

## Cross-border cooperation from the perspective of the Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise (CVSE) sector in the Republic of Ireland:

***What is the appetite for cooperation with organisations in Northern Ireland (or even in Great Britain), what might the challenges be, and how can these be addressed?***

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This article explores cross-border cooperation from the Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise (CVSE) sector in the Republic of Ireland. It provides insight into the appetite for collaboration with Northern Ireland organisations, potential challenges, and how to address them.

The themes of this edition of *The Journal* are commitment, resilience and perseverance. Similarly, these are the hallmarks of the CVSE sector worldwide, not just in the Republic of Ireland.

The fact that these characteristics are common to the global CVSE sector makes me optimistic about the long-run course for cooperation and positive relationships North-South, and indeed East-West, despite the present difficulties.

Political priorities generally lag where people are at, and where people are at is often better discerned from the direction, thrust, and energy of the communities of people and active citizens, which we know as the CVSE sector. There will be challenges, and we will look at these a little later.

On the face of it, Brexit and recent developments relating to the potential suspension of elements of the *Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol* will pull the Republic of Ireland (RoI), Northern Ireland (NI), and Great Britain (GB) further apart. But I do believe we can be optimistic.

### **Why optimism in the face of the prevailing mood?**

I believe we can be optimistic because of our CVSE sector. And the role it plays in knowing what is important, never giving up, and behaving civilly and inclusively while doing it. By 'our CVSE sector', I mean humanity's CVSE sector: a small but remarkable portion of which we have in the RoI, NI and GB.

I believe we can be optimistic because the CVSE sector embodies *commitment*, which is all about being clear about what needs to be done and communicating that unambiguously and courageously to stakeholders, be they partners or apparent opponents, along with the seriousness of intent to achieve it. In doing so, trust is built with people and communities and sends important signals to stakeholders that may not share the objectives. Think of The Wheel, Community Work Ireland, the Community Platform, and the Community Foundation for Ireland. Or Irish Rural Link, Pavee Point, Social Justice Ireland, and the Women's Council. Think of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP), which operates on an all-island basis.

The CVSE sector is and stays committed. Despite Brexit, the RoI, NI and GB sectors remain committed to their universal and shared social, community and environmental justice and equality objectives. This will continue to bring them together naturally, as it has always done.

I believe we can be further optimistic because the CVSE sector also embodies *resilience*, which, to use the cliché, is all about ‘bounce-back-ability’; to draw on reserves of energy inspired by commitment and self-belief. The sustenance from community, friendship, and common endeavour enable people to survive the setbacks that come with sustained effort towards significant changes in challenging times. So again, the CVSE sector embodies resilience – it is often the wellspring and font of stability for the communities and people it surrounds. It is very often through the CVSE sector that people and communities who need support and encouragement find their resilience through having available to them the company, the camaraderie, and the community they need to get through incredible challenges.

Finally, I believe we can be optimistic because the CVSE sector also embodies *perseverance*, which is all about keeping going on the mission towards purpose and objective, sustained by resilience and commitment, and not quitting until we’ve achieved the aim. So the people working for change persevere even though, in the case of many social justice and environmental aims, they won’t reach the goal within their career or their lifetime. And this is inherent to the CVSE sector.

Think of the work of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice; Friends of the Earth and Friends of the Earth NI; Greenpeace; Amnesty International and Amnesty International NI; Trócaire and SVP organised on an all-island basis; Concern Worldwide organised in NI. Think of the work of Simon and the Simon Community NI; Women’s Aid and Women’s Aid Federation NI; and Oxfam, which operates on a UK and Ireland basis. This trait of perseverance *characterises* the effort of the people who work in both unpaid and paid capacities in the CVSE sector worldwide.

Commitment, resilience and perseverance came to the fore during the COVID-19 crisis when the CVSE sector worked to support vulnerable people and communities and pivoted to delivering services remotely where necessary while continuing one-to-one support for vulnerable people in need. Notable initiatives in RoI, such as *Community Call*, saw the CVSE sector partner with the state to ensure the most vulnerable people were supported in their homes and not left in isolation during the crisis.

