

ACTIVITY REPORT

SOLIDAR & SOLIDAR FOUNDATION STUDY VISIT - LIMERICK, IRELAND 9-10 MARCH 2020

9 March 2020|

Limerick City and County Council (LCCC)

Welcome remarks

The visit is launched by Cllr. Michael Sheahan, Mayor of the City and County of Limerick, who welcomes participants highlighting the importance of partnership at local, national and European level. As a previous primary teacher, he commends education's essential role, from an early age and across the entire life. He introduces the Irish organisations joining SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation on this visit, highlighting the tremendous communal spirit that ensured the revitalisation of Limerick City through lifelong learning. **Limerick's rebuilding after the 2008 crisis is contextualised by him through the promotion of European values of solidarity, ensuring that European citizens understand the ties that bind them and champion those in any educational effort, especially as [Limerick was awarded the title of UNESCO Learning City in 2017 for its exceptional progress in promoting lifelong learning.](#)** Consequently, Limerick will be hosting the 2020 European expo, a festival of culture, celebrating Irish and EU cultures through education, entertainment and information. He concludes by reinforcing lifelong learning's importance and wishing fruitful meetings during the visit.

Lifelong learning through partnership – the Irish example

Elisa Gambardella introduces the organisations invited to share experiences and passes the floor to them.

Helen Fitzgerald, [PAUL Partnership](#), describes PAUL Partnership's activity, a multi-sectoral partnership company set up in 1999 that promotes social inclusion in Limerick. The organisation's board comprises representatives of the community and voluntary sector, social partners, state agencies and elected representatives among others. The added value of such collaboration on social and economic inclusion is apparent, as their work ensures that all Limerick inhabitants prosper from and contribute to the city. The organisation works on thematic pillars: community development, health wellbeing and ageing well, employment and enterprise, child and family support and education and lifelong learning.

Stretching across thematic pillars is their [Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme \(SICAP\)](#) aimed at working with locals for community development.

Individuals and groups are empowered and supported in their choices for community betterment, including by developing skills and capacities. The PAUL Partnership staff ensures collaboration with volunteering communities, assists with funding applications, provides support in developing strategic plans, empowers local actors to take charge of programmes that would impact and

revitalise their communities. SICAP is aimed at supporting underprivileged individuals experiencing longer periods of unemployment, educational disadvantage or hail from marginalised communities to improve their life quality, providing tailored 1-to-1 sessions for the creation of development plans, for guiding individuals toward access to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) or simply through financial, addiction-related and housing services. Beyond SICAP, PAUL Partnership is engaged in the Learning Limerick strategic collaboration, together with the Limerick Clare ETB¹ and LCCC, for a partnership that fosters lifelong learning initiatives and promotes access to education for all in order to promote Limerick as a Learning City and to revamp community engagement. Helen Fitzgerald highlights the extensive role of education in reducing isolation and ensuring social inclusion, revealing how societal participation via volunteering, community engagement or labour market access was facilitated by the lifelong learning perspective implemented by local stakeholders.



Dr. Maura Adshead, University of Limerick (UL), [Community, Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Life Skills \(CWELL\) diploma programme](#), presents academia's response to locally identified needs in disadvantaged areas.

¹ See below.

She stresses the importance of collaboration between academia and local actors in developing responses to local challenges, rejecting a top-down approach in which research-based solutions would be offered without consulting the people targeted by them. She discusses sustainability and constant engagement when implementing solutions, concluding with the need to empower local communities to claim ownership and to continue replicating solutions locally. Therefore, UL provides a two-year part-time diploma programme for adult learners from under-served communities. The programme has a practical component, enlisting learners in developing and implementing local projects. The programme recognises and validates skills which learners would have developed through volunteering or community engagement. It is a means to recognise and formalise potential informal and non-formal learning. The community co-designs the curriculum for each module, taking ownership over locally delivered projects. Local partners, community mentors and leaders assist with module delivery, culminating in the second year with a local project which learners run. Examples of projects ran by learners include Green CWELL, by which volunteers maintained the South Hill Hub gardens and then ran community events there. Healthy CWELL is another example, with learners running a fitness club for young mothers, ensuring that all social groups are included in society via local activities. **The principle by which programmes are guided is reciprocity between universities and communities**, ensuring that there is sufficient transparency involved, that equitable outcomes come for both in this relationship and that communities are as owners of development projects which build their own capital.

