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CASE STUDY

Suffolk Lenadoon Interface Project

OVERVIEW

This case study describes cross-community regeneration projects in an area of West Belfast characterised by ethno-religious segregation and inter-community violence. It illustrates how small scale trust-building initiatives have been the basis of increasing co-operation in regeneration projects, which in turn have acted as an effective catalyst in overcoming cross community tensions.

BACKGROUND

The political instability and civil unrest witnessed in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s left many settlements heavily divided across sectarian lines, leaving 68% of all wards in Northern Ireland with a population of more than 70% of one ethno-religious community or the other. Inter-community violence and the resulting segregation has had a major impact on many of the urban communities of Northern Ireland, and has been particularly acute in Belfast. The effects of segregation include the dislocation of housing and labour markets; communities trapped behind "peacelines", deepening their isolation from services; concentrations of severe deprivation in interfaces that are blighted and blighting, not least to international investors and tourists; and a disproportionate rate of deaths and violence during more than three decades of violence in "peaceline" communities. This legacy offers huge challenges to achieving aspirational goals of social and economic sustainability in the affected communities. Official responses to these realities have been scant, yet there is considerable evidence of innovative practice in engaging with even the most stubborn problems particularly their potential for wider learning. This case study focuses on one of these examples, based around one particular "peaceline", or interface, in West Belfast.

Suffolk is a small Protestant housing estate of 800 residents surrounded by mainly Catholic

Photo courtesy of SLIG:
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housing in outer West Belfast. The area has experienced considerable violence, intimidation and population change since the start of 'The Troubles', with both Protestants and Catholics often abandoning their homes around the interface for safer territorial heartlands. Suffolk continued to decline, deepened by geographic isolation, residualisation and the construction of a physical peaceline around two-thirds of the estate. The demographic dynamic underpinning the conflict in Belfast is vital to understanding the contested nature of territory; with Protestants having a lower fertility rate, older age structure and smaller family sizes than their Catholic counterparts, who occupy a narrower band of territory concentrated mainly in the west of the city. As Protestant communities have declined and Catholic population increased, the pressure of restricted land availability and housing supply has become more acute. However, territoriality is deeply embedded in 'not an inch', zero sum politics and is part of the construction and expression of identity and conflict, simply not reducible to the type of objectification implied in regulatory planning in such a context. Housing then became a crucial resource in marking and claiming territory and was deeply symbolic in the constitutional contest over Northern Ireland, as witnessed in the destabilising influence of temporary surrender of land in the form of traditional Orange parades.

THE PROJECT

Against the context outlined above, a community group in Suffolk and another in Catholic Lenadoon agreed a *Peacebuilding Plan* for the interface area in 2007, supported by the American charity, Atlantic Philanthropies. The Plan built on decades of patient, high risk micro-contacts which had slowly developed a sense of trust between community activists in the area. Initial contacts started in the 1980s over the need for traffic lights on the main Stewartstown Road, which is the effective dividing line between Suffolk and Lenadoon. An existing Lower Lenadoon Housing Group and its full time Development Worker suggested a joint approach and after initial discussions both the Suffolk and Lenadoon residents staged a sit-down protest to block the road. This opened up relationships with activists on either side which facilitated conversations, exposed perceptions, misconceptions and half-truths about the origin and practice of interface violence. The meetings also helped to identify common-cause issues and grew mutual confidence in the minority Protestant community that the larger Catholic community was neither threatening nor predatory. However, relationships remained delicate, with inter-community conflict flaring up at times of heightened political tension, such as during the dispute over Orange Order marches in Drumcree in the late 1990s. The impact of this wider context was explained by a Protestant community worker:

> "Even though things eventually did die down it looked as if the whole interface initiative was finished. People were interviewed in the media, saying that the after what they went through how could they ever be expected to trust the other side. So it did look as though the whole thing was near to collapse"

After a period of 'cooling off', tentative meetings were resumed but with the risk that issues, such as parading, had the potential to destabilise relationships. However, the local groups were supported by community relations facilitators to directly address the issues of concern by developing a joint appeal against violence whilst committing to the rights of both communities. As a result, a mobile telephone network was established among community workers. Here, any signs of violence were identified and dealt with by activists on both sides of the interface, which built trust between a wider group of community workers. A joint statement helped to prepare both groups to handle the dispute and it laid the foundation for potential further cross-community dialogue. This re-engagement led to the formation of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group (SLIG) to deal with two very specific issues: the need to address the physical environment of the Stewartstown Road interface and the development of robust governance structures that could withstand external shocks such as parading or internal threats such as paramilitaries.

