



Sharing Space



Rural Enabler Programme
Building Peace Locally

Sharing Space

The concept of sharing space is important, particularly in Northern Ireland where people from different traditions often live apart with their children educated separately and few possibilities for contact with individuals from other backgrounds. Studies¹ that specifically explored these issues in a rural context identified a number of very specific challenges in rural areas as follows.

- The lack of visibility of the presence of contested spaces in rural areas – often known only to local people. Their changing and fragile nature can reduce, and has reduced, contention levels in relation to some spaces however seasonal incidents can set progress back very easily.
- Many facilities in rural areas are associated exclusively with one tradition or the other making the sharing of spaces more complex.
- The challenge of sharing space in the rural southern border counties can be different to Northern Ireland, given that the majority community is often unaware of the issue and the need.

In current times particularly, the development of shared space in rural areas is important in the context of supporting and sustaining services with value for money being a critical issue. For example, the provision of outreach services including community education, welfare advice, health and wellbeing will not happen of its own accord and those who own or have charge of community space have a responsibility to ensure that all members of their communities have the best possible services.

¹ Beyond Belfast (2010) jointly commissioned by Rural Community Network and Community Relations Council and Contested Spaces (2012) commissioned by Community Relations Council on behalf of their Rural Policy Committee

Learning from the Rural Enabler Programme

The Rural Enablers have been working with communities, institutions and agencies across rural areas in Northern Ireland and the six southern border counties to support and facilitate individuals and groups to develop ways to share space. The Enablers used a three stage process as follows:

- Contact** – usually contact with the Rural Enabler is initiated by a local group/community representative. The Enablers often find this contact has been prompted by an internal group discussion on the need to engage/importance of engagement with other groups. At this stage, the Enabler will work with the group to explore what the current situation is and what the communities would like to see/do to create shared space.
- Engagement** – once an Enabler has worked with the group to identify what they want to achieve, the next step is to agree a suitable approach. An important element of this process involves identifying, targeting and engaging with all those who need to be involved. It also usually involves the development and implementation of an activity or series of activities which will begin the process of sharing space. This is crucial to confidence building. The Enabler has an important role here particularly in brokering trust with those who are prepared to be involved, ensuring that all parties can work to their strengths and securing a real buy-in to the process. Ultimately this should result in the development of relationships with others from different community backgrounds.
- Sustaining the Engagement** – one successful action or activity should lead to another perhaps more ambitious activity, further enhancing confidence and levels of trust. The key components of this engagement require a structured programme of work incorporating good communication with all members. The Enabler's role in this context is to continue to support those taking part in engagement work by ensuring that they make every effort to communicate with the wider community and bring them on board. Encouraging them to develop more activities to progress the real sense of shared space and engaging with others, including statutory bodies, will increase the sustainability of their effort.

As in most rural areas, children and young people are educated separately and have their youth activities held in separate space. It is important for local leaders such as school principals and youth leaders to create opportunities for sharing space. In one example, school children with the support of their teachers and principals, working with external facilitators, were able to create opportunities for children coming together in each other's schools as well as undertaking diversity work outside the school environment.

Learning: Sharing space presents many challenges particularly at institutional levels so leaders need to be innovative in creating opportunities to enable children to understand the value of sharing their space.



Lessons from Practice for Local Policy

This learning is relevant to communities, groups and organisations operating locally to develop and support the concept and practice of shared space.

Recognising the Challenges

In many rural communities, community and/or public spaces are tacitly used by only one 'side' of the community. Agencies and outsiders coming into an area need to be aware of any such issues (for example, sites where people have been killed or maimed; spaces which people perceive as being linked with particular organisations associated with the Conflict or just what some in the community perceive as no-go areas for their community). Organisations working in support of peace building need to find ways to encourage and support communities to actively engage in the process of building relationships with a view to making this space more welcoming to others from different traditions and perhaps eventually sharing their space.

In some rural communities, there may be only one community space (for example, Church Hall, GAA or Orange Hall) associated with sports, cultural or religious activity. These associations may believe that their facilities are 'open to all' and are unaware of the barriers which might prevent other communities from sharing the space. Institutions need to be aware of how their traditions, physical symbolism and emblems may be viewed by others and should take account of this to consider how to make their space accessible to all.

Fears and Barriers

Other challenges include acknowledging the fears of, and barriers to, the sharing of space such as:

- Groups or individuals moving too fast in promoting sharing. Local agents need to provide relevant and ongoing support. Issues such as pacing their efforts and ensuring that leaders bring their community with them and people feel comfortable in sharing their space.
- External setbacks in the local community such as outbursts of violence associated with the Conflict could easily undermine people's attendance in shared space venues. All those working at the local level need to have clear communication systems in place.

The learning for local community leadership is to know your community and communicate with them on an ongoing basis as to what is happening. Also good and ongoing communication with local leaders from the other community(ies) is important to sustain relationships when there are the inevitable setbacks as the peace process continues.