Triona Lynch and Mary Flannery, [Limerick and Clare Education and](#)

Training Board (LCETB), introduce ETBs' work, the authorities responsible for delivering further education and training regionally across Ireland. With 2000 staff members in the region, 33 further education centres and 300 locations, LCETB provides regional non-certified programmes of community education, reaching to people in their homes and encouraging them to join education. **The ETBs gauge people's interest in educational programmes and assist them with personal development plans, guiding their path into vocational education, higher education, employment or other areas of interest.** The programmes are tailored to learners' needs and availability, as they can be full time but also part time. The ETBs operate while acknowledging the severe deprivation surrounding Limerick and direct their work at sustaining employment and building a cushion for the locals. They highlight, as previous speakers, the engendered partnerships across Limerick, as they collaborate with PAUL Partnership, libraries and other organisations to provide educational programmes. Tutors provided by ETB can be found in various local lifelong learning organisations such as Limerick City Build. The ETB offers non-formal and non-accredited courses in IT as well, with the aim of ensuring that communities can transition to the digital age. This represents a non-threatening entry-point in education for many locals, using learning paths to achieve social cohesion and to build social capital.

Jillian Robinson and Ann Rizzo, PLACE-EE (Platforms for Ageing Community Engagement – exchange and enterprise), introduce PLACE-EE as a project, funded by the EU's Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme, which partners other regional EU countries to respond to issues experienced by rural inhabitants in relation to a lack of connectivity, of social

connectedness and of engagement in their communities. The aim was innovating how older people were engaged and eradicating social exclusion. Participants to the visit were introduced to PLACE-EE's work via a [video](#) showcasing testimonies of elderly people who were paired with youngsters in an initiative to exchange digital skills and knowledge on Limerick's history. **Old age isolation was combated by pairing the two age groups for intergenerational learning, contributing to the health and well-being of project participants via social connection.** Beyond the activities, the project outputs include a mapping tool to assess community resources and engagement, a good practice guide in developing community coalitions for older citizens in remote, sparsely populated regions and a toolkit for setting up Intergenerational Skills Exchange Projects among others.

Patricia Cusack and Pamela Brier, Moyross Library Service, share libraries' tremendous role in supporting lifelong learning in Ireland through inclusive spaces that promote literacy, culture and access to information. The library offers language development courses for parents and toddlers at a time when 70% of parents in the Moyross area have not finalised secondary education and with less than 2% having third level qualifications. **The library staff members use a holistic approach, working with speech and language coordinators to meet the community's needs.** They discuss the library's educational programmes that fill in the gaps that many educationally disadvantaged citizens experience. The Spring into Storytime programme engages young children in storytelling programmes, serving specifically three local primary schools. The Summer Stars programme ensures that children continue reading over the summer, while the October Children's Book Festival

welcomes local authors and storytellers to inspire and engender a love for books via workshops. Children collaborate with local authors in publishing their own storytelling books. The Library supports schools with books for coursework and it partners up with ETBs, providing materials for their courses, providing ICT, and generally facilitating educational institutions' work by providing access to premises that have classrooms, computers and WiFi.

Discussion

SOLIDAR members identify the positive role that partnerships have had on lifelong learning provision and social inclusion in Limerick and launch a discussion on enablers and barriers for partnerships as experienced in Limerick. **Participants highlight the centrality of partnerships in each strategic plan but underline the role of individual-based relationships that developed across many years in Limerick and Ireland.** They mention the supportive role of EU funding in the 1980s and 1990s and agree that a partnership culture developed around such funding to increase the amount that was going towards Ireland. However, participants are wary of the sustainability of the partnership culture, post-austerity, when exactly programmes for community development were targeted for cuts. There is no legislative structure that enshrines partnerships, therefore, being at risk to be minimised.

Participants discuss providing services to urban and rural populations, but also the Irish universal approach to service provision and to designing actions for the community given the homogenous Irish population and the urban environments' size. However, participants discuss the problematic measurements for the success of activities and actions imposed by public authorities. **The quantity of people reached by programmes rather than the quality of**

help received is measured, frequently coming at odds with CSOs normative systems and hampering their capacity to access more funding without failing to cater to the needs of the most disadvantaged. Participants raise concerns about accessing state funding when so many actions are developed in partnerships, having difficulties in quantifying each partner's work.

