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for Social Change

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Towards a New Common Chapter

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Ulster Canal Stores, Clones*

Report of Workshop

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1. Introduction

Workshop purpose

The purpose of this workshop was to bring those who have been participating in the *Towards a New Common Chapter* project together to consider the value of the initiative and whether there is interest in continuing it.

Desired Outcomes

- i) A shared understanding of the background to, and context for, this workshop so that all were starting for a common point of reference.
- ii) A greater awareness of who is in the room so that relationships could be developed and /or deepened.
- iii) An awareness of the range of issues and opportunities which have emerged over the course of the project so that these could be considered.
- iv) A shared understanding of the benefits and challenges of cross border work so that this informs participants' thinking.
- v) A sense of the interest in the room for continuing cross border co-operation through this project.
- vi) A list of any next steps

2. Welcome and introduction to the Workshop

Following welcomes Anthony introduced the background to, and rationale for, the workshop. He referenced the history of the original "Common Chapter" and how it had inspired the project's objective of developing a grassroots vision for cross-border cooperation engaging, in particular, with women's groups, Protestant community groups, and young people on both sides of the Irish border. The workshop, therefore, was to assess whether the participants in the first stage of the project, informed by their conversations in the preceding workshops, continued to value and support the project's core objectives.

3. Who is in the room?

Participants then engaged in a small group discussion whereby, aided by prompt questions, they spent time getting to know each other better. This activity was very successful and it seemed clear from the buzz in the room that there was a keen interest among participants to talk and communicate. The importance of creating space for this was reemphasised.

Feedback in plenary on the usefulness of this activity yielded the following comments:

- It is very helpful in getting to know each other; and a reminder that everyone is so different!
- The prompt questions lead us into other areas of conversation.
- How easy communication can be when space is made available; when an environment is created whereby people can approach each other and ask questions.
- The curiosity is great, and it's great to be listened to!
- There is a lot we have in common, as well as a number of surprising things discovered about each other.

4. What we have been hearing over the course of the project

Anthony gave an overview of issues and themes emerging in the project to date, using a 'problem tree' format. He highlighted the following:

Core problem:

Limited engagement in cross-border cooperation.

"Engagement": in terms of specific communities ("Protestant", ethnic minorities), gender (women, rural women), geographical locations.

Causes:

Reliance on EU funding (economic).

Lack of civil society involvement in planning (cooperation).

Lack of spatial logic (environment/social).

Politicisation (social).

Administrative/Cultural divergence (social/cooperation).

Lack of recognition of need for "single-identity" CBC (social).

Lack of participation of women/rural communities in decision-making (social).

Lack of knowledge/capacity (cooperation/social).

Effects:

Isolation/entrenchment/disenchantment (social).

Box-ticking (cooperation/social).

Time-limited projects (cooperation/economic).

Cross-community/cross-border resources that aren't (economic/social/environmental).

Unequal/unwanted outcomes of policies (social/economic).

Some issues and opportunities:

- ~ Cross-border women's action plan.
- ~ Telling the cross-border stories of Protestant communities.
- ~ Improving access to services in border region.
- ~ Tackling isolation, mental health, drug dependency/addiction.
- ~ Homelessness.
- ~ Improving cross-border tourism connections.

Comments shared in plenary following Anthony's input included the following:

- There is some despondency around the PEACE projects – seems like funders are more interested in numbers than in the outcomes of events organised.
- Sport has great potential as an area for coming together on both sides of the border.
- There is a fear of going too deep in some areas - of 'picking off the scabs' and finding a lot of hurt and pain underneath.

5. The benefits and challenges of cross border work

Participants worked in small groups to consider the value of cross border co-operation including the specific benefits and challenges associated with it. The following was shared in plenary. (Note: ideas repeated in different groups have been listed to give a sense of commonalities arising.)

5.1 Benefits of cross border work

Group i) feedback

Yes – there is value in cross border co-operation. This can be seen in areas such as :

- Emergency services:
 - access to hospitals;
 - emergency response;
 - cost effectiveness.
- Criminal justice systems:
 - PSNI/Garda;
 - tackling issues such as human trafficking, sexual exploitation, diesel laundering etc.
- Ulster Canal
 - Clones to Lough Neagh
 - Belfast-Lisburn-Lough Neagh.
- Positive relationships:
 - Getting to know each other – from one jurisdiction to another; from organisation to organisation;
 - Mutual support/campaigns;
 - Mutual support organisations.
- Promoting understanding of each other.

Group ii) feedback

- Social connections.
- Economic/tourists benefits.
- Peace - the big dividend is peace.

Group iii) feedback

- Economic –
 - business cross border – jobs/tourism.
 - more with Brexit.....?
- Cultural links:
 - history.
 - educational.
- Access – infrastructure, road/rail. Opened up two territories; ‘remember unapproved roads’.

Group iv) feedback

- Economic benefits (tourism etc.).

- Better access to health services.
- Reconnecting people, especially in rural areas, as well as building new connections. More than one-off meetings between Dublin and Belfast; and not just doing it to 'tick a box'.

