Research Project

'The Paralysis of Parochialism'

August 2017

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1.   Introduction

Research Rationale

The Paralysis of Parochialism research report has been commissioned to explore the barriers to the shared use of civic space within Northern Ireland. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, over the past number of years, has been delivering the Space and Place Programme; which seeks to support the development of better connections between people and communities through the development and re-use of difficult and/or underused space (buildings, parks and open space).

Through analysis of the applications to this programme, there was a realisation that many applications were seeking support for the development of new spaces (buildings and outdoor facilities) rather than developing or refurbishing already existing spaces.

CFNI was concerned that applications to the programme have shown that there remains a reticence within many communities to explore how they can use their existing built and natural environment or heritage to develop a more integrated, cohesive and shared community, in which people choose to live, work and socialise. As a result CFNI was interested in attempting to understand the reasons why many communities were still reluctant, nineteen years into the peace process to explore and develop shared community spaces. The Community Foundation was supported by the Global Fund for Community Foundations through its 'Burning issues' grants programme to explore the barriers to the shared use of space within Northern Ireland. The Global Fund was particularly interested in this topic as it could see its relevance in a global setting and for other divided communities.

In an economic climate where resources are increasingly scarce, it is unsustainable to continue to support multiple segregated and unshared spaces that are arguably negatively impacting on how a community works together, to address issues of disadvantage, exclusion and division. The Community Foundation believes support should be prioritised to facilitate communities to explore how such spaces could be positively transformed into a space that all of the community feel welcome in, can contribute to and ultimately benefit from.

The Community Foundation does not underestimate the challenges presented in attempting discussions around such issues but feel that due to its independence and experience in supporting divided, excluded and disadvantaged communities, the organisation is in an ideal position to lead this journey towards new possibilities for communities and local spaces.

Parochialism

The current situation in Northern Ireland (NI) is one where "people live within the same spaces, but limit the spaces that they share". Events, groups and decisions within a parish or a community are based *locally* - sometimes taking little heed of what is going on in the wider community. The term parochial itself means confined or restricted as if within the borders of a parish with limited range or scope[1]

Shared space as a complex process in NI

Within NI, communities and the spaces people live in, can be considered either as mixed or single identity (majority/minority), in terms of religious affiliation. This is further exacerbated, despite the Peace Process, by the little progress that has been made to encourage increased sharing of community assets across the religious divide. Specifically within single identity communities (a religious mix of 95/5%), the issue of sharing spaces are more complex as historical, political allegiances and the reluctance to cross denominational boundaries, come into play. The Northern Ireland Executive through the draft 2016 Programme for Government stated that one of the indicators to measure progress on a shared society that respects diversity in Northern Ireland was:

"% who think all leisure centres, parks, libraries and libraries in their area are shared and open to both Protestants and Catholics."[2]

CFNI believes that that this indicator does not capture the extent of interaction within these public spaces. People may continue to live in the same spaces but may not share in a meaningful way the spaces that they live in. This study sought to explore at a much deeper and local level these issues and the challenges that local communities encounter in their efforts to share the spaces that they live in, set against the legacy of the conflict.

New Communities

Added to the conflict related impact, is the relatively new scenario in many of our communities, which has seen the immigration of people from a range of other countries. Such has been the swiftness of this movement, some communities have struggled to put in place programmes and services that can assist migrants through an early settlement and integration process. Many of those who choose to work and live in Northern Ireland, continue to face obstacles in their attempts to settle down in the areas in which they are located, creating another impact on the development of a community that is shared, cohesive and inclusive.

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[1] **https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parochial** - **Merriam Webster Dictionary definitions website**
[2]

Research outputs

It is hoped that through this research the following outputs have been achieved:

- Raise the knowledge among local people within the study areas, of the perceptions and/or realities faced by the whole community in relation to the usage of spaces within their areas.

- Develop a range of community based conversations, at local level, which:
    - encourages and supports people within the study areas to explore how space
    - could be shared more effectively for the benefit of all people living in the area.

- Raise awareness at local community level of the potential of increased sharing of space in making a contribution to the tackling of poverty, disadvantage, community/good relations within the context of the study areas.

- Develop several recommendations, which will act as the building blocks for a more substantial 'community assets building' programme.

2. Research methodology

In August 2016, The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland commissioned Rural Community Network to conduct this research.

