

Economics of Belonging Project

Interim Report,
Summary
Feb 2023

DCU Centre for Religion, Human Values, and
International Relations
&
The Irish Inter-Church Meeting

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the state of discussions under the multistakeholder Economics of Belonging Project initiated in 2021 by the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations at DCU and the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting (ICC/IICM). The project involves a number of other partners including the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum.

The initial premise of our project was that the pandemic, a time of trial, was a good moment to consider the future of the economy. COVID-19 caused immense suffering and dislocation. It was a reminder of human fragility. In particular, it reminded us of the fragility of human societies at this time in history, despite so many scientific advances. On the other hand, the pandemic saw many examples of dedication to duty on the part of key workers, effective government intervention, and solidarity in civic society. The pandemic made us more aware of our interdependence at the global level.

The Economics of Belonging (EoB) project is concerned in the first instance with future economic models on this island (Ireland, Northern Ireland) and by extension in Britain and beyond. What have we learned from the experience of COVID? Can that experience help us to change for the better? How can we capture for our future benefit the sense of community we have often experienced during the pandemic?

We worked on the basis of a number of other guiding ideas. The engagement of faith communities with public authorities and other stakeholders is in the interests of society as a whole. We should always be ready to compare our own experience with the experience of neighbouring societies. In the circumstances of this island, reflections on the future of the economy can be enriched by North/South interaction. Relationships are all-important – including relationships across the two islands. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement should continue to be a sign of hope in the wider international context.

The full text of the present report is available separately.

Milestones along the way

The Economics of Belonging Project examined three current issues having demonstration value in the light of the kind of society we want. These are: child food poverty, aspects of the criminal justice system, and housing. The concept of “demonstration value” implies a common criterion of evaluation in seemingly different and distinct situations. From a religious perspective, this could be described as the standard of hope.

The standard of hope

Hope is an inner resource implying a readiness to engage with our circumstances and act where possible, even in the face of steep odds. If we are co-workers in a project whose overall design is not our own, appraising the truth of a situation, and acting or suffering in consequence of this, are bound up together and have value in themselves, even when we are not masters of cause and effect. Actions that conform with hope will be in harmony with other similar actions, including other people’s actions. There is an “in-built” consistency, compatibility, and coherence. This is not just about shaping coalitions. That can happen, certainly. But the point is deeper. A common criterion of evaluation – the “standard of hope” – links one situation to another and enables a variety of actors to give the future a definite shape or character, even before the overall picture becomes clear. In the 21st century, planetary ecology and the need for a just transition in the organisation of the economy depend on numerous individual decisions linked together by a common criterion of evaluation. This common criterion cannot be the standard of mere self-interest, which by definition pushes us in different directions. Any common criterion of evaluation at the local or global level will resemble the “standard of hope,” as described here. Hope, if restored to its full meaning in our culture, can inspire and bring together all those who face the future determined to be “part of the solution.”

Subjects having demonstration value

- Detailed research on '[Child Food Poverty in Ireland: A mapping review of the national and international evidence](#)' was undertaken by Dr. Lucia Vazquez Mendoza over a period of one year in 2021-2022, under the auspices of the Economics of Belonging project. This theme was suggested at the outset of the project by Archbishop McDowell. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been working on the issue in Northern Ireland, including in a report published in 2022. The topic acquired greater urgency as more people turned to food banks over the course of the pandemic.
- In the academic year 2021-22, DCU Masters-level students of Public Policy, under the guidance of Prof. Deiric Ó Broin, developed two Rapid Evidence Assessment Reports on '[The young offenders: reducing reoffending rates among young adult offenders aged 18-24 years in Ireland](#)' by Rebecca Gorman, Diarmuid Hanley, Brigitta Lannen, and Luke Quinlan; and '[Fines or prison – key issues in public policy](#)' by Richard Gow, Paula Williams, Morvarid Salehi, Vand Shehni, and Roger Harrington. Both research projects were undertaken with the objective “to assess how the Irish prison and justice system could be made fairer and more humane in a public policy context.”

Of the three subjects chosen for their “demonstration value” in the present context, housing proved to be the most difficult. The challenge is to identify the common threads linking a potentially very wide range of possible interventions. On Right to Housing, a panel discussion called ‘Homes for All: A Theme for the Debate on the Future of Europe’ was organised at the International Social Housing Festival (ISHF) in Helsinki on 15th June 2022. The panel had four speakers, Anne Barrington, Juha Kaakinen, Philip McDonagh, and Martina Madden. In the course of the ISHF, our panellists were invited to meet the Minister for Housing, Minister Darragh O’Brien. In a report by Martina Madden on the panel discussion she noted that the key message from all the four presentations made during this panel was that “...Irish housing and homelessness crisis not only could have been averted but can also be solved.”

