



Irish Abroad Unit



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



Global Irish Civic Forum

4 -5 May 2017

Report



COMMUNITIES, CONNECTIONS, CONVERSATIONS

The second Global Irish Civic Forum took place on 4-5 May 2017 in Dublin Castle, with the theme “Communities, Connections, Conversations”. As was the case with the first Global Irish Civic Forum, held in 2015, Irish community leaders from around the world, drawn from emigrant and diaspora communities, came together in Dublin to discuss the challenges facing the Irish abroad. Over 220 attendees from 16 countries, representing more than 150 organisations dedicated to supporting Irish communities around the world participated in the Forum. The event provided a means for face-to-face connections between those facing similar challenges in their own communities and was also an opportunity for shared learning and dialogue between these groups and the Government. The Forum is part of the comprehensive approach of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led by its Irish Abroad Unit, to working with the Irish abroad and engaging the diaspora under the five pillars set out in *Global Irish: Ireland’s Diaspora Policy* -supporting the diaspora, connecting with the diaspora, facilitating diaspora engagement, recognising the diaspora, and evolving diaspora policy.

The then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charles Flanagan T.D., made the welcoming address to participants. This was followed by Máire Treasa Ní Cheallaigh interviewing the then Minister of State for the Diaspora and International Development, Joe McHugh T.D. on his achievements and experiences since taking up the role.



Civic Forum



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PANELS

THERE WERE FOUR
PANEL DISCUSSIONS
ON THEMATIC ISSUES.

01 **Evolving Global Irish Communities – meeting their needs and identifying opportunities for collaboration.**

This panel was moderated by Alma Ní Choigligh (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). The panellists were Ted Smyth (New York), Ant Hanlon (Leeds) and Colette Shannon (Dubai). Discussions centred around the Irish community in the U.S., in Britain and in Dubai. Ted Smyth questioned whether the Irish-American identity faces a crisis, as Irish-Americans are becoming more distant with each generation. He proposed culture and branding as possible solutions. He highlighted the example of the New York Irish Arts Center as a good means of sustaining Irish culture abroad and suggested looking at innovative ways to engage with people of Irish descent visiting Ireland. Ant Hanlon discussed the increasing challenges faced by the Irish in Britain, not only those posed by Brexit, but also in relation to the ageing Irish population. Social isolation and inequality relating to the health service were mentioned. Funding is also becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Ant Hanlon emphasised the importance of young people becoming more engaged in volunteering and the need to better reflect the diversity that exists among the Irish community. Colette Shannon spoke about Dubai, which is one of the newer geographic locations for Irish communities. Unlike Britain, an ageing demographic could not be an issue in Dubai, as a valid work visa is required, so staying after retirement is not an option. On the other hand, this poses its own challenges in relation to the need for future planning by people who may be long term residents but will need to move on retirement. She also highlighted education, including access to the Irish language and Irish universities, as a key concern for emigrants in Dubai. Colette Shannon shared the view that youth engagement and culture are critically important in building strong Irish communities abroad.

Participants noted different experiences and challenges in different locations. A representative of Crosscare highlighted issues being faced by people choosing to return to Ireland having lived abroad. Crosscare had launched a report called Home for Good the day before the Forum that included the results of surveys undertaken by 400 Irish people, 83% of whom indicated that family was the main motivation for moving home. There was broad agreement on the importance of youth engagement and it was thought that building on our connections with the GAA and using culture more generally to engage with younger people would prove beneficial for diaspora organisations. Concerns were also expressed about political changes in the US, and what they might mean for the future of Irish influence there, and about the special status of the Irish in Britain post-Brexit.

02 **Communicating Better in a Digital Age: Using New Tools to Stay Connected.**

This panel was moderated by Ralph Victory (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). The panellists were Emine Etili (Twitter), Claire O'Donoghue-Velikic (Facebook) and Deirdre Ní Luasaigh (Culture Ark). Issues discussed included the elements of an effective communications strategy, the challenges and opportunities arising for Irish diaspora organisations in the social media era and how Irish diaspora organisations can best use social media. Throughout the discussion, the panellists stressed the importance of authenticity when using social media. Other elements highlighted in respect of an effective communications strategy included an understanding of the audience, being goal-oriented and the use of visuals or metrics. Emine Etili made the point that the strongest community groups are those that also exist offline. Regarding challenges, Deirdre Ní Luasaigh brought up the danger of information overload and Claire O'Donoghue-Velikic mentioned the struggle to produce meaningful content. Emine Etili felt that overall the opportunities arising from using social media outweigh the challenges.

