

iCommunity

A Vision for Addressing Challenges
on our Shared Island



THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY SECTOR

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iCommunity is a collaborative all-island project. It supports non-profits in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to discover and discuss the benefits of collaboration by highlighting examples of existing all-island practice while developing new opportunities to work together on shared challenges.

The project brings people and communities together to explore key themes, make plans to collaborate and showcase what works in our communities. Together we are identifying emergent local, regional, and all-island responses to challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, rural connectivity and development, digital inclusion and remote work, and how to scale responses including social enterprise to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and other emerging crises.

iCommunity is a joint initiative of The Wheel and NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action), and is supported by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities, the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, and the Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund.

Learn more at icomunityhub.org

Foreword

This report is the first of what NICVA and The Wheel hope will be many positive outcomes from collaborations by people and communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland working together to address shared challenges on a shared island basis.

Humanity and the planet itself face great challenges relating to climate change, biodiversity loss, and the need to decarbonise - but also great opportunities if we can achieve inclusive digitalisation and rural development taking advantage of our under-utilised all-island context.

The Wheel and NICVA have been working together for years on shared challenges faced by our members who span the diverse Civil Society organisations and networks in our respective jurisdictions – so we were delighted when the opportunity presented through the Shared Island initiative and with the support of the Reconciliation Fund and the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland to widen this work. Our iCommunity project enabled us to bring our members together to collaborate around the great shared challenges we all face on this island.

This report details the positive story of what happens when people north and south collaborate to agree priorities for action in areas that matter to them such as developing the island economy and social enterprise; delivering on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and achieving a just transition to a decarbonised future; and achieving digital connectedness and inclusion.

The report identifies an ambitious programme of work for civil society stakeholders to advance on a shared island basis – and we look forward to working with our joint members in progressing this vital work in the months and years ahead.

Our hunch was that there was an appetite in the third sector for practical collaboration in areas that make sense to address on an all-island basis. This hunch has been proven as you will see from the inspiring content in the report.

Deirdre Garvey
CEO, The Wheel

Seamus McAleavy
CEO, NICVA

Introduction

The iCommunity project was born from a view that civil society has a key role to play in pointing toward and leading the way in all-island collaboration. Its intent is to strengthen civil society organisations to ‘repair and build’ relationships across all communities on the island. This approach aims to bolster the foundations of North-South reconciliation work in the sector.

The focus of the iCommunity project to date has been to build on existing connections and scope potential mechanisms for new and sustainable links based on “mature, constructive relationships, built on trust and mutual respect” (DFA 2021), and to share the project learnings as widely as possible.

Led by NICVA and The Wheel, this work has been constructed upon decades of collaborations in the community and voluntary sector working towards positive change. With a specific focus on capacity building, both organisations have been supporting the sector, which includes those already working in the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (NI and ROI). Both are fully committed to working together to support a strong sector because they believe this is the best way to repair relationships and avoid issues which lead to division. The leadership in both organisations are, more than ever, committed to removing barriers to achieving peace by continuing to build a strong civil society that encompasses all communities.

Many participants in the project had not previously considered cross-border collaboration. Both those who did not have experience and those who did were asked to share their learnings via a narrative survey and some are beginning to contribute case studies and opinion pieces to the iCommunity website.

The program of activities was designed to engage people from across the island in conversations, networking opportunities and an exploration of the potential for further collaboration between organisations in NI and ROI. The approach builds on existing reports, including those published as part of the ‘Shared Island Initiative’, work by the National Economic and Social Council, and by the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

Five themes were chosen to stimulate discussion. These were thought to have resonance with shared challenges like **digital inclusion, social economy** and **rural sustainability**, but also topics that are in urgent need of a shared platform of discussion, such as **COVID-19 recovery**, and community-led **climate and biodiversity** action. Through these five themes, we have shown how much activity there already is, where organisations are at the moment, what the barriers are for collaboration, and what opportunities can be seized for the future.

Methods

To reach as wide an audience as possible, a variety of creative methods for engagement were used:

1. SenseMaker®, developed by Cynefin, is a unique survey and data collection tool which was utilised because it combines numbers and data analytics with stories and human wisdom. Using a SenseMaker collector, an invitation was issued to civil society actors in NI and ROI to share an imagined narrative about inter-jurisdictional collaboration either with or without past experience. Participants then analysed their narrative in terms of the factors that had the strongest influence on it.
2. Networking and facilitated discussion events were held based on the five themes. These included five fully online events, each lasting one and a half hours, with over 200 people registered and an attendance of 50%. There were also five full day hybrid workshops in which people could attend and interact across online or face to face interactions. For these events there was a registration of over 300 people but in person attendance was less than 50%, perhaps as people slowly returned to face-face events during the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

3. To compile information from the workshops, live graphic harvesting created visuals that would reflect key points raised by participants. The images are integrated in this report. In addition, an innovative facilitation tool from Cynefin was used: 'Future Backwards' is a method that allows participants to integrate lessons from the past, present views, and visions of utopia or dystopia, into a step by step plan of actions and risk mitigation strategies under each theme.

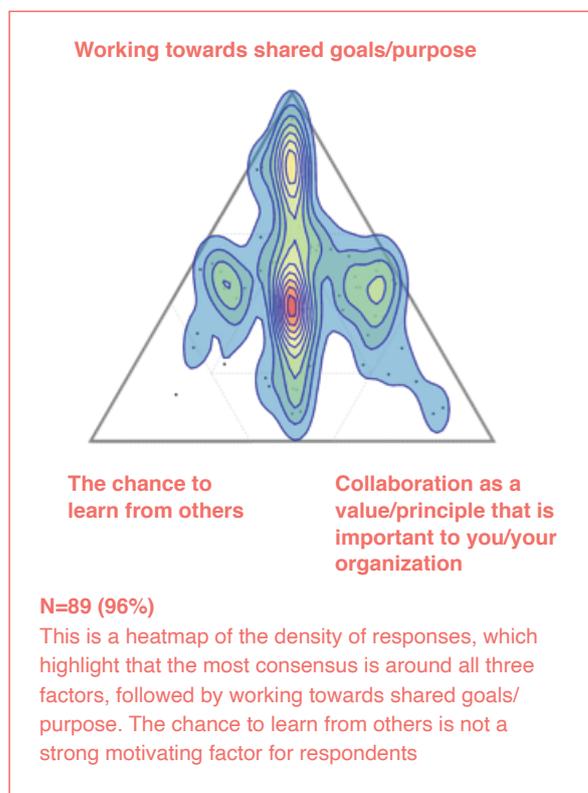


4.  A podcast was created as part of the project and shared through the iCommunity website and podcast streaming platforms. Across Divides is a 12 episode series of conversations across the five themes, with additional topics and an informal approach to appeal to a wider audience.

Appetite for collaboration

The Centre for Cross-Border Studies (2021) recently found that there is a “strong commitment to North-South and East-West cooperation among community organisations and local authorities on the island of Ireland, and significant determination to maintain cross-border relations and continue collaborative activities despite what was considered to be a negative political context”. On a similar thread, the National Economic and Social Research Council’s ‘Shared Island Shared Opportunity’ (2022), states that a solid foundation for the Irish government’s Shared Island initiative “is made up of working connections and relationships operating and evolving at various levels, from formal institutions to community-level networks”.

Motivation and willingness among the community and voluntary sector is a crucial backbone to all-island collaboration. This report finds that it is primarily driven by the desire to work towards shared goals or purposes (fig. 1), with many organisations valuing the principle of collaboration. Nonetheless, concerns about cross-border work remain, and these must be addressed if the third sector is to be empowered as a catalyst for change.

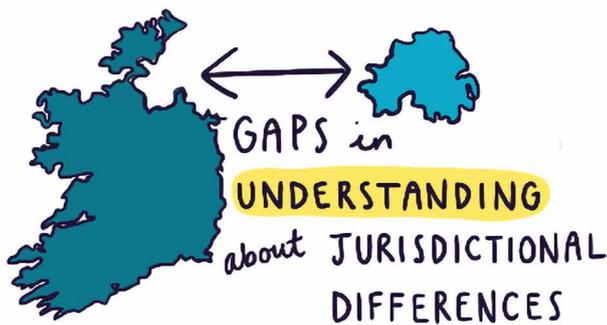


(Fig. 1) What would motivate you to work on an all-island collaboration? From Sensemaker data.

In advance of the iCommunity workshop series, participants were asked to imagine that they were about to embark on a project which requires collaboration with partners on an all island/cross-border basis. To gain an understanding of both their interest and uncertainties, they were asked what hopes and fears they would have about embarking on such a project. Of those who responded, 47% had worked on an all island/cross-border project and the remaining 53% had not. For participants who had not previously taken part in all island/cross-border work, there was a clear drive to do so, exemplified by many varied hopes. These included a participant who hoped to “learn from a variety of approaches, perspectives and expertise”; and another who aspired “to create a

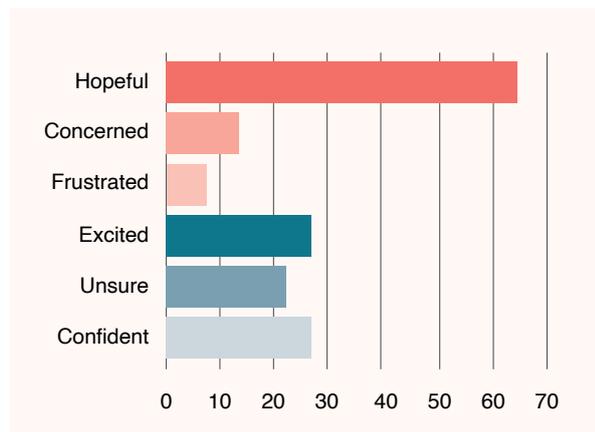
community of practice where partners can explore a variety of theories of change, explore experiences and create spaces where learning can be garnered”. Another participant responded, “my hope would be that it is not seen as a “cross-border” venture, but just people who have similar needs that work together”.

Fears among these participants lay primarily in the bureaucratic barriers and time commitments that could be foreseen in cross-border work. For example, one participant highlighted fears about “a bureaucratic process that uses resources”, and another stated they were unsure about “basic difference in regulations, funding, governance and reporting”. It is regrettable that a strong appetite for all island collaboration is held back by a lack of familiarity with bureaucratic processes. The same response was shared by many of the participants who had previously worked on an all-island basis: “Key barriers for me in the past have been a lack of understanding of each other’s jurisdictions”.



(image captured from live event)

Difference also breeds creativity, and there are learnings that can be taken from past experience. Some participants were able to share their wisdom from previous work: “it requires a good understanding of the nuances of delivering community-focused work in areas with very different communities and issues”. In general, the experiences of those who had taken part in cross-border work sheds light on a hopeful outlook for all-island collaboration: “When projects or programmes have staff given an all island remit, or are resourced to collaborate across borders, then great things happen”, noted one participant in a mindset shared my many others - such a feeling was supported by data gathered from the SenseMaker. While those who were surveyed expressed a range of emotions in relation to the thoughts they shared, the predominant feeling was ‘hopeful’ (fig), followed by ‘confident’ and ‘excited’. Of those who chose ‘hopeful’, the most common word they used to describe the thoughts they shared was ‘collaboration’. This presents a promising picture for all-island work, and a strong pretext to examine the themes laid out in this report.



