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### **Mapping Diversity, Negotiating Differences: Constitutional Discussions on a Shared Island**

We would like to thank you for inviting us to give evidence to the committee. We are reporting evidence from our research over the last 3 years, as clearly and simply as we can.

Our work was motivated by the need to explore the multiplicity of voices beyond 'official' nationalism and unionism - the disengaged, marginalised, disinterested, or non-voters. On most counts, they amount to close to half the population on the island. Only if they participate in constitutional discussion will the process be inclusive, fully democratic, and will it carry wide legitimacy across the island. Our research asked: Do they want to participate in the constitutional discussion, and what stops them doing so?

We engaged in open-ended conversations with well over 120 constitutionally disengaged participants North and South. They participated in interviews, focus groups and informal deliberative cafés. We talked with migrants, disadvantaged young people, third level educated young people, women, including border women, gender activists, all accessed through community organisations. They came from North, South and from the border area; they were from unionist, nationalist and neither backgrounds, their main interests were in social rather than directly political issues. Most of our focus groups and cafés were mixed, with participation from each jurisdiction and different community backgrounds. We asked about their views on the ongoing constitutional debate and on North-South relations. We designed the research to allow participants to develop their perspectives, articulate their values and priorities, and voice their concerns. We also designed a set of focus groups conducted by IPSOS MORI with a representative sample of the constitutionally undecided – another 30 participants, half from the North and half from the South. We tested out our findings and their policy significance with fellow academics, politicians, community partners and in a policy seminar with policymakers from Dublin and Belfast.

We developed/experimented with informal local small scale deliberative methods, both as educative and explorative as to how people scale up and out from everyday concerns to politics and constitutional matters.

This was multi-method evidence-based research undertaken over several years with very significant numbers of the population. Though not representative, our findings are meaningful and credible in showing patterns of response of large sections of the population, and mapping ways towards more inclusive discussion. To read more about it, please see our report, which has links to some of our academic articles.

See also recent published work:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367221147790>

<https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2023.a900122>

We found considerable convergence amongst our diverse participants on their values and priorities: the more they talked, the more convergence.

We found that greater participation did not bring increased polarisation, as some may fear. It rather allowed participants to think out their views and avoid knee jerk responses. Frequently participants came back to their earlier statements and qualified them, they learned from others' points, and sometimes they changed their minds.

Most participants were interested in constitutional issues and wanted to be involved because they view it as important. They were disengaged from politicians and politics, not from the issues.

They did not like the way the constitutional question is being discussed. They said it is too ideological, too technical, too abstract. They don't care much about the technical details of a referendum, or the exact institutional details of a united Ireland. They thought the priority was to talk about the type of social problems that exist now, and how problems could be overcome. They wanted constitutional discussion to begin with people's everyday concerns: bread and butter issues, gender rights, socio-economic issues.

These are the sorts of issues discussed in the ongoing Shared Island dialogues. But those dialogues are often quite tightly controlled, with set speakers and a few questions: our dialogues were much more open, conversational, with participants free to direct the discussion as they wished. Moreover, the shared island dialogues focus on shared issues and do not touch on contentious constitutional questions. Our participants definitely wanted to go beyond sharing problems to identifying real political and constitutional ways to fix them.

They wanted unbiased information about these issues made publicly available, on both sides of the border and how they would be impacted in different constitutional circumstances.

They wanted policy makers to take their concerns seriously – they wanted accountability and real channels of communication. For example, the border women were tired of simply being consulted, they wanted to help define the problems and be part of the answer.

We found a particular lack of knowledge of Northern Ireland in the South, and a particular need for discussion there. In the IPSOS focus groups, Southerners expressed much more hardline views than Northerners – they resisted any change in flag, or anthem, they glorified our ancestors who fought for freedom. But the more they talked, the more they changed their minds – they said things like 'sure that won't work', 'we have to compromise'. We concluded that only discussion and deliberation North and South will allow Southerners – as well as Northerners - to reflect on and prepare for what may be necessary. Only this will allow Ireland to avoid the mistakes of German reunification – much change in the East and no change in the West, provoking lasting resentment in the East.

We are academics not policy makers but several clear recommendations emerge from our research.

First, the need to go beyond large set piece deliberative forums, like the Citizens' Assembly, by adding on a series of smaller local deliberative events, linked to larger ones, and aiming to enhance inclusion, participation and input. There is need for this upstream deliberation in a systemic way now, North and South, while there is still time to think about the shape of a potential new Ireland.

Our research shows the importance and potential of small-scale deliberation. It is an educational tool and it helps in scaling up and out of personal experiences to a collective definition of the problems. Such small-scale deliberative events on everyday 'shared island' issues can and should be combined with deliberation on constitutional future.

For example, what would a united Ireland mean for healthcare provision on the island? Could it help the dysfunctions of healthcare coordination in the border area? Could it resolve the dysfunctions of healthcare in both parts of the island?

Such feeding in of local deliberation to constitutional design, and feedback to local discussion of the constitutional models, goes some way to securing inclusion and accountability – clear channels of communication between grassroots and policy.

Second, how is this to be done? Here we can give some broad thoughts, but a deliberative process clearly needs close coordination between grassroots, NGOs, academics and politicians:

For example, bringing in local councils (and paired North-South local councils) and local schools (and paired schools) and local women's groups as organisers of small deliberative events. This worked out well in the 'decade of commemorations' especially about 1916. The challenge is to do deliberation on a cross-border basis.

For example, as in other countries, having 'days of deliberation' across the island, in different forums from schools to mother and child groups to online forums. The challenge will be to collate the results and feed them into new constitutional models and new questions for research.

In conclusion, coordinated collaborative research is necessary to devise ways to maximise participation, inclusion, and accountability. We proposed a dedicated research centre to collect and collate research findings and map a cumulative programme of research for the next 5 years. An alternative mechanism would be to incorporate a diverse and inclusive academic team into a renewed Shared Island Unit.