



T:BUC Engagement Forum **“Delivering T:BUC and the UN Sustainable Development Goals”**

Tuesday, 20th September 2022, 10.00am – 1.00pm
Hybrid Event: Zoom/Stormont Hotel, Belfast

Minutes

Contributors:

- Mr David Donoghue** – Former Irish Ambassador to the UN,
Co-Facilitator of the UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Mr Craig McGuicken** – CEO, NI Environment Link
- Mr Dermot McGann** – Forth Meadow Greenway
- Ms Becca Bor** – St. Columb’s Park House
- Mr Gavin King** – T:BUC Trees
- Mr Chris Gardner** - Director of T:BUC, Head of Good Relations & Governance NIE
- Dr Denis McMahon** - Permanent Secretary, The Executive Office

1. Welcome and Introductions

Chris Gardner - Director of T:BUC, Head of Good Relations & Governance NIE

Mr Gardner welcomed all present to the Forum and advised of a change to the order of speakers as Mr Donoghue had been unexpectedly delayed. This was the first Engagement Forum which had been held in person since February 2020 and was particularly welcomed as the Engagement Forum was all about connections: physical connections and social connections. There were many people trying to solve lots of problems in this world and Mr Gardner’s message was: “Yes, you are making a difference”.

Before continuing, Mr Gardner took this opportunity to pay tribute to the life of the late HM Queen Elizabeth II, commenting that, whilst there might be mixed feelings with respect to the institution of the monarchy, she had been a shining example of duty and responsibility with the ability to engage with everyone she met.

Today’s Engagement Forum would be exploring the links between good relations and sustainability and Mr Gardner emphasised that the first relationship that needed to be realised was between ourselves and our environment before a start could be made to making good relations with others. The presentation would be shaped by the UN Sustainable

Development Goals (“SDGs”). There were 17 of these and discussion would focus on how these SDGs could be used to assist in creating self-sustainable communities.

2. The UN Sustainable Development Goals – Community Perspective

Mr Gardner advised that attendees would hear four examples of where good relations and sustainability was already coming together. Prior to introducing the guest speakers, Mr Gardner gave a brief overview on the work of T:BUC. Highlights included:-

- With a £3M budget, T:BUC was supporting 89 projects including small grant applications with a goal of positively impacting 37,000 people in Northern Ireland. Whilst progress had been hampered by COVID lockdowns, momentum was being maintained and Local Councils were engaging in good relations programmes with 10 Local Authority Action Plans and Projects already successfully completed. The organisation was pursuing grant funding from SEUPB and Peace+ going forward.
- T:BUC Camps Programme: 120 group events had been completed with 97% of participants having made friends with people from different backgrounds.
- 33 young people from Northern Ireland had recently visited Croatia as Goodwill Ambassadors in order to bring learning opportunities back to Northern Ireland.
- The Urban Villages initiative continued to work across communities in five areas promoting good relations.
- DoE/Peace III work was providing skills and employment training for 200 young people across Northern Ireland.
- The T:BUC Interface initiative continued to engage with local communities and try to gain community consent to reduce barriers in interface areas.
- The DfC Shared Housing Programme had a goal of developing ten shared housing neighbourhoods and had to date achieved eight shared developments with 1,700 homes.
- The Shared Education Campus Programme was progressing well with Limavady due to complete in March 2023.
- Strategically, T:BUC was currently reviewing it’s goals and conducting an extensive engagement programme with a view to the review being complete by the time of Ministerial return.

Mr Craig McGuicken : CEO, NI Environment Link (“NIEL”)

Mr McGuicken gave a brief overview on his organisation, which acted as an umbrella organisation for 70 diverse organisations, local, UK and International, co-ordinating action on environment and health topics.

Mr McGuicken commented that NICVA in 2018/19 had put together a working group on SDGs with the following outcomes:-

- 52% of organisations in Northern Ireland were aware of the SDGs;
- 20% felt they were very important;

- 70% were already unintentionally aligning with the SDGs by focussing on gender equality, reducing inequality and focussing on health and wellbeing so the SDGs were already closely aligned with the aims of the voluntary sector.

The SDGs were considered important for two reasons: (1) they represented an approach to development which was sustainable but not at a cost to the environment itself; and (2) the SDGs were not limited to environmental issues but many factors including health, fresh water, the historical environment, green spaces and agriculture and food. The organisation wanted people in Northern Ireland to have the best quality of life possible and an important factor within that was to improve the local environment. This was especially important given the current global crises impacting on people's well-being.

Mr McGuicken gave a brief presentation entitled: "SDGs and the Local Environment".

