

Linking between Ireland and the South

Good Practice Guidelines for North/South Linking



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Suas Educational Development

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LINKING BETWEEN IRELAND AND THE SOUTH

Good Practice Guidelines for North/South Linking

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WHAT IS NORTH/SOUTH LINKING?

Linking is a word with many different meanings and could refer to any connection between individuals or groups of people. In the last fifty years, however, there has been an increase in activities whereby groups such as schools, local community organisations, local authorities, towns, and civil society institutions in different countries establish connections with each other. Groups may link for a variety of reasons but are usually interested in establishing cross-cultural connections with groups in other parts of the world for mutual learning and to increase mutual understanding. These activities have become known as linking. North/South links have developed between groups in the predominantly rich countries of the northern hemisphere and the predominantly poor countries of the southern hemisphere.

“A link...is a partnership between communities for international benefit and mutual solidarity... Most community links are cross-cultural, between partners who are geographically remote from one another... activities may include exchanging knowledge, ideas and experience and involve the transfer of skills and other resources.”

(UN Volunteer Programme & International Union of Local Authorities).

Linking is “about communication and understanding...equality and reciprocity...(it) is not missionary, but about listening to each other”... It “creates international and cross-cultural friendships...increase(s) awareness about the world...can stimulate interaction between communities towards a local sustainable development...helps create understanding between different cultures...”

(Soesterberg Declaration).

“Linking is about working together...is about sharing experiences and views...is about mutual learning through respect...is about living together and sharing... An ideal community link is a link between the people at the grassroots in communities in the North and the South”

(UKOWLA).

“A friendship link...is based on equality. It is a method for mutual learning, exchange of ideas and local community development. It is not a transfer of money and material goods from one party to the other. A friendship link is really just like a

good friendship, a co-operation between equal partners...”

(Vennskap Nord/Sør - Friendship North-South).

North/South linking developed in the 1970s and 1980s, although the town twinning movement that developed in Europe after World War II could be described as linking, and international links between local authorities, towns and cities predate that war. Today linking is a common activity with thousands of groups in northern countries linking with partners in southern countries. In Ireland, linking is common in the education sector, and many schools have connections with southern schools and community groups. Although many Irish towns twin with partners in Europe and other northern countries, few are engaged in linking with the South. Linking is supported by a number of organisations at international level, including international local government organisations, the European Union (although the focus is mainly on twinning within Europe), the Council of Europe, and some UN bodies (e.g., UNESCO, UNICEF). The terms twinning and linking are often used interchangeably.

UNDERSTANDING LINKING

Certain features are seen as being typical of linking relationships:

➤ **Communication, learning and building friendships:**

Communication and ongoing contact between groups is central to linking, with the aim of partners learning about each other, about global issues, gaining an increased

understanding of each other, exchanging experience, and building relationships of friendship.

➤ **Equality, mutuality and reciprocity:** When linking, partners treat each other equally, and each contributes to and gains from the relationship.

➤ **Process rather than product:** Links focus on the processes of learning and building

relationships, rather than on concrete outputs.

➤ **Grassroots involvement:**

Linking is seen as an activity that takes place at grassroots rather than official level, and involves 'ordinary people' North and South.

Links can be categorised according to the type of group involved. The two most common categories are those involving

Characteristic		Comment
Number of 'partners' involved	Two participants	Linking involving an individual group and its partner. Communication may take place in a variety of ways. One to one contact allows for a deep relationship to develop over years.
	Many participants	Linking where many groups are involved in a network. Communication often takes place using Internet technology. It allows many groups to communicate with each other and allows for diverse inputs. However deep relationships may not develop.
Predominant means of contact	Visits and meetings	Partners visit each other, or meet at mutually convenient locations. Direct personal contact can significantly enhance the impact of the link. Visits are costly especially for southern partners.
	Exchange of materials	Participants communicate by exchange of letters or other materials such as posters, artwork, objects of cultural significance, etc. It is generally inexpensive but lacks the impact of direct personal contact, and communication may be slow and infrequent.
	Email, Internet	Partners communicate by email or via Internet sites. It allows for rapid communication and feedback. It is inexpensive for northern partners, but lack of Internet access and cost may be prohibitive for some southern partners. It also lacks the impact of direct personal contact.
Facilitated by another organisation	Yes	Some links are facilitated by third-party organisations such as NGOs or missionary orders. The facilitating organisation may be able to provide valuable advice and guidance. Several research respondents in this study felt strongly that all links should be facilitated by experienced organisations to minimise the risk of inexperienced groups making mistakes. However suitable organisations may not be easy to identify.
	No	Partners link directly. Allows for freedom in partner selection. May be a higher risk of mistakes being made and inappropriate activities being undertaken.

Table 1. Models of Linking

local civil society institutions such as schools, universities, third level colleges, churches or hospitals, and those involving **local authorities**. Many links involve other community or civil society groups such as community development organisations, NGOs (particularly those whose aim is solidarity with the South), parishes, trade unions, or simply groups of dedicated people interested in establishing a link. In practice, many links involve more than one type of group or groups that defy neat categorisation.

