

# **Self-help at the grassroots**

**How communities responded to the  
Northern Ireland Troubles**

*compiled by*

**Michael Hall**

**ISLAND** (90) **PAMPHLETS**

Published October 2008 by  
Island Publications/Farset Community Think Tanks Project  
466 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DW

© Michael Hall 2008  
mikeohall@hotmail.com  
<http://cairn.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/>

ISBN 978-1-899510-83-2

*The Farset/Inishowen & Border Counties Initiative is part financed by the  
European Union through the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation  
managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the Cross-Border Consortium*



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

## Introduction

The recent handful of Island Pamphlets undertaken under the auspices of *Farset/Inishowen & Border Counties Initiative* have focused on the largely unrecorded efforts made by grassroots community groups to not only counter the traumatic impact of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’, but to reach out to other communities in an effort to create better understanding, as well as engage those communities in purposeful debate and dialogue. Feedback at a grassroots level to these pamphlets has been positive. However, some of that feedback has clearly revealed that while people knew there was an amazing amount of work ‘going on in the background’, just *what* was going on was largely hidden from public view.

And yet, at a recent community-awards event (for the PATCH programme linking East Belfast and Drogheda) held in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Peter Robinson, Northern Ireland First Minister, admitted that if individuals and groups in the community had not persevered in the often difficult work of building bridges between people – in order to break down fears and counter misperceptions – then the politicians would never have been able to move forward. It was a welcome, if somewhat belated, affirmation from the political leadership of this remarkable grassroots achievement.

Some readers who admitted that they had been unaware of the amount of creative work undertaken at the grassroots went further, and asked that we supply more details on the development of grassroots activism, and how it sought to respond, at times of great adversity, to people’s everyday needs. It was to provide a partial answer to such requests that it was decided to present here a brief account of some of the more dynamic community initiatives which emerged. I say ‘partial’ because limitations of space make this a far from complete survey. Only a handful of projects have been described; there are countless others which could fill any number of these pamphlets. Perhaps some day a much fuller account can be written.

As the reader will see from the examples chosen, grassroots activism was never static – it was always forging ahead in its search for solutions. For example, groups located in either the Shankill or the Falls initially tended to their own needs, quite understandably, but eventually realised that those needs could only be adequately addressed by working across the ‘divide’. Likewise, individuals and community groups in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland realised that they too could play a vital part in bringing the estranged communities ‘up North’ together, and especially help rid the Unionist/Loyalist community of their misperceptions about people south of the border. Few of these community-based efforts worked in isolation; links were forged – whether cross-community within Northern Ireland or cross-border – long before our assorted politicians took their first tentative (and often begrudged) steps in that direction.

**Michael Hall**, *Farset Community Think Tanks Project*

# **AN OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISM**

## **1969-70**

This is what some have called the ‘fire-fighting’ period. The advent of the Troubles and the rapidly escalating violence not only came as a terrible shock to the communities most affected, but at times almost paralysed the normal functioning of society. The police were unwelcome in certain areas, ambulances found access to some estates difficult because of the numerous makeshift barricades which had been hastily thrown up for self-defence, domestic rubbish could not be collected, and refugees could not be rehoused quickly enough (at the start of the Troubles 1,800 families either fled or were forced to flee their homes; at that time this was the largest enforced movement of population Europe had seen since the Second World War). It was left to local people in their different communities to look to their own needs. While some individuals were more concerned with defence – and retaliation – and flocked to the paramilitary organisations in their hundreds, others sought to tackle the multitude of problems threatening to swamp their increasingly dislocated and traumatised communities.

## **1970s**

In response to community need, small community groups began to emerge and do what they could to ameliorate the worst effects of the daily conflict. The needs of the displaced were catered for as much as was possible; children were taken away from troubled areas on brief holidays; and action was demanded on the poor social conditions (Northern Ireland then had some of the worst working-class housing conditions in Western Europe). And all this was largely accomplished ‘hand to mouth’, as funding was nonexistent. Occasionally, money was supplied by a small number of local benefactors or international organisations.

Some of the community-driven initiatives were remarkably successful, such as the ‘Save the Shankill’ campaign which, for the first time, forced government agencies to take on board the concerns of local people. Other community efforts assumed a radical form: co-ops were established to provide food on a non-profit basis; there was an attempt to start a people’s banking system; there were efforts to create new forms of participatory democracy. But these radical initiatives usually floundered under the impact of the ongoing violence: people’s minds were concentrated on more life-threatening issues.

The Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission, which had been set up under the chairmanship of Dr Maurice Hayes, and which sought to employ a community development strategy to deal with the increasing levels of inter-communal violence and disaffection between government and governed, was closed down by the short-lived power-sharing Assembly of 1974.

## **1980s**

As people began to realise their strength 'community activism' began to burgeon, and soon hundreds of community projects, groups and initiatives were springing up everywhere: from poverty campaigns to radical theatre groups. The 'community sector', which had been largely driven by voluntary effort, began to receive major funding support from government. On the one hand this helped to consolidate the efforts being made, but on the other it created divisions between volunteers and those now getting paid for doing the same work. Furthermore, the need to conform to agendas set down by the funding bodies, and that fact that some of the funding was channelled through 'respectable' agencies such as the churches, gradually saw the demise of most radical grassroots initiatives. Nevertheless, community work had definitely moved from its initial 'fire-fighting' phase into one of consolidation.

Government set up the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, but, unlike the Community Relations Commission of 1969-1974, the emphasis was now on reconciliation rather than community development, an emphasis shared with the majority of local and external funding bodies.

## **1990s**

The next stage after consolidation was regeneration, and community organisations now, for the first time, lifted their gaze and began to look to the future. Much of the positive and productive work done at a grassroots level fed into, and helped to consolidate, the growing 'peace process'. However, there were still many problems. For example, increasing professionalisation of community work was seen as a bonus to some but a handicap to others: local people who had worked tirelessly for their communities often could not take up the jobs which began to appear due to lack of the required qualifications.

Victims' self-help groups also began to, at last, meet some of the personal and social needs of those who had suffered the loss of loved ones; in the 1970s and even into the 1980s victims' needs had gone largely unsupported, even unacknowledged. Cross-border work also began to build up a remarkable momentum, and found a surprisingly receptive response among Protestant/Loyalist working-class communities.

## **2000s**

In the 1990s a major investment had been made in Northern Ireland by the EU through its 'peace funding'. While this greatly assisted much of the work which took place, at the same time it created a massive dependency on external funding support. The current reality is that much of the community sector has become so reliant on such funding that its eventual withdrawal is going to have a major and adverse impact on current and future community efforts, with unpredictable consequences.

Increasingly, people from other conflict areas around the world – particularly community activists – have begun to visit Northern Ireland to both learn from local experiences and to share their own. Many important links have been established with international organisations.

---

# Ainsworth Community Association

---

The story of Ainsworth Community Association encapsulates the emergence and consolidation of grassroots community work in the wake of the 'Troubles'. In the face of the traumatic events many organs of government proved incapable of responding adequately to the needs of local communities and it was left to ordinary citizens in the areas most affected to develop their own responses and strategies.

At the very beginning of the Troubles most local energies were put into vigilante groups: people erected barricades at the end of their streets as a form of defence against the 'other' community. These barricades were manned nightly until the early hours of the morning. Many of the vigilantes progressed into the ranks of the emerging paramilitary organisations. Others, however, realised that the survival of their communities needed something far more constructive.

However, just as State agencies had failed in their initial response to the Troubles, few in government or the professions seemed to know how to deal with the complexity of problems which were now emerging. In the absence of any real creative thinking emanating from these quarters it was left to the communities themselves to come up with solutions. In the Ainsworth area, as Louis West, one of the vigilantes, recalled:

Myself, Ralf Hazel, Jack Harris, Tommy Aiken, Robbie Grub and a few others started meeting in Jackie Hewitt's house, trying to come up with ideas. We decided that we would try and open a community centre. But how to raise funds for that? We decided that we could do a collection and put a leaflet round the doors, for ten weeks, and everybody was allocated an area to do this collection.

And in their urgency to put constructive things in place in their community, they began to realise that to get things moving it was no longer any use writing a begging letter to someone in authority and pleading, 'Can we do such and such?' No, it was a case of ringing someone up and saying, 'Look, our community needs such and such, and we *intend* to do... whatever.' As Jackie Hewitt recalled:

I remember that certain officials were dragging their feet with regard to our desire to develop our community centre on Ainsworth Avenue. And we desperately felt we needed a community centre; we thought that it was absolutely essential to everything that we were hoping to do. So we threatened to get a portacabin and stick it in the middle of Ceylon Street – and suddenly things started to move, people started talking seriously to us.

In those days, of course, the work that was done at a grassroots level was oblivious of concepts such as 'capacity building', or even 'community development'. In the early 1970s community groups were focused on what was happening at the bottom of their own streets. However, the workers at Ainsworth saw the almost nightly interface confrontations, mostly involving young people, not necessarily as a product of the

sectarian conflict but as an outlet for the boredom and alienation felt by those young people. The workers felt that something had to be done about that; there needed to be somewhere for the young people to go, something to occupy them, to keep them off the streets. And so, Ainsworth Community Centre soon boasted a pre-school playgroup, two snooker tables and a boxing club.

As well as working to improve the wellbeing of the local community, the centre also tried to provide entertainment to lift people's spirits, for in those days people couldn't really travel too far outside their own area for such things. Ainsworth brought some well-known entertainment into the Woodvale, including acts such as Roly Daniels, George Hamilton IV, and Frankie McBride and the Polka Dots.

