



INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND

FundFocus

The newsletter of the International Fund for Ireland



Community Spirit

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Chairman's Introduction

The response by many local communities across Northern Ireland and the southern border counties (SBC) to the unprecedented and extraordinary challenges they have faced in the last few months cannot be commended highly enough. As we have watched the Covid-19 pandemic take over people's health and livelihoods we have witnessed interventions that prove just how resourceful and committed local people are to supporting their communities.

This edition of Fund Focus takes a closer look at some of the work carried out by our funded groups during this period and explores how we can build on this community cohesion as we move forward.

A newly restored NI Executive has come together and made difficult decisions almost on a daily basis, aimed at protecting those impacted by the pandemic. Local councils, statutory agencies, community groups and government have worked hard to design a range of initiatives and schemes aimed at protecting key sectors, industries and public services.

Many of the most vulnerable communities in NI and the SBC who have been struggling to survive have come together to support each other in a time of real need. IFI-funded groups have excelled during this period - putting traditional 'green and orange' barriers to one side to provide the support needed across communities. In many cases, the response to the pandemic has been a uniting force.

The International Fund for Ireland (Fund) has supported projects throughout the pandemic to ensure they are able to deliver much needed support. We recognised the need for flexibility in how groups delivered specific programmes and how they can plan long term to ensure the relationships they have built

both prior to and during Covid-19 are protected and have the chance to flourish.

You will read about a number of our funded groups who, faced with this significant challenge, took a leap of faith, believing they could overcome existing barriers and make a difference to vulnerable communities. In some cases, there has been a shift away from a focus on peace and reconciliation activities to more general community support as a response to the growing need during the pandemic. Examples of this include preparing food packages, delivering essential medicines, making PPE, offering support to those most vulnerable. We have seen innovations like ice cream vans repurposed to become shops selling essential items at no profit.

In February 2020 the Fund announced their round of funding, committing £492,654 (€544,781) to support six groups and continue outreach work with marginalised communities. The funding will help sustain engagement efforts across local communities, develop capacity and ensure support for all throughout the current health crisis and beyond. The package is distributed across the Fund's three core programmes (Peace Impact Programme, Peace Walls Programme and Personal Youth Development Programme) which all work with marginalised communities who have not previously or have only partially participated in peace and reconciliation activity.

In June 2020 the Fund approved, by written procedure, a further £181,064 (€200,222) to continue to support a number of Programmes in NI and SBC. These include; Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum, Edgarstown Residents Association, Fermanagh Sports and Cultural Awareness Association, Foróige Drogheda Turning Point and Maghera Cross Community Link.

As we move slowly out of lockdown the full impact of Covid-19 will become clearer and there is no doubt there will be lasting social and economic consequences. It is our concern that divisions could become apparent in the coming months as the debate around governments' responses to Covid-19 intensifies. We may see vulnerable communities more acutely affected, given the challenging economic landscape and fears over a resurgence in the pandemic.

The Fund is committed to continuing to play a key role in empowering communities and addressing the challenges we face together.

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

Paddy Harte
Chairman



Media Analysis

Rodney Edwards is Deputy Editor of The Impartial Reporter newspaper in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. He regularly leads on investigative journalism pieces such as breaking the silence around allegations of endemic child sexual abuse, which was shortlisted for an Amnesty Media Award earlier this year. He won 2019's regional journalist of the year at the Society of Editor's Regional Press Awards. Recently, his focus has been reporting on the wider impact of coronavirus in the local community:

I can still hear the cries of Tom Best whose wife Anne became the first victim to die from Covid-19 in Fermanagh, the most westerly constituency in the UK. Married for more than 50 years, Mr. Best could not be there when his wife died or when she was buried the next day.

Every death, every moment of this intense period in our history touched us.

We knew the nurse who had to hold the hand of the dying. We knew the doctor who went to work each day not knowing what he was

going to be met with. We knew the carer who bought her own personal protection equipment to tend to the sick, including members of our own families.

We knew the Best family, the couple who adored one another right up until the end. Each week we tried our hardest to stand up for those heroes and for people like 77-year-old Tom who needed us.

"Paying tribute in this way is all I have," he told me.

In addition to giving our readers a voice we launched a campaign to raise money to buy PPE for our healthcare heroes and raised over £10,000. We covered every #ClapForCarers event. We gave our readers fact-checked reporting, challenged the authorities, and highlighted the heroism.