Participants emphasised the importance of social media to raise awareness of campaigns and to allow people to stay updated on current affairs in Ireland, but also voiced concerns about the negative side of social media, and the continued need to communicate effectively with those members of our communities who are not on-line. In order to successfully use social media, organisations were advised by panellists to focus on their aims, plan a calendar of posts and integrate visual and verbal posts. All participants were given a Global Irish Communications Toolkit prepared by the Irish Abroad Unit to assist organisations with their communications.

03 **Imagining an Irish Culture for the Future – representing a new Ireland and engaging future generations of the Irish abroad.**

This panel was moderated by John Concannon (Creative Ireland). The panellists were Eithne Considine Shankar (Irish Film Festival Ottawa), Aidan Connolly (New York Irish Arts Centre) and Pat Daly (GAA Director of Games Development and Research). John Concannon opened the discussions by confirming the value of culture to the well-being of the country and of Irish communities abroad, and the importance of building on the legacy of the Commemorations in 2016, which saw some 1000 different events in cities all over the world. Eithne Considine Shankar expressed the view that greater collaboration between cultural organisations abroad could lead to stronger outcomes and better planning. Pat Daly highlighted the importance of values as an inextricable part of our culture and what it meant to be Irish. Aidan Connolly emphasised the importance of expressions of Irish culture abroad reflecting our traditions, but also being inclusive and representing the diversity of modern Ireland.

Other contributors echoed the importance of the role of culture in creating identity and a sense of community, and emphasised the importance of the Irish language, the importance of the culture of Irish travellers, and culture as an invaluable tool in engaging young people. Speakers emphasised the potential in looking beyond Irish music, dance and sport, to include dramatic arts, crafts and rural life, as aspects of Irish culture that should be celebrated abroad. St. Patrick's Day was referenced as a unique asset in terms of the celebration of Irish culture. It was suggested that arts and culture could play a significant role in changing mind-sets for political purposes, and that this could be explored in the context of our undocumented citizens in the US, where the arts could be used to tell their story to a broader US audience.

04 Voting Rights in Presidential Elections.

This panel was moderated by Dearbhail McDonald (Group Business Editor, Irish News and Media). The panellists were the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government Simon Coveney, T.D., the then Minister of State for the Diaspora and International Development Joe McHugh T.D., Senator Billy Lawless (Seanad Éireann) and Dr. Iseult Honohan (University College Dublin). Dr Iseult Honohan referred to the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention, and explored the options outlined in the Government's Options Paper published in March – which for the purposes of the discussion were divided into three main categories: extending the right to vote in presidential elections to all citizens outside the State; extending the right to vote in presidential elections to all emigrants who have left Ireland; or extending the right to vote to all emigrants with a time limit. Senator Billy Lawless gave an impassioned speech, appealing both to the Government “Tabhair Dúinn an Vóta”, and to the diaspora to come together to support a positive vote in the referendum - mobilising the Irish community abroad in a worldwide grassroots campaign which would include positively influencing friends and family at home who would be voting in the referendum.

Minister Coveney emphasised both the Government's commitment on this issue, and highlighted the importance of the consultative process and the strong desire of the Government to get the views of the global Irish to feed into their decision making process. He also noted the importance of navigating a way forward that would best contribute to ensuring a successful referendum. The commitment of Government on this issue and the important role for Irish organisations abroad were echoed in the closing remarks by then Minister of State for the Diaspora Joe McHugh T.D.

Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss what was seen as a very important issue, and emphasised the positive role that the Irish abroad themselves were prepared to play, and would play in achieving positive progress on this issue. While they would not participate in a referendum vote, they looked forward to participating in the debate and for a mechanism to be identified through which this could be done. In a show of hands at the end of the discussion, participants overwhelmingly supported the option which would see the right to vote in presidential elections

extended to all citizens. Speakers advocated for including more than just Irish-born citizens, referring to their own family members who though not born in Ireland retained a very strong link and a willingness to contribute to Ireland. Others advocated particularly strongly against any time limit based on time away from Ireland, referring to the elderly Irish emigrants in the UK in particular who had contributed so much to Ireland over many years, and to whom the right to vote could be particularly important. Reference was also made to the potential damage that could be done to Ireland's relationship with its diaspora if either too narrow a grouping was selected for the extension of voting rights, or if the referendum did not succeed.

There appeared to be a broad understanding among those present of the importance of due consideration and preparation being given to the option to be chosen and the wording of any referendum that would go to the people, and also that the legislative and administrative processes involved in managing any change mean it will not be possible to have voting from outside the State operative for the next scheduled election in 2018.