It is this tendency towards partnership and willingness to collaboratively and cooperatively work that will be key, I believe, in modelling inclusive approaches to responding to challenges on the island of Ireland. In both

jurisdictions, the ‘official’, as opposed to the ‘political’ states, generally understand this better, and this is a crucial building block that remains despite Brexit. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in RoI, over 600 CVSEs existentially threatened by income collapse were assisted through the state’s €45m special COVID-19 Stability Fund, which ensured they could continue their work.

The fact of that scheme demonstrated the extent to which the state recognised the crucial role played by these organisations in the social, community and indeed economic fabric (the CVSE sector in RoI employs 186,000 people) of life in RoI. Moreover, this improved state-CVSE working relationship characterises the collaborative approach to work that predominated during the COVID period and is now being studied (by the NESC and the Health Dialogue Forum in RoI) to identify the principles of partnership-working that emerged at that time. These principles point the way forward for the CVSE sector to lead in North-South and East-West partnership-working in the months, years, decades, and centuries ahead, for these are the timescales that sustainable public policy now needs to be anticipating and shaping.

When working at its best, the CVSE sector embodies and models these freshly identified principles of partnership working in its day-to-day work, including:

- Being focused on engagement and participation.
- Taking a collective leadership approach.
- Focusing on building trust and mutual respect.
- Demonstrating innovation and learning.
- Engaging in problem-solving deliberation.
- Focusing on delivering quality, people-centred services.
- Being transparent and accountable to the people and communities served.

It will be through demonstrating these principles — principles that are hard-wired into the culture of CVSEs — that cooperation with organisations in NI and in GB can be sustained despite Brexit and the threat to the *Protocol*.

So commitment, resilience and perseverance characterise the CVSE sector.

They will not give up on pursuing their objectives: fairness and justice, social inclusion, climate justice, fair transition, and poverty alleviation.

In the RoI, NI and GB jurisdictions, CVSE sectors often work with governmental partners to make practical progress towards their objectives and develop new policies. Sometimes they have to work against the grain of prevailing governmental priorities and values — and the CVSE sector has always successfully done both in its many diverse parts.

In each of the jurisdictions I have mentioned, the relevant ‘domestic’ sectors will rise to the challenges posed by Brexit to the communities they support and the objectives they seek to attain (be it social or environmental justice). The diversity in civil society is very, very much its strength; parts of the sector collaborate with government partners to encourage and shape progressive policy responses, while other parts campaign vigorously, sometimes even adversarially, to increase political pressure for change.

### **Societal and environmental challenges we continue to work on**

We live through a period of profound change as the world reckons with the positive and negative consequences of the 250 years of ‘modern’ economic and social transformation since the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But, again, I believe that we can be optimistic about our ability to shape and lead the necessary political and practical responses to these challenges through the efforts of our CVSE sectors.

Never have so many people in the history of the world had so many opportunities to find fulfilment and security, yet at the same time, many people and communities experience poverty in many increasingly unequal, well-off societies.

The world is facing the point of no return concerning the climate crisis. Decarbonisation is now a political imperative that will drive changed behaviours and expectations regarding standards of living and how we live for decades to come.

The world is living through a great extinction event as our agricultural, deforestation, and ecosystem-destroying developmental activities threaten tens of thousands of species.

Information technology has now become *de-facto* artificial intelligence and shapes people, personae and politics in profound, poorly understood ways.

Being profoundly reshaped is the *nature* of human nature; if there is such a thing. However, the culture wars indicate different perspectives on these changes, and progressive civil society is leading the way towards fuller, fairer and more equal lives for everyone.