Key challenges for Northern Ireland included:-

- Only 30% of Northern Ireland's fresh water was in a good condition;
- Housing Recycling stood at just under 50% compared to 25% in 2004/05;
- The percentage of journeys to work utilising public transport remained at 25% (with little difference since 2003);
- With respect to the historical environment, 75% of scheduled monuments were in good condition but the number of buildings at risk had increased from 340 to 570;
- Ongoing mental health issues post COVID lockdown. Access to outdoor recreation was considered vital with recent research reporting that 84% of those contacted feeling an increased sense of well-being when able to access outdoor space;
- Young People's communication with nature was reducing;
- Northern Ireland had the lowest level of forest cover in Europe and 60% of native species were in decline;
- Northern Ireland was unique in the UK in terms of not having an Environmental Protection Agency.

Future impact projections included:-

- 45,000 houses in Northern Ireland at risk of flooding;
- A potential sea level rise of 1 Metre (if measures put in place proved unsuccessful);
- Risks arising from an increase in extreme weather.

Two options had been identified to meet the challenges being faced: (a) Mitigation (e.g. sustainable transport, clean energy and energy efficiency); and (b) Adaptation (e.g. flood protection, disaster management and business continuity and infrastructure upgrading). A Net Zero target of 2050 had been set by Government. With respect to impact on communities, the road to net zero included: more green space, better planning, electrification of transport and modification of houses to green energy. However, there was ongoing concerns around economic impact of environmental measures on the poorest people in society.

Ending on a positive note, Mr McGuicken stated that there had been increased public interest in environmental issues over recent years, especially amongst Young People who were really engaged on the topic. There had also been improved Government Policies and an increase in much needed international co-operation along with more Governmental funding in support of green initiatives. In response to challenges, NIEL were working to a number of “Call to Action” goals including: providing links to local NGOs; providing information and detail on environmental issues and promoting educational programmes. SDGs provided an important framework for development, showcased the links between environmental growth and sustainability and played an important signposting role on the road to Net Zero.

Mr Dermot McGann: Forth Meadow Greenway

Mr McGann introduced himself as a member of Belfast City Council (“BCC”) working on the Shared Space Project. He went on to outline the development of the Forth Meadow Greenway which was unique, being the only greenway located in an urban area. Spanning segregated pockets within West and North Belfast, this natural access pathway challenged traditional psychological, territorial ownership thinking and encouraged mutual use and enjoyment. A £5.1M Project, part funded by BCC and DfC, developed the Springfield Dam and other areas with the purpose of:-

- Providing shared space walking pathways and cycle lanes;
- Allowing people to re-engage with nature;
- Encouraging neighbourhood regeneration in deprived areas;
- Assisting reconciliation work;
- Encouraging interaction between people from different areas;
- Giving people a natural pathway to travel to Belfast City Centre.

The Project had eventually been well received by both communities and a number of events had been scheduled to promote use of the shared space. There had been some initial concerns from local residents that conflict might arise near their properties, there had been some legal challenges and BCC had worked hard to build partnerships with other bodies given that BCC did not own all the Greenway land. Challenges still remained, not least of which was the increasing cost of building materials so the specification in some areas had to be cut back to essentials. However, the Springfield Dam Project opened in 2020, in the midst of COVID restrictions, and was used regularly by both sides of the community and was appreciated as an oasis in the midst of Belfast with no violent incidents reported to date. Forth Meadow was now being developed and a Volunteer Programme was established. There were now 52 volunteers, including 12 trained nature guides advising on the local flora and fauna and offering nature walks. Three major events had been held: a Bog Festival which was attended by 2,000 people; an event at Springfield Dam attended by 1,500 people; and an event at Woodvale Park which attracted 2,000 people.

Forth Meadow Greenway was supporting the following:-

- A Lower Shankill/Clonard Women's Project facilitating discussion on shared problems and experiences;
- A Youth Education Project, listening to Young People and what was affecting them and what they wanted going forward;
- Working on developing a narrative with local people and collecting information on their memories of the areas concerned. It is hoped that panels reflecting some of the stories will be erected going forward as well as installation of artwork along the Greenway (the first piece of artwork being due for installation in early 2023);
- Building up the Volunteer Training Project;
- Encouraging cross-community craftwork;
- Encouraging children to interact with nature and learn about the environment and, in particular, encouraging messy play (e.g. camp fires, foraging etc.);
- Trying to develop a Governance Model based on what the local people want.

Mr McGann finished his presentation by playing a video showcasing a poem: "On Common Ground" written by Mr Jim Deeds.

