WORLD LEADERSHIP ALLIANCE
CLUB DE MADRID

**The Shared Societies Project**:
**Leadership for Dialogue, Diversity and Social Cohesion**
***Building a world safe for difference***

**Replicable example of practice**

**Commitment IX**

Promote respect, understanding and appreciation of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity and support local communities in exploring their identity, sharing their experiences with other identity groups and working together with those groups on common concerns.

**Suggested Approach:**

Encourage cultural activities that explore issues of concern about relationships between different identity groups.

## Communities Connect Interfaith Cross-Border Young Peoples project 2007-

**Country**: Present. Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

**Background**

- Unlike in neighbouring countries such as Britain, which experienced immigration over a longer period of time, changes in Ireland have happened over a much shorter period of time. Therefore, the cultural and religious face of Irish society has changed significantly over a short period and society and government is being challenged to address these changes.
- A government-led national Action Plan Against Racism has been rolled out in the Republic of Ireland. It has a committee and action plan at local government level which works with a partnership approach to tackling racism at the local level.
- Communities Connect is two interconnected interfaith cross-border projects working with: i) Young Muslim and Catholic Men; ii) Young Muslim and Catholic Women.
- The Communities Connect Project works with young Men and Women from Crossmaglen in South Armagh and young people from the Muslim community in Dundalk a town in the Republic of Ireland on the Border with Northern Ireland.
- South Armagh is a community which is a predominantly Catholic community in Northern Ireland which bore the consequences of the 30-year conflict in

terms of violence both between members of the community as well as from other parties involved in the conflict. There is a high rate of displaced people and significant numbers of ex-combatants and ex-prisoners living in the area. Most residents have had very little contact with other religions particularly with the Protestant religion which many in the area perceive to be the enemy, along with the British government

- Most of the young people participating in the project had previously never met a Muslim.
- The Muslim community in Dundalk is a fast growing community comprising members from Sub Saharan Africa as well as, to a lesser extent, North Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The community is currently using a mosque which is inappropriate for the number of members and the Imam of the Dundalk Mosque states that he is eager to lead the community in a process of integration with the wider Irish society.
- Both the Muslim community of Dundalk and the Catholic community of South Armagh have been the victims of negative stereotyping by the mass media. South Armagh has been portrayed in the International and National UK press as a Republican stronghold for terrorists and Muslims have sometimes been portrayed as fundamentalists and terrorists.

**Goals**

- Both programmes (with young men and young women) aim to build trust and positive relationships between the Muslim and Catholic youth communities. The project aims to promote exposure for the young people from the Catholic community to otherness and difference and facilitate the Catholic and Muslim young people to develop skills related to embracing and developing respect for difference.
- The long-term aim is for the Catholic young people, having developed a relationship with the Muslim young people, to be able to face their Protestant neighbours by taking the same approach to addressing difference.
- It encourages the Muslim youth to feel more included in Irish society and to develop greater opportunities and practical tools for integration.

**Method**

- Communities Connect worked with youth leaders from the South Armagh area – This was important because trust already existed between the youth leaders and the young men and women.
- The young women's project entitled Dunmaglen Girls (a mixing of the words Dundalk and Crossmaglen) explores the young women's Muslim and Catholic religions and cultural identity within the context of exploring commonalities which the young women share.

- The young men's project uses sport as a vehicle for bringing the young Muslim and Catholic men together to discuss contentious issues. The principle sport is football and the methodology used is the conflict transformation tool of Democracy Soccer[1].
- The project addresses the stereotypes of the communities and asks the young people why they feel these stereotypes exist and what can be done to counteract these myths.
- The ethos of the programme offers all involved a wider view of society which moves away from the traditional bi-partite divisions between Protestant and Catholic to a perspective of inter-culturalism, inter-religious work, cultural diversity and respect of otherness.
- Both the initiatives are youth-led and the young people take complete ownership of the process because they shape the content, methodology, implementation and evaluation of the process.
- The women's interfaith project has included activities such as:

