involved. There is now a real appreciation of the climate for peace and a sign of change with people increasing their contacts along the border corridor. The continued growth of the southern economy over the given period also led the two economies to bear a greater degree of social and economic resemblance. According to Fr. Nolan, who received the Hall of Fame Award in November 2007:

Today we are seeing the beginning of the resolution of a conflicting situation which lasted for 400 years, starting back to the flight of the Earls in 1607 and the plantation in 1609. The thirty years' conflict was just a very sharp conflict but one in a series of conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

There is also a growing awareness that an island-wide agenda cannot develop with an inward-looking Ireland, but rather requires a successful integration into the global world. As such, the European commission has decided to pay extra attention to cross-border integration over the period 2007-2013, considering border areas as laboratories in which to test the ideal of a "Europe without frontiers." The Blackwater partnership, which has been highlighted as an exemplary model for the Cyprus border area, is a perfect illustration of the slogan: "Think local act global!" However, despite substantial progress, the persistence of parochialism and the resistance to cross-border initiatives at the grassroots level can still be identified as major obstacles to cross-border development.

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