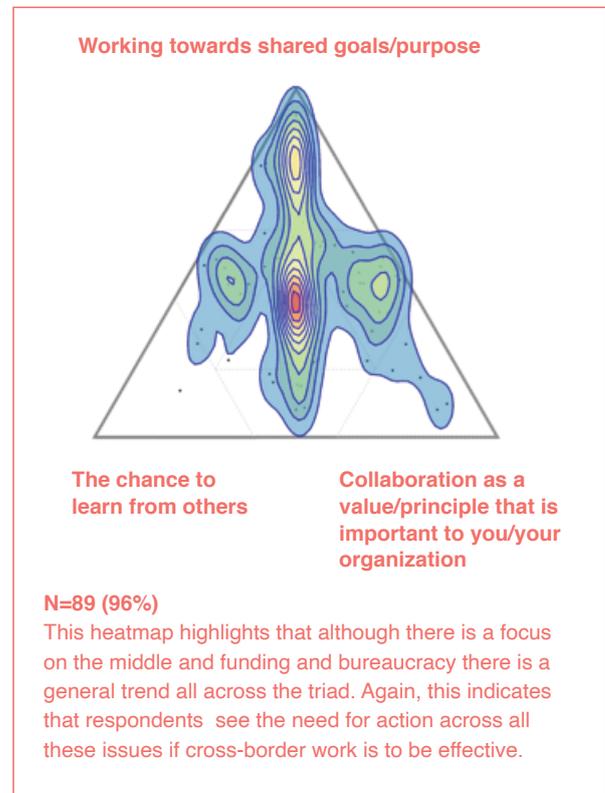
(SenseMaker fig)

Barriers and opportunities

Whilst the project addressed five separate themes, it found there were commonalities in the major barriers and opportunities that exist for all-island collaboration in the community and voluntary sector. This section draws upon discussion from the workshops and excerpts from those surveyed, reflecting the general feelings of participants. The barriers and opportunities apply across most of the following chapters, but are not revisited to avoid repetition and fragmentation.

Funding

Of the barriers highlighted in the SenseMaker survey, the prevalent topic was funding and bureaucracy. Funding opportunities must be flexible to accommodate the risks associated with groups of people working together across borders. In their report on 'delivering a new rural policy framework for Northern Ireland' (2022), Rural Community Network and The Community Foundation emphasise calculated risk taking as something to do more of, reducing the amount of excessive bureaucracy and auditing on grant programs. This means that funding silos need to be broken down and opportunities must allow for learning not only from successes, but also failures. In summary, participants advocated for funding that avoids simplistic frameworks to respect the complexity of the issues being addressed, taking into account regionality, urban-rural differences and a diversity of traditions. The existence of such flexibility is also recognised in the overlap of themes within this project.



(Fig, from SenseMaker: To develop effective cross-border working, we need to develop solutions to...?)

Most community and voluntary sector organisations participating in the project stated that demand for their services had risen but this has not been matched by funding. This means that while staff were very interested in pursuing opportunities for collaboration, they lack the time or resources to find and work with collaborative partners. There is a need for dedicated funding streams that facilitate networking and relationship building across the island, and examples were shared by participants from the past and during the pandemic. These included funding for social encounters and study trips with no agenda other than allowing relationships to emerge, with the possibility of forming partnerships but not as a requirement. Setting this groundwork is

essential to developing projects with meaning and purpose, with funding opportunities that can meet the needs of innovative projects, rather than fitting projects to set funding objectives. “There has to be equity in both partners and a shared objective, not just a funding opportunity”, stated one participant.



(image captured from live event)

While incentive and willingness for all-island collaboration persist, many of the mechanisms and frameworks to support it have been lost with Brexit. The loss of funding streams through the European Union has reduced the number of incentivised collaboration programs, including cross-border policy frameworks such as Interreg, Life, and Leader. Legacy projects have been jeopardised and there is a need to reestablish cross-border collaboration and linked policies. There is potential for this under the new PEACE PLUS program, which runs from 2021 to 2027. The program aims to contribute to a more prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland, but there is flexibility to include partners outside of the core area.

Communication and connections

Collaborating on an all-island basis needs to recognise differences, not only between institutions and bureaucratic processes as outlined above, but crucially in terms of identity and culture. There needs to be a process of listening and learning, information sharing, and the recognition of overlapping spheres of identity.



(images captured from live event)

Identity arose as its own theme while participants explored the potential for collaboration. Many were clear that care needs to be taken to recognise the multifaceted nature of individual identities, avoiding the kinds of definitive categorisation that leads to a mindset of partition. An example was provided by a participant who worked with young people on both sides of the border: “single identity groundwork had to be done... breaking down prejudice and stereotypes before collaborative meetings could take place”. This groundwork also needs to take into account specific traumas that must be treated with delicacy, and deserve the time commitment to be overcome or processed: “Recognition of the different cultures... of the hundreds or more who have been traumatised by the troubles and in the varying degrees in which people may be in recovery from these events”. The convening of specific opportunities for sharing, facilitated by events like the iCommunity workshops, is key to creating agency within communities so that they can have the space and opportunities to learn from one another. The methodology employed in the workshops, imagining where we want to be and then working backwards, was highlighted by several participants as a productive means of generating ideas for progress. It allows communities to work together on creative solutions that are sustainable, supported to create restorative spaces where people can reflect and connect, with more energy to contribute.

One participant described “the importance of deep listening at a civic level, grassroots consultation and engagement to really get to what matters for people in both/all communities and then carefully discerning where communities can network together to support their own expressed vision. Successful collaboration at this level can

mean that we move from local benefit to broader societal impact. For instance two communities will have separate but similar visions for young people and their development. They will often achieve their vision. However, by networking with others they can not only create more incredibly interesting experiences for young people but also work together to impact upon youth policy at a deeply practical level”.

It was mentioned frequently at workshops that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a cultural shift, with people more inclined to look outwards, thinking outside the box and open to collaboration. This is perhaps a moment to be seized in the pursuit of all-island work, but needs to be matched by policy, legislation and inclusive processes. The kinds of listening and collaboration that have formed the first phase of the iCommunity project are also necessary for the inclusion of those supporting marginalised groups, especially following the deepening societal inequalities that have been highlighted by the pandemic and will be detailed later in this report.

Shared narratives

One of the strongest commonalities among the community and voluntary sector on the island of Ireland is that many of the same challenges are being tackled through their work. Building relationships and finding solutions that have already worked depends upon effective storytelling and amplification of existing projects across the island. This is something that the iCommunity project have started to do, and is a point that emphasises the need for a shared practice hub.



(image captured from live event)



(image captured from live event)

Political foundation

Unfamiliarity with political processes between the jurisdictions has already been highlighted, but beyond this there is a fear of political instability, especially towards Northern Ireland, that is a disincentive to all-island collaboration. A mindset of reluctance among organisations in the Republic of Ireland was highlighted, meaning that all-island collaboration for civil society and communities is left at the mercy of poor politics. The Centre for Cross Border Studies (2021) finds that “smaller organisations with limited resources and with various competing organisational priorities within their own jurisdiction, are beginning to view cross-border cooperation with Northern Ireland as potentially overly problematic and, therefore,

something they may feel increasingly reluctant to be engaged in even if they still recognise its inherent value”. The point was further raised by NESC (2022), reporting that “a conducive and certain political environment is fundamental to continuing all-island co-operation and engagement”, further stating that government actors across and between the islands, “should seek and prepare for an opportunity to reset the context and agenda for north-south and east-west co-operation”. The CCBS (2021) further highlights that “among the major factors seen as shaping the negative political context was the destabilising effects of political division in Northern Ireland due to attitudes towards the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, and the UK Government’s relations with the EU”.



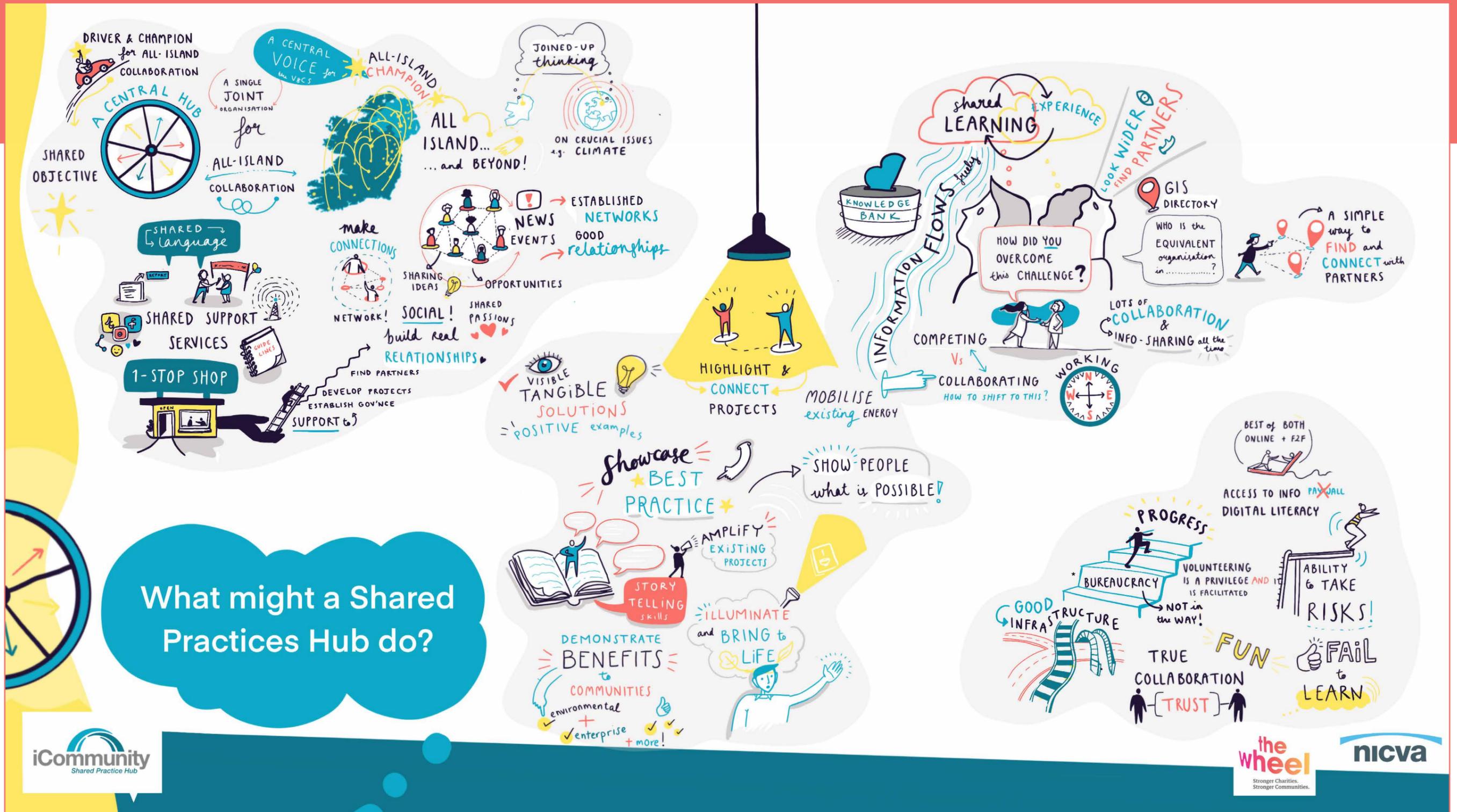
(image captured from live event)



But whilst political instability might be a disincentive for collaboration, the gap left by institutional and political disharmony may be providing an opportunity for the community and voluntary sector to thrive. During an event on a shared island approach hosted by TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change), sociology professor at Maynooth University, Colin Coulter, suggested that political instability in Northern Ireland did not align with the significant progress being

made in other areas. Pointing to the fact that Northern Ireland has reached the longest time for which a democratic legislature has gone without sitting, he said in that time Northern Ireland has had winners for the Booker Prize, Turner Prize and the European Prize for Literature – “Northern Irish civil society is booming”, he summarised.

A collaborative support hub



There is significant opportunity for all-island work in the community and voluntary sector. From the side of the sector itself, overcoming the barriers outlined in the previous chapter of this report depends upon meaningful networking, sharing and amplifying of ideas, and the resources to do so. Throughout the workshops and online surveys, the need for a central hub that supports and facilitates all-island collaboration was repeatedly highlighted. A desire for this to be hosted online was also prevalent, with indications that this was the best way to make use of time and resources, allowing materials to be accessible to hard-to-reach groups and reducing travel expenditure. While this does not undermine the value of in-person collaboration, it provides a one-stop-shop that allows organisations to begin to address many of the barriers highlighted in this report, and to seize the opportunities that we describe.