Commissioned researchers – Rural Community Network

Rural Community Network (RCN) is the regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations, to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Like CFNI, RCN work towards being a more shared, inclusive and cohesive society; a place where everyone is treated equally and where everyone can and should play a role as an active citizen within Northern Ireland.[3]

Research methodology

Prior to any interviews or focus groups taking place, an agreed set of criteria was drawn up with CFNI to select a list of potential communities that RCN would research. Criteria were applied and a list of candidate areas for research were identified. CFNI selected a few Council areas containing settlements with a mixture of population sizes, community backgrounds and geographic locations.

In this instance a few communities were identified across Northern Ireland. These communities had the following characteristics in that they were urban; rural and peri urban and were demographically either majority Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) or Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR), majority CNR/PUL or mixed 50/50. Some of the areas researched also had a migrant population which was taken into consideration throughout the interviews and focus groups. Statistics for the migrant population in each area were noted from the NINIS website.

As the research was exploring attitudes to shared space, segregation and community development a qualitative approach was adopted. This qualitative research was in the form of a mixture of focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews. There was an extensive engagement process with the local community. The research fieldwork was carried out between September 2016 – December 2016. A summary of the key findings were presented by the Community Foundation Policy Officer at the Global Summit on Community Philanthropy in Johannesburg, South Africa 1 & 2 December 2016.

Overall 108 people were engaged in the process from across the selected council areas; contributing to practice based learning and evidence and allowing for future planning and policy in relation to anti-poverty, community and good relations in NI. It should be noted many people and organisations who were approached to take part in the research declined to do so. Several others stated that they would consider taking part but declined to do so when their participation was discussed with

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[3] **www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org**

management committees, colleagues or family. We believe that this was in part due to fears around safety and security, the sensitivity of some of the issues we were discussing in relation to shared space and the legacy of the conflict in many of these communities.

The research fieldwork involved 16 one to one interviews and 14 focus groups, with 108 people across all areas. The outputs of the research were an overall research report written in January 2017 and presented to CFNI March 2017.

The findings of the research across all 6 communities were broadly framed into five themes:

1. Positive aspects of local communities, as a place to work or live. Our intention was to adopt an appreciative inquiry approach to ensure that the positive aspects of communities and community life were discussed in the workshops.

2. Understanding of the term "shared space"

3. Perceptions and realities faced by communities in relation to the usage of space

4. Exploration of how space can become more shared which would be of benefit to all those living in that area

5. Perceptions and realities of neighbouring towns and communities; in terms of being a shared space.

The research represents a snapshot of views expressed by a small number of community activists and local residents in a number of communities. The research was time bound and resource constrained and as such findings and recommendations emerging should be read in that context.

Ethical framework

In terms of conducting the research itself, an ethical framework was developed by RCN and agreed by CFNI, which ensured consistency in approach across the two council areas. This was to allow participants and researchers to agree in advance of fieldwork the issues being discussed, how information would be used, confidentiality and consent issues.

It was agreed as a prerequisite that none of the communities researched would be identified. This was due to the sensitive nature of the work and also through direct experience of past research where participation was not guaranteed should spaces or places become identified.

As part of our ethical framework we agreed with participants that:

- The community they came from would not be identified in the final report or at the presentation of key findings to Councils, funders or other stakeholders

- Individual comments would not be attributed to participants.

- Participants could withdraw from the research process at any time and could ask that their comments be removed from the research.

- Interview/focus group notes were shared with participants to allow them to change or exclude comments they weren't comfortable with or which were inaccurate.

3.   Analysis

Developing a common language of sharing

Generally, it was found that shared space is a term that most people understood and many expressed clear ideas about it being an inclusive and positive term. It should be borne in mind though that most participants in the research were community activists or volunteers and may have been more likely to have some understanding of the concept of shared space than the wider population in those communities. Funders should seek to continue to make use of the term and create a common parlance with it until it becomes a more widely understood term like 'integrated education'.

Sense of place as a catalyst for sharing

The participants we spoke to identified a strong sense of place and a sense of belonging as key elements within the complex range of factors which influence where people choose to live. People's connections to place and to others within their community should be identified as a key building block or community asset for the development of something new or different for a community. If people have a strong connection to place and to others within that place, they are more likely to want to see that place thrive and develop which should enable organisations to secure buy-in from local communities for their programmes of activity.

Safety and security are still key priorities in many communities

Safety and security are also key determinants of where people chose to live, socialise and work. They tend to choose places and spaces where they perceive that their safety and that of their families is not in question. Given the legacy of the Troubles in our communities we again must identify issues of 'safety' as a key consideration for communities who are working to share space.

