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FUND Focus

INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND

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Collaboration and Regeneration-Key to Future Peace Wall Removal

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CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

In 2019 the International Fund for Ireland commissioned its second Attitudinal Survey of residents living beside interfaces in Northern Ireland. What we learned from this survey was that fears still exist, but a steady increase in inter-community engagement has allowed a level of confidence to emerge with renewed hope for a future without barriers.

Uncertainty was a consistent theme in 2019, particularly for communities in NI and border counties who were unsure of how their lives would be affected post-Brexit and with the ongoing absence of an Assembly and Executive in NI to make decisions locally.

We are moving into 2020 with cautious optimism, following the announcement of the restoration of the NI Assembly and Executive and clarity gradually emerging on Brexit. Local communities can now start to feel they have a voice and can engage in shaping their future. The restoration of the Assembly and Executive, which had been absent for more than three years, will provide a renewed sense of hope for those who are only starting to take the first steps towards peace and reconciliation.

This edition of Fund Focus explores the theme of collaboration and regeneration and the impact it has in building confidence around the future removal of Peace Walls.

Twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, over 100 barriers remain as visible signs of community segregation. This is preventing much needed progress for those severely impacted by the conflict.

The International Fund for Ireland recognises that considerable work is required to deliver significant changes around barriers. The IFI Peace Walls Programme is working hard at local level to break down the mental barriers and stigma around interfaces and encourage community engagement and dialogue while tackling fears, tensions and divisions.

We have seen progress in a number of areas in the last 12 months including the completion of the Serpentine Road/Navarra Place shared space which involved the removal of a peace fence and installation of a multi-use games area and play park.

Collaboration and partnership across government, community and statutory agencies will be vital in continuing this progress in the right way and in the best interests of communities and residents. Conversations around Peace Walls go beyond the island of Ireland with international recognition of the work of the Fund and communities in dealing with this complex issue.

Recently, youth group Creggan Enterprises visited Yale University as part of a delegation from NI to participate in a conference, 'Twenty Years of Peace: Progress and Possibilities in NI'. The conference discussed the future of NI following the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and the importance of cross-community representation in conversations aimed at resolving difficult issues linked to conflict and division.

Since 2012, the Fund has invested more than £5.2m in the programme to enable the existing six community groups to deliver interventions in their area that have led to the successful alteration or removal of some physical barriers and the amending or re-imaging of others.

It is important to acknowledge the support the Fund has received from the British and Irish Governments. The essential work of the Fund is also only possible because of our donors - the United States, the European Union, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and we remain grateful for their enduring support and encouragement.

Paddy Harte, Chairman

Youth Projects Boosted with IFI Funding

In November 2019, The International Fund for Ireland pledged £2,337,765/€2,805,315 to provide further intervention and support for marginalised communities.

The funding allocation will support 23 projects in their peace and reconciliation work across Northern Ireland and the southern border counties.

A significant proportion of funding will focus on the Fund's Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP). Launched in 2015, the programme works with 16-25 year olds who have faced a range of complex issues including: poor mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, difficult family backgrounds and been in or close to the criminal justice system.

Commenting on the funding package, IFI Chairman, Paddy Harte says: "The IFI's work is more relevant than ever. The continued lack of political leadership alongside an increase in hard line opinions on Brexit and dissident activity means that many communities feel more isolated and entrenched with little support on the ground to deliver positive outcomes.

"The IFI is delivering interventions and prepared to go where other agencies cannot to offer better pathways for engagement and growth. Our PYDP Programme in particular is like no other youth initiative. It is tailored to the individual, develops much needed life skills, instils confidence and prepares young people for positive life choices and employment."

Mr Harte adds: "Young people today face more challenges than ever and they often feel that society has let them down.

"Growing tensions within communities alongside high levels of social and economic deprivation all work hand in hand to spur on those opposed to the Peace Process who continue to try and radicalise young people through paramilitary recruitment.

"We will continue to engage with those who have benefited little from the Good Friday Agreement and help young people to transform and become positive role models within their local communities."

Further information about all the beneficiaries from the International Fund for Ireland's latest funding package is available at: www.internationalfundforireland.com

Caption: (L to R Back Row) Bernie Butler; Sadie Ward-McDermott; Allen McAdam and Avila Kilmurray; (L to R Front Row) Paddy Harte, IFI Chairman and Hilary Singleton.

GOING TO THE PEOPLE:
Peace Walls Work in Context

By Avila Kilmurray, IFI Board Member

Some years ago a community worker was bringing a group of Belfast children back on a bus from a cross-community trip. She went to investigate upon hearing an argument break out between two young boys. "What's the matter?" she asked. "I asked him to come and play ball against my wall but he says he won't", complained one. "But I asked him first to play ball with me against my wall", responded the other. The irony was they were both talking about either side of the same wall: one of Belfast's stolid Peace Walls that divided their neighbourhoods.