As Ainsworth got more and more involved in local community issues, they soon began to liaise with other groups trying to tackle similar problems. More significantly, they began to meet people who were working on a 'cross-community' basis. Joe Camplisson, for example, was running a community development office on the Antrim Road, and he and the people associated with that office, such as Jim McCorry, began to have an influence on what Ainsworth was doing. As Hewitt remarked:

We began to see a wider picture, and we began to associate with people from the 'other' community. And, really, that seemed a very natural thing to do – although you were always worried in case you would end up getting your windows broke because you were talking to Catholics. Even if all you were doing was getting pensioners together you could face difficulties, because at that time many people were hesitant to be seen working cross-community.

Hewitt also noted:

By this time we were also getting away from the notion that to attain peace all you had to do was release a couple of doves into the air, shake hands with each other in church, and so on... that wasn't really what was going to resolve the problem. We needed to find jobs for our young people, we needed to work for real change in people's everyday lives. And in the process we gained more expertise in community development-type work. And these things were being brought about by our own community-based efforts – the politicians couldn't deliver this; and, anyway, their main concern was to marginalise us.

Area-based community endeavour had progressed to cross-community contacts; the next stage was cross-border engagement. As Hewitt recalled:

In recent years people could easily get involved in cross-border work because it was readily funded under the Peace programme. But Ainsworth's first involvement in cross-border work came about because of quite different circumstances. There had been a bomb in Dublin, and obviously the people in Dublin felt a mixture of reactions, including a deep anger. But some busmen in Raheny, all trade unionists, met together and decided that *their* reaction would be to form a friendship group. Through their representative Mick Nelson we began this relationship with the Dublin busmen, linking in also with Glencree, and Father John Carroll in Strokestown, Roscommon. And we started to take

kids back and forth on camping trips and things like that. And to us the real value in all this was that it didn't happen because money was there from a 'peace programme' to do it; it came about because people *wanted* it to happen and they went out and they got the money to make it happen.

Such exchanges were not without problems. One particularly traumatic experience [*described more fully in Island Pamphlet No. 86*] occurred when the father of two of the children was murdered by the IRA and the holiday had to be abandoned and the children brought home. As Hewitt recalled:

That was a terrible experience. I mean, here's two kids from the Woodvale: we had taken them down South and their father is shot dead by the IRA. And what do you do now? Do you continue with cross-community work, with cross-border work? Those were the questions we faced. That was just one experience, but those were the situations that Louis West, Tommy Aiken and myself had to deal with and then decide what we were going to do about them.

While relationships with progressive individuals within the leadership of the Loyalist paramilitary organisations – people such as Andy Tyrie – were positive, some elements within the rank and file were not always so supportive. As Louis West recalled:

There was constant harassment from some paramilitaries. They once robbed Ainsworth, took everything out of it – even the salt-sellers! The paramilitaries also wanted to use Ainsworth to make money. We kept them out to the extent that we told them if they were caught using the place we would probably lose our grant from the City Council. They wanted to use it every month for selling drink or having a cabaret, because their own club wasn't as big as ours. [But there were also more personal threats.] One night my place was petrol-bombed and I had to jump over the flames! I can't prove it, but I could nearly bet that it was local paramilitaries behind it. I wasn't the only one under pressure, of course. Jackie Hewitt had his windows put in one time.

Despite all these pressures, Ainsworth Community Centre eventually became an integral part of the local community. It was used as a distribution centre during the period when EEC stocks of meat, butter and cheese got too high and community organisations were allowed to distribute it cheaply. It was also used a depot to which the local community could bring money, food and clothing to be sent to people in Eastern Europe, or the victims of the earthquake in Armenia. And during the period of the Ulster Workers Council strike (1974) it was in operation 24 hours a day; local people even slept in the Centre because they had no heat in their homes.

The work done at Ainsworth was eventually complemented by the setting up of a Youth Training project, and, when the ACE (Action for Community Employment) scheme was brought in by government, the development of Farset Youth and Community Development Project. Farset was just one of many innovative community projects which can trace its roots to the energies first harnessed by Ainsworth Community Association.



---

## Farset Youth & Community Development Project

---

Farset Youth & Community Development Project originated in 1982 under the management of community activist Jackie Hewitt. Funded under the auspices of the Youth Training Programme, it focused on the needs of young people in the Ainsworth area of Belfast's Shankill Road. As it grew, it moved to premises on the Springmartin Road, on the West Belfast Protestant/Catholic interface. There it found an ideal opportunity to display its imaginative way of responding to community needs. On derelict 'no-man's-land' between Protestant and Catholic estates, Farset created a **City Farm**, introducing an assortment of farm animals into the lives of local children, as well as training young people in horticultural and animal husbandry skills. Encouragingly, the City Farm, throughout the period of its existence, drew its visitors, its workers and its supporters from both sides of the communal 'divide'.

Farset then came under the auspices of the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme and its continued growth – it eventually employed some 250 people – necessitated another move. In 1985 a new site was identified on the Springfield Road, once again directly straddling the 'interface' between Protestant and Catholic working-class estates. In the 1970s this area had not only been deemed to be among the most socially disadvantaged in Europe, but had been described as Western Europe's "most dangerous conflict point". In reality, the new 'site' was a derelict building standing amid waste-ground, and many were the words of caution and predictions of failure voiced. But for Farset's management and staff, such a location seemed quite appropriate. If Farset's purpose was to enhance the quality of life for local communities, to increase job opportunities for young people, and to make a contribution to confronting the sectarian divide . . . then what better place to be?

The energies nurtured by Farset led to the initiation of numerous projects, with one project often leading directly to another. For example, during Farset's **Youth Exchange Scheme** with France, a group of young people from Belfast and Dublin displayed a great interest while visiting the graves of the many Ulstermen and Irishmen who had died at the Battle of the Somme. Out of this interest grew the **Farset Somme Project**, which did much to counter prevailing misconceptions by revealing that the sacrifice made during the Great War was a *shared* one, involving Protestant and Catholic alike. Teams from Farset undertook the renovation of Ulster's war memorial at the Somme – the Ulster Tower – erected in 1921, but lying locked up and disused. Other employees compiled an extensive **computer database** of all Irish casualties in the War, and a **Visitor's Interpretative Centre** was constructed adjoining the Tower.

The Somme Project also enabled Farset to fulfil one of its founding ambitions: to initiate projects which could become self-sustaining. Out of the Somme Project grew the **Somme Association** which now employs over 40 people, and is behind the widely-acclaimed **Somme Heritage Centre** at Conlig in County Down.

The skills of those involved with Farset's **Mural Department** also became much in demand at community centres, hospitals, leisure centres and other venues throughout Belfast. The mural team was part of Farset's **Community Arts Department** which also provided creative art and photographic services of the highest standards.

Many community organisations, unable to afford to have a video made of their work – whether to promote their objectives or for fund-raising purposes – were greatly assisted by Farset's **Audio-Visual Department**, which made over 80 such videos.

Such innovative projects not only helped to improve the quality of life for local communities, but enhanced the self-esteem and employability of the ACE workers, many of whom left Farset with certificates of competence and often examples of their work. These were vital commodities as they continued the search for employment.

Farset's **Training Department** constantly monitored the ACE workers' progress. Each employee was assessed and a 'training needs analysis' prepared, geared to helping them develop existing skills and acquire new ones. Training was provided 'in-house' and Farset became an accredited RSA centre, offering CLAIT, DTP, IBTZ, and other courses such as NEBSM, Audio-Visual and Media Techniques.

Farset's **Environmental Team** greatly enhanced local communities, paying particular attention to the needs of the elderly and infirm. Environmental squads engaged in building and joinery, painting and decorating, gardening, graffiti removal, as well as general labouring. While the Environmental Team attended to the material needs of vulnerable groups in the population, their social and personal needs were not neglected, with **Community Care** in the form of home visitations being offered.

Farset's **Computer Department** was involved in transferring to computer 380,000 burial certificates from Belfast City Cemetery, creating a database which is proving to be of invaluable assistance to the Irish genealogy industry. In the process, the ACE workers also received accredited computer training.

The **Research Department**, which involved archive research and the gathering of oral history, underpinned Farset's belief that a proper understanding of the past could make an important contribution to the future.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, an ambitious **East European Aid** project brought much-needed help to areas of Eastern Europe where civil conflict had drastically affected people's lives.

One of Farset's most successful initiatives has been **Farset Enterprise Park**, set up in 1989 to assist former employees and local people start their own businesses. The proprietors are drawn from all traditions; indeed, some businesses are partnerships of people from both Nationalist and Unionist backgrounds.

When Farset first set up in its Springfield Road site, the surrounding area was an economic 'black-spot'. Not only did Farset become the landmark project of the area but new developments also took place all around: Farset Enterprise Park; Springvale Business Park; and now **Farset International Hostel**. Without question, Farset has been the foremost pioneer in the regeneration of the area.

When government finally ended the ACE programme, Farset's workforce was decimated and ultimately reduced to its current core staff, with a primary focus now

on **Farset International Hostel** and on building exchanges between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, (through the **Farset/Inishowen & Border Counties Project**). Farset also continues to support a number of important reconciliation and conflict resolution initiatives, such as **Farset Community Think Tanks Project** (see page 35) and **MICOM** (see pages 24-26).

Through the voluntary input of its Board of Directors Farset has been fortunate in having a wide and impressive range of skills placed at its disposal. Directors, management, staff and workers together ensure that Farset will never stand still; it will be constantly engaged in developing purposeful and innovative ways of meeting community needs.

---

## **Farset International Hostel**

---

The idea for a purpose-built hostel was first mooted in the 1980s during exchange visits, organised by Farset Youth & Community Development Project, between young people from Belfast and their peers from other European cities. Mainly as a result of the political unrest, youth accommodation in Belfast left much to be desired, and contrasted sharply with the excellent accommodation on offer to the young people from Belfast on their European visits. As Belfast began its slow return to peace and normality in the 1990s, the idea of establishing a hostel was resurrected and driven by Farset's manager, Jackie Hewitt. He was supported throughout the process by Farset's chairman, Rev Roy Magee, and president, Barney McCaughey.