Participants discuss the novelty of validating skills developed through actions that support the community via the CWELL programme. This is uncommon across Ireland as it encourages learners to be collaborative, rather than engage in the competition usually associated with higher education or with further research. The CWELL programmes are intrinsic to learners and their community, integrating universities in community activities. Academia's role is, however, not demoted, as the success of PLACE-EE's intergenerational programme resided in the community mapping and intergenerational toolkit they developed before, using it to convince youngsters and elderly to participate while maximising the gain that each participant received. Furthermore, the value of partnerships was replicated, as the Irish Hospice Foundation and the Age Friendly programme in Limerick provided support to their work. The size of Irish communities contributes to the development of such partnerships given how manageable they become, how easy it is to identify who can support each endeavour and how easy it is to contact these actors. **The partnerships ensure that the voice of the community is enabled on equal footing with state agencies when devising community development actions.** The matrix of cooperation is not exclusively top-down or grassroots, allowing for flexible information transfers and better cooperation. It is more time-intensive but it

yields more satisfactory results for those most in need.

10th March

Visit Limerick City Build

Catherine O'Halloran, [Limerick City Build \(LCB\)](#), describes her work in assisting ex-prisoners' community reintegration. LCB



emerged as unemployment was damaging Limerick's community and pushing young men into criminal activities. **The remit and focus are on creating employment and bringing the economy back to so-called black spots of high unemployment in Limerick – some of the highest in Europe – focusing specifically on young men.** Catherine discusses class differentiation in such communities and chronic deprivation that these people experience for generations. Therefore, LCB applies a trauma-informed perspective on training and therapy provided to ex-prisoners. The programme deconstructs their self-perception, which formed in the underprivileged environment from which they hail, and it reconstructs it to create new possibilities for societal reintegration. It employs a relational approach, which contributed to 96% of its clients to remain out of jail and sustain employment. **Many LCB graduates have gone on to run successful start-ups or joined local businesses.** Catherine ensures SOLIDAR

members that the support offered to ex-convicts extends beyond the moment they secure employment, as they need assistance to cope with the work pressures and also as the employment opportunity might not be a good fit for them and they need support to transition. The organisation caters for 20-30 participants at a time with a minimum of 20 hours per week attendance requested on their side, for as little as 6 weeks, but there is no cap on their time at LCB, as the purpose is helping them find sustainable employment and adjust on their own terms. Meditation and group therapy are followed by apprenticeships and trade disciplines within LCB's warehouse and under the supervision of an ETB trainer.

SOLIDAR members introduce their work.



Milena Susic from [IDC](#) discusses their work with vulnerable people returning from former Yugoslavia countries and with internally displaced people. They offer non-formal education, provide certificates and enable them to move into employment, while assisting with legal services. Luis Cortes from MPDL discusses the services that they provide to refugees and migrants in finding employment. Veronika Varep from JMC talks about their programmes for long-term jobseekers, for people recently released from prison and for third country nationals. Yvona Hofmanová from Organisation for Aid to Refugees explains their services on refugees' societal integration. Leo Niederwimmer from BFI OOE explains the training courses provided to ex-prisoners to join the labour market. Lou Boyd from Volunteering Matters describes their

volunteer-led social action projects, the work in upskilling people on youth offending orders or probation-leave, but also the coping training they provide to assist with the daily routine outside of incarceration.

Discussion

SOLIDAR members and Catherine discuss assisting ex-prisoners with applying for social welfare or other administrative tasks which seem daunting after incarceration. They exchange on ex-prisoners' desire for participation and their hunger for belonging which makes most of them be deeply engaged with programmes provided by participants. **Participants discuss the need for more funding and reconciling this with altering their model of work based on donors' requirements.**



Moreover, they share on the complexity and efforts needed for applying for funding which takes a toll on small CSOs.

SOLIDAR members witnessed

the work of the people engaged with LCB, viewing their facilities, programmes to build boats, to provide furniture for local businesses and generally were explained the training procedures by the LCETB-provided trainer. The centre aids young men to reintegrate in society and pursue education should they wish to, but it does not directly cater for literacy provision or to enhance skills beyond a practical level that would boost confidence and allow to start over. SOLIDAR members understand the young men's daily routine, how courses are

provided, the support that men receive in figuring out which future employment to seek, and the trainer's approach for assisting with their work.