In the survey and during the workshop series, participants were asked what they might like such a collaborative hub to do or offer (present following quotes in creative manner?):

“Be a go to place for information and match making between organisations and also to support the development of collaborative funding applications.”

“Bring together potential partners - identifying commonalities. Information and advice on how best to navigate funding criteria. Provide opportunities for collaboration with potential partners.”



(image captured from live event)

“Shared learnings from real people on areas that are identified as causing difficulties for collaboration.”

“Easy to access; online; possibly some online real time engagement; a clearly communicated purpose.”

SHARED OBJECTIVE



SHARED language

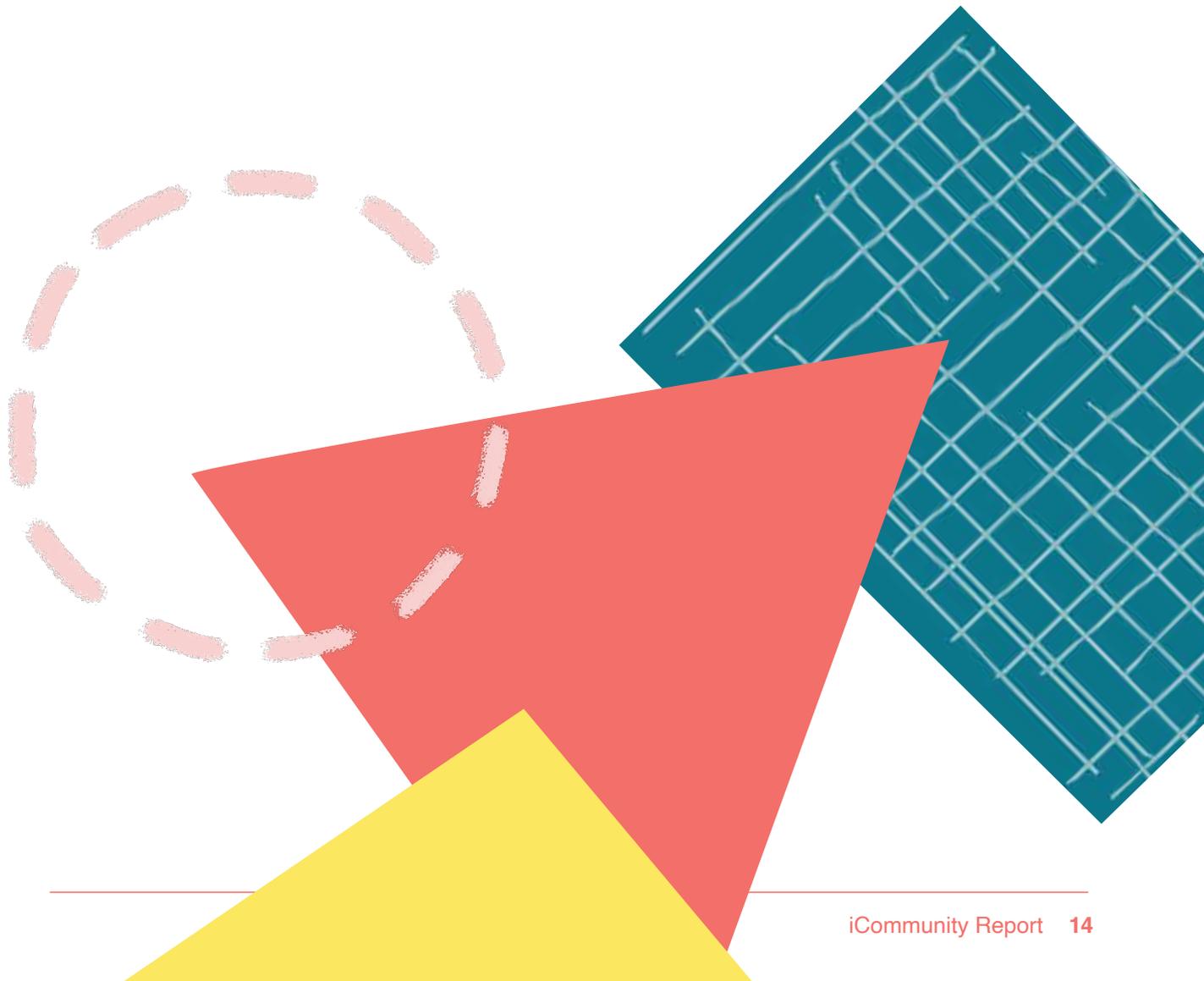


SHARED SUPPORT SERVICES

1-STOP SHOP



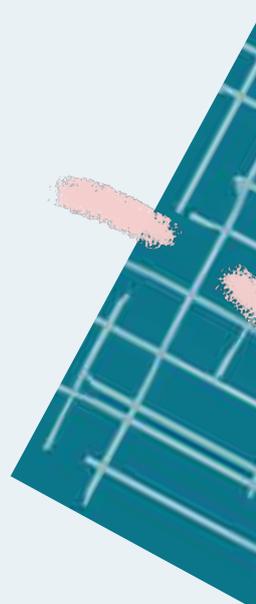
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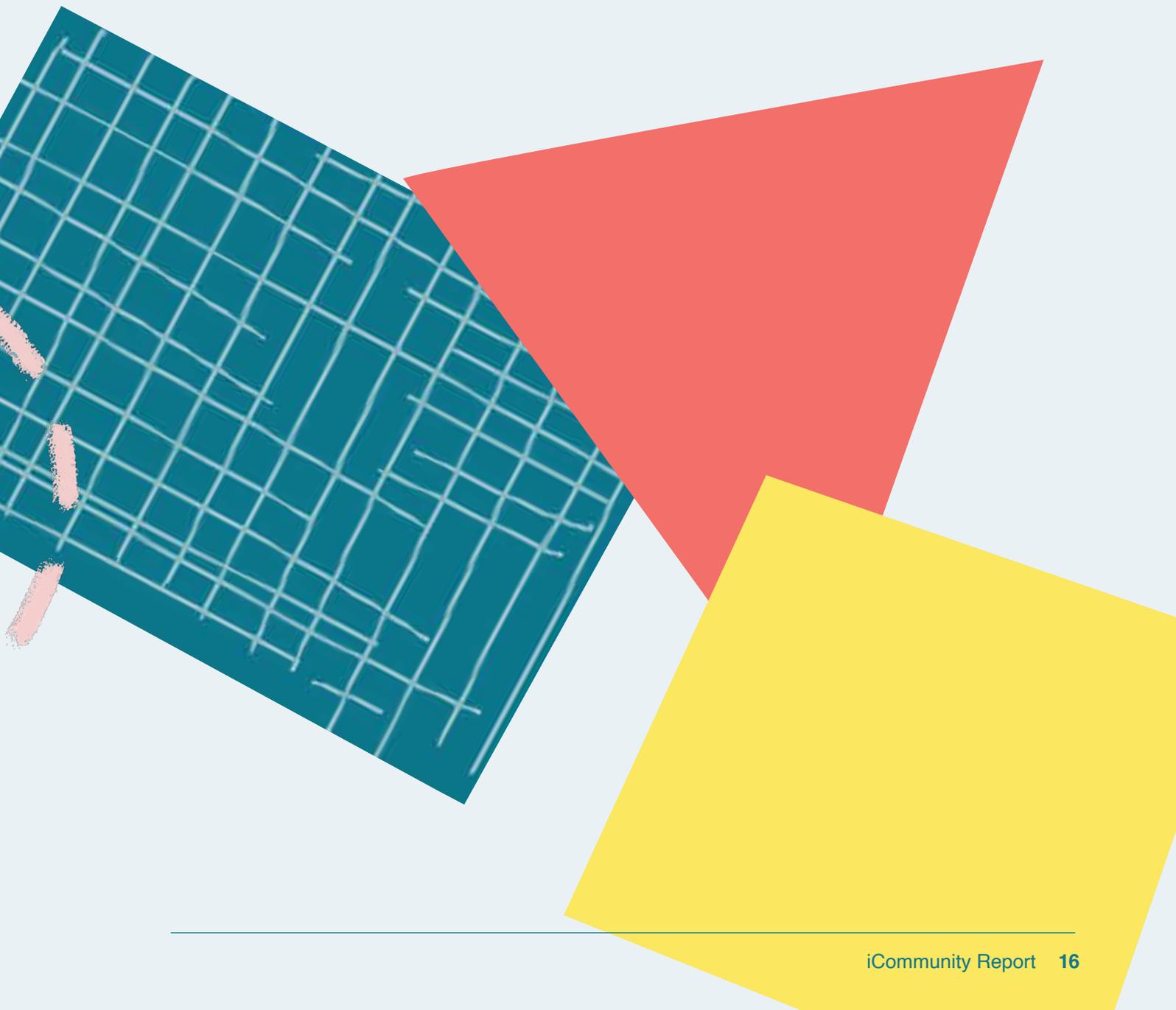


Project themes

The Wheel and NICVA identified five themes for all-island collaboration to be explored through the iCommunity project. These were based on issues of concern and interest to the people and organisations they support across the island, and which most clearly lent themselves to an all-island collaborative approach. Within some of the themes, fledgling all-island collaboration had already begun at a certain level and there was potential for expanded collaborations. There is some overlap between the themes, and this highlights the need for appropriate discussions, funding and legislation that supports collaborative work across multiple areas.

The iCommunity project has provided an unprecedented opportunity to bring together a wide range of people and communities from across the island with interest, knowledge, and lived experiences of these shared issues, enabling them to explore and identify ways to enhance collaboration that tackles them.