The world of work has been, for many, utterly transformed since COVID-19 and by the use of remote and virtual technologies to deliver services and support working remotely. As a result, the 'hybrid workplace' is rapidly becoming the new normal for a significant section of the workforce, with considerable implications for the adequacy of people's work environments.

CVSEs work in all of these notable thematic fields and will continue to do so. Hence I am confident that CVSEs will lead the way in maintaining and restoring, if necessary, North-South and East-West cooperation – especially now facilitated by virtual working, to which many workers have become accustomed.

### **What are the challenges now impeding CVSE cooperation?**

Notwithstanding the values driving successful cooperation, we must address the practical issues to facilitate and support this effort.

Brexit has changed things significantly, and we would be foolish not to recognise this. The Irish Government's *Shared Island Initiative* has provided an essential focus for efforts now needed to counter the Brexit-related centrifugal forces pulling communities North-South, within NI, and East-West apart.

Following our joint membership of the EU, pre-Brexit, and post the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*, there had been a long period of improvement and normalisation of relationships on the island North and South and, indeed, between Ireland and GB more generally.

People crossed the RoI/NI border much more frequently. For many living in cross-border areas, the border became more or less an irrelevance in how they lived their day-to-day lives, with upwards of 30,000 people commuting across the border daily. The Queen of England's visit to RoI in 2011 was a notable and remarkable symbol of this normalisation.

Irish Government and European Union programmes such as the Reconciliation Fund, the PEACE programme and Interreg funded organisations North-South and East-West to collaborate on shared priorities.

Far greater numbers of people in RoI holidayed in NI, and Northern visitors to the RoI increased too. As a result, cultures began to get to know each other better – the first step to understanding, appreciation and respect.

Post-Brexit, we now face much more polarised political circumstances North-South and East-West. We know that relationships at the very top level between the UK and Irish governments are at their frostiest and most fractured in over thirty years. At the time of writing, it is difficult to know whether the change of leadership in the Conservative Party will result in improved relations. We know that similar relationships between the government and political parties North-South and within NI are equally strained. In the absence of a functioning Executive, it is easy to see the mounting challenges ahead if HM Government persists in its apparent disregard of the *Protocol*. I quote Harry McGee in the Irish Times report (June 23): “[the] political intent behind the Bills published by Boris Johnson’s government ... is obvious: it essentially wants to ghost the EU forever” – and by association, the Republic of Ireland.

What are the practical centrifugal forces the sector will have to overcome if it is to counter these trends? How can we embody an alternative way of being on this island if we are to address the new challenges and approaches to cross-border cooperation, mobility and relations?

### **Challenges to cross-border cooperation, mobility, and relations**

The increased frostiness of the political atmosphere means people are more *unsure about reaching out* because of the possibility that they will be misinterpreted in their actions or have their motives misconstrued (perhaps deliberately).

There is a general lack of understanding of the differences in *jurisdictions* at a fundamental level. People were already sensitive about causing unintended offence through *the possible inappropriateness* of their language when meeting people from other cultural backgrounds and political traditions – and this will be even more the case in this new, more polarised setting. It is through working and being together that people get to know one another and sustain relationships – so it is a concern that with Brexit, people will potentially have *fewer* statutory-programme opportunities to fund work they would like to do together.

Time must be made – and resourced – for people to prioritise working across jurisdictions; we need to make it easier.

People and communities were only beginning to learn about the varied cultures and histories on the island. For many, these were unknown and regarded as mysterious, alien, or threatening. Unfortunately, this work of cultural learning and familiarisation through exposure will be set back significantly because of the trajectory we are now apparently following.

The absence of an Executive means no *locus* for cooperation and collaboration. There is no place where formal, statutory dialogue can take place about what is needed.

This is exacerbated very seriously by the apparent disregard and disinterest by HM Government in any real concern for the consequences of its current policy on the *Protocol* for North-South and, indeed, internal NI community relations.

We also forget that in considering the question of cross-border policy, *internal borders* are running across thousands of miles inside NI, where *barriers of mind* also need to be overcome.