5.2 Challenges of cross border work

Group i) feedback

- Brexit – although this could potentially be a positive opportunity also?
- Different legislation/tax systems etc. in both jurisdictions.
- Lack of knowledge in relation to how 'to do' cross border work.
- Political challenge – there is no consensus around constitutional issues such as a united Ireland, and staying in the EU.
- Different cultures - some feel there is more segregation now 'than there ever was'.
- Historical legacy including the wounds and the hurts – EU programmes do not address these core issues, they tend to be more interested in 'bricks and mortar' projects.

Group ii) feedback

- Brexit – the possibility of a 'hard' border causes fear, and it could do much damage to the peace process.
- People – stereotypes: how communities view each other; how men and women, younger and older view each other. Need to learn how to see the person themselves, see beyond the stereotypes.
- Bureaucracy/red tape that has been tied in with various funding programmes.
- Lack of recognition for the value of work, especially the qualitative aspects.

Group iii) feedback

- Feeling threatened - 'a united Ireland through the back door'. This can leave people, and especially members of the Protestant faith, feeling vulnerable.
- 'The baggage of conflict' needs to be taken into account.
- Brexit – what next? This unknown may throw up a range of challenges.
- Funding, among other things, is needed.
- Common sense approach to practical issues such as health, education and crime.
- Political will is needed.
- Finding the energy and/or time – 'volunteer fatigue' is a concern.

Group iv) feedback

- Culture and attitudes held by different communities.
- Brexit.
- People are unwilling to compromise at government/council levels. There was – and is – no real commitment at Government level, cross border co-operation has not been pushed.

Emerging themes

A number of comments on what themes were emerging were made in subsequent plenary discussion.

- The benefits of cross border co-operation are chiefly around:
 - ~ peace – helping maintain and embed peace.
 - ~ improved social connection at different levels including neighbour to neighbour and further afield;
 - ~ economic benefits;
 - ~ benefits in relation to services, many of which are life-saving services;
- Groups and individuals ‘at the coal face’ recognise the benefits and challenges more than most.
- The lack of political will to address the underlying issues appears to be a common theme. Whilst there may be ‘lots of lip-service’ this is not translating into policies and action on the ground. Linked to this is the need for action at *both* (formal) political and grass roots levels.
- Brexit was raised as an issue in all the small groups – the Good Friday Agreement may break down because of Brexit. In the bigger picture it may be that the European Union will cease to exist which will have much wider political implications. Anthony suggested that the issue of Brexit and the EU, whilst no doubt important, be ‘parked’ for now; border issues facing us have been present prior to the EU and Brexit challenges, and will remain.

6. A future for this project?

Participants ‘walked and talked’ in pairs to discuss their responses to the question of the future of the project.

Comments shared in plenary included:

- ~ The kind of work that this project does is essential, especially for the reasons described in the benefits of cross border work (noted earlier).
- ~ Cross border connectivity and relationships allow us to overcome divisions.
- ~ It is also valuable as a way of sharing information, knowledge and skills.
- ~ There is a degree of fatigue in the CVS, people have been working at this for years.
- ~ There is a need for more education in relation to the benefits of cross border co-operation.
- ~ This work needs to continue and leadership is required if the next generation is to be educated about the issues. If we don’t do this work and continually challenge perceptions there is a real danger that people will ‘slip back’ into old ways of behaving.
- ~ It may be worthwhile thinking about ‘digging a bit deeper’ into root causes and potentially harder issues in cross border work.
- ~ Whilst Brexit may happen it is important not to get side tracked by this, or by what happens in France, Italy and the US – we need to keep talking and sharing solutions.
- ~ When we think of cross border work we tend to think immediately of funding. It would be exciting to do cross border work with no funding and no projects! It seems sometimes that when our backs are to the wall we become more creative.
- ~ Unless people ‘on the ground’ do this kind of cross border work, no-one will.

- ~ There are great opportunities to work across the island on women's issues, and look in particular at rural women's equality issues.

Following discussion in plenary **participants reached consensus that there is interest in the group in continuing the work of the project.** It is worth noting that two members of the group had left the meeting prior to this agreement being reached so it would be important to connect with them and check if they concur.

It was clarified that the next phase of the project will run over an 18 month period; and that the likely time commitment of participants would be attending 2 meetings in the first 6 months to begin the work of developing a vision for cross border co-operation. It was suggested that any information available on progress in relation to the original Common Chapter be reviewed and built upon, as appropriate.

7. Immediate Next Steps

The following immediate next steps were noted:

- Anthony will contact people present to confirm details re. their interest in the project.
- He will then will start scheduling next stage – 2 meetings in 6 months (January-June 2017)
- NIYF will take a steer from their members. 1st phase will be easy to engage, 2nd phase would be more like a project and might be more challenging.

8. Workshop Evaluation

Participants were positive about the days proceedings and the following specific points were noted:

What worked well...	What could be changed/improved...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The location.</i> • <i>The mix of people in the workshop.</i> • <i>Small group discussion.</i> • <i>It was very educational – I learned a lot.</i> • <i>It was well planned.</i> • <i>Connecting with new (and less new) people.</i> • <i>Having young people present.</i> • <i>The worksheets were helpful.</i> • <i>The overview at the start.</i> • <i>Facilitation was great.</i> • <i>The centre, the food and the welcome we received.</i> • <i>People both sides of the border – both traditions, men and women, members of the Traveller community.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Have more younger people, and especially more young women.</i> • <i>Possibly more 'local' people from the areas in which we have our meetings.</i> • <i>Have more diversity in terms of colour.</i>