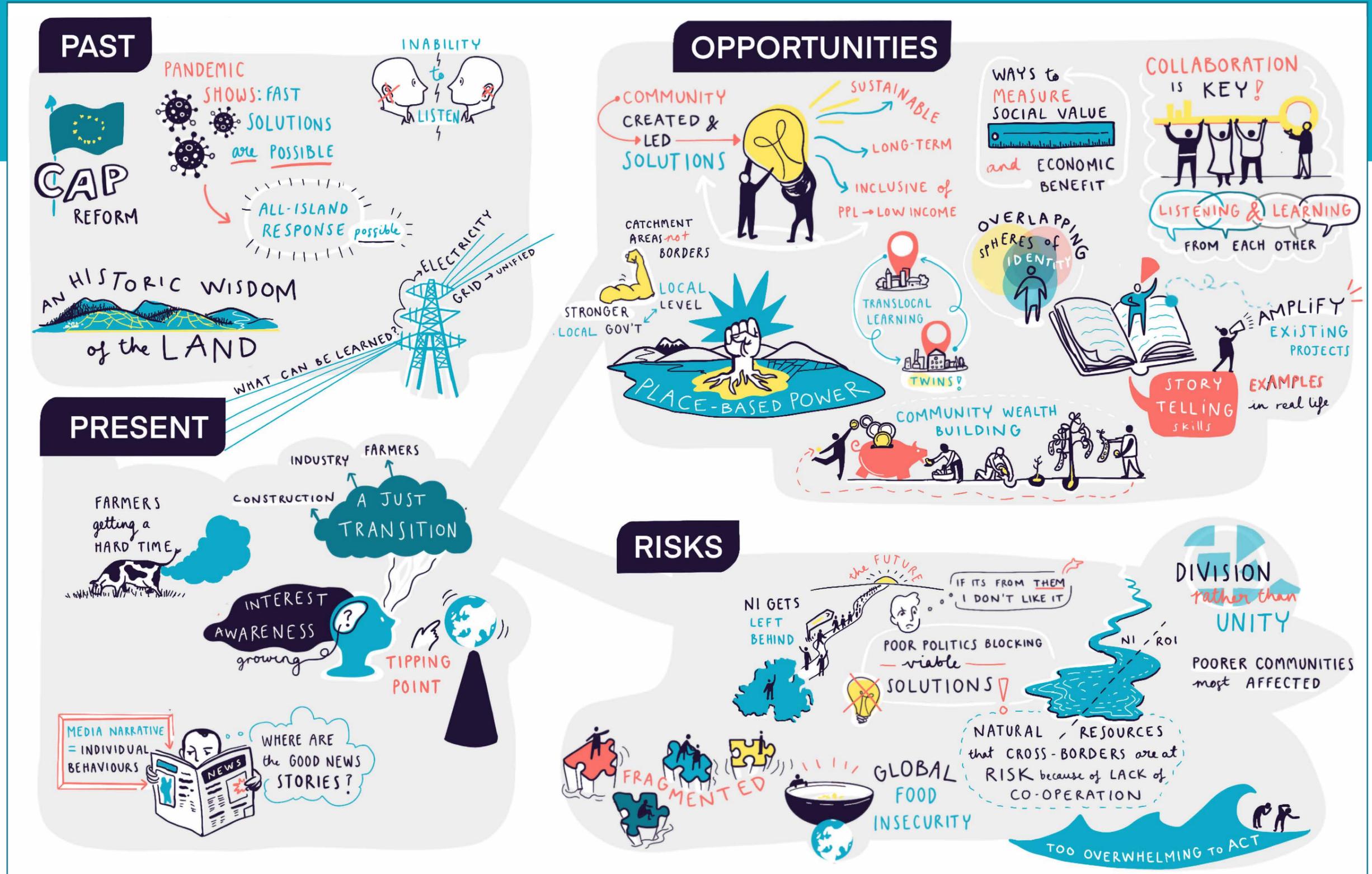




Climate change and the sustainable development goals

A Community Approach to Climate Change, Decarbonisation and the SDG's

Dublin 1 May 4th 2022



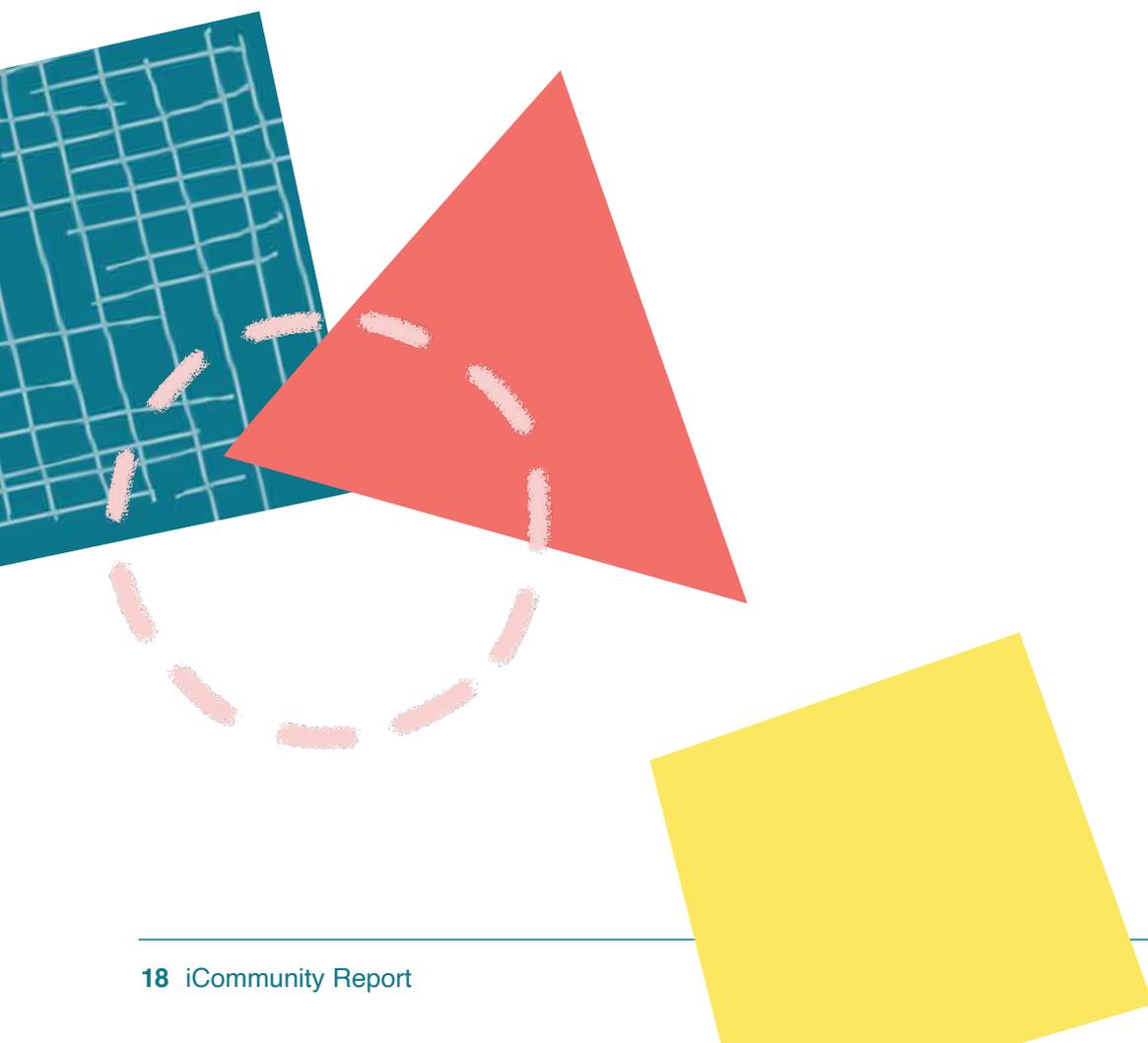
The climate and biodiversity crises are universal challenges, and global responses are taking place through international cooperation. On this small island it is impossible to look at environmental issues as anything but a shared challenge, and this lends well to integrated and collaborative solutions.

One participant noted that: “Currently more work is done with partners in England, Scotland and Wales than with those in the Republic of Ireland. Given that Ireland is a single biogeographical unit, we should be doing more cross border partnership on an all-island basis to deliver outcomes for climate and biodiversity”.



(image captured from live event)

Of all the workshops and events, this theme gained the most attention and was highlighted as a powerful and tangible opportunity for all-island collaboration.





(image captured from live event)

In February 2021, the Shared Island Unit within the Department of the Taoiseach hosted the Shared Island Dialogues with a range of groups and organisations, institutions and departments from across the island. There was a strong focus on biodiversity, nature-based solutions, and working for a just transition to a carbon neutral future. The consistency of this theme across various workshops, dialogues and reports highlights its importance in all-island collaboration.

Climate emergencies have been declared in the Dáil and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and there are already examples of all-island work to address these challenges. The NESC report, 'Shared Island Shared Opportunity (2022) highlights "considerable potential to build on the progress of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, and to further discussion on issues such as nature recovery networks and a wildlife web, developing linkages or corridors of natural vegetation between existing conservation areas". The report goes on to say that "in order to deepen progress, efforts need to be focused on collaborative projects and outcomes which make a real difference to communities on the ground - on both sides of the border". Similarly, the iCommunity workshops raised the need to scale up existing solutions such as Ark Gardens, Community Wetland Forums, Grow It Yourself, Rivers Trust, Belfast Healthy Cities, and Dingle Peninsula 2030.



(image captured from live event)



During the iCommunity podcast 'Across Divides', we learned of the work already being done, such as work by the Rivers Trust to address

challenges of pollution in river catchments that cross jurisdictional boundaries. It is important to highlight such existing successes led by communities whilst providing support and networking between them.

Podcast guests on the biodiversity focused episode: Dr Una Fitzpatrick (senior ecologist at the National Biodiversity Data Centre), Mark Horton (All Ireland Director of The Rivers Trust and chairperson of Ballinderry Rivers Trust) and Shirley Clerkin (heritage officer at Monaghan County Council) all expressed that support for community organisations must include access to funding with room for failure, and support to work with ecologists and experts.

Participants at the workshop on this theme emphasised that if communities are to be engaged in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises then work must be done to overcome divisions not only between jurisdictions but in the conversations about these joint issues. They highlighted that many of the approaches taken so far have failed to include meaningful engagement with the needs of farmers, communities and marginalised groups. This was further evidenced in the 'Talking Green' survey carried out by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies in partnership with TASC (2020), which found that the farming community showed the most substantial de-prioritisation of climate action. This blocks opportunities for community solutions, leading to a stasis that puts the island at risk when what is needed is resilience. The same report found significant distrust of politicians in the Republic of Ireland, emphasising the clear necessity for a community-led response.



(image captured from live event)



Another episode of the Across Divides podcast focused on decarbonising the island. Deliberative democracy and community wealth

building were discussed as principles upon which to build a fair transition to carbon neutrality. Rebekah McCabe, from Involve NI, outlined the integration of deliberation not just among the community and voluntary sector, but at the government level to overcome the sort of adversarial debate that has characterised decision making over the climate crisis. This was highlighted as being critical for a Just Transition when decarbonising the island.

While Khalil Moran (currently undertaking a PhD focusing on Community Wealth building) noted that while the empowerment of communities is crucial to a just Transition, there needs to be visible action at the government level: “I don’t think you can do everything at the local level, you need the grass-roots and the top-down to meet each other, and I think there is a really specific, actionable path for people to take if they want to roll into that process, and I think it’s achievable”.



(image captured from live event)

The opportunity for the island of Ireland to become a model for other countries was noted in the episode, since as a small island we have the capacity to achieve widespread and collaborative change. If this can be based on global models such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), then we will be able to demonstrate that such frameworks are practical and achievable, and can be applied at a larger scale. However, it was noted during the workshops that there is a lack of general understanding on what the sustainable development goals are.



(image captured from live event)

Recommendations

- Tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis must include meaningful engagement with farmers, communities and marginalised groups.
- There needs to be better supports and barrier removal for the scaling up of existing community-led solutions in the climate and biodiversity crises.

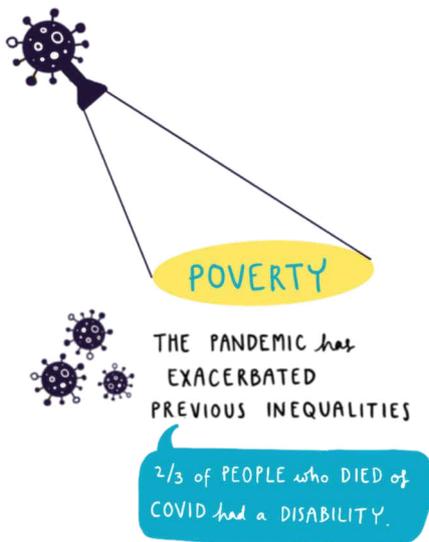
Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

Helping Communities Recover from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Belfast | 10 May 2022



The workshop and online event for this theme had the lowest turnout across the entire series. Those attending were organisations supporting some of the most impacted groups during the pandemic, youth, older people, migrants and people with disabilities. Concern was expressed that this might be indicative of a continuation of the lack of attention to the inequitable impact of COVID-19 on marginalised groups, with much of the wider public seeing issues surrounding the pandemic as already past or forgotten. The long-term impacts of the pandemic more generally on health, mental health, employment, and education among other marginalised groups emphasises the need for a fair recovery from the pandemic.



(image captured from live event)

The impacts on vulnerable groups highlighted during the workshops included loss of independence for the elderly and those with disabilities. A report published by Disability Action Northern Ireland found that 35% of social care had been impacted, over half of the people they surveyed had experienced disruption to accessing food and medicine, and there was a notable decline in physical and mental wellbeing. A key element in the response to the pandemic is

gathering the lived experiences of people from marginalised groups and bringing them to the fore. Highlighting people to act as champions, replacing traditional gatekeepers, and harnessing their stories in legislation. It is important to take into consideration the different barriers faced by people who are recovering from the pandemic, a process that will take longer for some than others.