Notwithstanding the threats to economic activity posed by inflation and energy, the likely continued growth of the RoI economy is expected to result in potentially decreasing public interest and awareness of the need to counter the centrifugal forces pulling us apart. As a result, and fueled by a growing population and still-increasing levels of educational attainment, there may be complacency in RoI about deepening relationships between North and South post-Brexit.

In the long run, and if the *Protocol* is abandoned, divergent standards and programmes and protocols and simply cultural ‘ways of doing things around here’ in both jurisdictions will reduce the relevance of (and therefore the opportunities for) cooperation.

### **So what needs to happen to counteract these trends?**

We need:

- More opportunities for people and communities to:
  - Work together on significant societal, environmental, and economic challenges. And in doing so, get to know each other through working ‘shoulder to shoulder’ on shared challenges.
  - Learn about each other’s histories, cultures, and backstories (cultural and educational exchange programmes) to develop

appreciation, understanding and respect; and become confident in their use of language about each other and indeed about themselves.

- Come together to debate and propose ways to unblock the stalled and paralysed political processes, politics, and structures so that the CVSE sector may, to the extent that it can, partially fill the vacuum.
- Funding programmes specifically focused on supporting these types of work (practical working together on shared challenges and cultural and educational exchange).
- A functioning Executive in NI.
- Now that we are on potentially divergent paths, leadership effort and initiative internally in RoI, NI, and GB to keep awareness of the importance of maintaining relationships.
- In all jurisdictions, a new political consensus about respecting and not ghosting or exploiting each other.

### **How can we practically proceed towards these objectives?**

Civil society and CVSEs have a crucial role in pointing to and leading the way ahead (in partnership with the public and private sectors) and supporting everyone to play their part and get involved. Our shared challenges have never been more significant, but neither have the opportunities been more plentiful.

In February 2020, the board of directors and senior staff of The Wheel and NI Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) met in Belfast for a joint meeting. The two organisations resolved to work collaboratively to address these unprecedented challenges for people and society.

Follow-up meetings have since explored:

- what is both possible in the medium and short terms; and
- what we believe is now needed to enable civil society to play to its strengths in the challenging times ahead.

Our two organisations have a shared ambition to create a virtual (and physical) *Collaboration Hub* to bring communities together to address shared challenges and capitalise on shared opportunities on a shared-island basis.

Through doing this, we aim to play our part in increasing understanding and better relations between the communities on the island, creating spaces and places to support better dialogue and improve community understanding and appreciation.

Over the last twelve months, NICVA and The Wheel have been jointly implementing our iCommunity shared-island project, which brings groups and communities together to identify shared ground for collaboration in the context of the shared island and what types of initiatives can inspire and add value across society.

Having hosted ten workshops, we are collating the findings into a final report with a summary of proposals on practical initiatives that would have the support of civil society groups as areas for collaboration in both the north and south.

Additionally, we have identified a cohort of potential participants for future collaborative activities, and an increase in awareness of the possibilities for shared-island working has been created in the public consciousness through the communications work to promote the initiative. The approach has laid the groundwork for implementing the whole *Collaboration Hub* concept.

### **Collaboration Hub: Themes**

The Collaboration Hub has been aimed at identifying possible practical value-adding initiatives that CVSEs could work collaboratively on in two key areas:

1. Supporting greater shared-island economic and social collaboration. Achieved through identifying emergent local, regional, and island-level economic responses/requirements to COVID-19 and Brexit to deliver sustainable prosperity, health, and well-being for current and future generations.
2. Researching and showcasing ‘what works’ on a shared-island basis in new ways of supporting and serving the needs of people and communities.

Within these two broad areas, themes that have been discussed and explored for their potential for collaborative shared-island joint working include:

- Ensuring rural connectivity and sustainability.
- Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Developing the island economy and social enterprise in particular.
- Digital connectedness and inclusion.
- Achieving a just transition to a decarbonised and sustainable island.