In the border region of Ireland (as well as other areas in the Republic) one of the most prevailing concerns of the Protestant community is the dissipation of their culture and particularly the space occupied by Protestant schools. Minority communities here need to feel reassured by the majority community and, in particular, the leadership that their space is not under threat and their traditions, culture and systems are not undermined. The majority community needs to be aware of, and sensitive to, these very real fears. Given these times of economic austerity when resources are so limited, this provides a real challenge for all communities – majority and minority.

Learning: Majority communities need to understand the real fears of their minority counterparts and be prepared to reach out. Minority communities need to articulate their fears and concerns about their space being made redundant.



The vital role of agencies and external stakeholders

Local agencies and others have a critical role to play in encouraging and supporting the shared use of community space. This can operate at a number of levels.

- Instigation role in providing a context for discussion on shared space to stimulate new thinking on the opportunity for sharing.
- Brokerage role in creating and/or supporting local networking where events can be held in a variety of venues, thereby introducing communities to spaces where they might not otherwise visit.
- Providing ongoing support and incentives to communities and key individuals therein to share their space through mentoring and resources.
- Being a reference point for other agencies/ supporters coming in to support the sharing of space in local communities.

Leaders and workers in agencies need to know the communities they are working with and have a good knowledge of the issues to do with sharing space. They need to be aware and respectful of local sensitivities and know when to challenge communities and when to leave well enough alone.

The Enablers have identified a number of key stakeholders who are among those most likely to take up the challenge of sharing their space.

- Community leaders who generally have the trust of their communities, who know what the community will bear and how best to engage them to have ownership of the process.
- The clergy with responsibility for many spaces throughout both jurisdictions and who, despite reduction in congregations, still retain influence within many rural communities.
- Other institutions which also own community facilities/spaces and which have the potential to recreate them as shared spaces – either on a full time, part time or casual basis.
- Local statutory agencies which have the responsibility to work with community leaders and others on an ongoing basis to support their work at local level – through mentoring, mediation, communication and resources.

The importance of early ‘wins’ and sustaining them

The whole process of sharing space is one which needs small and early successful projects to enable communities to feel that they have achieved something worthwhile. It is important for those who have a taste of success to continue to be supported by local authorities, local support agencies and networks. This will also require help with communicating and sharing the learning so that others can learn from successful experiences.

Contentious space in some rural areas may really come to the fore at certain times of the year - in this instance, the parades season. Two central groups, an institution and a resident's group, were contending the hosting of a parade in a rural village. The Rural Enabler Programme, in response to a request from a statutory agency, was able to facilitate a mediation process which engaged both groups in agreeing a way forward which could be accepted by all.

Learning: There is a need for timely availability of mediation and facilitation skills to support communities in promoting the sharing of space, particularly where it can be contentious.



In terms of sharing space, Enablers cite the importance of starting ‘where people are at’. People are not generally interested in the idea of peace building for the sake of it but are interested in sports, arts, culture and environment. Finding ways to share common interests among communities is a good starting point. Rural Enablers supporting communities and working in partnership with other agencies including local authorities, police and schools have been able to work on a number of projects which have enjoyed early success. A critical factor, however, has been sustaining this work and challenging the community to take the next and ongoing steps.

Beginning the process

Throughout rural Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, the issue of identity is very strong, characterised by the presence of institutions such as the church and other faith based organisations, GAA, Orange Order and in some areas, Bands Fora. These organisations, by their nature, serve to reinforce the sense of belonging and community connectedness for some members of the community. In order to build a wider sense of belonging and cohesion, it is critical to involve these organisations in the process of sharing space. The Rural Enabler experience of working with some of these organisations has been very slow and tentative. In some instances, it has been dependent on individual personalities which can ‘make or break’ the concept of sharing space.

Within local communities, people need to feel safe to show leadership and be supported by others as they begin the process of sharing space. This involves taking risks which sometimes work or which can result in setbacks such as:

- community groups splitting up because the leadership has not brought others along through the process or where members may not be ready
- partners working alongside others until the last minute and then failing to show for the event presenting reasons which are not necessarily believed but have to be accepted
- outsiders or agencies not fully knowing/understanding/appreciating the underlying issues of sharing space and how particular groups work

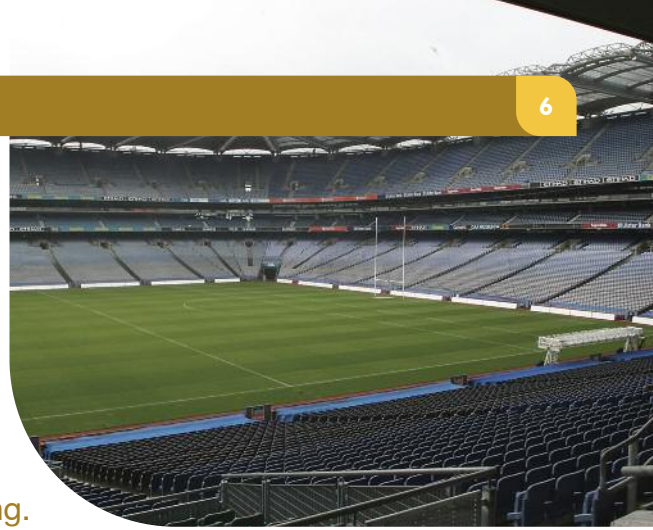
In an effort to demonstrate how space can be shared successfully, it is important for communities to create attractive incentives. In one particular rural community, a new initiative involving children’s drama, art and music was introduced. This was accompanied by a proactive strategy by the majority community to engage families from the minority faith tradition in the area.