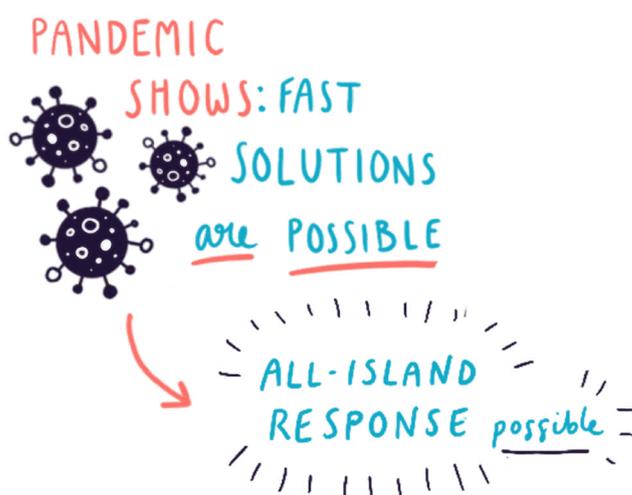
(image captured from live event)

A feminist recovery plan published by the Women’s Policy Group for Northern Ireland and featured on the Across Divides podcast, analyses the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in terms of economic justice, health, social justice and cultural inequality. It stipulates that “any recovery programme put in place, must meaningfully take into consideration the institutionalised inequalities that exist within Northern Ireland, and must co-develop a roadmap forward with the communities affected”. While the need for a fast management plan during the pandemic may have been one factor that led to the exclusion of marginalised groups, there is an opportunity to address such exclusion via the co-production of recovery plans. This and other development plans can build on the community support that was exemplified during the pandemic.

Participants noted that responses worked well where existing community organisations were supported by governments in an open and discursive partnership. Progress made in these new and flexible relationships in the community sector need to be allowed to continue, it was felt. In other aspects of civil society, it was highlighted that the need for democratic participative processes that reflect the leadership of community organisations has never been more important to deal with the convergence of crises. Learning from the pandemic extends to issues of equality and representation. Several organisations represented at the workshop noted progress had been made in their areas, such as migrant and disability rights before the pandemic set their work back significantly. However they also suggested that pre-pandemic approaches often did not allow for fast responses to emerging situations. Many participants expressed that learnings from the pandemic, such as flexibility in the government response should be used to accelerate work that was slowly gaining momentum beforehand.

Recommendations

- Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic must be inclusive of marginalised groups, learning from their lived experiences and taking the opportunity to work towards a fair and equitable society.
- Democratic participative processes to be at the core of all group engagements to better reflect the leadership of community organisations, which have never been more needed, to deal with the convergence of crises.



(image captured from live event)



TRANS-LOCAL LEARNING

POLICY

ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

ACCESS for ALL

COMMUNITIES AT THE CENTRE

FURTHEST BEHIND FIRST

ALL VOICES HEARD

LOCAL SERVICES LOCALLY DESIGNED

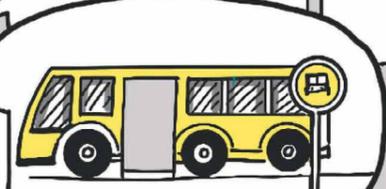
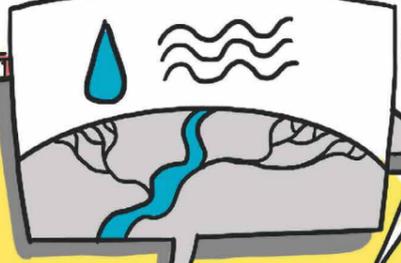
SUPPORTING FARMERS

CARBON CAPTURE

CHEESE

15 MIN TOWN

LOCAL ARK



Social economy

Developing the Island Economy & Social Enterprise

Belfast | Wednesday April 25th 2022

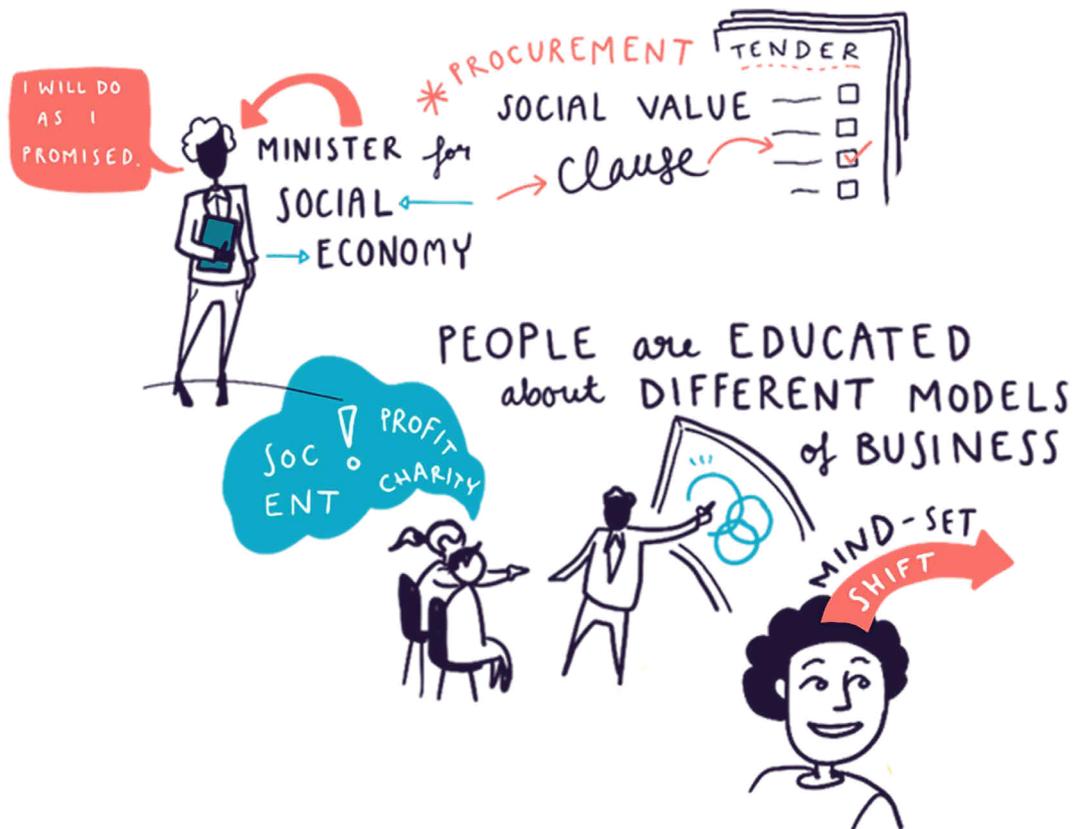


Social enterprises provide opportunities for the provision of services and employment to support disadvantaged communities and address issues such as food poverty, social housing, or environmental issues. While there has been a growing understanding of the social enterprise sector, both in the public domain and within the sector itself, there is still work to be done in raising awareness of its potential across the island. This can be achieved both through public sector interventions that encourage all-island collaborations in the sector, and through networks within the sector itself. However, there has been no specific work at a policy level across the different jurisdictions on the island.



(image captured from live event)

The Department of Rural and Community Development in the Republic of Ireland published its first government policy for social enterprises in 2019. This policy has the key objectives of building awareness around social enterprise; growing and strengthening social enterprise; and achieving better policy alignment. While Northern Ireland does not yet have a formal policy, various government departments are active in the area through an All Party Group on Social Enterprise. Overall, responsibility for the development of social enterprise policy in Northern Ireland resides with the Department for the Economy, but the Department for Communities also provides key support to the sector as part of its urban regeneration and rural development mandate. In June 2018, the British-Irish Council, established as part of the Good Friday Agreement, agreed on social enterprise as the new theme for its social inclusion work sector. The Department of Rural and Community Development contributes to the Council's work in this area, along with representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive, Scotland, Wales, Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. This forum also provides an opportunity for peer learning and cross border cooperation in the area of social enterprise. A more coordinated approach to public sector interventions could encourage more all-island collaboration in social enterprise.



(image captured from live event)

While the National Social Enterprise Strategy has benefits in the Republic of Ireland, there is a level of bureaucracy that needs to be overcome to collaborate across the border. Participants felt that in the past, social enterprises were vibrant in the border counties and benefited from cross-border funding. They saw that this kind of enabling environment could be reinvigorated through the creation of social value clauses in contracts and procurement, and the development of funding streams, being careful not to draw away from other community organisations with no capacity to trade.

Within the sector itself, networking was highlighted by participants as a major step towards effective collaboration, allowing representative bodies of social enterprise to work together towards common goals and support the growth of the sector. There are already representative bodies in both jurisdictions. The Irish Social Enterprise Network is the national body for social enterprise in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and Social Enterprise Northern Ireland is an independent member-led organisation that acts as the representative body for social enterprises and social entrepreneurs. These networks have connected in the past but there has been limited funding or extra capacity to facilitate continual connection and learning.



(image captured from live event)

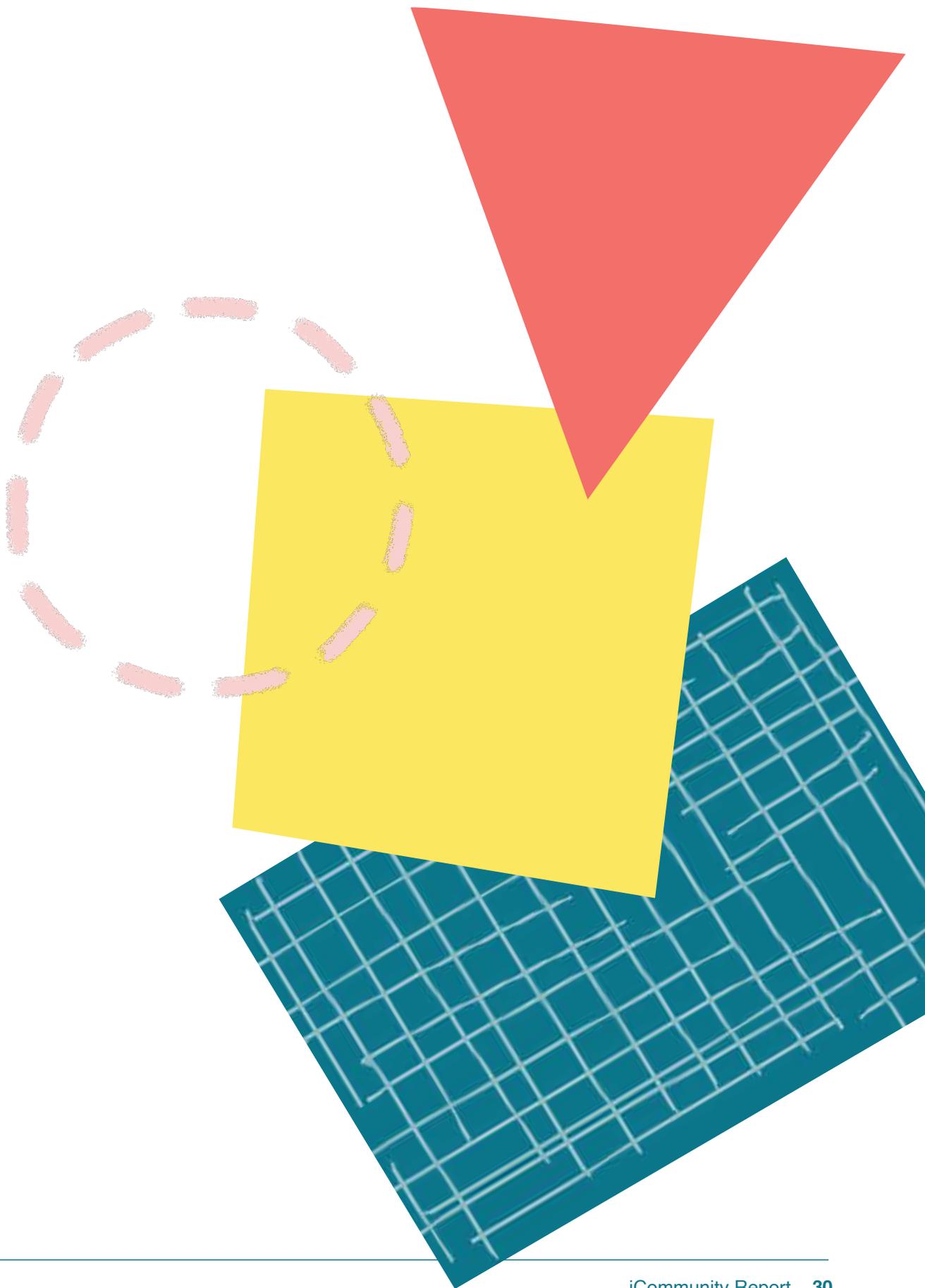


(image captured from live event)