Fifty years after the erection of the first Peace Wall in Belfast little has changed. The number of dividing walls and barriers increased in response to community fears, but also due to security force and party political convenience.

U.S. poet, Robert Frost, wrote 'Before I built a wall I'd ask to know, what I was walling in or walling out'. Well, not in Northern Ireland – walling out 'the other' was an all too easy default position that has left us with some 100 interface structures. The most visited Peace Wall in Northern Ireland, Cupar Way in West Belfast, is 14m high and has been in place for those 50 years.

Working with Residents

The International Fund for Ireland recognises that the dismantling of these legacy structures is not an easy task. The IFI has supported six Peace Walls projects since 2012; investing £5.2 million across areas, that each deal with a number of interfaces. This investment underpins local community efforts to build the confidence of local residents to envisage the eventual removal of the barriers. The fear of the consequences of change often trumps the ability to envisage a less fearful future.

This situation is hardly surprising given that 70% of all conflict-related deaths occurred within 500 yards of a Peace Wall and 85% of killings within 1,000 yards. Add to the mix the fact that Peace Walls are located in some of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland; areas blighted by under-investment and stigma. In these circumstances the progress made by the community-based activists supported

MAIN: A drone shot of Peace Walls in North Belfast.

BELOW: An architect's impression for the former Finlay's factory site in West Belfast.

by the IFI has been nothing short of remarkable. There are programmes of activities both within and between communities, with an increasing number of local residents meeting their counterparts from 'the other side' of the wall. Community organisers also encourage residents to think of 'win-win' development initiatives that can benefit both 'single identity' communities where the walls are removed or made more porous, for instance by opening gates and so on. The Fund believes that the most impacted communities need to determine the pace of change for it to be sustainable.

Changing Attitudes

While change can seem slow, it is happening. The IFI commissioned its first Attitudinal Survey of residents living beside interfaces in 2017 and the survey was repeated in 2019.

Fears still exist, not helped by the uncertainties created by the prospect of Brexit and a lengthy period of non-functioning devolved government. 76% of people said that they would like to see the walls removed in their children's or grandchildren's lifetime, only 19% said that they wanted the walls removed now. However, the trend is positive, as those who feel that the walls should be removed now has increased from 13% to 19% over the past two years. The appreciation of enhanced inter-community contact was also reflected, with 40% of those interviewed reporting regular contact with residents from 'the other community' as compared to 26% in 2017.

Safety and security issues still dominate in the minds of those interviewed. The critical 'what if' question. The IFI has been working with relevant statutory agencies to ensure that Interface Barrier Support Packages can be put in place to ameliorate these fears. Commonly known as 'aftercare', these packages would meet the cost of fitting houses with appropriate security infrastructure and repair any damage that might be the result of sectarian hate crime. Working out the specific details of these schemes is taking somewhat longer than anticipated, but a collective agency effort is an essential element to ensure progress. If local residents demonstrate the courage to embrace change, then policy-makers and resource holders must respond in a timely and effective manner.

Supporting 'Win-Win' Approaches

The Peace Wall groups have championed approaches that not only soften physical structures but also deliver services, facilities and environmental improvements. One example is a potentially iconic shared space and eco facility in the Black Mountain area of West Belfast. With over 80% of the funding committed under the EU PEACE IV programme it urgently requires the final funding (£1.2 million) to be realised. Another model of good practice is the dismantling of a peace fence in Navarra Place (North Belfast) to allow the opening of a shared playpark. Inter-agency collaboration provided the required funding.

The IFI is acutely conscious of the work still to be done in order to meet the Northern Ireland Executive aspiration of the removal of Peace Walls by 2023. More importantly, it is committed to working with local communities to ensure that the children of today don't have to argue about which side of the wall to play ball.

MAIN: The new Shared Space at Navarra Place includes a play park.

BELOW: Serpentine Road's solid metal peace fence before the transformation.

CASE STUDY:

Greater Whitewell Community Surgery (GWCS)

Over many years of the conflict, the Greater Whitewell area experienced interface tension and violence resulting in population movement, blighting and devaluation of property. Recently, the area has become more 'settled' with new families moving in but visible signs of the conflict remain in the form of high, harsh peace barriers along with continuous levels of segregation and sectarianism.

Greater Whitewell Community Surgery (GWCS) is located on the Shore Road in lower North Belfast and has been part of the IFI Peace Walls Programme (PWP) since 2012. The programme focuses its attention on building relationships and developing a 'sense of community' that is inclusive of all residents in order to forward the goals of the PWP. It has facilitated a range of cross-community programmes aimed at building trust and confidence of local residents.

Activities include good relations programmes, a mental health programme, counselling and advice/support and a range of projects with young people. GWCS also works with local primary schools to deliver cross-community projects, including several large art projects which have been located on peace fences. There is also an intergenerational group which allows the exchange of views between older and younger residents.