They identified the potential upturn in the depressed Northern Ireland tourism industry and the need for quality conferencing, banqueting and overnight accommodation at affordable prices. It was also recognised that after many years of the 'Troubles', West Belfast's reputation had created a curiosity factor for large numbers of potential visitors who would be interested in cultural tours to see the famous Belfast murals and learn about the Northern Ireland conflict. After identifying a suitable site Jackie and his Farset directors began to explore the feasibility of building a hostel using local labour.

The initial plan was to build the facility through the Action for Community Enterprise (ACE) scheme, a government-sponsored work/training programme. However, this scheme was abandoned, as a result of a change in government policy, before any construction had commenced. Added to this, potential funders, including the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and government departments, were not convinced of the need or the potential success of a hostel facility located in the upper Springfield Road, an interface area of Belfast which had borne the brunt of decades of political upheaval and inter-communal conflict.

Undeterred, the organisers pushed forward with their plans for the hostel project, in the hope that it would bring jobs and revitalisation to an area which had become synonymous with violence and division. This self-assurance had been forged from their experience of initiating numerous social and economic regeneration projects during the worst period of civil unrest.

The hostel project received a real boost and encouragement when the International Fund for Ireland agreed to commit substantial funds to the venture, subject to approval and support by government in the form of an economic appraisal. But this appraisal process dragged on for many months with a huge amount of work put in by Farsset directors, most of it on a voluntary basis. Eventually, it became clear that the group's endeavours were being frustrated as they found themselves pushed 'from pillar to post' and burdened with the sheer weight of bureaucracy involved in the process. Indeed, the organisers felt that some government officials were actually opposed to their plans for a flagship social economy project, as they were being forced through so many hoops. To add insult to injury, the local further and higher education institution pulled out of its commitment to the project at the last minute. They had indicated an interest in becoming an integral part of the initiative, training unemployed people for the growing catering industry.

These negative developments left board members reeling and gave ammunition to the cynics. Eventually, the patience of Farsset directors ran out and a letter was sent to funders and supporters informing them that all plans had been shelved. This caused shock-waves within the public and political sectors and two local politicians met with the disillusioned Farsset board and encouraged them to persevere. A meeting was convened attended by various government officials and a deal was hammered out which gave the green light to fund the project.

After many years of frustration **Farsset International** finally opened its doors for business in 2003. The project costs of £2.25 million were met by a cocktail of funding from IFI, the Department of Social Department, Belfast European Partnership Board, as well as a loan from Ulster Community Investment Trust. To date Farsset International, which is more of a budget hotel than a hostel, has been a major success, defying the critics and cynics as its reputation as a quality location continues to grow. The average occupancy rate since the official opening has exceeded 60%, which is a remarkable achievement considering the venture had been established in untried territory.

Patrons come from across the island of Ireland and international visitors have been flocking to the venue which offers *en suite* twin rooms with TV and tea and coffee-making facilities. There is also a residents' lounge, a self-catering kitchen, laundry and secure parking. A restaurant and bistro not only serves food for guests but caters for large and small on-site conferences. At one such conference in 2005, US Senator George Mitchell paid tribute to the excellent facility and the role it plays in cross-community and cross-border events. Indeed, the hosting of local and international peace-building programmes has been an important aspect in the growth of the facility as a neutral and safe venue.

---

## Springhill Community House

---

Just across the ‘interface’ from the community workers in Ainsworth and Farset, their counterparts within the Catholic working-class communities had been just as active in creating grassroots-based projects. One of the most innovative was Springhill Community House, the house itself being the residence of radical priest Fr Desmond Wilson. Fr Wilson had spent 15 years teaching young people in St Malachy’s College, but felt that much of that education would be wasted, because the young people, once they left school, would ditch most of it. He felt that what was needed was a programme of *continuing education right throughout life*, which would help people to develop.

He was not alone in such views, for a belief in community-based education gained ground in the 1960s. This movement also coincided with the advent of the Troubles, when the normal institutions of society had been found wanting, and many believed there was an urgent need to analyse that failure and develop more adequate alternatives.

A group of people around Fr Wilson decided that one thing they could do was to provide people with an empty space in which they could determine their *own* programmes of education. And so, at the beginning of the 1970s, they experimented by having a house in the Springhill area of Ballymurphy open to the public, with nothing on offer except an empty room. Yet that empty room soon became a place where people came and discussed what *they* wanted to learn.

When community groups began to emerge in greater numbers throughout the 1970s, local people began to take a direct interest in different aspects of their lives –politics, planning, policing, etc. Their efforts were often met by hostility from those in the professions; the people who were in charge of such things were resentful that ‘ordinary’ people should be demanding an input. It was no different with education-based initiatives such as Springhill. Those who controlled education – whether in the educational establishment or within the Catholic Church –were resentful of people in Ballymurphy taking control of their own education. Likewise, the people who were in charge of resources withheld funding from the initiative and they had to survive on support from a few understanding and open-minded individuals.

Despite these obstacles the project continued to develop. University lecturers were invited to come in, on an unpaid basis, and hold classes and discussion groups. There was a similar engagement with people from the Arts Council. Representatives from all the political parties were invited to come and argue their case. As Fr Wilson recalls:

One of the first things that people did was to invite *every* political party to come and talk to them, and every one of the parties said ‘yes’. The DUP had reservations about coming into Ballymurphy, but they readily agreed to meet us elsewhere – I think it was in the Ulster People’s College. Interestingly, however, the people who most consistently refused to come were from our own Church. Even for just ordinary discussions. That was a terribly demoralising thing for people.

A few public enquires were held, and, eventually, formal classes in ‘O’ and ‘A’-levels, because some people wanted those. But what seemed to be most important was the *informal* approach to education, by which people decided what *they* wanted to talk about and *who* they wanted to hear. The everyday concerns of people were also catered for, and people came into Springhill Community House and held creative discussions around those concerns, trying to determine possible remedies for them.

When Springhill Community House started up, its focus had been on adults, not on young people. But one day a couple of parents came along to say that their children had been expelled from school. At that time it was very easy to expel children; there seemed to be a particular desire on the part of certain schools to focus on ‘academic achievers’, and if any of the pupils coming from the ‘lower orders’ showed behaviour which didn’t fit in, then they were expelled. Anyway, these youngsters came with their parents, and asked for help. Other than assisting the parents to obtain legal advice, there was little Springhill could offer to these young people – apart from that empty space. But the young people wanted to avail themselves of that, and when their numbers grew, Springhill finally advertised for a teacher –but explained that there was no money to pay them! The project was very fortunate to obtain the services of an American, Pat Daly, and soon a vibrant alternative education facility developed.

Springhill provided the space –just a couple of rooms in the house – and the books and the light and the heat, and Pat Daly supplied the teaching. It was basic English and Mathematics, but also whatever the pupils showed any interest in wanting to learn. Daly had the idea that if they wanted to learn something that he didn’t know anything about, well then, they learned it together – which proved to be a sound educational approach. After Pat Daly’s departure Springhill Community House was very fortunate in having a succession of excellent individuals who acted as tutors.

There were those in the education system who very much resented what Springhill was doing. One of the teachers in St Mary’s College referred to projects such as theirs as the ‘dubious alternatives’, a term which, in turn, the project now began to use with some pride. Also, schools resented the publicity which was being focused on the ease with which children could be expelled. There was also the fear that if people took charge of their own education there would be chaos: as Fr Wilson commented: ‘People in the professions are always afraid of chaos.’ The education establishment tried to freeze the project out. They even tried to claim that what Springhill was doing was against the law. But the freezing out didn’t succeed, and, in Fr Wilson’s opinion, the initiative was a successful one:

I think the whole experience of Springhill was a positive one. For example, there was one girl in particular who had been very difficult and really disrupted things. But she eventually turned into a completely different person, and came back and helped us in the House. In fact, the number of young ones who came back, either as visitors or to actually help us, is a fair indication, I think, of their positive experience. We saw youngsters coming in here and they would sit with their heads down, yet after a short period those youngsters would be standing up straight and looking as if they really had a new sense of self-confidence.

Many of the individuals behind Springhill Community House were also instrumental in the development of Conway Mill Education Project on the Falls Road, which took the concept of community-driven education to a much higher level. It fared even worse from those in the establishment; indeed, there was a strenuous campaign mounted against it. From the TV programme *The Cook Report* to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, numerous efforts to destroy Conway Mill as a community-driven initiative were made. As Fr Wilson noted:

Basically they were afraid of people taking control. Even if Springhill Community House and Conway Mill Education Project had been extremely conservative there would still, I believe, have been that resentment because the ‘wrong people’ were in control.

The efforts to freeze-out the two initiatives prevented them from receiving government money to develop their work, and they relied to a great extent on the likes of the Rowntree Trust, or on donations from sympathisers around the world who believed that the work which was being done was necessary and purposeful.

But, ultimately, as Fr Wilson points out, the two projects were all about creating opportunities not only for learning, but for meaningful dialogue and debate:

At that time, local communities were engaged in more creative conversation than they were ever given credit for. We discussed a variety of options: from Ulster Independence to a United Ireland. There was a range of conversations going on, at a time when we were being told by government propaganda that ‘these people are unable to talk to each other and we must go in there to keep them apart and do the talking for them.’ Rubbish! Community groups were communicating with each other practically all the time.

The fact of the matter was that if we wanted to talk to UDA people we rang them up on the phone and arranged something. Springhill and Conway Mill always provided an open invitation for people of all backgrounds to come and talk. The government wasn’t providing that type of meeting space, but community groups were. Government was afraid of such talking, and that is why there was such a concerted campaign by certain people to outlaw Conway Mill, and to make sure such dangerous dialogue didn’t occur.

