

Launch of report by International Centre for Local and Regional Development
Ms. Deirdre Ryan
Board Member of the International Fund for Ireland

“Moving towards a new era of peace and cooperation”

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted to be in Blacklion this morning, representing the Board of the International Fund for Ireland, at the official launch of this very impressive report.

The relationship between the Fund and the International Centre for Local and Regional Development stretches back to 2005, when we first approved financial assistance for this research. We are glad to be associated with the work of the Centre, and welcome its report today as an important contribution to our shared goals of peace and reconciliation on this island.

The International Fund for Ireland was established by the Irish and British Governments in 1986 with the objectives of promoting economic and social advance, and of encouraging contact, dialogue and reconciliation between unionists and nationalists throughout Ireland.

The IFI applies two important criteria in its programmes: cross-community and cross-border. We share the view expressed in the report that cross-border collaboration in Ireland involves more than minimising the inconvenience presented by borders everywhere. In Ireland, as the report notes, cross-border collaboration involves a process of healing after decades of political conflict. Furthermore, it implies cross-community collaboration also.

1. The work of the Fund in the areas studied

For our part, the Fund has worked ceaselessly and impartially to facilitate the remarkable progress made towards lasting peace and prosperity on this island as a whole, and has committed, since its inception, more than 850 million euro to a wide variety of projects in Northern Ireland and the border counties, including a significant number in those localities studied for this report.

Many of those projects have impacted on the areas studied in today's report. For instance, the IFI was the first body to support the **Kiltyclogher** community in the bleak days of the late '80s, when the village was completely cut-off from its natural hinterland in County Fermanagh. IFI support enabled the community to convert the bomb-damaged former vocational school, and the former village courthouse, into a hostel and community centre respectively, thereby facilitating activity-based tourism and community development in the district. These facilities have enabled the community to work cooperatively in the hugely successful “Kiltycashel” cross-border partnership with the neighbouring **Cashel** area of Fermanagh.

Rossinver too was not forgotten. Over ten years ago, we supported the refurbishment of Ballagh Church, to provide a focus for cross-community development, and contribute to enterprise generation in the area. Rossinver's Organic Centre is another important development in the region, which benefited from significant early-stage finance and planning assistance from the IFI. Earlier this year, the IFI became the key funder of the Centre's *Growing Together* project which is working with schools, community groups and women's groups on both sides of the border to facilitate reconciliation among participants. The launch of this project took place only last month in the Courthouse just down the road in Blacklion.

And of course, the **Blacklion-Belcoo** key border crossing has long been an area of focus for the International Fund for Ireland. Early support through the Fund's Border Towns and Villages and Community Regeneration and Improvement Programmes (CRISP) gave these villages much-needed environmental improvements at a time when they appeared bleak and run-down. The Courthouse re-development undertaken in Blacklion by Blacklion Development Association was a hugely significant project supported by the Fund, turning what had been the site of a permanent army checkpoint into a multi-purpose community facility and information centre.

Glenfarne too, was not overlooked by the Fund, as we assisted Glenfarne Development Association with the provision of much-needed enterprise space.

In addition, in the northwest, the Fund initiated an ambitious community-led cross-border regeneration project in the villages of **Pettigo** and **Tullyhummon** on the Donegal/Fermanagh border. This initiative brought together the community, public- and private-sectors from both sides of the border in a unique bottom-up approach to social and economic regeneration.

Around the same time and, building on the success of the Pettigo-Tullyhummon experience, the Fund adopted **Strabane** and **Lifford** as a Flagship Initiative. It is widely accepted that this was a bold and innovative action which succeeded in supporting the local communities on both sides of the border, and added further knowledge to this emerging approach to cross-border cooperation.

Clones and **Castleblayney** have also benefited in turn from the IFI's work. Clones Regeneration Partnership, an umbrella organisation comprising local development groups, the local authority and various agencies, developed a re-generation strategy for the town. This focussed on economic development, urban renewal, infrastructural development, the provision of a centre of excellence, and the rebuilding of Clones Chamber of Commerce. The International Fund for Ireland provided substantial support over a three year period to facilitate this regeneration.

The Iontas Centre in **Castleblayney** and the Castleblayney Community Enterprise Centre have both been financially assisted by the Fund. In the case of the former, workspace units were prepared, and in the latter, craft workspace and community offices. Each case shows the IFI's longstanding commitment to redressing the economic disadvantage suffered in these areas.

These locally-based projects are additional to our broader suite of programs which are being delivered throughout the border counties, examples of which are the *Wider Horizons Programme* and the *Integrating Communities Programme*.

Since being established 1986, the Fund has supported five and a half thousand individual projects – I won't mention them all! - and has helped create 55,000 jobs.

2. Sharing this Space

In December 2005, the Board of the Fund adopted a new strategic framework for action, entitled "*Sharing this Space*". The new strategy was born out of a dual recognition that both parts of Ireland had achieved previously-unknown levels of peace and relative prosperity, but that much still remained to be done to help deliver a sustainable peace – including assisting many communities which were still suffering the effects of deprivation and alienation.