Our ambition is to establish a community hub to facilitate and drive the formation of ongoing, sustained, collaborative learning-and-working partnerships building on the work of our iCommunity shared island project. We want to support those partnerships in the continuous rollout of all-island work programmes that address these shared challenges.

Ideally, partnerships of organisations and communities north and south would be invited to form and bid into a call for proposals to secure funding packages to develop collaborative work programmes in the thematic areas identified above and potentially many others. Subject to resource availability through special funds being put into place.

This is the kind of action the CVSE sector can and will take. But it will need resourcing by the statutory sector in all jurisdictions and input from the PEACE programme.

Proposed actions at the planning stage include:

- Taking an *action research* approach. Involving direct engagement with voluntary and community organisations north and south to facilitate joint discussion on pre-identified themes (such as the above) around key community challenges.
- Developing a *Collaboration Hub* as a mechanism to provide information and advice to support CVSE sector, private sector and public sector collaboration and to drive and provide support for collaborative partnerships implementing the agreed thematic workstreams.
- Establishing a *flagship challenge* fund to support collaborative partnerships. This fund could be ‘bid into’ by potential partners or ‘brokered by’ promoters to advance the critical emergent themes from the action research. Whichever option best fosters cross-community collaboration in developing local solutions can then be replicated in a shared-island context.

- Supporting collaborative partnership communities in implementing their ‘shared island, shared challenge’ initiative.
- Showcasing and celebrating achievement and our natural community spirit with a high-profile *Festival of Community Ideas* event (imagine BT Young scientist for community initiatives).
- Developing and implementing a strategically positioned communications plan that includes a broad range of local, regional and national media partnerships with strong multi-platform activity animated by inspirational, educational and accessible content.
- Directing community engagement between the networks of The Wheel and NICVA. We hope to work with communities to deliver outreach and community engagement forums, seminars, and coffee mornings across the island to build linkages and awareness of the actions and ideas that can ‘*be the change*’ in local communities. We can introduce them to toolkits and ideas, work with stakeholders and bring collaborations together to share their challenges and solutions.

These are activities that The Wheel and NICVA aim to implement, coordinate and facilitate if the resources are available.

Will our CVSE sectors focus on these areas naturally – as noted in my introduction?

Yes, they will.

Will the sectors be able to do this to the extent that the current crisis necessitates?

I do not believe so.

Targeted resources, currently absent, will make all the difference. They need to be made specifically available to support CVSEs to focus on all-island responses at the scale that will now be required to counterbalance the post-Brexit centrifugal forces pulling polities and people apart. The CVSE sector stands ready to lead and is already moving in the direction needed – but it needs more support to do this crucial work.

## Conclusion

There are grounds for great optimism that the CVSE sector can play a crucial role in laying pathways towards a new way of being together on this island in the post-Brexit context.

It will do this because of:

- The core values of commitment, resilience and perseverance that it brings to its work; and
- The universal and unifying character of the sector's significant societal, environmental and economic challenges.

When taken together with the sector's natural bias towards collaborative and partnership approaches and its inclination towards innovation when responding flexibly to emergent need (the bread and butter activity of the CVSE sector), these characteristics point towards a central role for the sector in the years and decades ahead. As a result, CVSEs will increasingly lead in national policy development across jurisdictions, setting the context within which politicians and political parties respond.

The CVSE sector has the confidence to transcend the limitations imposed by fundamentally 'artificial' national political boundaries and ensure that our politicians and politics address the real issues that are important in the lives of current – and most importantly – future generations. Brexit has been a lamentable development that has reinforced divisions unhelpful to ensuring a sustainable future for humanity on our shared planet. The CVSE sector will, through its work to address the pressing universal, global challenges, make an enormous contribution to bridging the artificial divisions created by Brexit. But governments must resource the sectors to do more of what they do naturally – and it is through the application of these resources to bring people together to address shared challenges that these divisions will be overcome.