The Undocumented Perspective.

In addition to the Panel discussions above, an additional panel event on 'The Undocumented Perspective' took place on the eve of the Forum at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Headquarters, Iveagh House. Panellists for the event were Senator Billy Lawless, Celine Kennelly (Coalition of Irish Immigration Centres), Michael McMahon (Families of the Undocumented in America), Ronnie Millar (Irish International Immigrant Centre Boston) and Michael Lonergan (DFAT). This event highlighted different perspectives and views on the current situation concerning our undocumented citizens in the US, building on the wide outreach that Ireland's Embassy in Washington and our Consulates across the US are undertaking as part of their very active engagement on this important issue.

WORKSHOPS

THERE WERE FIVE TOPICS
FOR DISCUSSION:

1. THE REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GLOBAL IRISH: IRELAND'S DIASPORA POLICY.

Five simultaneous workshops took place to allow participants at the Forum input into the review of the implementation of the Diaspora Policy. The publication of a specific Diaspora Policy was seen as a positive development, as was the appointment of a Minister of State for the Diaspora. The majority of people attending were aware of the policy and about half had read it in full. It was said to have brought cohesion and to have highlighted the work carried out by the Irish abroad

Youth engagement was seen as important, but also a challenge for organisations, Britain was mentioned as a particular example as the Irish community there is aging. Several ideas for how this engagement could be brought about were identified. The right to vote was seen as an important way of ensuring that young people feel that their voices are heard. Technology and social media, such as Twitter campaigns were viewed as good methods of identifying with young people. There was support in general for the idea of summer camps, with partnership with the GAA, promotion of the Irish language and engagement with school children being highlighted as possibilities for greater youth engagement.. Participants suggested that more could be done to engage the media abroad about the story of the Irish abroad.

Also raised was the importance of increasing connections between the business and civic arms of diaspora engagement, and the importance of the work of local authorities in Ireland in promoting engagement with their diasporas. Considerations related to the Government's Emigrant Support Programme arose in these workshops (as well as in the ESP specific workshops – see below), with participants highlighting the challenges posed by aging communities in Britain and the US in particular. The changing local funding environment in the UK was also highlighted as a challenge for organisations there.

2. BETTER GOVERNANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The chief facilitators for these sessions were Laura Leonard (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Helena Keleher (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and Amanda McMaw (ASM Chartered Accountants). Difficulties relating to board members was a common concern expressed by participants throughout all the workshops on governance, particularly in relation to skills shortages, difficulties in recruiting members and the amount of staff time being spent on managing boards. Another key theme was collaboration. Many participants expressed a wish for more collaboration with other organisations, both on a thematic and geographical basis. Connections around St. Patrick's Day and GAA were seen as useful. Youth engagement was seen as important, as generational gaps are emerging and it was suggested that forming links with universities could be beneficial. The application process for the Emigrant Support Programme was described as cumbersome for smaller organisations.

3. FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES AND DIVERSIFICATION

The chief facilitator for this session was Richard Dixon (Concern Worldwide). Having an effective board of management was seen as crucial. Lack of capacity in certain skillsets is a challenge. Participants advised that receiving ESP funding raises the prestige of organisations and is useful in leveraging

funding from other sources, so it therefore can have a very beneficial multiplier effect beyond the amount of the actual ESP grant. Collaboration between organisations was discussed, with the suggestion that several organisations could join together in organising a fundraising event and then divide the profit. The role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was raised in relation to this issue, as some participants were of the view that DFAT should be more involved in ensuring that collaboration is achieved. Overall the views expressed about the ESP were positive, but participants noted the burden on small organisations of the application and reporting process. Specific suggestions included shorter application forms, the provision of multi-annual funding and a change in regulations to allow funding to be spent on hiring dedicated fundraisers. While there is still merit in traditional means of fundraising such as St. Patrick's Day events, bingo and raffles, alternative ideas were presented including in-kind fundraising, for example renting out space.

4. CULTURAL HERITAGE PROGRAMMING

The chief facilitator for this session was Christine Sisk (Culture Ireland). Culture was said to be essential in combatting the potential isolation of Irish groups such as the travelling community and older people. Participants welcomed the fact that the ESP supports both welfare and cultural projects, noting the importance of culture, as it is not distinct from welfare, but rather an important aspect of health and wellbeing. Some participants were unaware of the Emigrant Support Programme and thought it should be highlighted more on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website. The importance of cultural organisations being aware of each other's work and creating better linkages was highlighted. As in several other workshops, youth engagement was seen as important and it was thought that comedy or storytelling may be a good mechanism to achieve this.

5. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE AND NEW DIASPORA NEEDS

The chief facilitator for this session was Paul Gleeson (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). Participants identified political changes in the US and Brexit as key challenges facing Irish communities abroad. Mental health was also highlighted as a recurring challenge and there were calls for increased funding in this area, and for increased support for the Irish language abroad. Demographics and numbers were discussed in terms of the future makeup of Irish community organisations. It was noted that there seems to be a trend of younger Irish people no longer integrating into local Irish communities due to improved communication and transport links with Ireland. Some participants noted that in their experience the younger emigrants now tend to only reach out in times of crisis. The generational gap that exists may be bridged by arranging events to bring young and old together. While technology is viewed in a positive light by younger people, as it allows them to easily maintain contact with Ireland, it can be an access barrier for older and middle-aged Irish people who may be less technologically savvy. Difficulty in accessing useful data on pensions for example is a concern for the ageing Irish population in the U.S. Also highlighted were the importance of having the diversity that exists among the Irish community reflected in events like the Civic Forum, and difficulties experienced by some returning emigrants.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

In addition to panel discussions, specific breakout sessions were arranged on mental health for citizens abroad and on returning emigrants.

The breakout session on **mental health** was moderated by Helena Keleher (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), with key speakers Senator Joan Freeman (Pieta House) and Catherine Hennessy (Immigrant Counselling and Psychotherapy Britain). The group discussed the specific psychological and emotional challenges faced by the Irish abroad, in particular those with complex needs, newly arrived migrants and the elderly. These include social isolation and loneliness, dementia and memory loss, childhood trauma and adversity and the impact of poverty and discrimination on disadvantaged groups, including Travellers and those in contact with the criminal justice system. The role stigma can play in acting as a block to accessing services and impeding conversations about mental wellbeing was raised. The group also discussed ways in which agencies including welfare services but also social arts and sports societies business networks and alumni associations can tackle stigma and talk more about mental health. This session was oversubscribed and there was significant interest across the spectrum of attendees.

The breakout session on **returning emigrants** was also well attended. This session was moderated by Ann Derwin (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), with key speakers Sarah Owens (Crosscare Migrant Project), Tim O'Connor (Diaspora Advisor and former senior diplomat) and James Parnell (Irish Times). Topics covered included opportunities for communities and for Ireland that returning emigrants will create, and the challenges and difficulties experienced by some returnees including the challenge of reintegration. Ireland was described as a leader in the field of diaspora engagement. One of the key findings was that the vast majority of people who decide to return to Ireland do so because of a major life event, such as the birth of a child or the death or illness of a family member. The group also discussed the changing demographics and locations of the global Irish community abroad. The then Minister of State for the Diaspora Joe McHugh T.D. joined the discussion and spoke about the work of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Irish Abroad through which government departments are working to alleviate disproportionate burdens that negatively affect returning Irish emigrants.

In addition, the Civic Forum provided an opportunity for consultation around citizen-focussed innovation and developments in the wider work of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade including the new **Consular strategy and Passport reform** and presentations were given by DFAT officials Pat Bourne and Fiona Penollar. Throughout the two days of the Forum, representatives of the Passport Office provided information on the new online passport renewal service.

A networking event took place on the first evening of the Forum, attended by university students and business people as well as attendees of the Forum. It was an opportunity for ESP organisations to network with Irish companies and business networks, and to make connections with new organisations and possible future partners. A smaller networking event took place on the second evening in order to facilitate participants who wished to further discuss issues raised at the Forum with officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and those who simply wanted an additional opportunity to network with other Forum participants to consolidate personal contacts and discuss possible opportunities for future collaboration.

KEY THEMES AND LOOKING AHEAD

The atmosphere at the Forum was energetic, with lively debates taking place over the course of the two days. Participants were deeply engaged in the topics for discussion and the overall view was that the event was beneficial, both for representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and for attendees. There seemed to be a genuine willingness to get involved and to make the most of networking opportunities. This positivity was reflected in the responses to the feedback survey which issued to all attendees. The Forum received very high satisfaction ratings and 65% of attendees reported that they had made lasting connections with new organisations and individuals.

Seven key themes emerged across the discussions in plenary sessions and workshops across the two days. In relation to many of these key issues, the in-person contacts made and networks developed by attendance at the Civic Forum will assist organisations in positively engaging on these issues. In addition there are specific things that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade can and will do to assist organisations and the global Irish more generally in these key areas:

THEME 1 THE DESIRE FOR BETTER CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS BY, AND BETWEEN, IRISH ORGANISATIONS ABROAD.