Sheila Chillingworth, from the Education & Library Board, told me that people down there were once talking about the kind of experiments taking place in education, such as in Springhill and Conway Mill. And a lot of it *was* indeed experiment: people would say – we’ll try something and see if it works. Anyway, at this particular meeting the idea of people coming into a house in a council estate and holding their seminars there really bugged them. ‘But how do they all pay for this?’ someone asked. (Actually, a lot of the tutors gave their services free.) Someone said, ‘Apparently, they put round a hat.’ And there was a roar of laughter. But, as Sheila Chillingworth pointed out to them, ‘You may laugh, but it works.’

---

## Springfield Inter-Community Development Project

---

In 1988 the committee of Ainsworth Community Centre began to re-evaluate the effectiveness of the cross-community work it had been engaged in for almost twenty years. That work had largely consisted of taking young people and adults out of the area, where they were provided with the opportunity to meet with others from across the 'peaceline'. However, despite a genuine commitment to the work, the benefits were hard to quantify. While it was obvious that cross-community friendships were being made, it was also only too obvious that the peaceline was growing longer and larger and tensions between the communities were increasing rather than being ameliorated.

Concern at these increasing tensions along the 'interface' between the two communities was further compounded by the growing unemployment within the broader Protestant working-class community which Ainsworth serviced. Alongside this, the area was suffering the effects of housing blight brought on by redevelopment. There was clearly a need for a radically new approach which would address the *totality* of problems facing the community.

The committee was also well aware that the community on the other side of the peaceline was also experiencing the same problems. Accordingly, Community Development was adopted as a strategy, aimed at taking both communities towards social and economic reconstruction and the resolution of violent conflict.

Simultaneously, other people working in the community on various projects had also recognised the need for a new approach, and their ideas were shared and discussed with those involved in the Ainsworth initiative. As these discussions proceeded it was agreed to apply for funding to allow for the implementation of a broad community development approach, with the aim of complementing the work done by existing community groups in both communities.

When Billy Hutchinson –who had been working in the Shankill Activity Centre on behalf of Farset –suggested the establishment of a Standing Conference, bringing together community groups working on both sides of the interface, it was decided to make this concept the pivotal component of the new initiative.

With the support of Joe Camplisson, who also provided consultancy and training, an application was made to the International Fund for Ireland in 1988 and resources were secured in Spring 1990 to employ a project director to:

1. Co-ordinate the inter-communal activity currently undertaken by Ainsworth Community Association in partnership with other community groups.
2. Devise and direct a programme which helped implement the new Community Development strategy.
3. Research the totality of problems which affected the quality of life for all sections of the community.
4. Make recommendations with respect to those research findings.



The post was duly advertised, and Billy Hutchinson, because of his obvious enthusiasm for the task, was appointed in July 1990. The initiative was to be called the Springfield Inter-Community Development Project (SICDP).

It should be pointed out that when Billy, a Loyalist ex-prisoner, embarked upon his initial discussions with groups on both sides of the Interface, the violence was continuing unabated and to move between the two communities carried its own risks. His efforts were later shared by Tommy Gorman, an IRA ex-prisoner, and both of them set about their task with a clear commitment.

However, underpinning the whole effort was the deeply-felt belief by everyone concerned that the two communities *could* work together for the betterment of all. It was believed that if the process succeeded in developing it contained more potential to improve the quality of life for both working-class communities along the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Road interface than anything undertaken by the political parties and government agencies.

The first Standing Conference, involving 80 community activists from both sides of the Shankill/Falls/Springfield Road interface, was held in October 1992 and, despite the tensions which surfaced, proved to be a landmark event. In collaboration with Michael Hall of Island Publications a booklet describing the conference was distributed around the community network. A reviewer in *Books Ireland* commented:

There is no attempt [in this publication] to disguise the disturbing aspects of the conference or the eruption of emotive issues, which reminds the reader this was not just an academic debate but was concerned with real issues which affected and divided two communities of real people.

This collaboration with Island Publications also saw the setting up of ‘Think Tanks’, which brought community activists and others into small-group discussions which were in turn summarised in booklet form and widely disseminated. At first these Think Tanks were ‘single-identity’ in composition, but eventually, as SICDP had hoped, joint Think Tanks were eventually convened.

While the convening of an annual Standing Conference had to be put on hold, partly due to the ongoing political situation, SICDP forged ahead as one of the most dynamic and innovative community-based organisations working on the West Belfast interface. Its remit constantly broadened to include work on the problems faced by diverse groups of people, including young people, women and ex-prisoners. Inter-community cultural initiatives were undertaken and, of course, the prevailing socio-economic conditions confronting working-class communities along the interface became a prime focus of their energies. SICDP initiated the first all-Belfast Community Economic Conference, in an effort to draw attention to, and seek remedies for, socio-economic needs.

A Community Leadership programme was established, which provided training for local community groups and community activists. This effort to create a pool of local expertise in interface community development work was to become a mainstay of SICDP’s work.

This brief overview cannot do justice to the work undertaken by SICDP in the course of its twenty years of community engagement. Needless to say, however, the project has maintained its influential position within grassroots community development work.

SICDP, under the leadership of Roisín McGlone, was renamed **Inter-Action Belfast** in 2002 as an acknowledgement that its work and influence was impacting far beyond its local setting. The 2008–11 strategic plan stated as its aims:

- Promoting participation in reconciliation, communication, information and empowerment
- Building trust and exploring diversity
- Developing communities across the interface and highlighting community needs
- Community safety and the resolution of contentious issues
- Sustainability of Inter-Action Belfast

Within this remit, Inter-Action Belfast acts as not only an ‘umbrella agency’, providing assistance and acting as a funding conduit to over 40 local community organisations, but also runs a number of specific projects including:

**A Cross-Border Women’s Project** which brings together mainly women on a cross-border and cross-community basis. They work on pertinent issues through a training course entitled ‘Paving the way to reconciliation.’ This draws on their personal experience to develop and enhance their life skills. The second stage of the course is at present training women in community leadership and activism.

**A Peace and Reconciliation Development Project** which aims to develop a shared vision for interface regeneration. It employs two workers from nationalist and unionist backgrounds who together manage a **Mobile Phone Network** and the **Springfield Intercommunity Forum**. The network was originally set up to co-ordinate a controlled response to inter-communal rioting through grassroots knowledge and communication. The Forum began life as cautious and tense meetings between the activists involved, but through the building of strong interpersonal relationships has expanded to become instrumental in facilitating dialogue which in recent years has seen a dramatic reduction in community tensions. It has now moved on to tackling social problems and local regeneration issues on a cross-community basis.

More recently the project undertook a task which initially was fraught with great risk to the organisation but proved to have been farsighted. It grew out of the deadlock over parading which had resulted in the worst interface rioting seen in years. Dialogue was at a standstill due to the refusal of the community to engage with the police and the lack of understanding between police and the community. Along with initiating communication to resolve conflict between the local protagonists, Inter-Action Belfast opened a channel of communication to the PSNI in West Belfast which eventually involved senior commanders in developing a new approach to community policing.

---

## Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project

---

Before the Troubles, Suffolk, although a mixed area, was largely Protestant, separated from the rest of Belfast by numerous Catholic housing estates. The area then defined as Suffolk spread out north and south of the Stewartstown Road, with most Protestants residing on the southern side (the area to which the term Suffolk has since been restricted), but a fair proportion residing on the northern side (now referred to as Lenadoon), where they lived side by side with their Catholic neighbours. The actual setting, at the very edge of Belfast, was hard to better, for it was surrounded by green fields, with a sense of freedom and space not possible in public-sector housing closer to the city centre.

1969 saw the advent of the 'Troubles' and escalating inter-communal violence in different parts of Northern Ireland, which ranged from stone-throwing at houses belonging to the 'other' community, to the expulsion of families from certain areas of inner-city Belfast. And then in the 1970s the violence progressed to bombings and shootings, and tit-for-tat murders kept communities in a state of constant fear. Inter-communal tensions produced inter-communal violence and gradually, from fear or direct intimidation, the Protestants living on the northern side of the Stewartstown Road moved to the southern side, their former houses now taken over by Catholic families likewise escaping intimidation and expulsion from other parts of Belfast.

The Stewartstown Road eventually became established as yet another of Belfast's notorious sectarian 'interfaces'. On either side of this new interface residents tried to re-establish the basics of life. It was a difficult task, made worse by the ongoing violence and compounded by the fact that many people were living in houses damaged either as a result of the conflict or by former occupants bitter at being forced to vacate their homes. The Stewartstown Road reflected the division: it was desolate, derelict and unwelcoming.

Given the trauma of the Troubles it was understandable that cross-community contacts were slow to develop. Indeed, most people in both communities wanted nothing to do with the 'other' side. Nevertheless, some individuals in both communities realised that the communal divide was a real barrier to any hope of improving their areas. In the small Protestant enclave of Suffolk in particular residents were constantly leaving, their houses were lying empty and the estate was in terminal decline.

Some of the early cross-community contacts were kept secret, because such contacts carried great personal risk. However, one issue seemed to be sufficiently 'non-political' to allow people to unite: the lack of traffic lights on the Stewartstown Road. A joint campaign on this issue yielded an unexpected success and the preparedness to engage with the 'other' community increased, if only marginally. These productive cross-community efforts encouraged those who believed that joint work could promote positive changes in the area, and more substantial ideas began to emerge. Talk was

now of major regeneration, which would benefit both communities. But these tentative steps were still in their infancy when the area, like other parts of Northern Ireland, was engulfed in the continuing fall-out from the Drumcree conflict.

In July 1995, the police in the town of Portadown were involved in a stand-off with local Orangemen after the latter were prevented from marching from Drumcree church along the Garvaghy Road (formerly a 'traditional route' before demographic changes meant that the road now went past a Catholic housing estate). A compromise agreement with local residents eventually allowed the marchers through. The following year the Orangemen were again prohibited from marching and a more serious stand-off resulted. Three days of Loyalist rioting across Northern Ireland led the RUC to reverse their decision, and they forced the marchers through against the opposition of the residents. Days of rioting then ensued in Nationalist areas. In July 1997, the Orangemen were again escorted down the Garvaghy Road, after 300 Nationalist protesters had been forcibly removed, an action which sparked off severe rioting in many Catholic areas, including Lenadoon.