It has been challenging for society, for our economy, for very many families in this border region, for our weekly newspaper, but we will get through this. And we will get through it together.

Dearbail McDonald lives in Howth, County Dublin and is an award winning journalist, author, broadcaster and motivational speaker. She is the former Group Business Editor of Independent News and Media and is a recipient of the Mary Cummins Award for Women of Outstanding Achievement in Media. She received an inaugural Dublin City University Special Alumni Achievement Award and is an Irish Tatler Media Woman of the Year.



Like many a great plot, my Covid-19 lockdown scheme – think of the proverbial caterpillar transformed into a butterfly - did not turn out as planned.

I had no intention of joining the ranks of the cocooned, relishing the freedom of key worker status afforded to my media colleagues and I.

But I soon found myself truly isolated, relying on friends and neighbours for everything, after a mindless fall that left me on crutches for almost a month.

But life is full of curveballs, even the ones we should have been prepared for i.e. a major global pandemic such as Covid-19. And, like you, I have tried to embrace the sheer vulnerability and uncertainty of it all as best as I can.

I have been humbled and awed by our frontline workers. I have wept for those who lost loved ones, who lost their jobs, their sense of hope.

Mistakes were made and will have to be accounted for. But I have been staggered at the ingenuity of governments, companies and communities, working together to implement

systems and solutions that were deemed impossible to achieve in ordinary peacetime. Now we know that they can.

I fought back tears at the weekly clap for carers and marveled at how our common humanity saw us rally to help stranger and friend alike, finally understanding the maxim that no one is safe until everyone is safe.

I also wondered, will it last?

No entity survives contact with Covid-19 unscathed; such is its awesome power and genius.

It has been fascinating to see how rapidly the political landscape is changing throughout the world as political leaders grapple with a common foe.

A global health crisis such as Covid-19 is an adversary that makes a mockery of borders, those on land and sea, as well as the borders in our minds.

Will Covid-19 see a new era of genuine power sharing (power caring?) in Northern Ireland?

Will civil war enmities be buried in the Republic

of Ireland to pave the way for a new form of government where common policies on major issues such as climate change take their rightful place?

And what of Brexit, which had occupied our hearts and minds until the coronavirus placed it, temporarily, into a ha'penny place?

Pandemics change history, society and culture, for both good and for ill. Covid-19 will be no exception.

As we emerge from our lockdowns, as the analgesics of emergency financial measures wear off, what do we leave behind and what do we take with us into what the French call Le Monde Après (the world after?).

There is no old normal or new normal. But there is a chance to further shake the chrysalis of the past and emerge from our cocoons with a renewed sense of community and compassion to get us through the inevitable hard yards.

Covid-19 showed us the best that we are capable of: a return to the old ways and attitudes that no longer serve us would be a tragic waste of this crisis.

CASE STUDY

Intercomm

The Intercomm project, based in Carrickfergus has been supported by the IFI for almost two years through its Peace Impact Programme. A predominantly Unionist town, Carrick in recent years has become the focus of internal paramilitary feuding and unrest.

The team have carved out considerable success through their outreach work in this period, building trust with communities, challenging attitudes and behaviours as well as negotiating the removal of threatening flags and murals in the town.

Covid-19 has shifted focus for the group and produced a new set of challenges according to Winston Irvine, who manages the project.

“The current health crisis has understandably caused a lot of fear, whether it’s through illness with the virus, financial implications or unemployment. People have been severely affected and mental health is another issue, which is dominant too. We are seeing a lot more dependency on alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism and a rise in referrals to key partners such as Extern, who we’ve been working with too.

“As more people struggle financially, some see this as an opportunity to exploit through money lending. Paramilitaries in the town are actively reaching out to the most vulnerable in society and with extortionate interest rates on these loans, there is a real fear that people will be forced to align themselves or join these criminal groups.”

Despite these unprecedented circumstances, there is a renewed sense of community spirit, leadership acting collectively for a shared goal.

In the early stages of the crisis, the group swiftly engaged with a range of key stakeholders from church leaders to the PSNI as well as local businesses and sporting organisations to form a community response system, which

has been delivering a range of services for around 4,000 people in the town.

Winston says: “Initially we created a traffic light system and delivered 5,000 leaflets to the most deprived homes in the area. Residents were encouraged to put either red, amber or green cards in their windows to alert our team on the level or nature of help required.