Gatekeepers can be assets or liabilities

In some of the interviews we conducted people referred to the gatekeepers who exercise power and control over communities. Gatekeepers can be both an asset and a liability in a community and future funding programmes should seek to ensure the power and influence of these gatekeepers is more positive than negative on the communities they engage in. Gatekeepers whose values are grounded in good community development practice should be supported but where practice is poor or influence is controlling this practice needs to be addressed.

People and relationships more important than physical assets

In many of the interviews people referred to the importance of people and relationships as the key to developing shared space rather than the physical assets. A key aspect of shared space development were the people to people connections that fostered understanding, trust, and importantly a welcome to spaces which hadn't

been shared before; Where people felt wanted, valued, welcomed they tended to return to access services and socialise. Any future programmes should emphasise the importance of the development of interpersonal relationships in a community promoting a shared space project.

Meeting a genuine need is fundamental

Most respondents said that shared space development should only be supported if it was proved to be needed and wanted by the local community. Many cautioned that shared space couldn't be imposed from the top down and it had to be seen to be meeting a genuine local need. People felt very strongly that to understand the needs of a community good community consultation was essential.

Development of shared space needs to be overt

In-depth community consultation should be a prerequisite for those organisations who seek to develop shared space. Those projects that had a clearly defined ambition and ethos focused on the development of shared space were most successful. Those who were less open about their intentions to develop shared space tended to struggle to gain local community buy-in.

Development of hyper-local communities

Across NI communities have worked hard to develop community assets. They have sought to serve the local community's needs through capital development projects. An unintended consequence of this "hyper-local" approach to community spaces and service delivery is that, particularly in remote areas, self-sufficiency can lead to increased isolation from the 'other' community. In building a community's capacity to meet the needs of its local population that community can become more self-sufficient and as a result can be more insular and more disconnected from neighbouring communities with negative effects on community relations.

Encouraging conscious inclusion

Where groups have sought to develop policies or programmes of 'conscious inclusion' this has also led to better sharing outcomes. Where there had been consideration of the 'other' during planning and implementation, people from a range of diverse backgrounds were supported to experience events and activities that otherwise could have been be exclusive. CFNI should invest to identify and support processes and actions that develop "conscious inclusion". Local leadership of organisations is vital to this - those who lead with an ambition to develop a shared space agenda may effect change but those who lead and don't consider a shared space agenda will continue to serve only those who feel they can access the service. It will be much less likely that they will look up and out to see who is excluded.

In our research, we came across two examples of positive use of existing spaces where groups consciously sought to engineer the delivery of a programme across a divide and those interested were encouraged to venture into the 'other's' space. A

small amount of funding which supported this programme to take place made all the difference to the sharing in that community.

Supporting the risk- takers

Risk taking behaviour demonstrated by some of those interviewed showed how, when individuals choose to challenge established social norms, they could positively influence the development of shared space. The research showed that transformation does happen in places but sometimes it is hard won over a long period. It also requires an element of risk taking as well as an acceptance from the wider community that this should happen (or at least not being opposed to it). Programmes which support organisations taking risks to develop shared space (or leadership skills development) in communities should be considered.

A localised approach to the legacy of the past

The memory of the past is still prominent in many areas and while some traditional boundaries are blurring and some changes are slowly taking place within communities, there must be an acknowledgement of the history of contested areas and spaces. The starting point for the redevelopment of shared spaces in these communities should start with project promoters seeking to understand and respect the legacy of the past in that community and the implications for their project. If that is done well, evidence from our research shows transformation and change can be supported to happen.

4.   Key Recommendations

When considering the development of further funding programmes that will seek to promote the expansion of shared spaces in communities funders should consider the following:

Recommendation 1
The development of shared space cannot solely be about developing neutrality and neutral spaces. Several participants expressed suspicion about this type of approach. However the flip side of this is that it may be more difficult to develop genuinely shared spaces.

Recommendation 2
Establishing that genuine need for a project exists is key and ensuring that local users have been involved in evidencing that need is a fundamental starting point. Ensuring that the right mix of services and activities that are valued by a wide cross section of the community in the right space is vital to ensure spaces are shared. If these fundamental elements are wrong or ill-considered then shared usage is unlikely to develop.

Recommendation 3
When developing shared space funders should engage with project promoters to ensure they are assessing the impact of issues that may affect how a shared space may be used at different times of the year, for example, when flags, emblems or symbols are erected or when contentious parades or protests are happening.

