

A WORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN, DR. TIM O'CONNOR



I am delighted to contribute to the fourth edition of *Borderlands: The Journal of Spatial Planning in Ireland*. The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) is very proud of *Borderlands* and the contribution it is making to the understanding of spatial planning and regional development on the island of Ireland, particularly in the context of the continuing journey of peace and reconciliation which we are on together. Since the last edition (No. 3, January 2013), a landmark date was passed in that regard – the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement became 16 years old, a milestone it reached on 10 April 2014. Another way of looking at it is to see the Agreement as having become a fully-fledged teenager – lots of promise and potential for the future, but still a work in progress.

We have indeed made a lot of progress in Northern Ireland and in relations between North and South and Ireland and Britain in recent years; but the truth is we are still at a relatively early point of the journey when one looks at the historical context in which the conflict was framed. I make that point both as an attempt to put some context on the issues and challenges that remain for the Process, and also as an encouragement to keep going with the daily work of peace-building and reconciliation - work like we do at the ICLRD.

For the ICLRD, our task is to be facilitators of the quiet task of closer collaboration between practitioners and communities engaged across borders and boundaries - of all kinds - in regard to regional development and spatial planning. It is,

as I say, quiet work, low-profile work perhaps (not many headlines there), but nonetheless vital in the context of ensuring that the 'New Beginning' of the Belfast/Good Friday and St Andrew's Agreements turns into long-term success.

Much of the ICLRD's work over the past few years have been undertaken under the auspices of the **Cross-Border Spatial Planning Development and Training Network (CroSPiAn)**, a sub-programme of the Centre for Cross Border Studies led Ireland-Northern Ireland Cross-Border Cooperation Observatory (INICCO). These suite of projects are funded under the EU INTERREG IVA programme which is administered by the Special EU Programmes Body.

Under the current CroSPiAn programme, running from February 2013 to April 2015, the ICLRD is continuing its work in strengthening the policy and operational linkages between central and local policy-makers and among officials and practitioners involved in spatial planning in the Irish border region. There are three core elements to this:

- developing and delivering professional education programmes which are responding to the priority needs and objectives of local government in the Irish border region during this period of reform;
- identifying opportunities, and operational frameworks, for progressing a shared services agenda across local government that improve the delivery of public services; this will occur through action research and two pilot initiatives to demonstrate practical models for cooperation in delivering front-line or specialised services;
- supporting the principle of evidence-informed planning by mapping the compatible 2011 census data from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and developing an updated all-island deprivation index in an on-line,

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user-friendly format to support collaboration among central government departments across the island.

Meanwhile, we also continue to support evidence-informed planning through our sister organisation, the All-island Research Observatory (AIRO). This work programme has led to new technical approaches to developing compatible and accessible data for cross-border analysis in housing, accessibility to services and measuring deprivation.

The ICLRD conferences and workshops continue to be well-attended and recognised networking events, bringing a whole range and mix of practitioners together in the cross-border space who perhaps otherwise would not gather under the one roof – a simple achievement in itself, but vital in terms of the journey described above.

Speaking of “gathering”, it was my privilege in the last year to have been Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Gathering Ireland 2013, a unique project by the Irish Government aimed at mobilising communities around Ireland to issue invitations to their kith and kin overseas – the great Irish diaspora - to gather in Ireland in 2013. It was a tremendous success. Over 5,000 Gatherings were held all round Ireland, with hundreds of thousands of our people from around the world responding to the call and the invitation and visiting Ireland. The heroes of the project were the thousands of communities who spent months preparing the warmest welcome for our people around the world, and the outcome was a re-affirmation of the profound bond that continues to bind those of us who live in Ireland – the ‘Home Place’ as it were – and those who had to leave.

I want to pay particular tribute to the role played by the Local Authorities in ensuring the success of the Gathering. They did a tremendous job in supporting communities, and in coordinating efforts on the ground. It brought home to me again, in personal terms as somebody not involved in the space, how important the contribution of Local Authorities is –

they are the arm of the State that is closest to the people and to communities on the ground. I have long believed they have a vital role also to play in consolidating peace and reconciliation, and that is why an organisation like the ICLRD is so important in supporting them in that work. The Gathering has served to further underline the value of their role and the need to continue to support them.

In closing, if I could add a brief personal comment.... I will shortly be stepping down as Chairman of the ICLRD. Over the years, I have been involved in different roles around the organisation since its formation was first tabled back in 2002. It has been a privilege to see the organisation grow over the years, a growth driven by its partner members – the School of the Built Environment at the University of Ulster, the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at NUI Maynooth, the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh, and the Institute of International Urban Development in Cambridge Massachusetts – and today its contribution across various strands and spaces is rightly hailed by many. The ICLRD was invented as a response to new questions being asked by the Peace Process in terms of cross-border collaboration which were not being addressed in precisely this way by anybody else. In the ten years or so in-between, the ICLRD has quietly built its reputation as a facilitator, supporter, honest broker, trainer, safe and neutral space – a unique mix for a unique situation.

It has been a privilege to have been involved in that journey and I look forward to supporting the next Chairperson, the Executive (and in that regard I pay tribute to the terrific work over the years of John Driscoll and Caroline Creamer), the Advisory Board, the partner and affiliate organisations, and the Secretariat at the Centre for Cross Border Studies (much thanks to Andy Pollak and now Ruth Taillon, Mairead Hughes, Eimear Donnelly and their colleagues) as the voyage continues.

I thank all the contributors to *Borderlands*, a critical piece of the overall offering of the ICLRD, with a

special word of appreciation to Caroline Creamer, who has undertaken the editorial role as a great labour of love.

Since the last edition of *Borderlands*, we lost our wonderful Nobel Laureate, a true son of both parts of Ireland, the great Seamus Heaney, who understood this journey we are on better than most. His loss is felt by all of us but we have the continued consolation of the remarkable and enduring insights and wisdom of his writings and poems. I leave the last word – of encouragement - to him:

*“So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here”.*

The ICLRD and our partners are proud to be part of the voyage toward that further shore.

Dr. Tim O’Connor
Chairman
**International Centre for Local and Regional
Development**