“Thanks to a collaborative approach we have secured funding from a number of other sources to help provide meals, food parcels and other household essentials. An Italian restaurant in the town called Castillo has for example prepared over 600 hot meals for those who need it most. Local football teams Carrick and Barn United have each undertaken creative fund raising efforts from baking to sporting challenges to help the local community. This has allowed 260 food parcels alongside 200 educational packs for children to be delivered to homes throughout the town.”

The project has been inundated with messages of gratitude and support and a significant number of people are now volunteering to ensure these efforts continue.

Differences have also been set aside by most but there are a number of underlying issues that could reignite old wounds and anti-social behaviour in the town, especially during the July holidays, which remain a traditional Loyalist celebration involving marching bands and bonfires.

“The community response has been humbling to say the least but against that backdrop we are in the background providing critical diplomacy. We have been working hard to broker

an agreement around paramilitary flags in the run up to the parading season.

“This has been a massive issue in the past but I am delighted to say that we have reached a suitable agreement with groups and flags will not be displayed this year.

“Brexit is another area of concern and there is a fear that post Covid-19 deeply divisive and political arguments could return and communities will regress into the age old green and orange divides.”

Intercomm hopes to continue to make progress with the fractured community in Carrickfergus in order to provide leadership and support in a post Coronavirus world.

He adds; “It is important that we are able to continue to deliver and offer opportunities for the people of the town. As we start to restructure the economy after this crisis, people will need to be signposted and given the necessary tools to enable employment opportunities. Mental health too will be another focus for us and we plan to explore how we can partner further with others to signpost and offer support.

“Change won’t come about quickly in our sensitive work but we are committed to develop relationships, challenge negative perceptions and harness the goodwill that has been created to bring about positive outcomes in the future for the town.”

ABOVE: The project team worked with a number of partners in the town throughout the pandemic to offer support.





CASE STUDY

Black Mountain Shared Space Project

New partnerships and a real sense of community are just some of the positives that have come out of the coronavirus pandemic in West Belfast, thanks to a swift response by Black Mountain Shared Space Project (BMSSP).

Since 2013, BMSSP has been funded through the IFI's Peace Walls Programme and it also secured funding in 2014 for work within the Peace Impact Programme. This year marks an important milestone for the group as they have been working with the local community for 11 years.

At the start of lockdown, the project moved quickly to collaborate with a number of other organisations in the Upper Springfield and Whiterock areas in an effort to help those in need.

Seamus Corr from BMSSP says: "There has been a tremendous amount of goodwill throughout the crisis, which has been encouraging to see. Early on we identified a system that basically allows us to cover every household in the area, with representatives working from street to street reaching out to residents.

"We encouraged people to contact us on an emergency number, which is open from 09:30 to 23:00 hrs daily and letters were also delivered to every household outlining the services that were available.

"Working alongside a number of partners including Upper Springfield Development Trust, Upper Springfield Youth Team, Good Morning West, local businesses and Gort na Móna GAC means we have been able to put a strong structure in place to deliver widespread support."

Street by street, house by house- no one has been left out of this community response. Hundreds of fresh food

and non-perishable food parcels have been given out through the Department for Communities funding and CFNI's coronavirus fund. Over 2,000 meals have also been prepared with residents even selecting their preferences from a weekly menu.

"There is a real sense of partnership across communities and we've had over 60 volunteers come together working collectively to respond to the need. Gort na Móna GAC has also essentially become a storage and distribution space for the street teams to come every Tuesday to collect food parcels for their designated areas.

"One couple in Gort na Móna are housebound - the wife is bed bound and her husband is in a wheelchair. Their carer had to self-isolate and one of our street reps rapped the door. We're now supplying them meals and it's taken the pressure off them and the carers. We received another call from a lady on the Shankill Road area who is partially blind and struggling in lockdown. Thanks to having the response system in place, she has been able to get food and support."

Traditional green and orange views have been set aside during the pandemic and the project has had to change the delivery of its engagement with residents with WhatsApp, phone calls and zoom meetings becoming the new normal for everyone.

"Whilst the heart of the community has never been stronger, we see that mental

health is a massive issue and will continue to be an area that needs resource and focus after Covid-19 – luckily we are able to signpost people who need support through our response team.

"There have been a few anti-social behaviour incidents in recent weeks but largely the attitude from both the Catholic and Protestant communities has been exemplar."

Looking ahead, Seamus believes that come November, people may revert back to hard-line views around Brexit and borders but communities here have been impacted by trauma and conflict too much for the good work to stop.

