

ICLRD REPORT LAUNCH: BLACKLION, 21 NOV. 2008

Good afternoon.

Mr. Wells, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; it is a pleasure to be here with you on this occasion which marks the launch of the report, *Fostering Mutual Benefits in Cross-Border Areas: The Challenges and Opportunities in Connecting Irish Border Towns and Villages*.

A very apt title. For those of us who live along the Border and/or have been engaged in cross-border activity, we know that there are mutual benefits to be gained by both jurisdictions – North and South - working together. Cross-border cooperation, as a process and an activity, is something that our communities have long been advocating – well before all this talk of an all-island economy and collaborative strategies.

To get to where we are today, we have had to overcome many challenges in the past twenty or so years – ranging from personal to systems to operational. But through our commitment to our communities and the places we live, through our perseverance and spirit, we have slowly chipped away at these challenges and as each year goes by, we grow stronger, we build bridges and we grow closer.

Today we are in a very beautiful part of the country; the natural landscape that surrounds us has much to offer and to a large extent, this potential remains untapped. I'm sure Mr. Wells agrees with me on this point – I understand he once worked in the vicinity. Not only are we located on the shores of Lough McNea, but we also have in very close proximity to us the Marble Arch Caves and Geopark, the Cavan Burren and of course, we are in the heart of the Green Box. In addition, in the heart of Blacklion village, we have the very highly regarded McNea's Bistro.

The beauty of this area – extending into my own constituency of North Leitrim and Sligo – has huge growth potential; particularly in the areas of eco-tourism and the development of both activity breaks and quiet retreats. These potentials are noted in this report; together with some proposals on linkages that could be followed-through on so as to raise the profile of this region and develop its economic base.

This area has something to offer to a wide range of people – the adrenaline junkie, the food lover, the hiker, the fisher-man (or woman), the budding artist, the craftsperson. But to develop a quality product that will put this region 'on the map' so to speak, we need to continue to work together.

And in other areas too, opportunities exist; for example third level institutes collaborating on an intra-regional basis to develop joint courses and/or modules, the joint branding and marketing of cross-border hinterlands – not only as a tourism destination but also as a place to do business, and in this same vein of thought, to promote inter-business linkages and cooperation.

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) is itself an interesting model of cross-border cooperation; its partners hailing from Northern Ireland, Ireland and the US. Like many of the cross-border organisations operating on the ground here in the Irish Border region, they are part-timers --- in that each member of the research team here today has a full-time job within their respective institutions. But because of their belief in what can be achieved through cross-border collaboration, they have in the past five years come together under the banner of ICLRD to work with communities, local government, the cross-border networks and with central government – to name but a few.

As a result of a previous publication by ICLRD – prepared for *InterTradeIreland* – both governments, North and South, are currently finalising a collaborative framework which outlines key sectors where both jurisdictions will cooperate more closely into the future. This framework will draw a line under the decades of back-to-back policy development that has so negatively impacted on the Border region.

The report that is being launched today also has the potential to make a contribution to policy. I've had the privilege of a sneak preview and lets just say --- if anyone out there thinks that the Border towns and villages are sleepy backwaters with little activity going on, their eyes are about to be opened.

My congratulations to the research team and the ICLRD. My congratulations to you - the facilitators, promoters and enablers of cross-border cooperation. In the words of Andy Pollack of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, you truly are “the heroes of the border region”. You should be proud of all that you have achieved. And as we enter into a new phase of funding programmes, I wish you the very best and encourage not only community groups but also local government agencies and the business community to engage in these programmes. We can achieve so much more by working together rather than seeing ourselves as competitors.

Thank you.