There are large social enterprises that have been very successful and can share their learnings with small startups. A database of groups, organisations and social enterprises was strongly suggested so that ideas can be shared. As stated by one participant: “I am thinking of an online hub for social entrepreneurs and enterprises from the island, with interest groups, each interest group can then meet individually at regular times and create solid connections which can then further develop outside of the hub. - it should be a place where we can look for and find partners for shared projects”. It was also suggested that collaborations could be spread globally, allowing social enterprises to demonstrate their local impacts and join in ways of thinking about key issues like climate and social justice. Work is already being done between NI, England, Scotland and Wales, and the ROI could be brought into these networks in an effort at east-west collaboration.

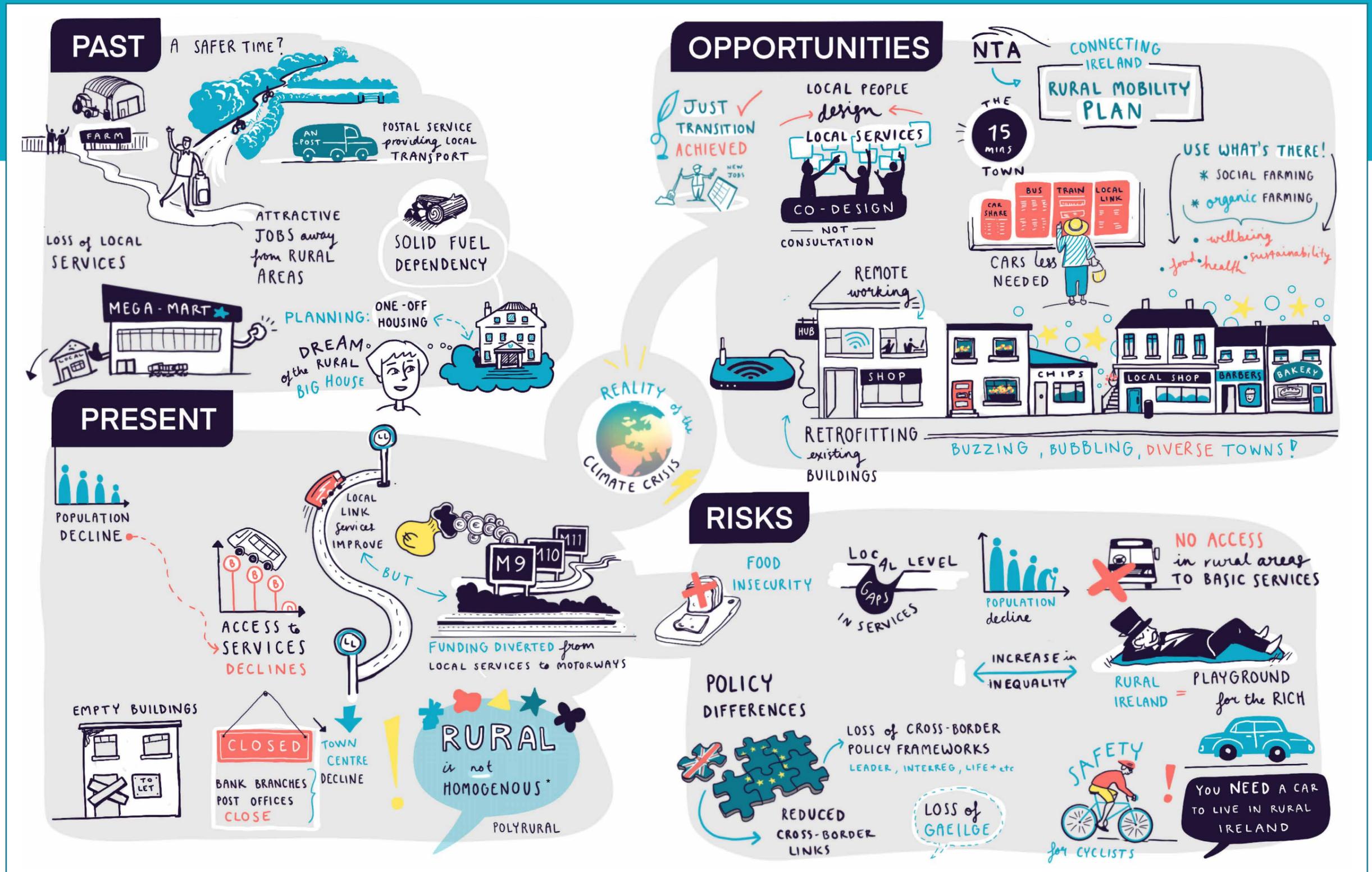
Recommendations

- Public sector interventions that reduce the burden of bureaucracy are needed to support the growth of the sector.
- There needs to be specific support for more all-island and international networking within the sector so that new social economy innovations can learn from the experience of existing projects.



Rural sustainability

Rural
Connectivity &
Sustainability
Dublin 1 19th May



*sic

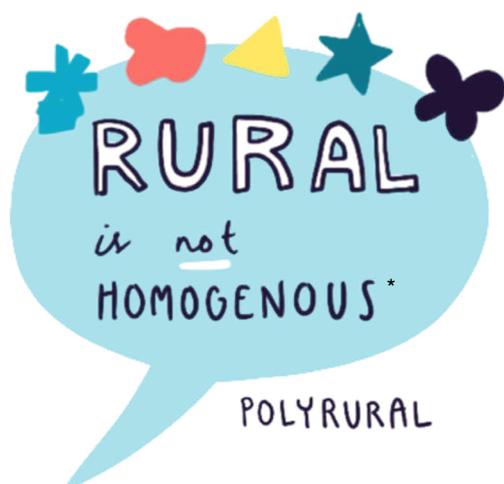
The Irish government’s Rural Development Policy (2021) aims to enhance, develop and deepen all aspects of north-south cooperation and the all-island economy. Similarly, the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland (2021) identifies a need for cross-border cooperation as well as synergy with the rest of the UK and the EU. This is important, as highlighted by participants in the iCommunity workshop on rural sustainability, since similar challenges are faced in both jurisdictions. However, it was noted by participants under this theme that while the broad challenges overlap the characteristics of each area differ and local knowledge of development needs is crucial to addressing them.

For example, according to participants, transport funding has excluded small local projects, making walking or cycling less safe in rural communities. There is also a cascade effect resulting from rural out migration that has exacerbated the decline in transport services since there is less incentive for public investment. This leads to wider impacts on healthcare and social exclusion as people living in rural areas are less able to travel to access services or engage with friends and family. It was suggested that the island be connected through a transport policy that provides bottom-up support to build transport services, reducing the costs for individuals and families who presently rely on cars. This would have an additional climate impact.



(image captured from live event)

(image captured from live event)



(image captured from live event)

Out-Migration by younger people was a major discussion point in the workshop on rural sustainability. It was proposed that an effort to retain local populations would benefit from more representation by younger people and marginalised groups to create more innovative solutions for rural issues. It was argued that people would be motivated to stay if they are empowered to contribute, but to achieve this the drivers of out-migration must also be addressed.

*sic



(image captured from live event)

A major driver is poverty that needs to be tackled with strategies including universal basic income and diverse employment opportunities in rural areas. Another driver was the effect of food policies that have left farms in decline or at risk of debt. Farmers were described as being “at the whim of global markets”, and it was suggested that there is a need for more local markets that improve food security whilst supporting livelihoods and wellbeing.

RURAL SUSTAINABILITY

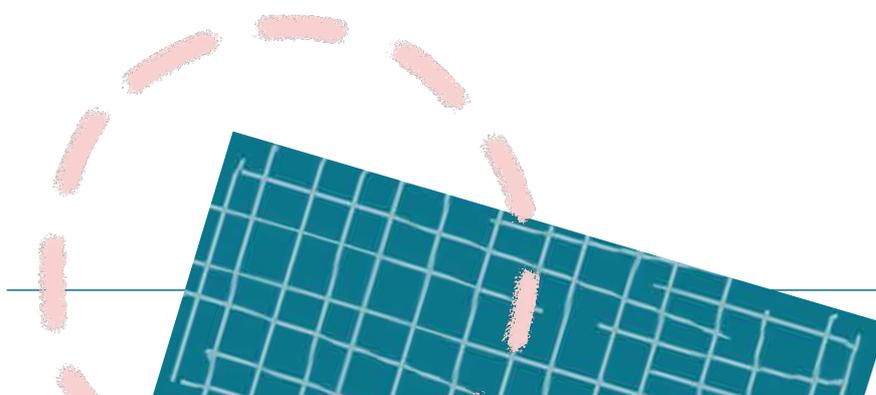


(image captured from live event)

CONTRIBUTING to RURAL LIVELIHOODS & wellbeing

If the issues facing rural communities are to be overcome, then it was emphasised that this must be done through co-creation and community design, not the poor level of consultation that was noted as characterising past interventions. This can be achieved in part through local, regional and all-island

networks that allow people to learn about the possibilities for local development and facilitate their own decision making. Access to experts in selected areas of activity was also noted as being vital if local communities are to have a level playing field with other more extractive economic actors.





(image captured from live event)

Such agency can shift communities away from market-led development that leads to the kinds of issues described above for rural dwellers such as young people trying to access housing and farmers' routes to market.



(image captured from live event)

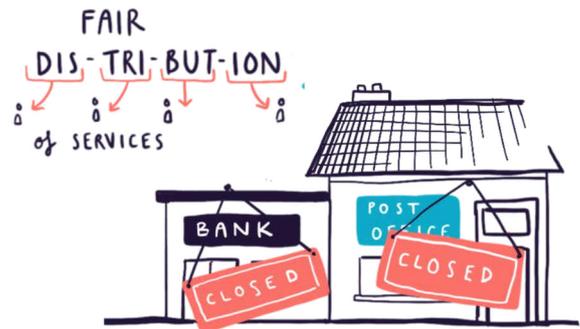
Connecting people more locally through accessible transport along with re-localised production, plus innovations in retrofitting of towns and village buildings through locally

run cooperatives and accessible service provision, will help to achieve more livable vibrant rural communities.



(image captured from live event)

Connecting regionally, all-island and with international rural networks depends on improvements to digital inclusion and connectivity, which will be discussed in the following chapter.



