

A New Common Charter

for cooperation within and between these islands

“An initiative to empower civic society to drive cross-border, North-South and East-West cooperation across these islands.”¹

Introduction

The vision for cooperation within and between these islands by grassroots community organisations we propose below was developed in the light of our critical engagement with what had been known as the “Common Chapter”. Following the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the devolved administration in Northern Ireland gave its approval to a section on cooperation with the Republic of Ireland in the *Northern Ireland Structural Funds Plan 2000-2006*. The same text was contained in the Republic of Ireland’s *National Development Plan 2000-2006* in a section on cooperation with Northern Ireland. This replicated text – the “Common Chapter” – set out the two Governments’ priorities for cooperation and how funds (particularly European Union funds) would be used to support it. It was understood that cross-border cooperation for the island of Ireland had three dimensions:

- cooperation along the border corridor and between Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland;
- North-South cooperation within the island of Ireland; and
- East-West cooperation between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, Europe and internationally.

Within the 2000-2006 period for which these plans were designed devolution in Northern Ireland was suspended, and following the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2007 the Common Chapter was not revived.

What follows below, therefore, is the result of a sustained process of engagement by grassroots community organisations from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with the notion of cross-border, North-South, and East-West cooperation, and conversations with counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. This has led to a vision of cooperation and what it should entail.

It comes about in recognition of the need for cross-border and cross-boundary cooperation to be independently valued and enacted at the grass-roots level, with people and

¹ This has been developed as a result of the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project, led by the Centre for Cross Border Studies (www.crossborder.ie), and generously funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Community Relations Council, and Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Reconciliation Fund.

communities setting their own priorities and advocating for their inclusion in regional and local strategies. Without this engagement, it will continue to be hostage to the political environment and the time-limited pursuit of European funding, hampering the ability of cross-border and cross-boundary cooperation to contribute to the development of meaningful and productive relations among people and communities within and between these islands.

In a rapidly changing context, it is essential that community organisations are ready to contribute to the shaping of development plans at local and regional levels, and to identify and exploit possibilities for North-South and East-West cooperation that will be of benefit to them.

A New Common Charter

Recalling the “Common Chapter” on cross-border, North-South and East-West cooperation that existed in Ireland’s National Development Plan and Northern Ireland’s Structural Funds Plan, **we hereby propose a New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands** by grassroots community organisations that promotes social justice and equality, but do so:

- Acknowledging and respecting the differences that make these islands what they are, while also recognising and cherishing the relations between the people and communities that live in its different nations and regions;
- Recognising, valuing and accepting languages whose roots may cross the borders within and between our islands;
- Recognising that faith traditions are organised and followed by people and communities within and across these islands;
- Valuing the musical, literary and other artistic and cultural traditions and their expression that have spread across the world and whose development has been assisted through relations within and between these islands;
- Realising that whilst we can compete against each other, sport and sporting organisations also unite us within and between these islands; and
- Recognising that our islands are connected by family bonds that cross the borders that separate them.

We hereby propose a New Common Charter for Cooperation by grassroots community organisations within and between these islands which values how it can:

- Maintain and strengthen family ties and friendships that cross borders;
- Allow for the sharing of local resources and services across boundaries;
- Increase opportunities for the sharing between people and communities of information, knowledge of policy and best-practice within and across these islands;

- Widen our evidence-base to include what is happening across the borders that separate us;
- Improve policy-making by matching it to the realities on the ground and identifying cross-border opportunities to collaborate to solve shared problems or exploit common resources;
- Promote cross-border friendly relations between people and communities that give insight into the views of those from within and across these islands, and allow for difficult conversations to be had;
- Promote a civil society that values diversity and in which there is the ability to disagree respectfully;
- Facilitate the exploration and celebration of a community's culture and heritage with a view to future cooperation;
- Increase the protection and enjoyment of the environment;
- Encourage and develop community leadership;
- Contribute to our common safety and wellbeing;
- Explore economic opportunities;
- Discover and enhance tourism potentials;
- Exploit mutually beneficial links in education, including adult and community education, as well as higher education; and
- Engage with and support human rights, particularly for the most isolated and marginalised in our communities.

We believe that grass-roots community cooperation within and between these islands can usefully contribute to the following issues:

- Building inclusive communities;
- Capacity-building for community leadership in cooperation, especially for emerging leaders;
- Exploiting the potential of cross-border tourism, especially rural tourism, which includes not only the Northern Ireland-Ireland border, but also the Wales-England and Scotland-England borders;
- The exploration of histories and heritage that cross borders within and between these islands;
- Improving women's representation in decision-making structures;
- Promoting the need for affordable, accessible quality childcare and social care support;
- The promotion and support for gender equality proofing and gender budgeting;
- Advocating for the provision of affordable, accessible and regular transport services, especially in rural areas and border regions;

- Promoting the need to facilitate educational opportunities within and between these islands, including through the removal of any undue administrative and/or financial obstacles that may discourage the movement of learners across these islands;
- Advocating for the improvement of the value given to and the quality of vocational and non-university paths to careers; and
- Promotion and support for rural proofing and regionally balanced budgeting and resourcing.

We hereby commend this New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands, and call on community organisations, representative bodies and networks across these islands to indicate their support by undersigning it and promoting its contents.² We also call on political representatives across these islands to support and facilitate the achievement of this New Common Charter's objectives, ensuring that community organisations are encouraged and given the means to cooperate within and between these islands.

² To show your support for the New Common Charter, email Anthony Soares at the Centre for Cross Border Studies (a.soares@gub.ac.uk). Your organisation's name and logo will be added to the list of supporters appearing on the project website (<http://crossborder.ie/towards-a-new-common-chapter/>), and included in the network receiving updates on the New Common Charter's progress and work on the next steps.