Resilience in global food systems

The inaugural meeting of a multi-stakeholder project on global food security, “Collective Action for Ending a Collective Problem,” was held at the OSCE Documentation Centre in Prague on 26 and 27 October 2022, under the auspices of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations. Participants included the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting, the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum, and CREATE, an academic network based in Rome. Overall, the goal of this initiative is to frame an initial vision of the complex system under which a high and growing percentage of the world’s population is exposed to hunger. It was agreed that Africa, with its rising population, should be a particular focus of this research. However, food insecurity also affects many people even in the most prosperous societies. From the project team’s broadly based analysis, the plan is to identify interventions that would enhance equity, agency, and resilience in the system. The team will seek to “engage” in political spaces in which advocacy is likely to make a difference.

Meetings

Under this project, meetings have taken place from spring 2021 to early 2023, all on zoom except for the in-person meeting on 20 September 2022.

We have invited four expert speakers during this period:

1. Juha Kakkinen, a leading architect of Finland’s Housing First policy
2. Dr Sabina Alkire of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and an expert on wellbeing frameworks
3. Mr Justice Gerard Hogan, Justice of the Supreme Court and expert on the origins of the Irish constitution
4. Dr Sarah Longlands of CLES (The Centre for Local Economic Strategies), who spoke about Community Wealth Building

- Against the background of this project, project partners engaged with the National Economic and Social Council during the preparation of its consultation report of July 2021, “Ireland’s Well-Being Framework.”
- Supported by the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting and the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum, the Centre curated the religion and human rights segment of the EU Fundamental Rights Forum in Vienna in October 2021.

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- In February 2022, the project partners hosted a meeting at DCU to develop shared thinking on a number of public issues relevant to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), an initiative of the European Union. The February meeting brought together leaders and members of many different churches and faith communities and other invited guests. We drew on the economics of belonging project in arriving at our conclusions in key policy areas.
 - A half-day meeting was organised with Dr. Sarah Longlands in September 2022. Dr. Longlands, Chief Executive of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), presented her organisation's work on Community Wealth Building (CWB). Community wealth building focusses not just on the economic progress of a community; it also involves helping people value what they have and move away from the financialisation of assets. In the later part of the day, participants in the project discussed the possibility of using a similar approach (CWB) in pilot projects in Dublin and East Belfast. These discussions continue. The CWB approach would need to be adapted keeping in view of local governing structures in these locations.

Summary of key ideas and recommendations

“Lessons learned” during the pandemic include the following:

1. the importance of investment in the infrastructure of society
2. the need for equity in the delivery of services (no “bifurcation”)
3. the questioning of “efficiency” as the main criterion for economic choices
4. the questioning of the “liberal” understanding of the role of incentives
5. a renewed attention to the dangers of polarisation and disenchantment with institutions.

This report measures the potential for a culture of solidarity against specific policy challenges in three areas: child food poverty, criminal justice, and housing. The goal was to discover a common criterion of evaluation in seemingly different and distinct situations – or in other terms, a standard of hope.

In the sphere of child food poverty, we found that providing meals within early childhood settings is a key example of investment in the infrastructure of society (“invest to save”). The findings on advertising and the incidence of obesity demonstrate that considerations of profit alone, if allowed to shape the economy and society, pose a threat to human values.

The much lower incidence of imprisonment in some social groups than in others calls into question the overall shape of the prison system. In relation to young offenders, we call for greater recourse to Community Sanctions and Measures (CSM). Training programmes for judges need to include aspects of “judicial innovation.” Individual judges or the judiciary panel can help bring in more practical and progressive CSMs.

On housing, a central conclusion is that policy introduced at the European level – namely, increased financial liquidity – has been a key factor in house price inflation in many European countries and cities. We suggest a number of avenues through which this problem can be addressed at the European level. We suggest six guiding ideas for Ireland’s housing policy:

1. we support the principle of strong state-led investment in public housing
2. an enhanced programme of public investment should empower local authorities
3. “commodification” describes the cultural shift that has aggravated the housing situation
4. we should re-examine the balance between property rights and the common good
5. we should balance home ownership, renting privately, and rented social housing
6. we have an obligation to learn from promising practices in other countries.

Participants in the project will seek ways of applying the Community Wealth Building (CWB) approach in pilot projects in Dublin and East Belfast.

Finally, the present report argues that parishes, religious institutions, and faith communities should take account of recent successful examples and further enable affordable and sustainable cost-rental housing schemes on their own land.