Geraldine O'Kane is Manager at GWCS: "We see ourselves as one community working for the benefit of all although we are, of course, sensitive to identity and cultural difference."

There has been success in the last year with a shared space facility in the Serpentine Road/Navarra Place area in conjunction with Belfast City Council and the Department of Justice (DoJ). A harsh high solid metal peace fence on the Serpentine Road was removed and replaced with an open-mesh boundary fence, with artwork designed by local children, around a Shared Space play park and a multi-use games area.

It has taken several years to negotiate, receive finance and other permissions to see the work completed but GWCS persevered to bring it to fruition for residents.

"Over several years we negotiated, had meetings with key stakeholders and most importantly, with the community who highlighted their concerns about the project. We worked slowly with them to alleviate those concerns. The new capital project started in February 2019 and completed early July. The new play park and other facilities have brought the kids together and residents worked with us to reach our goal. We had an official opening in September, bringing everyone together to celebrate this new community chapter."

The project intends to continue its work on the remaining segregation barriers in the area. Conversations continue in Lower Whitewell and Graymount on the potential removal of an automated gate with replacement by a 'normal' boundary gate as a first step.

"We hope it will be replaced with an open gate in the future and eventually removed with the consent of the community".

Work also continues around potential change to a 9m high solid fence with mesh top running across back gardens dividing Serpentine Gardens and Gunnell Hill. A long standing peace fence in the grounds of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School could also be part of future work if DoJ was to agree an appropriate Aftercare Package for local residents.

"A Peace Wall is more than the physical structure. It is a psychological barrier in people's minds so it takes time to break that down. It's slow work, but we always have hope and you can see positive attitudinal change taking place as a result of our work."

Parents from the interface, who would rarely have mixed previously, are meeting organically when their children meet. Young people flourish as a result of engaging with the programmes and training offered, with many going on to be youth workers and progressing through education.

"We can see how the challenges of society can get them down but, with help and support, they find a purpose and belonging and we see the changes - they are maturing. As part of our work, we offer Advice Services and residents really appreciate this. It provides opportunities to talk to them about our work and joint aspirations for the area."

Mrs O'Kane adds: "After all this time, there is still a stigma that comes with Peace Walls and living on an interface, it inhibits opportunities and social mobility and I want to see that go."

An open-mesh fence replaces the old peace fence with colourful artwork designed by local children.

Factory Community Forum (FCF) – Peace Impact Programme

A wall situated on a major road into Larne has been given an eye catching makeover, thanks to FCF, which has united the local community through its outreach work. The wall was a space used for sectarian and conflict related graffiti for more than 30 years and impacted local residents negatively. The new mural, which was unveiled by former world champion boxer Dave 'Boy' McAuley, aims to 'Promote Positive Aspirations'. It features education, peace and sport elements and showcases local positive role models such as footballer Gareth McAuley, DJ and music producer Robert Ferguson (DJ Fergie) and Dave 'Boy' McAuley. Pictured are L to R: Gareth McConnell, Factory Community Forum, Dave 'Boy' McAuley, IFI Chairman Paddy Harte and Mid and East Antrim Mayor, Cllr Maureen Morrow.

Ulidia Training – Personal Youth Development Programme

Thirty one young people have transformed their lives thanks to a collaboration that aims to break down the stigma around Mental Health. The 'IMPACT' project, which is part of Ulidia Training, works to enhance employability, boost confidence and encourages participants to give back to their local communities. Participants worked in close partnership with Coleraine's Community Rescue Service (CRS), a volunteer led rescue organisation that searches for missing people. The project involved managing a successful community based mental health and wellbeing programme that offered a range of activities for local residents including; wellbeing workshops, Community Rescue Service training, mental health walks and a search and rescue scenario. Pictured L to R are: Barry Torrens, Unit Commander of Coleraine Unit, Community Rescue Service (CRS); Leanne Abernethy, IMPACT Project Manager and IFI Board Member, Allen McAdam.

Downstrands Family Resource Centre– Personal Youth Development Programme

Nine young people from across southwest Donegal received certificates after successfully completing the 'Ignite Your Future' project. It helps young people develop skills that will enable progression into training, further education or employment. The two-year cross-community scheme is participant led, with a programme of activities, training and support, tailored to suit each individual. The project aims to inspire young people to create compelling futures by addressing skills deficits and supporting personal growth. It also builds self-confidence through educational visits, targeted learning, good relations and developing life skills and reduces feelings of rural isolation in young people providing peer support and a friendship group. Pictured are: participants with Paddy Harte, Chairman of the International Fund for Ireland, Dolores McGeady, Donegal ETB (both seated) and course facilitators, Kieran McHugh and Kate Morgan.