The new strategy refocused the Fund's activities and resources away from economic development onto more hard-edged reconciliation work in the most deprived and marginalised

communities in Northern Ireland and the border counties, thus shifting our balance of priorities while maintaining our overall strategic direction. Programmes are now clustered around four key areas of activity, broadly summarised as: building foundations for reconciliation, building bridges for contact, building integration in society, and leaving a legacy.

Our earlier work prepared the way for this new strategy. “*Sharing this Space*” allows us to work directly with groups representing all facets of the community. We facilitate the coming-together of parties on a cross-community and cross-border basis, spanning a range of ages and experiences. The participants in the projects we fund range from victims to ex-prisoners, school children to older people. We are willing to believe in the unlikeliest of partnerships and put first money on the table. Groups come to us and we ask: “Are they moving beyond their comfort zone? Are they taking a risk?” If they are willing to take the risk, we will meet them halfway. As Robert F. Kennedy once said: “*Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly*”.

We recognise that problems can be approached from many angles, and music, dance, education, gardening, and even simple conversation each have their place in our programmes. We have moved from capital builds to building social capital, and aim to ensure the sustainability of community and voluntary groups well into the future. Where previously, through our *Communities in Transition* program, we supported capacity building in marginalised single identity groups, today, through our *Integrating Communities* programme we are supporting similar groups from different identities to become partners.

Our new strategy recognises that alienation and segregation amongst communities is one of the core obstacles to realising a sustainable and genuine peace on this island. It also recognises the necessity of supporting those local groups and personalities who show the leadership required to move their neighbourhoods towards cross-community and cross-border collaboration. True leadership in difficult times is hard, but the first step is the hardest. As our record shows, the IFI has been, and will be, there to support those willing to take that crucial first step

3. The impact of the Troubles on the areas studied

The research report being launched today is an exciting work which explores the layers of connectivity shared between these marginalised cross-border communities hitherto torn asunder by the Troubles. For too long, the development of these natural communities was disrupted by instability.

The International Fund for Ireland has, for over 20 years, worked to overcome the fact that people who had so much in common with each other could not – or would not – reach out to their neighbours. As such, the research presented today brings us welcome news. It tells us that the people of these localities are re-emerging from the divisions imposed upon them in past decades, and seeking out their cross-border counterparts to face the future together.

John Donne famously observed that “*No man is an island, entire of itself*”; instead, he recognised that every person was a thread in the rich tapestry of life, inherently and essentially connected to the rest of mankind. The ties that bind people into communities, and communities into networks, are manifold and varied. Today, courtesy of technology, communities exist in which the members have never met one other or perhaps even set foot in the same country. Bound together as they are by shared interests, geography is easily overcome. In traditional communities, however, such as those studied in the report being launched today, physical geography is one of the most significant threads that link one life to another. Physical proximity breeds familiarity and familiarity breeds – not contempt – but fellowship.

The Troubles and the social and economic decline associated with them have robbed the border region of so much. As a Board Member of the IFI, I cannot tell you how heartening it is to read that the people of these most isolated communities have put the mistrust and fear of past times aside, and now look forward with confidence to a future of collaboration and shared interdependence.

We all have a responsibility to ensure the benefits of this new era of peace and stability are experienced by everyone in our society. Prosperity has been enjoyed by many on both sides of the border over the last number of years, but it has not touched all lives equally. The secluded communities studied in this work have hitherto been amongst the most culturally and economically marginalised on this island, and are those upon which the Fund has focussed much of its work.

Over the years, the IFI has helped build economic stability in disadvantaged areas struggling in the face of political instability, inter-communal violence, unemployment and the collapse of investment and tourism.

More importantly, in places where the inhabitants would be forgiven for believing themselves forgotten, it has built bridges among people across the political divide, and given hope where none existed before.

The steps towards genuine cross-community and cross-border collaboration these border communities are now taking are essential if they are to develop successfully, and to reach the potential denied them until now.

4. Conclusion

I have spoken frequently of isolation today, but isolation need not always be a negative. In poetry and literature, isolation is most often associated with tranquillity. W.B. Yeats, a man inspired by the landscape of Sligo and Leitrim, wrote wistfully of his desire for tranquillity in his most famous poem "*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*". He yearns for the seclusion of Innisfree where he "... shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow. / Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings." On this island too, peace comes dropping slow - but steady. I know the day will soon be upon us when the border region will be associated with, and valued for, the tranquillity and peace its isolation offers.

As we move through this new era of peace and co-operation is timely to acknowledge the contribution made by the consistent international encouragement and generous political and practical support for peace in Ireland. The IFI has been the principal channel for this support, notably from our donors: the United States, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and our special thanks must go to them - without them this project and many other projects would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank the International Centre for Local and Regional Development for the enormous resources of time and energy its research team have put into the preparation of this report. You have given us much to ponder, and your work will, I have no doubt, be studied eagerly and widely.

We consider your work to be an opportunity for the Fund to contribute to the strategic development of cross-border links, reconciliation, and development in interface areas. The Centre has the potential to revolutionise planning in both parts of this island, and to encourage a more joined-up approach in the border region and North-South than is presently the case. The International Fund for Ireland is delighted to have facilitated your research and I look forward to the insights to come in your future publications.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for your kind attention.

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