Already we have prepared and circulated the Global Irish Communications Handbook to assist Irish community organisations with their communication strategies and in particular to assist them to utilise social media in a way that benefits their work and mission. The feedback received has been very positive and we hope this resource will provide ongoing assistance to Irish organisations abroad. In addition we will:

- Further disseminate the Global Irish Communications Handbook to smaller Irish organisations worldwide who did not attend the Civic Forum, but who may find its contents of assistance to their ongoing work.
- Develop a new on-line diaspora directory on the Global Irish Hub website to highlight the range of Irish-connected organisations all over the world, to assist organisations to keep in contact with each other and to increase awareness among Irish citizens abroad and the wider diaspora of the breadth and range of Irish organisations in their area and globally.
- Use the Global Irish Newsletter to increase awareness across communities of key events and possible opportunities for collaboration.

THEME 2 INCREASED YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The need for increased youth engagement was a common thread throughout discussions over the course of the two days. We will work with our Missions abroad to identify additional opportunities for engagement with the children of Irish emigrants and the younger generations of our diaspora. We will:

- Ensure the 2017-18 ESP funding includes projects focussed on youth engagement.
- Support additional research about the needs of younger members of the diaspora.
- Look at existing Departmental youth engagement initiatives to explore possible inclusion of the global Irish.
- Engage with the GAA and other national cultural organisations to explore ideas around Irish cultural summer camps that could be delivered abroad, increasing the number of people who can benefit from this engagement.

THEME 3 FOSTERING GREATER COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS

Participants highlighted the potential benefits from increased information sharing between cultural organisations, and the possibility of additional collaboration. The new on-line Diaspora Directory will be a useful tool for organisations by assisting them to identify potential partners for cooperation. In addition, we will:

- Work through our network of Missions abroad to facilitate connections between different types of organisations and different parts of the global Irish community, including connecting welfare organisations with business networks.
- Prioritise new collaborative projects involving two or more organisations in the Emigrant Support Programme 2018-19 grant round, 'ring-fencing' €200,000 for this purpose.

THEME 4 SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE IRISH ABROAD

Supporting the mental health of our emigrants and communities abroad was raised as a key concern by participants. We will:

- Work with civil society partners to facilitate access by Irish people abroad to mental health services, including, where necessary, culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate services.
- Support the delivery of guidance and/or training to front-line staff of our Missions abroad and welfare organisations on mental health issues.
- Ensure that sustainable projects supporting the wellbeing of our communities abroad are supported by the Emigrant Support Programme, and encourage the replication of good projects to ensure practical results.

THEME 5 EMIGRANT SUPPORT PROGRAMME PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

While there was an overall understanding among participants of the need for proper management of, and accountability for, grants from exchequer funds, some noted how the current procedures can be onerous for small organisations in receipt of small amounts of funding. We will:

- Work in consultation with Missions and organisations towards the revision of the processes and procedures of the Emigrant Support Programme with the intention of moving away from a “one-size fits all” process towards processes proportionate and appropriate to the size of the organisation, and the level of funding sought, and the local legislative environment.
- Communicate with organisations so that they are kept informed of any changes to ESP processes in advance of the 2018-19 grant round.
- Continue to embed a culture of monitoring and evaluation in the Emigrant Support Programme funding.

THEME 6 BOARDS AND GOVERNANCE

Across many discussions, participants highlighted the challenges they are facing in recruiting board/committee/executive members and ensuring best practice governance procedures. We will:

- Develop guidance on good governance to assist organisations in checking themselves against best practice in the management of their affairs.
- As outlined in Theme 3, work through our network of Missions abroad to facilitate connections between different types of project and organisation and different parts of the global Irish community, including connecting welfare organisations with business networks, and looking at innovative ways to increase involvement of younger members of the diaspora with established organisations.

THEME 7 RETURNING EMIGRANTS

The challenges facing some citizens who are returning to live in Ireland having lived abroad were also discussed in a number of sessions. We will:

- In addition to the work being taken forward through the Inter-departmental Committee on the Irish Abroad, commission a specific economic report to review, and propose measures to address, issues disproportionately affecting citizens returning to live in Ireland having lived abroad.
- Work with industry partners to ensure availability of better information for returning citizens in relation to commercial matters.
- Launch a mentoring scheme targeted at assisting returning emigrant entrepreneurs.
- Support information and assistance services aimed at assisting our most vulnerable citizens abroad who may wish to return.



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