A company was formed called the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project; this

was managed by four members of the Lenadoon Community Forum, four members from the Suffolk Community Forum and four independent members recruited for their expertise in local development. The company focused on a single project to build a two storey block of shops and offices on the site of a derelict property on the Stewartstown Road. Retailing on the ground floor would generate a commercial rent whilst the upper storey was allocated for offices for community groups and government offices. An external facilitator supported the development of the legal, financial and constitutional aspects of the project. The project also set out rules on the use of symbols, flags and emblems and established processes for dealing with disputes and areas of conflict.

The next challenge was to bring the wider communities on board using public presentations of the plans to both sides of the divide. The SLIG group particularly highlighted the role of women in Suffolk in negotiating with

hostile interests and disinterested local people and who were tenacious in selling the message at considerable personal risk:

> "These women were all very vocal and made themselves very unpopular with some of the things that they said and some of the things they did, but they were prepared to step out and try something."

Despite these reservations, a public meeting produced almost unanimous support for the project in Suffolk; the community endorsed the openness of the discussions and recognised that the project offered a "win-win" solution. Funding for the regeneration project came from the Department for Social Development and the International Fund for Ireland and when implemented, the new centre completely reshaped the interface, physically and socially.

The police reported a significant drop in

Photos courtesy of SLIG; www.slig.co.uk

interface violence, the new property units were fully occupied and confidence in the investment environment is reflected in the construction of a new retail store on an adjacent site on the Stewartstown Road. The project gained additional momentum with a new 50 place childcare facility proposed in a Phase 2 development to be funded by the EU PEACE II Programme.

Atlantic Philanthropies worked to develop the concept of shared space in order to consolidate and develop these small gains via a locally based Peace Building Plan. This was described in a joint statement by the two groups.

> "The Plan will respect the positions and values of each community while specifically seeking to:
> - Identify shared spaces that can be accessed by both communities;
> - Identify activities that are required to provide security and build confidence within and between communities; and
> - Identify and respect that some activities, services and spaces will not be addressed in the short term but may form part of future options.
>
> Furthermore the plan will include proposals of the development of an Advocacy role and the development of Good Practice projects that can benefit both communities. The Joint Plan will include indicative budgets and timeframes for activities. It will also include indicative levels of investment from other bodies including statutory organizations."

The voluntary sector organisation, Community Places, provided technical planning expertise to assist with the wider consultation in each of the communities. The Local Peace Building Plan identified issues, especially housing, that were too contentious to deal with in this context, so agreement was reached that effort was focussed on areas such as health and sports, young people and women's development, which required enhanced trust and reciprocation.

Difficulties were encountered wjth staff recruitment in the creation of the interface plan, but a baseline study has now been prepared to identify actions and to help allocate resources. The group highlight that had it not been for Atlantic Philanthropies, the momentum built by SLIG would have been lost as the government's regeneration agency (the Department for Social Development) would not commit to continued funding. The group came to the view that government demonstrated little understanding of the complexity of interface problems and the need for structured resource allocation. Prioritising interfaces as a spatial problem is itself an important challenge requiring a different set of bargaining and argumentation skills and one which the formal state apparatus appears incapable of adequately addressing.

THE IMPACT

The Interface project in the Suffolk-Lenadoon area has helped transform a situation of violent conflict into a state of mutual co-operation. This has grown from very small scale, even personal contacts, into neighbourhood wide regeneration initiatives, with cross-community trust incrementally developing with each stage of cooperative practice. Although essentially a grass roots initiative, this has been catalysed and supported by well targeted charity and state funding, providing essential resources that have given a degree of sustainability and growth to the initiative.

LESSONS LEARNED

On the surface, the political context of Northern Ireland and the intensity of the civil conflict witnessed there makes it look as if it would hold few opportunities for policy learning in a wider UK context. However, many urban areas within Great Britain witness different forms of community tension and it is suggested that the Suffolk-Lenadoon experience illustrates a number of core principles that may also be applied in these contexts, including:

- The development of micro-relationships of trust are vital in conflict transformation and need to be developed from the bottom up
- Appropriate policy responses in the context of community tension must be contextualized by an appreciation of the landscape of power and resource allocation, which will orientate action to more engaged and pragmatic processes
- While physical regeneration projects *on their own* cannot ease community tensions, if they help address cross-community benefits, they can become a catalyst for wider conflict transformation processes.
- Public sector funding in areas of community tension is fraught with political sensitivity and risk, but cross-community initiatives are often reliant on long-term secured funding.

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