Ms Becca Bor: St. Columb's Park House

Ms Bor began her presentation by saying: "We are very much part of the environment and the environment is part of us". St. Columb's Park House is a reconciliation centre in the midst of a park in Derry/Londonderry. A walled garden had been recreated but it was essentially a wild space with hawks in the trees, rich in wildlife and natural flora and fauna. Part-funded by Peace IV and Derry and Strabane District Council, the ethos and aims of the centre included:-

- Permaculture is an approach to land management and settlement design that adopts arrangements observed in flourishing natural eco-systems and this was being used as a metaphor for people's relationships to themselves, to nature and to each other;
- This could be summarised as People Care/Earth Care/Fair Share;
- There was obviously a climate crisis but also a crisis within people: anxiety, feelings of helplessness about the future, cynicism, etc. so an aim at St Columb's was to create a supportive environment to help people create and live in a better world;
- Practices were nourishing, sustainable and regenerative with an underlying theme of stewardship in mind;
- To give people a space where they could first build good relationships with themselves which was essential prior to working with others; to help them find their generosity of spirit and then move forward towards harder issues collectively and challenging the two tribe mentality.

Initiatives included:-

- Foraging: Connecting people with nature and teaching them about the berries, plants, nuts, etc. they can forage for;
- A Young People Programme called: “The Wee Muckers” where Young People could sling hammocks in trees, forage, learn about plants, trees and nature and sit around a camp fire sharing stories and re-igniting the oral tradition that is so much a part of Ireland’s history, playing in the dirt and with the soil and taking shelter from the rain in the trees;
- Empowering people through campaigning (e.g. against gold mining in the Sperrins and work to protect the River Foyle);
- Looking at borders and edges of nature’s eco-systems, the hedgerows, estuaries and rivers and the rich diversity present in those areas and allowing nature to teach and soothe the marginalised, the physically and mentally handicapped, those feeling disempowered, always with focus on relationships: relationships with self, with others and with the environment;
- Working with other organisations to offer maximum access to the facility.

Ms Bor concluded her talk by emphasising that the SDGs goals around sustainability and environment were engrained in everything St Columb’s strived to achieve.

Mr Gavin King: T:BUC Trees

Mr King introduced himself as a NI Civil Servant currently acting as Head of Camps and Interventions Branch at [Lisburn]. His Department facilitated environmental-based shared activities across both Communities.

A tree planting initiative, working alongside DoE and EA personnel, was a key part of the current T:BUC Camps Programme. Working alongside the Woodland Trust, over 700 trees were planted by 100 Young People at Cave Hill, Belfast, in 2021. With the collaboration of the Stormont Estate and DfC, over 100 trees were recently planted by 40 Young People at the Stormont Estate. Mr King stated that awareness around the key importance of environmental issues was growing, especially amongst Young People. Feedback from a recent survey showed a 100% positive response to a question around whether the environment was important to Young People (compared with an 80% positive response the previous year). There was a strong theme around legacy with the tree planting exercises; that people were gifting for the next generation. It was also a cross community event where people could interact with Young People from different cultural backgrounds. Mr King stated that the T:BUC Trees initiative was being replicated across 11 Councils in 2022 with 1,000 people signing up to plant seven different species of trees. Further initiatives to promote health and wellbeing, gender equality and the environment were scheduled for 2023 and Mr King encouraged participants to visit the organisation’s website for more details.

A short video was played where Young People reflected on what they had taken away from a recent tree planting event.

Mr Gardner thanked all the speakers and advised that, due to time overrun, a link for the planned “Show the Cornfield” Project Video would be sent to participants. A comfort break was taken from 11.45am and Noon and Mr Gardner encouraged participants to visit the informational stands which had been erected alongside the refreshments area.

3. The UN Sustainable Development Goals and Peacekeeping

Mr David Donoghue: Former Irish Ambassador to the UN, Co-Facilitator of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Mr Donoghue began by apologising for his late arrival and went on to express his admiration at the spirit of activism inherent within the Community Groups who had already given their presentations. He went on to summarise his work with the United Nations. In his role as Irish Ambassador to the UN, he had been asked to co-facilitate discussions on the UN SDGs alongside the Kenyan Ambassador to the UN. The rationale behind the pairing was to try and ensure balanced representation from the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere, the “Developed” and “Undeveloped” countries; a global outlook. The aim was to involve all 193 countries in discussion and negotiation in order to agree SDGs that would be relevant, achievable and acceptable to all nations. In 2000 there had been Millennium Goals set by the UN with respect to health and education but these were “top down” goals which had not been negotiated and criticism had emerged as a result. A concept of sustainable development emerged from that work and in 2015 the UN wanted to develop an holistic concept spanning economic, social and environmental needs with emphasis on sustainable development and particular focus on helping to tackle social needs (e.g. poverty). The UN had listened to feedback from the previous exercise and formulated an inclusive approach and it was a massive undertaking to try and reach common ground across 193 countries but, amazingly and uniquely, all countries agreed and signed up to 17 SDGs.