(image captured from live event)



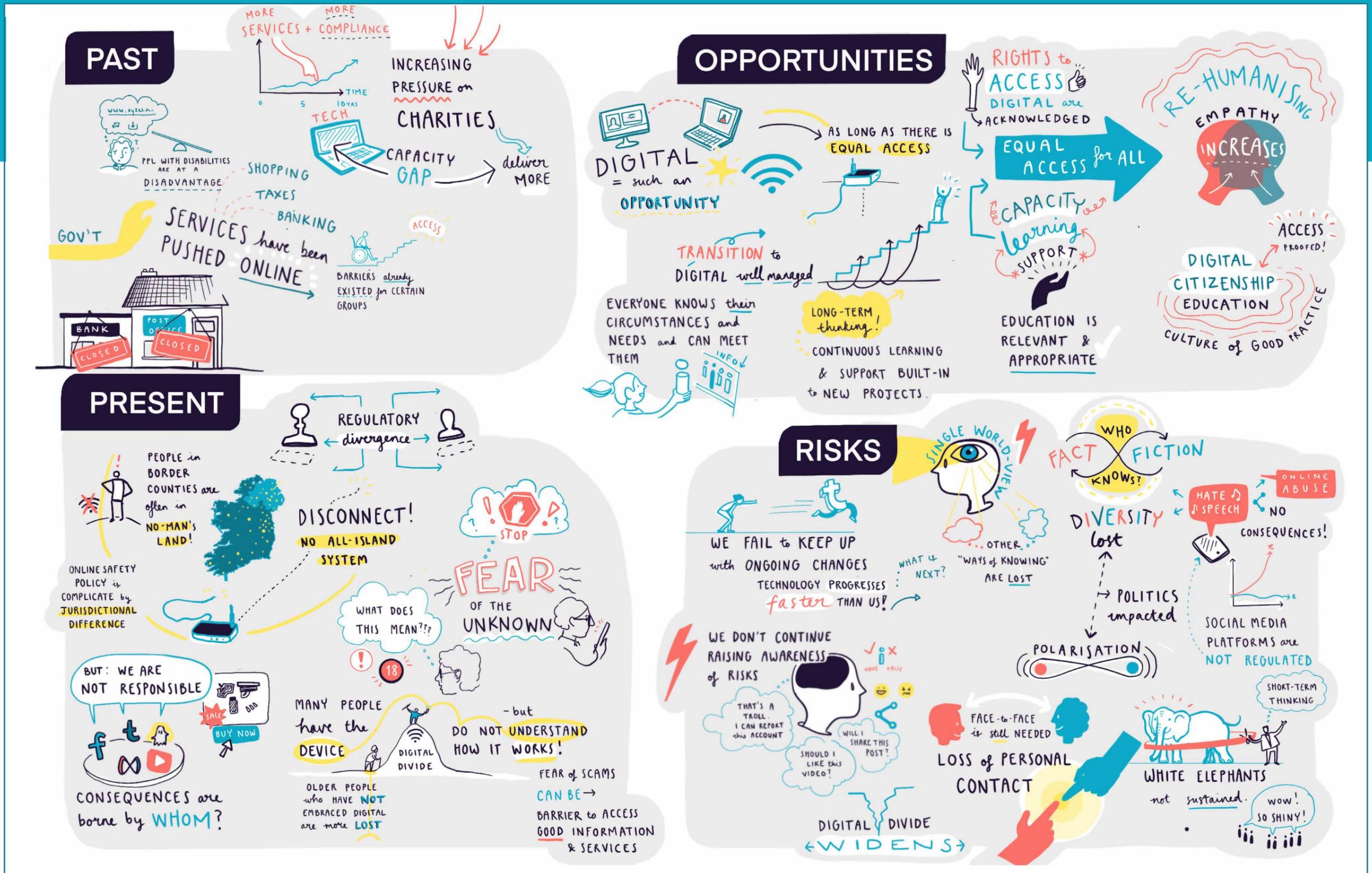
(image captured from live event)

Recommendations

- Co-creation and community design is needed to achieve rural sustainability through the localisation of food markets, transport solutions and diverse employment opportunities.
- Enhance local participatory democracy to support co-production with access to relevant experts to develop local community owned or profit sharing innovations

Digital inclusion

Digital
Connectedness
& Inclusion
Belfast | 8th June



Digital access has a range of benefits for the work of civil society. Going remote in some types of community outreach, training and engagement extends reach and opportunities for collaboration. But there are also issues with a lack of face-to-face work especially with vulnerable populations where relationships take time to develop over longer periods to allow less visible needs to be identified, or where people do not have digital access or digital skills.



(image captured from live event)

There was debate on whether the increased use of technology and online environments reduced or increased the workload for community and voluntary organisations.



(image captured from live event)

The issues of digital access, digital inclusion and digital safety were highlighted by participants from across the island in rural and urban settings as being very significant.



(image captured from live event)



(image captured from live event)

The NESC report, 'Digital Inclusion Ireland' (2021) outlines a number of strategies in ROI that are supported through the EU. These include legislation around cybercrime that several participants in the workshops indicated are absent in Northern Ireland. This means there is the risk of a lack of accountability for online platforms and users are potentially put at greater risk.



(image captured from live event)

According to workshop participants, the elderly and people with disabilities have been warned about the risks of going online, leading to a fear of doing so. One charity told of how they had been sending links by text but people were afraid to open them. Other charities offering help for victims of domestic abuse or people with disabilities face the challenge of making platforms that are both accessible and secure for sensitive issues.



(image captured from live event)

In Northern Ireland, the legislative focus has been on addressing infrastructural challenges, namely broadband and mobile coverage. The need for improvements to infrastructure were highlighted in the iCommunity workshop, particularly in the border regions where there is a lack of efficient broadband and issues with mobile roaming post-Brexit. There are efforts to overcome infrastructure challenges in Northern Ireland, including work under Project Stratum and Shared Rural Network.

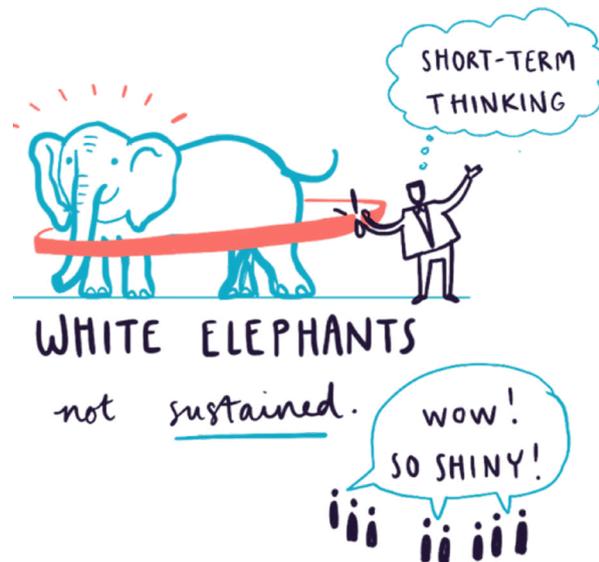


(image captured from live event)



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However, if these strategies are to be inclusive, they must be accompanied by training that ensures those most in need of digital access are able to make use of it when it arrives.



(image captured from live event)

The closure of public services like post offices and banks, and their migration online, has created a barrier for those without the digital skills or equipment to use them. People with the greatest need to access services are very often those who are least likely to have digital access. The example was given of elderly people seeking a fuel top up grant who need to upload a photograph of their empty fuel tank.



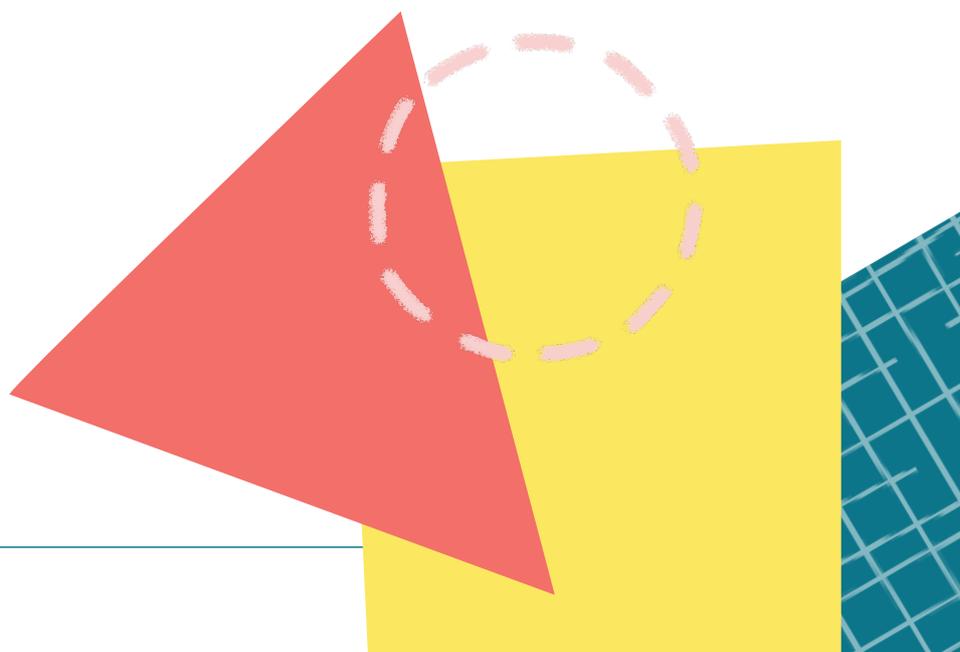
(image captured from live event)



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As charities fill these gaps, they have been faced by compliance measures and issues around the allocation of resources. It was stated that there needs to be investment in civil society to keep up with advances in technology in the ways that private industry can, in terms of both equipment and the skills to use it.

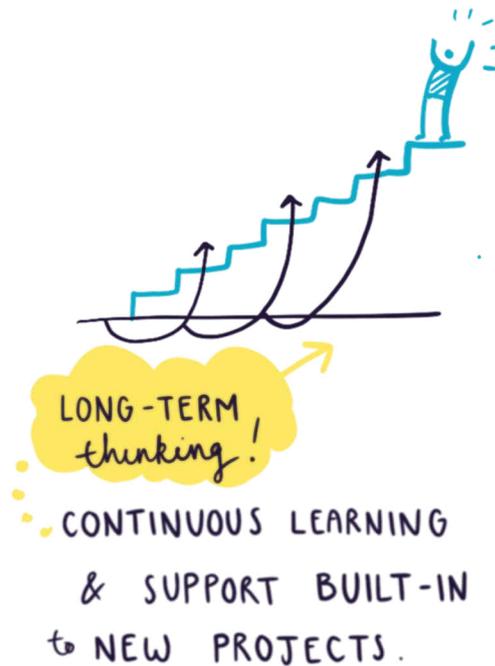
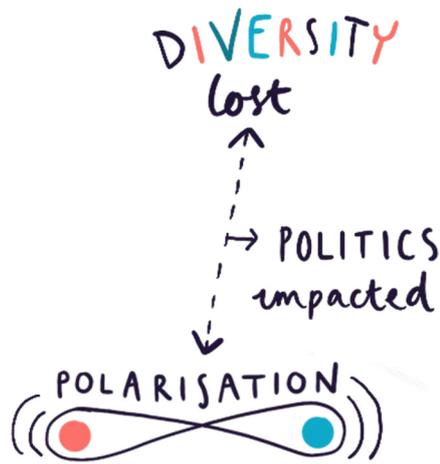
An important consideration in relation to digital narratives was highlighted by workshop participants in terms of which narratives are told and the reliability of online information. Several civil society organisations have identified this issue in their client bases and are working to address it but need the legislative frameworks and resources to support their efforts. It was noted that without measures and efforts to address this aspect of digital information, polarisation has been shown to be exacerbated.