Indeed, the Suffolk-Lenadoon area suffered the worst violence it had ever experienced. Two hundred British Army soldiers were positioned along the Stewartstown Road interface and thousands came from Lenadoon and further afield to attack them. And although the Catholic community asserted that their targets were the soldiers, Suffolk estate was bombarded with hundreds of petrol bombs.

It looked like the end for any cross-community links. Yet, despite these events, and despite the risks involved, individuals on both sides agreed to keep trying. A mobile phone network was established in 1998 to cope with the now-annual Drumcree violence; this allowed each side to keep in touch and allay rumours emanating from the 'other' side, for it was often rumours which precipitated violence. And when this time Drumcree situation was handled successfully – unlike in other parts of Northern Ireland which saw extensive violence, including the murder of three children – it confirmed the benefits of joint work across the interface.

This joint work resulted in the formation of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group, a sign of growing confidence. But the impetus behind the group's most ambitious venture was provided when the Housing Executive decided that it was going to demolish a number of the buildings on the front of the Stewartstown Road. A radical initiative now began to take shape. A company would be formed: the **Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project**. Its management board would have four directors from Lenadoon Community Forum, four from Suffolk Community Forum, and four independent directors would be brought in because of their individual expertise. The Company's aim would be to build a two-storey block of shops and offices – replacing some of the derelict property then standing on the Stewartstown Road – the shops being on the ground floor, for which a commercial rent would be charged. On the upper floor one wing of the building would provide office space for local community projects and initiatives (which would be charged a community rent), while the other wing would be available to statutory and other organisations able to pay the commercial rate. As long as the company didn't go bankrupt or get into debt, any profit would be

divided into three parts. One third would be given to Lenadoon Community Forum – to fund projects or services within Lenadoon – another third would be given to Suffolk Community Forum – who would do likewise within Suffolk – while the final third would be retained by the Company to continue to develop its needs. Or course, this final shape did not materialise overnight, but was the product of months of intensive discussions.

Having agreed on what they were about, it was now time for the members of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group to sell the idea to their respective communities. This was a daunting task, but to their surprise, and to the credit of people in both communities, public meetings –despite being ‘hot and heavy’ and full of loudly-voiced misgivings – finally gave the workers the go-ahead to proceed.

Having obtained the endorsement of both communities, an entirely different challenge now lay ahead: the procurement of funding. It had been realised from the outset that if the project had been limited to only one side of the interface, then no funder would have shown much interest in it. However, the fact that this proposed enterprise was owned by *both* communities and would help to turn part of a violence-prone, sectarian interface into a ‘shared space’ was surely something which would have appeal.

The search for backers began well. The International Fund for Ireland was prepared to put up half the money and the Housing Executive gave them the land. Approaches were now made to government – in the form of the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) – for the other half of the money. However, this proved more than problematic. As one worker commented: ‘The civil servants gave us constant hassle, putting us through endless hoops and obstacles. They openly called our initiative a “white elephant” and questioned its viability.’ As the group members successfully responded to each obstacle, it was only to find that more obstacles were placed in their way. Finally BRO reluctantly came on board and funding for a first phase was agreed.

The initiative soon began to prove its worth and was able to assist community groups on both sides of the interface. The project then developed plans to move into a second phase, in which it was hoped to incorporate a 50-place child-care facility, two more shops and more office space. After some initial difficulties, funding was eventually secured to enable this second phase to proceed.

Atlantic Philanthropies provided funding for a joint peace-building plan. Today the initiative has gone from strength to strength and is lauded across Northern Ireland not only as an example of how two deeply-polarised communities can ultimately work together, but how local communities can take responsibility for the creative regeneration of their own areas.

---

## The Early Years Project

---

In 1993, a number of community workers in the Shankill Road area of Belfast, Jackie Redpath, Jackie Hewitt and May Blood among them, sat down to develop a strategy which would try and project their vision for the Shankill 15 years into the future, not simply for the following 12 months, which had been the norm in community work planning given the ever-present uncertainty regarding funding, not to mention the ongoing political instability. The outcome was the 'Shankill Strategy Report', which would attempt to take forward the development of the Shankill through a number of key areas, including education.

Simultaneously, members of the Shankill Women's Forum had come to the conclusion that they needed to focus on the *earliest years* of a child's life. While it was certainly important to improve primary and secondary education provision, they felt that the very *stimulus to learn* could either be encouraged or hindered before children even reached nursery age. Furthermore, those workers involved in community development realised that it was pointless to attract inward investment into their communities if there was no local workforce equipped with the necessary skills. The problem was that within the Protestant community the value placed on educational attainment was extremely low. Yet without an education there could be no qualifications, hence no job prospects. It was a self-defeating cycle which was blocking any real chance of meaningful economic regeneration within the community.

And so 'early years intervention' gradually developed as a concept. By coincidence, Maureen Dunwoody, who worked for N&W Social Services Trust, was running a programme in the area around health issues, and part of this involved the training of local women who would visit people in their own homes to discuss family health matters. This approach – of training local workers to take a 'message' directly into the home – seemed an ideal method of delivering what the Shankill women now wanted to accomplish with their 'early years provision'.

They put a few tentative ideas together and engaged others in the discussion, one of whom had just returned from a visit to Europe where he had heard of the funding programme URBAN I, open to any European city with over 100,000 inhabitants and with pockets of deprivation. They decided to submit an application for an 'Early Years Project', through which they would endeavour to work with all local children from the day they were born; indeed, they would offer the service to young parents even *before* their children were born.

The application was successful and the Early Years programme was established. Maureen Dunwoody became its first manager and May Blood became Information Officer. Out of the £6.5m they received they planned to establish three family centres, employ 90 people, both Protestant and Catholic, and provide a sizeable training element for the workers themselves, and also the parents. To ensure that the jobs would be

accessible to all local people they decided that the ‘job descriptions’ would not stipulate *any* skills – except for administration jobs where a certain amount of typing and computer knowledge was required. But for the ‘Home Visiting’, which was the vast bulk of the work, applicants only had to be a parent; that was the sole qualification required. They were, in fact, challenged by someone who said: ‘You’re discriminating against me, because I’m not a parent, and yet I raised my brothers and sisters.’ So, they changed the advert to read: “...to be a parent or possess parenting skills.”

The new workers were inducted 16 at a time, each batch receiving 10 weeks’ intensive training: starting with the very basics, such as what they actually did when first setting foot inside someone’s house, and including issues of confidentiality – for the workers, being local people themselves, were often known by those they were visiting, and this threw up a number of problems. But this was all worked through in the training and the ongoing support once they went out to do the actual work. Alongside the project’s own training, the workers were permitted, and indeed encouraged, to undertake any other training which was deemed relevant. For instance, some people went to Queen’s University, others took NVQs, at all levels, in various aspects of child-related work. Many of those who went through the project came out very well qualified and this helped them gain employment in a wide range of jobs.

The project, once it was fully operational, employed 90 workers, the bulk of whom were Home Visitors. A small flyer was produced, which was left in doctors’ surgeries, the local library and other venues, explaining what the project was all about – and people then self-referred into the programme, requesting that a Home Visitor come and see them to discuss their needs. The Home Visitor might encounter a range of problems and it was their task to offer advice on these. Some problems, such as debt, might require that the worker refer the family to a consumer advice body. With other problems, such as mental health issues, the referral might be to an appropriate professional. But with everyday problems of living, such as coping with the children or just feeling isolated, the Home Visitor tried to encourage each family – usually the mother and child (or children) – to attend one of the three family centres, not only because meeting other parents could help counter the feeling of isolation, but because while they were there they would be exposed to the different education programmes being run, which dealt with everything from cooking to health issues. The Home Visitors were not educationalists, their task was simply to try and encourage an awareness of the importance of education, especially in the early years of a child’s life.

There was a lot of research done on the initiative. For example, it was evaluated by Queen’s University, who worked with the project for four years. Queen’s ultimately came out with a very positive report, saying that it was the best use they had seen of such funding, and highlighting how positive the project’s impact had been for the long-term regeneration of the local community.

For the length of the three-year funded period the Early Years Project more than fulfilled its expectations. Now that the funding period has ended, the project still operates, but in a smaller capacity.

---

## MICOM

---

As a result of his efforts to counter the inter-communal violence which erupted in 1969, Joe Camplisson became the first fieldworker appointed by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission, set up under Dr Maurice Hayes. Through his training with the Commission Camplisson learned that community development was something which could not only assist local communities address real needs through self-help action, but could be an instrument of necessary systemic change.

The Commission brought in John Burton, a conflict resolution specialist, known for his 'Basic Human Needs Theory'. Camplisson was impressed by Burton's approach: in particular, when he introduced an Official IRA leader and some of his associates into a 'problem-solving' process, examining their own and their enemy's positions. This process helped reveal that: the conflict they and their adversaries were engaged in had an identity-related dimension; adherence to the military option was a self-defeating strategy; they had a problem to be solved rather than an enemy to be destroyed. Burton believed that *assisted analysis*, the quintessential element in this problem-solving process, could bring adversaries to a 'win-win' outcome which would satisfy their respective identity needs.

When the world was alerted to the plight of Romanian orphans – following the downfall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 – Ainsworth Community Centre was one of many community venues inundated with offers of material assistance from local people, but the workers there knew that sending only money and material was not always the most appropriate response. A community-based specialist team, of which Camplisson was a part, was sent to Romania to investigate community needs on the ground.

While in Romania Camplisson received a request to facilitate a similar self-assessment of needs in neighbouring Moldova, which in August 1991 had declared its independence from the Soviet Union and was experiencing identity-related tensions between its Romanian-speaking majority and the non-Romanian-speaking minorities, who were ethnically Slavs. Camplisson's arrival in Moldova coincided with the outbreak of hostilities between Moldovan government forces and militias from a breakaway region to the east of the River Dniester – Transnistria.