Each of the 17 SDGs was a headline. The goals were not just icons; there were seven or eight individual actions underpinning each headline. A firm statement of commitment was: “As we set out on the road to 2030, we will leave no-one behind”. It sounded idealistic but every country was asked to prioritise the needs of the poor, the marginalised, the most vulnerable and to focus on the needs of the people before the needs of the country. The SDGs were not legally binding but it was a politically binding framework. Mr Donoghue emphasised the importance of activism at a local level in order to meet the SDGs by 2030. This was not a Governmental exercise but a global challenge involving all aspects of society.

The voluntary sector and community groups had always been seen as vital players, partly because of their dynamism, vision and energy but also because the UN wanted to ensure that poor performing global Governments were held to account. There was strong emphasis on what could be done at a local level. SDGs were a global framework but action needed to be taken at local and district level in every country. Government and Local Government had a part to play in galvanising and offering support, philanthropic institutions and the private sector as well as Government could offer funding support. Businesses are engaging under the heading of: “Corporate Social Responsibility” but it will be the voluntary sector and

community groups who will do much of the work to ensure SDGs are met. Mr Donoghue encouraged groups to head to New York and to be at the forefront when asking questions such as: “What are you doing on this?”. There was also huge emphasis on inclusivity and exchange of best practices and information sharing.

A comfort break was taken between 12.11pm and 12.30pm.

4. Panel session

A Panel Session with Contributors was held, facilitated by Mr Gardner.

- Q. Mr Gardner asked what NIEL’s key steps towards sustainability were.
- A. Mr McGuicken responded that NIEL were liaising with the 70 organisations under its umbrella as well as other voluntary groups on local initiatives. There was, however, a need for more Government funding.
- Q. More detail was requested on the difficulties encountered at the start of the Forth Meadow Greenway Project.
- A. Mr McGann responded that initially there were security concerns (e.g. “Will someone be able to see into my house?”) and reservations were overcome through listening and through dialogue. Communication was key with presentations given to local partnerships, groups and to individuals.
- Q. There was a query about how organisations could measure outputs and outcomes.
- A. Mr McGuicken commented that good relations grew over the space of many years. Bringing people together with a common interest was a powerful catalyst and Young People expressing concern for the environment tended to remain engaged so it was not so much a matter of what we do but how we make a case for sustainability utilising the SDGs.
- Q. One participant queried whether the printed informational packs for the Engagement Forum were really necessary and went on to say that women tended to hold the reins in terms of sustainable buying power and suggested that more buy in from women’s groups would be advisable.
- A. Mr Gardner took this feedback on board. It was suggested that the SDGs be shared as widely as possible between community and voluntary groups.
- Q. A participant mentioned her work with the third generation “Troubles” Young People and Ms Bor’s comment around the “two tribe” mentality. Mr McGuicken asked Mr Donoghue how this might affect or impact on achievement of the SDGs.

- A. Mr Donoghue felt this was a good point. He stated that one of the goals was: “Creation of peaceful and inclusive societies”. It was a language to encourage creation of more accountable societies and this applied to many countries, not just Northern Ireland. There were some countries that were homophobic or still had a fundamental lack of human rights. Mr Donoghue stated that he had some involvement in the original Good Friday Agreement but that we were now in 2022 and he sensed that Northern Ireland was changing and, whilst you still had the Nationalist and Unionist traditions, the “other” grouping was becoming larger. The Alliance Party was growing as were the Greens and there were many new citizens in Northern Ireland from other faiths and other backgrounds. Mr Donoghue encouraged participants not to underestimate the “other” faction. For example, The Green Party were currently in Government in the Irish Republic. Mr Donoghue stated that he had asked himself whether the Good Friday Agreement was still relevant and he thought it was and that safeguards for the two traditions needed to stay in place at present. However, that binary dynamic might be subject to change going forward.

Mr King agreed that there was now much wider diversity within Northern Ireland society than the “two tribes”. Times had moved on from when T:BUC was created in 2013 and he suggested that, perhaps, it was time to review the physicality of some documentation and formulate more dynamic strategic guidance going forward to ensure it properly reflected the more diverse society that Northern Ireland was evolving into.

5. Closing Remarks

Closing Remarks from **Dr Denis McMahon**: Permanent Secretary, The Executive Office

Mr McMahon thanked all participants for their contributions and went on to highlight some issues which had struck him as being particularly relevant, namely:-

- It seemed to be a “T” day: tribes, trees, tracks and trails, targets and totality;
- People were at the heart of the SDG vision so it was around taking high ideals and bringing them down to the ground;
- The importance of Partnerships between Government, Industry and Community Workers/Groups.

Mr McMahon took this opportunity to thank everyone engaged in “Good Relations Week” and with this Engagement Forum for their hard work.

Mr McMahon introduced Ms Rwanda Shaw to participants. She had appeared on the TV programme “The X Factor” in 2017. Ms Shaw went on to sing: “Change starts with us” to a rapt audience.

The Engagement Forum finished at 1.00pm.