(image captured from live event)

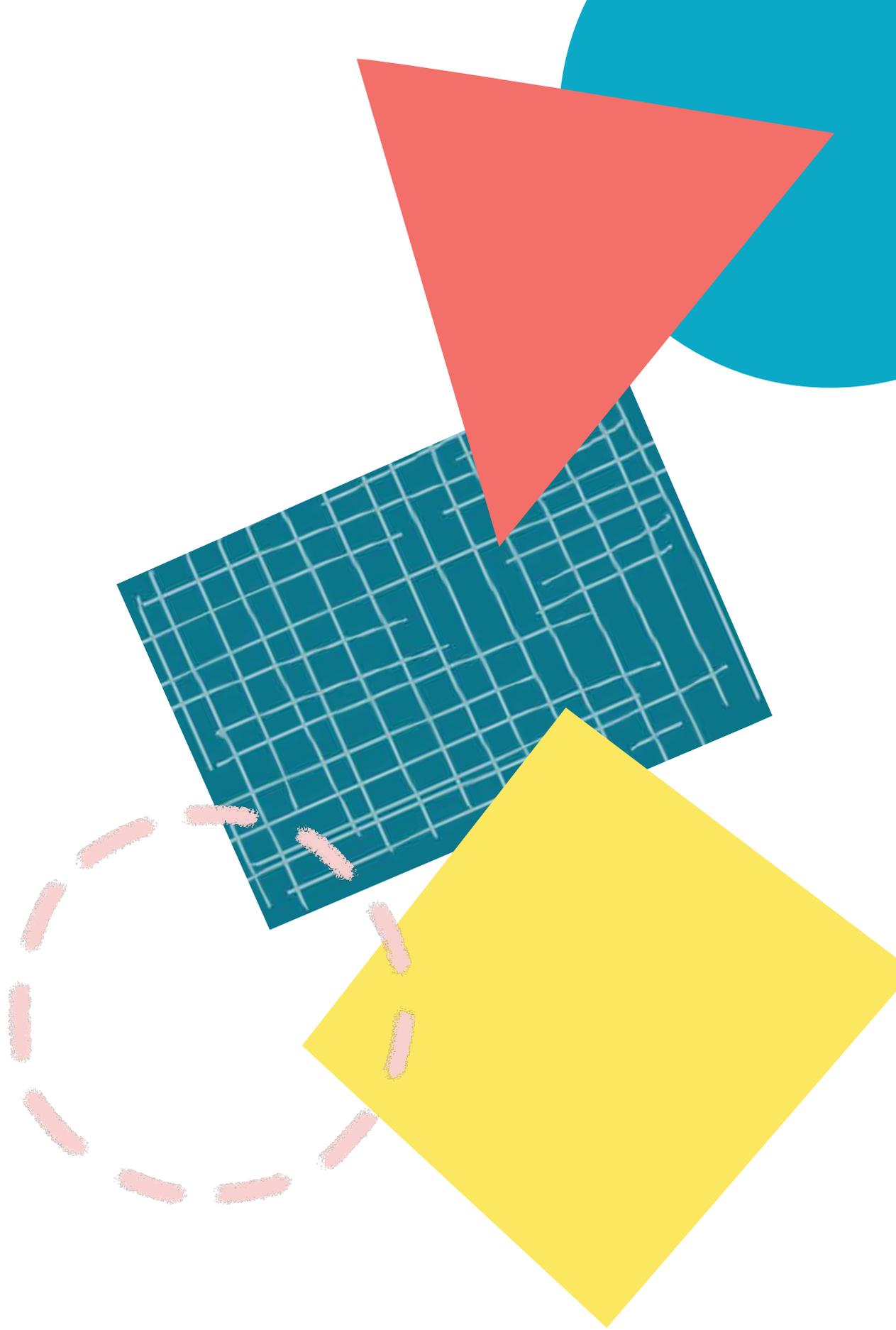
Creative learning methods have been utilised by some organisations that took part in the iCommunity project, using theatre or film workshops, or uploading and editing photographs, as methods to teach digital skills before moving on to the practical matters of online banking or sending emails. However, it was said that there is a lack of overarching organisations or programmes to facilitate access to skills, meaning that there is fracture, dislocation and duplication between various initiatives. This highlights the need for shared practice hubs that facilitate island-wide learning over longer periods and in more joined up ways than typical funding mechanisms allow.



(image captured from live event)

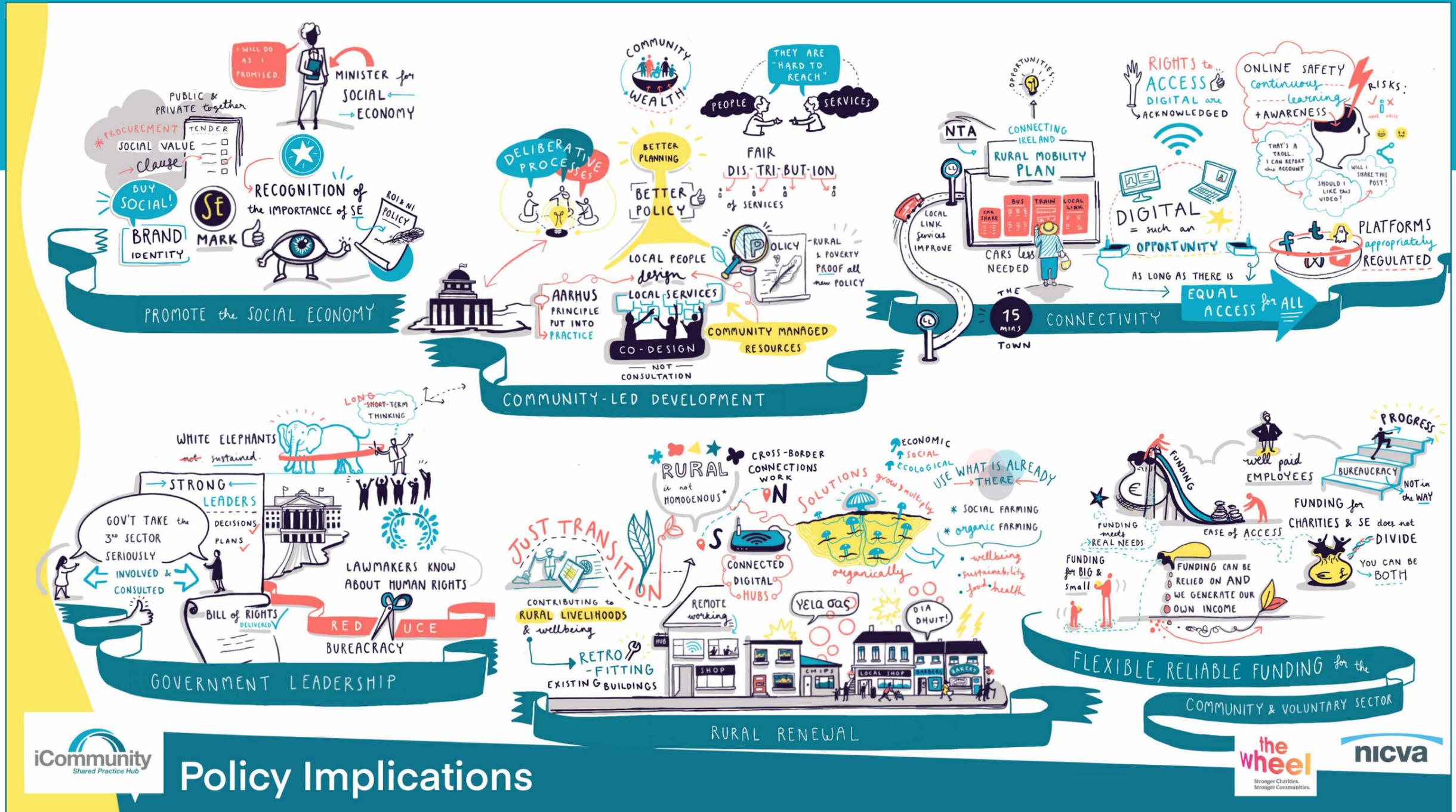
Recommendations

- Support for those most in need of digital access to receive both connection support and appropriate training.
- Alignment and strengthening of legislation between jurisdictions to protect internet users.



Shared vision

Policy Implications



Policy Implications



The future backwards method utilised in the iCommunity hybrid online and face-to-face workshops allowed participants to imagine a positive vision. It is with such visionary foresight that it is possible to determine the best processes to reach common goals for the community and voluntary sector across the island. Not only was the iCommunity project able to gather such ideas from the sector, but it also brought together groups that are taking major steps in the right direction. It is this strength of organisations and existing projects that forms the basis for a shared practice hub.

The workshops, SenseMaker survey, podcasts, and the case studies that have started to be gathered from various organisations shed light on the work already being done to tackle the issues raised across the five themes. As previously noted, there was a significant amount of work taking place under the climate change and biodiversity theme. The All-island pollinator plan, highlighted by Dr Una Fitzpatrick and others, as an example of collaboration that brought people and organisations together with the value of recognising the rich biodiversity in need of protection across the island. A point to be celebrated across jurisdictions, and in need of an all-island response. Cooperation Ireland has been running an All Ireland Schools Climate Change Project that links children through online classes and events. These are just a few of the civil society organisations working on projects several of which bridged more than one of the iCommunity themes. Organisations like ‘Supporting Communities’ a partner organisation on the Onside project, working with disabled people and those suffering from social isolation, through healthcare and digital inclusion. The North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub is working to enhance the

learning experience of young people taking part in youth services across the island. The British Heart Foundation is working with the Irish Heart Foundation on an all-island air pollution project, and Involve NI have set up a new all-island group to support deliberative democracy.

There is an appetite for all-island collaboration, as evidenced by this report, and it is clear that it needs a stronger foundation. Communities and organisations in both jurisdictions have the blueprints for all-island work, and the sharing of their experiences, combined with the vision of upcoming groups, has the potential to seed broad and deeper collaboration across the island. Such work will have benefits for the people directly affected by the community and voluntary sector, who are often those that are most in need or hard to reach. All-island work requires an investment of time and resources, it comes with barriers and challenges, but experiences have shown that it presents practical opportunities to tackle problems that are not only local to each jurisdiction, but indeed across the island and beyond its shores.

If the community and voluntary sector is to achieve the goals set out by an all-island approach, then certain interventions and assistance are required from the public sector. Those directly related to each of the themes have been highlighted in those sections and are listed again below. In addition, the following common recommendations from iCommunity participants are noted.

Common recommendations

- More inclusive bureaucratic processes that can be understood between jurisdictions.
- Funding opportunities that are flexible to accommodate the risks of working across borders.
- Dedicated funding streams to support organisations to have additional capacity for networking and relationship building beyond core service delivery.
- Funders and cross-departmental recognition of overlapping spheres of identity, avoiding the definitive categorisation that leads to a mindset of polarity.
- Deep listening at the civic level, through the convening of specific opportunities for collaboration and rights based deliberation on development choices for local communities and marginalised groups.

Thematic recommendations revisited

Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Goals

- Tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis must include meaningful engagement with farmers, communities and marginalised groups.
- There needs to be better supports and barrier removal for the scaling up of existing community-led solutions in the climate and biodiversity crises.

Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic must be inclusive of marginalised groups, learning from their lived experiences and taking the opportunity to work towards a fair and equitable society.
- Democratic participative processes to be at the core of all group engagements to better reflect the leadership of community organisations, which have never been more needed, to deal with the convergence of crises.

Social Economy

- Public sector interventions that reduce the burden of bureaucracy are needed to support the growth of the sector.
- There needs to be specific support for more all-island and international networking within the sector so that new social economy innovations can learn from the experience of existing projects.

Rural Sustainability

- Co-creation and community design to achieve rural sustainability through the localisation of food markets, transport solutions and diverse employment opportunities.
- Enhance local participatory democracy to support co-production with access to relevant experts to develop local community owned or profit sharing innovations

Digital Inclusion

- Support for those most in need of digital access to receive both connection support and appropriate training.
- Alignment and strengthening of legislation between jurisdictions to protect internet users.

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SOCIAL FARMING

VIBRANT

HUB

CO-WORK

BARBER

Joy's Cafe



7 MINS

5 MINS

LIBRARY 10 MINS



iCommunity is where nonprofits and social enterprises in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland come together to learn from shared experiences. Learn more at icommunityhub.org

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