St. Mary's Parish Men's Shed



SOLIDAR members are enthusiastically welcomed by a group of beneficiaries and volunteers of this community programme, who explain the mission and activities of the Men's Shed. 450 such organisations span across Ireland, grouping men and allowing them to share different skills that they have. **The co-learning processes allow for the development of a communal spirit while passing on traditions.** SOLIDAR members benefit from witnessing the sharing of such skills as they see how Men's Shed members tend to a common garden, build beehives, organise music classes to teach Bodhran drumming and Irish Ballad Singing. **The members prepare each other to later give back to the community** by organising singing sessions at nursing homes, festivals, and to provide art, music and martial arts classes to local learners. The earnings are reinvested in the Shed or donated while members pay a subscription to maintain the Shed. The Irish Men's Sheds meet annually for a two-day event which gathered 1000 participants in Galway in 2019. Through their work, they wish to clear the bad reputation associated with Limerick and revitalise the communities.

SOLIDAR members discuss with Men's Shed members the work they provide across Europe, highlighting how the concept of Men's Shed is not widespread in Spain, Austria or Estonia.



City Council – World Café

SOLIDAR members return to LLLC to continue exchanges with CSOs across Limerick to exchange on partnerships between local authorities and CSOs in providing social inclusion, on intergenerational learning and skills for future and on intercultural dialogue for social inclusion.

Linda Ledger, St. Munchin's Community Centre, presents her centre's work, contributing to eradicating long-term unemployment by including disabled people, people struggling with addiction and early prison releases. **It provides opportunities for employment, on disadvantaged people's terms, empowering the community and creating jobs which would not normally be available through state agencies' programmes.** The Centre collaborates with LLLC, the Department of Social Protection, LCETB and Limerick Age Friendly. It provides services for the elderly, such as bingo games, a photography studio, a flower shop, services to clean and fix their

houses, education classes (literacy, tai-chi, yoga), a café. It supports the administrative needs of community members that have difficulties filling in governmental forms. Their services are geared towards people's needs, as they provide transport to their bingo games for example, or meals on wheels programmes to ensure a holistic approach to people's needs. They offer training to create a baseline for people wishing to enter employment while they figure out what they wish to do in the future.

She highlights the lack of a single governmental body monitoring community centres in Limerick. **The lack of structure in service provision across geographic communities runs the risk of creating inequality gaps, allowing some communities to be more privileged than others.** Moreover, this is needed to imbue community centres with accountability and would allow for better monitoring of training that people undergo and for better understanding their needs. This structural hurdle is coupled with increased bureaucracy associated with their work or with applying for funding, which pressures small CSOs that work in unpredictable conditions in communities. She continues the conversation about official benchmarks measuring numbers of people benefitting from services rather than service quality. She discusses with SOLIDAR members the refusal to apply for grants due to donors' requirements that impact CSOs' ethos.

Ahmed Hassan, Doras Luimní, explains his organisations' remit as providing services to migrants in Limerick and West Ireland. Their work started with English language provision for migrants and refugees, expanding into working with EU nationals entering Ireland and with third country nationals studying in Limerick. **They assist with general needs related to migration, administrative or simply to provide support when in need, but also**

have taken charge of the resettlement programme for Syrians and Iraqi refugees in Limerick. They provide client-based services revolving around migrants' and refugees' needs.

Michael Quilligan, [Tait House Community Enterprise](#), explains the work they perform in the most deprived Limerick suburbs. They provide community services such as a café, a childcare centre, meals on wheels, refitting old households and programmes to **combat loneliness for the elderly**. He explains the stigma associated with Irish social housing, and how well-off citizens moved out, leaving such communities even more vulnerable. As a result, Tait House intervenes in such areas, with around 90 staff members, to focus on enterprise and deliver services.



Find the Social Media coverage of the visit on [TWITTER](#) and [FACEBOOK](#)

Discussion

Participants exchange on the unavailability of community centres in countries such as Estonia, where associations target groups or operate based on geographical regions. **They discuss the needs of the people during the digital and environmental transitions, and about possibilities to reskill people based on this. However, they prioritise the revitalisation of the community first.** The first building blocks represent the engagement of disadvantaged communities to take an active role in the community by means of courses such as those provided by Tait House on horticulture, scarf making and breadmaking. This provides an opportunity to guide people then further into education or employment programmes, therefore, such centres are less about training and more about the importance of social inclusion to create a starting point from which people can make best use of the opportunities that they have available for them. However, participants discuss the patience and funding required for such an endeavour. **The contribution from local and national authorities is essential and would yield future gains as the community members would more easily adapt to the new societal requirements.** Participants require a more forward looking approach when allocating funding to allow more leeway for CSOs to meet the needs of community members and guide them throughout the new transitions.