Recommendation 4
Funders should encourage project promoters to consider developing local protocols around issues of flags, identity, culture and traditions. Shared space is unlikely to develop where the display of flags and emblems is an issue.

Recommendation 5
The participation of all sections of the community who are potential users of a shared space is essential from the start of planning for a shared community project of their needs and concerns are to be taken into account. Without this step a shared space will be much more difficult to achieve.

Recommendation 6
Funders should not underestimate the ongoing impact of legacy issues in areas which were impacted by the Troubles. They must take a localized approach to recognize that the Troubles impacted some communities much more than others. In several focus groups and interviews unresolved legacy issues were identified as a key block to the development of shared spaces and better relationships between communities**.**

Recommendation 7
Funders should accept that many existing community premises such as orange halls, GAA halls or those halls connected to churches as well as premises and

spaces situated within areas that are single identity will struggle to develop shared space.

Recommendation 8
Funders should consider the need for resource funding to run services, developmental programmes and activities that explore conflict legacy issues in existing community buildings and spaces rather than capital funding to develop or regenerate spaces.

Recommendation 9
Funders should seek to use community development approaches to engage with issues of inclusion and to address the key questions of who isn't at the table and how do we get them to the table?

Recommendation 10
Funders should carefully consider the need for the development of additional facilities in communities and to take account of the range of existing assets in a community that may be utilized.

Recommendation 11
Funders should consider supporting programmes which allow those organisations taking risks in contested communities to explore the development of shared space.

5.   Conclusions

The development of shared space at community level remains a key objective and a key challenge for government, funders, community organisations and citizens almost twenty years after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. This research project encountered a number of initial challenges not least of which was building sufficient trust with both individuals and community groups to encourage them and their contacts to take part in the process. A number of people declined to participate in the project when they became aware that the research would focus on gathering views on issues of contested space, the impact of the Troubles and the current state of relationships that exist across the community. People had a genuine concern about expressing opinions on the issues we were discussing which, in itself, is telling. The research also showed that both urban and rural communities continue to feel the effects of the legacy of the Troubles. In many communities this legacy means that developing shared space will continue to be challenging work. Issues of trust between communities and concerns that still remain over safety and security of individuals visiting the 'other's' space were widespread amongst research participants. Many described spaces that had a history, a story connected to the past /past incidents that then shaped and in some ways distorted the use of that space long afterwards.

The issues of interfaces and cross community tension are often very obvious and visible in urban communities. This is even more the case at times of cultural celebration, elections or periods when people are expressing community identity due to civic tensions. Some participants considered that these tensions had lessened over the years and that the interface between one community and another had evolved and changed over time. In some urban areas the interface had been pushed back out of town centres to more outlying segregated residential areas. On the other hand in several of the rural communities involved in the research contested spaces existed which were invisible to outsiders but were well known to locals and where the 'other community' was less welcome or would feel less safe.

To enter into any community to change the use of space or to look to include others in the use of those places is to first seek to genuinely address the legacy that exists in that space and in people's association with that place. That change will not come from the siting of a building or the development of a space but will come with good engagement , the building of relationships and the creation of a common vision into which the community has been involved in inputting. For some spaces their history and significance will mean that it is unlikely they can be changed into truly shared spaces and we must acknowledge that is a reality for some of these places. For others there is the need to challenge the perception that things have to remain the same and won't change into supporting communities and funders to looking at the art of the possible. With good community consultation with support for individuals to take risks to make those changes communities can be persuaded to change the space or the place into something different.

Over the past 20-25 years community groups have sought to develop local facilities and local services which has led to the development of a wide variety of buildings

and infrastructure. This has led to the development of what could be described as hyper-localism at the local level where people don't need to share space or go out of their own community and is an unintended consequence of funding which was provided to develop community infrastructure.

People need to be supported and engaged to plan the development of shared space based on genuine community need. In many communities this work won't happen naturally and will need to be animated and incentivised by funders. From communities we spoke to the development of shared space appears to have been more successful in those areas where conscious inclusion is a project aim and projects are stating this openly from the outset. Funders should seek to maximise the usage of existing assets in communities before supporting new build projects.

An opinion expressed in several focus groups is that the issues associated with shared space, interfaces and contested spaces and peace building are issues that are considered much more now by working class communities. The view was expressed that twenty years ago these issues were the concern of middle class communities, activists and churches. The people expressing this view considered that this represented progress and that whilst the legacy of the Troubles still casts a long shadow people are much more willing to discuss these issues than they were twenty years ago.