Camplisson saw at first hand many of the acute problems which had either arisen from, or had been exacerbated by, the conflict. To facilitate an analysis of these problems he helped to organise a conference, involving 60 participants, in the neutral venue of Nitra, in the former Czechoslovakia. At this stage he was concerned with assisting in the development of effective self-help socio-economic processes and infrastructures, with only minor attention given to either the causes of the conflict or its resolution. The conflict, however, could not be ignored, and he was soon receiving requests to do what he could to help bring about peace. His efforts to initiate a conflict resolution process met with support at all levels of leadership: from army and militia



commanders right up to the Moldovan leader, President Snegur, and the new leader of the breakaway Transdnistria, President Smirnov.

Two distinct but complementary strands were now emerging. A second conference at Nitra consolidated the community development work which was engaging people at the grassroots on both sides of the conflict interface. Secondly, the community development strategy was now also aimed at conflict resolution, in a process which had the involvement of the political leaderships.

In 1992 a ceasefire had been negotiated and international peacekeeping troops deployed to monitor it. When the OSCE set up a peace mission the Moldovan and Transdnistrian authorities established 'Expert Groups' who would represent the two sides in OSCE mediated negotiations. It was agreed that these Expert Groups would also engage with Camplisson. He realised that a conflict resolution process engaging the political leaderships would require a different approach from that used at Nitra:

For those at the grassroots struggling to survive from day to day you endeavour to help them address their needs in ways which bring them into productive relationships with perceived adversaries. This was the purpose behind the Nitra-type conference/workshops. For the political leaders, however, you are *not* concerned with building interpersonal relationships between the opposing leaders –this is to be avoided. As the political leaders are the only ones with authority to resolve the conflict, you want to *hold them* to a representation of the extreme positions as they bring their constituencies towards a 'win-win' outcome.

It was now that Camplisson recalled the lessons he had learned from John Burton's conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland:

One of Burton's ideas I was drawn to was that of getting people into a situation where, with the help of a third party, they could judge whether or not what they were doing was self-defeating. There was no point in *me* telling them that, they had to be placed in a position where they could set out their objectives, evaluate their strategy for achieving those objectives, and then determine *for themselves* whether this strategy was taking them towards those objectives or taking them further away. Furthermore, Burton's theory holds that people can only satisfy their *own* needs by recognising that the needs of the enemy have also to be met, and that *they* too have something to say in satisfying the needs of their enemy.

To harness support for his work, Camplisson and a number of his closest associates established MICOM (Moldovan Initiative Committee of Management).

The small group of individuals – drawn equally from Moldova and Transdnistria – who had come together to assist in the organisation of the Nitra conferences formed themselves into the Joint Committee for Democratisation and Conciliation (JCDC). And while the political leaderships were being engaged in the separate, but complementary, conflict resolution process, the JCDC were facilitating community development initiatives in cities, towns and villages. In order to assist the growth and strengthening of the JCDC, Camplisson brought them to Belfast in 1995 to engage in

a comparative study with individuals and groups working with similar problems in Northern Ireland. Of most significance to the JCDC was the realisation that community groups in Northern Ireland were able to work together on a wide variety of issues *irrespective* of whether their society's conflict was on its way to resolution or not, and that in such co-operation there was no requirement that people in either community need abandon or dilute their deepest aspirations.

In late 1995, Camplisson found that the governmental Expert Groups were locked in an impasse and that the OSCE could not inveigle them to re-enter dialogue. He realised that this was symptomatic of a deeper problem, namely that the *roots of the conflict* were not being fundamentally addressed. As long as these deep antagonisms remained unresolved, any mediated negotiations, with the expectation upon both sides to make progress, only served to threaten them, forcing them to retreat.

I appreciated that they had the responsibility to find constitutional arrangements which would allow them to function and survive – and this is what the OSCE was facilitating in its mediation process. MICOM's role, however, was different – it was to help them, through *assisted analysis*, to deal with the complexities of the *underlying* conflict between them, and their role within that conflict. Hence, I suggested that they needed new insights into how to deal with their conflict and invited them to Belfast to examine the Northern Ireland conflict.

Both sides agreed and a visit to Belfast took place in 1996. The visit helped to confirm to the governmental delegations the counter-productive nature of violence. It also served to reveal that although the process of conflict resolution – as undertaken by MICOM – and the process of mediated negotiations – as undertaken by the OSCE – could frustrate one another, they *could also* be made compatible.

Furthermore, Camplisson knew that it was important to show that the community-based strand of the process was complementary to the strand engaging the political leaderships, hence the governmental delegations were accompanied by members of the JCDC. All parties were later brought together at four seminars held at Albena, Bulgaria, which not only helped to advance the conflict resolution process but the self-help efforts ongoing at grassroots level. The seminars also impacted in a practical manner on the security situation on the ground, with the ending of a seven-year curfew. At all the seminars representatives were present from different levels of leadership within Northern Irish society: community, local government and party political.

Although the ceasefire still holds, the OSCE process of negotiation remains in place but is 'frozen'. The two governments have been unable to enter fully into MICOM's conflict resolution process, partly because of Russian influences over which they have no control. Nevertheless, at both governmental and community level the willingness to engage with MICOM and the JCDC in a range of activities embracing all levels of leadership still remains, as does the belief that a return to war is not an option and a 'win-win' outcome is the most desirable goal.

The CD/CR process in Moldova has proven of interest to a group of Israelis and Palestinians who are currently seeking ways of utilising it in their own conflict.

---

## Drogheda Cross-Border Focus

---

Sean Collins had grown up beside the River Boyne, little knowing the crucial part it would play in his efforts to facilitate reconciliation between communities north and south of the Irish border.

Initially I couldn't fully comprehend the divisions which existed in Northern Ireland, for I had grown up in an environment where you didn't think about Catholics and Protestants: you played with your neighbour on the street and never wanted to know whether he was a Catholic or Protestant or Muslim or Jew. As the Troubles escalated, I became only too aware of the role history had played in both creating and sustaining those divisions –including the history of the Battle of the Boyne, 1690, which held such significance for the Unionist community of Northern Ireland. Then it was suggested to me that many Northern Protestants might want to visit the battle site, especially in the run up to the Tercentenary celebrations, and that there might be a role for someone local to talk to them about that period in their history. And so I began an intensive study of the history of the whole Boyne area, hoping that, if called upon to perform such a role, I could at least give a more balanced presentation than the one which then prevailed.

I was indeed asked to perform such a role, and, starting around 1981, groups began to come down to Drogheda for a tour of the Boyne. Sadly, because of the conditions at the time – this was well ahead of the Good Friday Agreement – people were reluctant to say who they were and I regret that I don't have a record of those groups, because they simply wouldn't tell you. But I do remember having some wonderful lunches on the banks of the Boyne.

And from then on there was a constant flow of groups coming down, and I was also asked to go to Northern Ireland and give a lecture or two on the Battle. Then in 2000 I was elected mayor of Drogheda and decided to use my office as much as I could to promote the whole notion of peace between all our peoples.

One of my contacts in Northern Ireland was Bob Armstrong from Newtownabbey, who had brought members of his historical society down. Bob knew Fraser Agnew, who in turn suggested I meet the board of the Farset project in Belfast. And so I met with Jackie Hewitt and others. They asked if I was prepared to work with them and provide communities with the opportunity to know each other better. I readily agreed, for that was something I had always believed in.

The chairman of one of the earliest groups which came down said that while it was marvellous to be on the Boyne, he felt regret that there were hundreds of people in his own town who would love to come to the Boyne but would be afraid. And I found it hard to take that people would be afraid to come to Drogheda. I was determined that there should be an open door, and Farset provided a vehicle through which people could come down, and when they came to the Boyne they knew that Ide [Lenihan] and myself would be there to welcome them.

It's a funny thing, the stereotypes that people have. Even now people will ask

me what type of a town Drogheda was during the thirty years of the Troubles: was it pro-Provo, was it pro-Republican? I always tell them that it was a town like any other in the South, just trying to survive, and where no particular political party had any big following, least of all one connected to paramilitaries. But that was the image up North, and all the time we were trying to break down those stereotypes. And even today people in Drogheda regularly stop me in the street and ask, 'Are you still meeting the people from the North?' And when I reply that we are they will say, 'That's great. Please keep doing that; that's what is needed. People need to have their hands out in welcome for everyone who comes down here.' And that's what we have tried to do.

Sean Collins then came into contact with East Belfast community worker, George Newell, who had a similar passion for history. George's belief that a balanced presentation of history could promote understanding led him to establish Ballymacarrett Arts & Cultural Society. As Collins noted:

In 2002, now calling ourselves Drogheda Cross-Border Focus, we decided to work in collaboration with George in East Belfast. The two organisations put in for funding for an extensive cross-border project which would use history as a tool for creating better understanding between our communities. We called the programme PATCH: Political Awareness Through Citizenship and History. It lasts for forty weeks, and the participants look at all aspects of their local history, and the history of the island. We believe that the PATCH programme has not only engendered a far better understanding of our history –as well as demolishing a lot of the myths and rubbish with which people's minds had been filled for far too long – but it has allowed genuine and lasting friendships to grow. And as long as the funding is there to support our work we will certainly continue to do it.

Another stalwart of Drogheda Cross-Border Focus is Ide Lenihan, who first got engaged in cross-border work when she lived in Galway.

When the Troubles first erupted in Northern Ireland, the government of the Republic felt they needed to have a contingency plan to cope with the anticipated flood of refugees fleeing south. I was then in the Civil Defence, and we were tasked with putting this plan together. It was decided that we couldn't let people gather all along the border, so they were to be moved to Limerick, Galway, Cork, etc. Now, the expected flood of refugees didn't actually materialise; we just got one big crowd who we sent down to Galway. But, subsequently, we decided to set up the Green Cross, and in those days –I suppose because we didn't know any better – we only worked with the Catholic side, which was mostly in Ardoyne.