- Visit to the Clonskeagh mosque in Dublin and discussion workshop.
- Visit to a Catholic church in South Armagh Northern Ireland and discussion workshop.
- Making traditional Northern Irish recipes using halal food.
- Team building activities using sport and water based exercises.
- Artistic / creative work to explore identity and religion (bead work, drawing, collage-making)

- The young men's interfaith project has included activities such as:

- Democracy soccer – the participants co-create their own rules for the game and interwoven into the game are discussions about racism and discrimination, stereotypes, respect, tolerance, difference and otherness.
- Activities such as fishing, African drumming, horse-riding, cooking together, and while the young men are engaged in such activities, themed discussions are facilitated.

- The process has been recorded in a creative and youth specific way through the use of video diaries into which the young people have had input in terms of the design and layout of the DVD, its content, music to accompany the DVD and dissemination of the 2 DVDs.

[1] www.colombiajoven.gov.co/golombiao.htm in Spanish
www.cromos.com.co La Paz se Juega en un campo de futbol
www.bbcmundo.com Un caso de estudio Golombiao 03.11.2005

- They were launched at an event in the Dundalk Institute of Technology where Communities Connect is based. The impact has been positive within academic circles.
- It is important to document processes of interfaith work in order for the work to have a ripple effect on policy makers, governments, academic institutions and the wider society. It is also important to document the process in a way that allows for maximum accessibility and in a format which is easily understood by and meaningful to young people, minority faith groups, and other groups which may be interested in getting involved in interfaith work.
- Communication meetings were held regularly between all parties involved in order to address all issues as they arose. This was particularly valuable for talking about cultural differences and dealing with potential misunderstandings resulting from the cultural and religious differences of the parties involved.

**Impact**

- The young people involved have developed friendships with young women and men from the other community. They have built networks of friendships and maintain these friendships through sites such as Bebo and MySpace which are independent of the project. Should funding cease for this project, the relationships and friendships would continue.
- There has been positive impact on the parents of the participants in South Armagh whereby they have been exposed to the Muslim tradition through the positive feedback of their sons and daughters. There has been impact on the parents of the Muslim young people by supporting them in integrating more in Irish society. For example, parents of the Muslim young people attended the launch event of the DVD.

**Enabling conditions**

- Communities Connect engaged in a long process of trust building and capacity building with the men's group and the women's group of the Mosque in Dundalk before being asked to engage with the young people.
- Support from the Imam from the Mosque of Dundalk has been key to the success of the project. He acted as a broker between the project and the parents. The Imam has visionary leadership and deep commitment to integration.
- The Dundalk Institute of Technology, where Communities Connect is housed, supported the interfaith programme in terms of providing student support from the Community Sports Leadership degree course, facilitating a sports venue in the Institute for the activities to take place and creating the opportunity for the young people to access a formal institute of further

education which they would have felt was inaccessible to them prior to engaging in the interfaith programme.

- The Young people involved were committed to the process and enjoyed the project.
- There is a move by both governments of the UK and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to address the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland and to ensure that the sectarianism left over from the conflict in Northern Ireland does not turn into racism against the newly arriving communities.
- Funding was available for the initiative through the EU fund for Peace II ( 2006 – 2008) and Peace III (2008 – 2011) which is part funded by the Irish Government under the National Development Plan. The main aim of the fund is to secure the future so that in this case the young men and women from South Armagh do not revert to violence in the future. It also aims to secure the future for a more integrated society whereby the Muslim community does not feel marginalized or excluded and thus would not lean towards extremism or fundamentalism.
- Initiatives using sport to eliminate racism are being backed by local government. One such initiative is "show racism the red card" (www.theredcard.ie) which uses football as a tool to address issues of discrimination and racism.

**Comments**

- The Muslim young people were not an established youth group so there were certain issues to deal with in terms of insurance and child protection. More negotiation work is required in Ireland between religious minority groups and state agencies on how these communities can actively engage with the state, local government and support agencies.

**Contact / References**

Johdi Quinn – coordinator of the Communities Connect project Johdi.quinn@dkit.ie