Learning: Heightened awareness for the project promoters around accessibility of their premises to minority and other groups who had not been accessing the activities and events being delivered by the centre. Opportunities for new activities can overcome fear of sharing.

It is important for local agencies in particular to support the concept of sharing space and to sustain this sharing for the benefit of local families and the wider community by:

- appropriately and sensitively challenging current ways of thinking about space when engaging with local communities – an outsider is well placed to do this as they can take the risk without as much recourse to community
- continuing to support community leaders in tackling change and promoting the concept of sharing facilities on a cross community, intercultural and, where appropriate, cross border basis
- supporting the emergence of community and institutional champions who will continue to challenge traditional thinking to ensure that they have an awareness of the risks, fears, difficulties and barriers the community highlights and how to manage these risks
- reflecting continuously on progress – where communities have come from, where they are now and where they hope to go

Lessons from Practice for National and Regional Policy



The nature of shared space in rural areas, both north and south of the border, requires national/regional policy makers and funders to acknowledge the following.

1 **Developing and sustaining the concept of shared space is an ongoing process which requires sustained support rather than one-off interventions. This will involve financial and, indeed, human resources as well as recognition of the progress being made at local level.**

- Careful monitoring and vigilance is also required by a range of players including local agencies which can feed this information through to regional and national levels. It is important that regional/national bodies support partnerships working at local level by recognising local complexities and assisting with appropriate interventions.
- Grant makers need to value the contribution of communities and agencies and their ability to work in partnership. They need to find ways to promote and reward collaboration thus avoiding competition or potential duplication.

2 **National/regional institutions have a responsibility to support and challenge local players in their sharing of space by ensuring that best practice is highlighted, that duplication of space is not supported and that where there is contention, there is a commitment to ongoing support.**

- National/regional organisations have the scope and capacity to share learning with others through awareness events showcasing best practice which can encourage leadership to emerge at local level.
- Those operating at national/regional level can facilitate quiet conversations in support of the idea of sharing space.
- Where national/regional institutions have invested in their people on the ground through, for example, peace building training skills including mediation, there has been a shift in mindsets to sharing local space.

- In the past, many of these institutions including churches, GAA, Orange Order and Bands Fora were not recognised as potential peace builders. This has changed and these institutions are increasingly regarded as having an important role to play in this context. They have the trust of their membership and are in a position to champion the best and most appropriate leadership and influence at local level. This work needs to be sustained and further developed particularly with organisations or their membership who in some areas remain outside the peace process.

3 **Dealing with the issue of sharing space in rural areas requires national and regional organisations to collaborate with local players. This requires partnership working where people can play to their strengths while recognising the limitations of others. Those who are somewhat removed from the work on the ground have a responsibility to showcase and find ways of celebrating good practice as an influence to others. This requires sensitivity so as not to damage the progress which has been achieved.**

The learning here has shown the need for ongoing support:

- to help build the community capacity for the good of the local community. For some, this has encouraged the development of a clear plan for an area rather than sporadic fund chasing for small amounts of funding which may be useful in the short-term but which may not address the real and ongoing difficulties in an area.
- for training needs around provision of mediation and negotiating skills. Methods of dealing with community tensions and potential contention especially on a seasonal basis are also required.

4 **All peace building work in rural communities should adopt the approach of the Rural Enabler Programme, outlined in the Introduction paper.**

Lessons for Practical Interventions with Rural Communities

- Sharing space presents many challenges particularly at institutional levels so leaders need to be innovative in creating opportunities to enable children to understand the value of sharing their space.
- Majority communities need to understand the real fears of their minority counterparts and be prepared to reach out. Minority communities need to articulate their fears and concerns about their space being made redundant.
- There is a need for timely availability of mediation and facilitation skills to support communities in promoting the sharing of space, particularly where it can be contentious.
- All parties – the community with the support of key agencies and others - have a collective role to play in promoting the sharing of space. Processes of mediation and dialogue alongside small practical events help to build relationships.
- Heightened awareness for the project promoters around accessibility of their premises to minority and other groups who had not been accessing the activities and events being delivered by the centre.
- External setbacks in the local community such as outbursts of violence associated with the Conflict can easily undermine people's attendance in shared space venues.
- In many rural communities, community and/or public spaces are tacitly used by only one 'side' of the community. Agencies and outsiders coming into an area need to be aware of any such issues (for example, sites where people have been killed or maimed or spaces which people perceive as being linked with particular organisations associated with the Conflict).
- The process of sharing space is one which needs small and early successful projects to enable communities to feel that they have achieved something worthwhile.



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