"As we move past the current health crisis, our work will concentrate on maintaining, strengthening and growing relationships both locally and with other projects across the border too.

"Irrespective of everything that has happened in the last few months, I am hopeful for peace building work to continue in the local area. We are also progressing with the transformation of the former Finlay's site into a shared community space bringing resources, a range of services and employment to West Belfast. It really will bring renewed hope to this part of the city."

ABOVE: BMSSP has worked with a number of other organisations to ensure that the most vulnerable in the community are receiving support throughout the crisis.

CASE STUDY

YESS

The Foróige YESS project has been supported by the IFI since 2016 through the Personal Youth Development Programme and currently works with young people from Sligo town

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many participants have experienced an increase in anxiety, loneliness, social isolation and mental health issues all stemming from the pandemic. Sadly, there has also been an increase in suicide rates within the community as many struggle to adjust to life in its current form.

Claire Gavigan is an Area Manager for The YESS project and believes that the tailored approach of the PYDP Programme has enabled the team to keep young people engaged: "Although we've had to adapt the delivery of our project to phone calls, WhatsApp, emails, video calls and social media, it has been important to maintain the strong relationships that were in place before the health crisis. 24 out of 28 have remained with us on their journey, which is really encouraging. We are always on hand to offer support and in cases of extreme vulnerability, we've delivered resilience and wellbeing packs to participants too."

Since March, participants have engaged with 36 online courses over the space of 10 weeks and, while some courses are still ongoing, they've gained 10 new qualifications. Courses ranged from H.S.E. delivered Stress Control to Communicating with People with Intellectual Disabilities, Yale University certified - The Science of Wellbeing and Aberdeen University certified - Nutrition and Wellbeing.

"With the assistance of the project staff, three participants have also successfully obtained employment – one in a nursing home as a result of her qualifications, the second in a factory which makes

hand sanitizer and the third with a funeral director in Dublin.

"Everyone has had to adapt and some of our participants have been very innovative. We currently have two Community Champions who were working on initiatives to improve their local community. 'Remember Me' is an inter-generational project with a local care home, which has now been modified to work with residents via video messages.

"The other, 'Next Generation' works with 10-12 year olds on themes of resilience, compassion, empathy and self-belief. It has adapted by engaging with its young people over zoom and Social Media. We plan to connect the two groups with the young people writing to care home residents, to create new connections and conversations."

The project has also been working with a number of partners in the area including Gaisce and health support services such as HSE, Sligo Social Services Drug and Alcohol Misuse counselling, Pieta House and Simon Community.

"The project operates in a disadvantaged area with many of our young people coming from poorer socio-economic backgrounds where there is a high level of drug and alcohol misuse and anti-social behaviour. Communities are experiencing very real challenges – mental health issues, low self-esteem, anxiety and loneliness. Other major issues include high levels of unemployment, social isolation, alongside a degree of hopelessness and uncertainty about their education, jobs and the future.

"Progressing towards third level education isn't the norm but we are encouraging people to keep a positive attitude and acknowledge that, while these restrictions are difficult, they won't last forever."

The YESS project plans to deliver its work in new ways as society moves beyond coronavirus but recognises that the increased social isolation, anxiety and so on all must be factored in to any future outreach work.

Claire adds: "It's unclear what will happen in the future in many ways but this will also impact other areas such as Brexit. It will have a damaging effect on the economy, both sides of the border. Cross-border relations have also been affected by circumstances beyond our control but we are looking at a number of ways that we can engage with Northern PYDP projects – one idea is to have an All-Ireland Zoom Quiz League.

"We would like to continue to build the capacity of young people to be more self-sufficient and resourceful, to know how to make good decisions, be resilient and be employment ready so they feel empowered and ready for the next stage of their own personal journey."

ABOVE: Pictured with Mary Robinson are Elizabeth Murphy and Foróige YESS participants from Sligo, Alice Smith and Kealan Houze at the recent Mary Robinson International Human Rights lecture in March 2020..



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The International Fund for Ireland is an independent international organisation established by the British and Irish Governments in 1986 with the objectives of promoting economic and social advance and of encouraging contact, dialogue and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists throughout Ireland. Donors to the Fund are the United States of America, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. International Fund for Ireland, Seatem House, 28-32 Alfred Street, Belfast, BT2 8EN / PO Box 2000 Dublin 2. www.internationalfundforireland.com

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