Then I came to live in Drogheda and met Sean and began to assist in the work he was doing. When I first got involved with the Northern Protestant groups who were visiting the Boyne two things struck me. Firstly, women in particular always wanted to fill plastic bottles with Boyne water to bring home, and my initial thought was: 'Mother of God, that dirty river, you wouldn't want to do that!' And then I said to myself: hold on a minute, I go to Lourdes as a Catholic and do the same, so what's the difference? So you were rationalising everything. But the second thing

was that I found their misperceptions of the people of the South to be absolutely extraordinary. It was so negative, and I put that down to the way their politicians had wound them up. But, again, I had to look at that too, for what *we* were told about the Northerners was also much of the same, and *we* believed it.

History is always written by winners, never by the losers. And in Northern Ireland there was next to nothing taught about Irish history, and in the South our history stopped at 1916 – and we knew nothing beyond that. I visited the Somme recently with a group and there was one man there – a former leading Loyalist – and he was very angry about how he had been duped over the years, and was only now finding out the real facts for himself, especially about the people in the South. This type of new understanding can only come from communities engaging with one another, and that is why this work is so essential.

I am hopeful that there has been enough work done that you won't cod the people again, on either side. At the end of the day we all have similar problems, especially with regard to our families given the new downturn in the economy. I reckoned we have come a long way since I first started in cross-border work: we can now talk to each other, we can respect each other's positions. That can only be done by communities, it will not be done by government, or legislation. We have broken those barriers.

Sean Collins noted that cross-border contacts could be made at many different levels.

We have focused on encouraging Northern groups to become involved with Southern ones, on different aspects, in any area we could. For example, we hosted a dinner one night for Drogheda and Linfield football supporters – we brought them together to talk and have a meal. We have done the same with bandsmen from North and South. We have built up some amazing links, whether through our association with Ballymacarrett or Farset.

In 2000 I also revived the cenotaph in Drogheda, which is the memorial to the men killed in the Great War. The ceremony hadn't been held for thirty years and I decided that I would revive it. To be honest, I didn't know what the ceremony was all about. There was no British Legion left in Drogheda, so I rang up a man I knew in the British Legion in Whiteabbey, John Dumigan, and asked him to explain to me what was involved. And he said he would come down and show me. And for that first commemoration he brought down 17 of his members, in their uniforms and their colours; and now about 100 of them come every year. We hold it on a Saturday so that they don't have to rush back to do their own one, and hundreds of local people come, as well as representatives of the different churches. We invited people whose relatives were named on the cenotaph to come – there were 400 names, and maybe 350 of their families are still living in Drogheda. Most of them turned out, and that was great to see. We also found that there are lots of people from Dublin and other parts of Ireland who had heard about our ceremony and had served in the British Army themselves, some of them alongside the ones from Northern Ireland, and they began to use the occasion to meet up again and renew old friendships. And that too has been great to see.

Ide Lenihan revealed just how extensive some of the contacts can be.

I work with a group from Derry who are involved with exploring the Ulster-Scots heritage. We visited the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, and Chesapeake Bay where many of the immigrants from the North of Ireland landed and settled. Now, we also run a programme in conjunction with people from Newtownabbey and when I mentioned the Ulster-Scots project to them they were eager to participate in that also. So we all went out to the Shenandoah Valley together –from Newtownabbey and Drogheda –and looked at the history of why people didn't stay in the North and what made them emigrate and so on. We learned an awful lot.

There is another project which Sean set up in Derry years ago – where we look at St Columbcille's legacy in Ireland and his journey to Iona in Scotland. We took a group up along the west of Scotland, and will be returning with another group very soon. And all those connections are being made all the time, with different people. If we get funding we will continue to explore this shared history.

Our funding is nil at present. We only get programme costs and core salaries whenever a programme is going on, but when it finishes we all go back to being voluntary workers. We are fortunate in that a group we helped at one stage have managed to obtain their own offices, and they let us have rent-free office space. It's a place where we can also hold meetings.

Sean Collins added one last anecdote which revealed how easily misperceptions arise and how, just as easily, they can be overturned.

One time an Orange lodge from Portadown rang me up and said that they wanted to visit the Boyne. The local police assumed that because they were from Portadown their visit would be seen as contentious locally, because of the Garvaghy Road stand-off and all that. And so, the place was surrounded by about 40 Gardai and plainclothes detectives. They set up roadblocks and closed off the area, meaning that people who lived in the area had to make long detours. And the Portadown ones came down, marched in their uniforms into a field at the Boyne, played a few tunes, went back to their buses and away they went. Now, there wasn't as much as a cross word said to them by anyone. So we went to see the police Superintendent afterwards and put it to him that the next time there was a group, if he did feel there was a need for security, would he not just put two fellas in a car a mile down the road out of the way. And he did that and there has never been any trouble.

We are determined to continue to keep these cross-border links going. As long as there is Farset and Ballymacarrett and Inishowen and ourselves there will be people to do it. Our problem, apart from not having regular funding, is that we cannot always facilitate the numbers of people who want to participate. There is a great eagerness there now for these links. And, more importantly, many ordinary people from North and South have now reached out to each other as friends, and some of them don't even need us to bring them together now –they have made their own contacts and go up and down to see one another independently –for weddings and such like, or just for the socialising. That proves to me that it has all been worth it and that it must continue.

---

## **Inishowen Partnership (youth and cross-border)**

---

Inishowen Partnership, employing over 20 workers, has made a significant impact on local development in the Inishowen Peninsula, Co. Donegal, since it was established in 1996. Its work falls into three main categories: Services for the Unemployed and Training, Community Development and Education, and Youth and Education Initiatives. It is the latter aspect which will be looked at here, for the Youth Officer, P J Hallinan, has also widely engaged in cross-border work, something he was doing prior to joining the Partnership.

I had been involved with people in the boxing world across the whole of Ireland, but particularly Northern Ireland. I represented Donegal on the Ulster Council of the Irish Boxing Association and was vice-president of the Council for 13 years. During this period I was in every part of Ulster, and visited Belfast regularly. In those years I was a member of the Garda Síochána and I suppose I was a legitimate target to both sides, but I can honestly say that I never felt threatened in any way. I saw a side to people, particularly in Northern Ireland, that others might not have had the opportunity to see. I saw them as good, honest people, who were committed and dedicated to the sport of boxing. And there was no divide there –politics or religion never entered into it; we always had a great respect for each other.

During my time in the Guards I was Juvenile Liaison Officer, and my job was looking after young people who got into trouble with the law, trying to keep them out of courts and prisons and onto the straight and narrow, as well as get support services for them. In 1997 I retired from the Garda Síochána and I took up the post of Youth Development Officer with the Inishowen Partnership. Part of my job was to set up youth provision, training for youth leaders, and increase the opportunities for young people in Inishowen. I was in the job about two years when I became involved with an organisation called Border Horizons, which was responsible for the Wider Horizons programmes in the northwest, and that organisation was chaired up by Glen Barr, Paddy Doherty and Peter Dunne. Ultimately I became vice-chairman. But I got a phone call from Glennie one day telling me there was an organisation on the Shankill in Belfast called Farset, and that its manager, Jackie Hewitt, would like to meet with me, in relation to cross-border work.

So I met up with the guys from Farset and quickly decided that we would see what we could do together. We got initial funding from Cooperation Ireland, for three years. Our role was to facilitate groups or organisations from both sides of the border meeting up with one another. The scheme took off and I can safely say that, over the three-year period, somewhere in the region of 40,000 people have engaged with each other through the programme.

Through his association with Glen Barr he got involved with a remarkable project centred in Messines, Belgium. In 1998 former Loyalist politician Glen Barr and Southern TD Paddy Harte had launched the 'Island of Ireland Peace Park' there. Its

purpose was to commemorate all those individuals from Ireland, from whatever tradition, who fought in the Great War. To complement the Peace Park and extend its purpose, an International School for Peace Studies was established in 2000 in collaboration with local people.

Glennie had invited me to go out to Belgium to see the programme they had going on out there, and that experience had a huge impact on me. As a consequence, we set up 'Foyle Training Towards Reconciliation' which was a programme based on World War I, and which engaged people from all backgrounds and traditions: Nationalists, Unionists, Catholics and Protestants. Basically the realities of World War I are used as a tool for reconciliation, for bringing people together, for looking at the sacrifice made by people from both traditions, those who enlisted in the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions and the 36th (Ulster) Division.

It's a five-day programme. As well as visiting the main battle sites in the Somme area – including the Ulster Tower at Thiepval and the Irish Cross at Guillemont – and the sites around Messines, the participants engage in numerous group activities. Basically: we walk, we talk, we socialise. The programme has reached out ever more widely and engaged with communities and community leaders and with young people. An amazing amount of people have been brought out to Belgium to undertake the programme.

I can safely say that the things which have happened during those programmes, the barriers which have been broken down, the relationships which have been developed, the understanding ... have been remarkable. And we make it clear to the participants that we are not there to convert Catholics into Protestants, or Protestants into Catholics, or Nationalists into Unionists... The major focus is on education. I myself am still on a learning curve. We are not there to change people, we are there to give them an opportunity to explore and make up their own minds.

Basically, to quote the words of Willie McArthur when he was chairman of the International Fund for Ireland: 'We don't have to love each other, we don't even have to like each other, but we certainly have to respect each other.' And it is this mutual respect that is central to the whole thing, in a real and meaningful way – there is no tokenism involved.

A lot of young people – in mixed groups, North/South, Protestant/Catholic – have gone to Belgium and have had a great experience. It has provided them with an opportunity to meet one another, talk to one another and listen to each other. And many ex-combatants – both Loyalists and Republicans – have been with us and have played pivotal roles out there. They have engaged with the young people and have made a huge contribution to putting them right on a whole lot of stuff.

And I suppose one outcome of the experience is the acceptance that glorifying war and glorying conflict is a futile exercise. In particular, the old mantra of needing to die for Ireland is fundamentally challenged. What we are trying to get the young people to see is that rather than *dying* for Ireland, it is better that they *live* for Ireland and make it a better place for everybody, North, South, East, West, Catholic, Protestant, Nationalist, Unionist.

The challenge now arose: how could the impact of this programme be brought home



to Ireland itself? One way was through an initiative located at Dunree Military Fort, overlooking Lough Swilly, a few miles north of Buncrana.

It was my personal experience in Belgium and France which was central to the setting up of the Inishowen Friends of Messines, the core task of which is to remember those men and women from all parts of Ireland, but particularly from Inishowen, who were killed in World War I and had been forgotten about. And for the last four years now we have brought people to Dunree Fort for an act of remembrance. And these people have come from East Belfast, the Shankill, the Waterside, the Bogside... you name it... from all over Ireland. Last year the Connaught Rangers came up from Co. Roscommon.

Central to the commemoration is that we read out the names of all the men and women from Inishowen who we know lost their lives during the war –we have identified some 249 names – and we get someone from each of the respective parishes, preferably a family member, to read them out. And we have had a lot of encouragement over the years – and not one dissenting voice.

And there were other aspects of history which began to be explored.

I was annoyed that I myself knew so little about my own history. So it is highly beneficial to focus on local history. We took two busloads onto the Shankill where they received a warm welcome. And when they were given a talk by some Loyalists everyone was surprised at how balanced the presentation was. Those Loyalists didn't apportion blame in any one direction, and to me that was very positive. We also took our group to the Falls Road. And to the Somme Heritage Centre –and they have done a great job there, it's very well delivered. We also took groups to the Boyne where Sean Collins gave them a fascinating talk. So there is a lot of local history under our noses which can be used as a learning tool as well.

We went on a tour of Derry, its Walls and the Bogside, given by Sean Feenan from the Ebrington Centre. We did the AOH, the Apprentice Boys... the lot. And the balance was there and the slants were looked at on both sides. It was a heavy day and would need to be revisited, but when you have balance you can let people make up their own minds. We did the American Folk Park, and it was amazing.

P J Hallinan is a firm believer in the value of cross-border engagement.

Cross-border work has the potential to change this island for the better. I have long believed that the only people who will ever solve the problems of Northern Ireland are the people of Northern Ireland themselves, the 'ordinary' people. And it's about building a capacity and a confidence in those people, so that they can come forward and go forward. And they need support in their efforts, they need resources, and regrettably with the ending of Peace II those resources are diminishing.

And although I believe that things are now going in the right direction, there needs to be even more engagement and above all more dialogue. Dialogue is central to the whole process and good understanding will come from it. I think there has been a lot of dialogue taking place over the years and I have to applaud those people who put their necks on the line, irrespective of what side they come from, and have worked at it consistently and surmounted so many obstacles. Those people

deserve to be given the chance to complete the job that needs to be done.

All the cross-community and cross-border engagement has succeeded in changing the whole atmosphere. I believe that the days of the dissidents are numbered. The people of Ireland have spoken, and they have made it very clear that they want a peaceful existence and they want natural, normal living for their communities and especially for their children. We do not have to endure what we had to endure for thirty years, and the challenge is to see what has been learned from the conflict, and whether enough people have learned not to repeat the mistakes of the past. And whether we now have the confidence to seriously address the divisive issues of the past and go forward. I have no doubt that we do.

In the process of dialogue and engagement there's a huge amount of common ground appearing: on the need for better education, better housing, better standards of living, employment... all those basic things. And I have seen people from both sides of the interface work together as best they can, even through difficult times.

I also believe that we have got to work at our culture and our history, and we have got to work at them for the right reasons. For if we do that, then they will be instrumental in helping us go forward. No more beating the old drum or shouting the slogans – that day has gone. The central thing to it all is trust, and the willingness to work together for a better future, and that is not impossible.

As a consequence of all these cross-border activities people from Northern Ireland, particularly those from the Protestant community who were once so suspicious of anything and everything across the border, are now beginning to appreciate that they have real friends in the Republic of Ireland. Similarly, people in the Republic have begun to realise that those people in Northern Ireland, who have been subject to conflict for so long, are really long-lost family of theirs. A few years ago, during the period when violence erupted on the Shankill Road, there were genuine concerns expressed here in Inishowen that wouldn't have been there before. People were coming to me and saying: 'P J; are our people all right up there? Can we do anything for them. Sure they can come down here until it's over.' Now, that would never have happened before; before they would have said: 'Ack, it's that crowd up there at it again.'

As this pamphlet goes to print the new 'power-sharing' Executive at Stormont hasn't met for some months as a result of the stalemate which has arisen between Sinn Féin and the DUP. The tragedy is that after all the hard work people at a grassroots level, north and south, put in to ensure that the 'peace process' was developed and sustained, the community sector is more under-resourced and sidelined than ever. On this, PJHallinan made a final comment:

The challenge for our different communities is to ensure that the politicians are doing their job, that they are looking after the needs of the people. There needs to be dialogue between the communities and the political parties, there needs to be a forum where the politicians can be reminded not only of people's everyday needs, but of their hopes and fears. However, knowing what politicians are like, our communities must at the same time also develop the capacity to look after their *own* needs. People can exert more control over their everyday lives than they realise.

---

## **Farset Community Think Tanks Project**

---

Michael Hall, involved in community activities since 1968, had long felt that the rich diversity of ideas and opinions he was hearing daily at a grassroots level – much of it at variance with the stereotypical views presented by the media – needed to be heard more widely. He also believed that there was an urgent need for an acceptable vehicle through which people could be encouraged to engage in debate and dialogue. One means was by getting people from both sides of the so-called ‘divide’ into direct face-to-face small-group discussions. In March 1988, he endeavoured to gather together a number of community activists (along with a prominent UDA leader) into what he termed a ‘Cross-Community Think Tank’ but the adverse political situation prevented the initiative from coming to fruition. He next decided to try and stimulate debate through the medium of booklets, and in 1992 began preparatory work on a series of publications (initially these were history-oriented) which would be published under the imprint of ‘Island Pamphlets’. Then, in December 1993, while in conversation with Billy Hutchinson of SICDP, the Think Tank idea (which Billy had also been considering) was resurrected, and he and SICDP collaborated on a number of increasingly influential ‘Think Tank’ pamphlets. For the next five years output was sporadic because funding was piecemeal.

Then, in late 1998, core funding was obtained under the EU Peace Programme and, with the administrative support of Farset, with whom Hall had had a long association, the volume of work took off. Between 1998 and 2005, operating as the Farset Community Think Tanks Project, he was able to facilitate a rich assortment of discussion groups, embracing young people, senior citizens, victims, ex-prisoners, community workers, Loyalists, Republicans, those with disabilities, women’s groups, community development practitioners, interface activists, cross-border workers... and many others. The geographical spread was equally diverse: Think Tanks were convened in the Shankill, the Falls, Ardoyne, Glenbryn, Short Strand, Ballymacarrett and other parts of Belfast, as well as in Derry and Strabane. Initially people engaged in their own locally-based Think Tanks, but eventually community groups expressed the desire to cross the sectarian divide and engage in joint Think Tanks.

Furthermore, the EU funding allowed for 2000 copies of each pamphlet title to be distributed free of charge to over 100 community groups with whom Hall had built up working relationships during three decades of community activism. To date, there have been 90 titles in the pamphlet series, containing within them over one and a quarter million words of oral testimony, and over 175,000 pamphlets have been widely distributed around the community network.

The pamphlets have also had an impact further afield; indeed, some titles have been distributed by Israeli and Palestinian peace activists on both sides of their conflict interface. Although the EU funding ceased three years ago the Think Tank Project is still heavily involved in grassroots efforts to engender debate and dialogue.

## ***Sources and further reading:***

### **Ainsworth Community Association**

This chapter was compiled from material contained in Island Pamphlet No. 72, *Grassroots leadership: Recollections by Jackie Hewitt and Jim McCorry*, and Island Pamphlet No.76, *Grassroots leadership: recollections by Louis West and Anne Gallagher*.

### **Farset Youth and Community Development Project**

This chapter was compiled from interviews with Jackie Hewitt and Barney McCaughey.

### **Farset International Hostel**

This chapter has been condensed from an article (written by Sammy Douglas, on behalf of East Belfast Partnership) which appeared on the website [www.makinggoodmoney.org](http://www.makinggoodmoney.org)

### **Springhill Community House**

This chapter was compiled from material contained in Island Pamphlet No. 71, *Grassroots leadership: recollections by Fr. Des Wilson and Tommy Gorman*.

### **Springfield Inter-Community Development Project (Inter-Action Belfast)**

The original Standing Conference organised by SICDP is described in Island Pamphlet No. I, *Life on the Interface*.

### **Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project**

A more detailed account of this project is given in Island Pamphlet No. 61, *Building Bridges at the Grassroots*.

### **The Early Years Project**

This chapter has been compiled from Baroness May Blood's autobiography, *Watch My Lips, I'm Speaking*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2007.

### **MICOM**

A concise overview of MICOM's work is given in Island Pamphlet No. 61, *The search for conflict resolution: lessons drawn from a community development strategy*. A much fuller account is given in the book, *From Conflict Containment to Resolution*, by Joe Camplisson and Michael Hall, Island Publications, Belfast, 2002.

### **Drogheda Cross-Border Focus**

This chapter was compiled from interviews with Sean Collins and Ide Lenihan.

### **Inishowen Partnership**

This chapter was compiled from an interview with P J Hallinan.

### **Farset Community Think Tanks Project**

Further background to the development of this project is provided in Island Pamphlet No.78, *Grassroots leadership: recollections by Michael Hall*.