Groups link for a variety of reasons: for development education; to learn about global issues; to learn about cultural difference and diversity; to build relationships of friendship; to share experience and knowledge. Linking is seen as a very good way to achieve these aims. Southern partners may have similar or different reasons for linking. Northern partners frequently want to provide support to their southern partners, in terms of financial and other resources. For southern partners, the receipt of this assistance may be the most important reason for linking. The giving and receiving of aid can be a difficult problem to manage, as discussed later. Links frequently have more than one underlying purpose or theme.

Models of linking vary depending on a number of characteristics such as the number of 'partners' involved,

how they communicate, and whether or not the link is facilitated by a third party (see Table 1 on previous page).

GUIDELINES TO LINKING (See Figure)

Before you start...

It is common for linking activities to develop without careful thought. Individuals often fail to examine their personal motivations for linking, and are unclear about what they hope the link will achieve. Failure to give careful consideration to these issues in advance runs the risk of false expectations being raised on both sides, and subsequent disappointment and frustration. So before starting a link, take time to reflect, to be clear about personal motivations, about the purpose of the link, and to be realistic about what is likely to be achieved. Remember that you won't save the world! Ask yourself is this the best way to achieve your purpose. If, for example, your principle aim is to provide aid to those in a poor country, you might be better employed giving financial support to a reputable development agency, or becoming involved in campaigning and advocacy. It is important to take time over this process of reflection - it may take several months.

Be guided by the principles of linking

Equality, mutuality and reciprocity are considered to be the core principles of linking, but the differences in context

between you and your partner may make these difficult to achieve. Nonetheless strive for equality by aiming for equality of effort and contribution, equality of representation, equal contributions to planning and evaluation, and equal accountability. Each partner should give and receive. In practice northern and southern partners have different needs, wants and capacities. It is reasonable to expect that contributions and gains, although reciprocal and mutual, may be different. Relationships where all the benefits are one way should be avoided.

Linking should also be guided by other principles. Honesty is critical, honesty about your personal agenda for linking, about your own way of life, and about problems in your part of the world. Northern partners need to be honest about problems in the North, so that southern partners realise that there are problems in the rich world too. Ongoing critical thinking and reflection needs to guide the relationship, reflection about the process itself, about what is to be achieved, and about the impact of your activities. Humility is also crucial with both partners needing to admit their limitations, acknowledge the input of their partner, and being willing to learn.

Be aware of context

As discussed previously, linking takes place between people living in very different circumstances and contexts. Your partner's

social, political and cultural circumstances will be quite different from yours and they may live in a country with a significant colonial legacy. It is important to be aware of the potential impact of such contextual differences. One of the most significant differences between you and your partner will be the difference in economic circumstances. Northern partners are frequently significantly wealthier in material terms than their southern partners. This can create power imbalances in the relationship, and make the achievement of equality difficult. It can also prompt northern partners to engage in aid donation (and southern partners to seek it), which may create a sense of dependency in the partner in the South, negatively affect their sense of dignity, limit genuine communication, interfere with the process of self-reflection and obscure a deep understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty. An over-emphasis on fund-raising activities may also reinforce stereotypes. Cultural differences will also affect all aspects of your relationship, including how you communicate, and your approach to such things as management practices. Partners from the North need to be particularly aware of the paternalistic tendencies that exist and tend to develop in North-South relationships. These factors should not prevent linking. In fact, in many ways the aim of linking is to address and confront such issues. However, it is imperative that they are constantly in your mind.

Get started

Links that are reliant on one person are difficult to sustain and manage effectively so avoid over-dependence on one person. In the early stages set up a working group made up of interested parties. Inclusive links are more likely to be sustainable, so it is important to sensitise and seek buy-in from potentially interested parties, such as school management and local authorities. Information and guidance should be sought from organisations specialising in linking, some of which publish recommendations and guidelines (a list of resources is provided at the end of this booklet). Advice may also be available from national organisations. Decide what model of linking to employ. Do you want a one-to-one link or to be part of a network? Do you want to visit your partners or exchange materials? Having clear objectives will help with these decisions.

Find a partner

Decide what criteria you are looking for in a partner. If you are a rural community in Ireland and want to share experiences about rural development, you may want to choose a community with similar rural characteristics, facing similar problems (e.g., depopulation). Again having clear objectives will help here. Many links arise out of personal contact with communities in the South (e.g., through a returned development worker or volunteer), or in the context of international networks (e.g., a religious order's

missionary contacts in the South). If not readily apparent through such a contact, partners may be found in different ways. Links may already be active locally through schools, community groups or local authorities, and it may be possible to involve yourself in these activities. International NGOs, missionary groups and solidarity groups may have useful contacts. In addition it may be possible to become involved in an already established international linking network, such as the UN's ASPnet programme. In Ireland the Institute of Public Administration keeps a register of towns interested in linking with Irish towns (although the predominant focus is on European twinning).

Once you have identified a potential partner, find out as much information as possible about them, their locale, their country, and their cultural, economic, historical and political contexts. Seek information from a wide variety of sources (books, Internet resources, relevant embassies, people who have visited the country, nationals living in Ireland), and always be careful to check the reliability of your sources. As discussed below it may be very useful to seek advice and guidance from organisations 'on the ground' (embassies, NGOs, missionary groups, etc.) in your potential partner's country that are familiar with them. If a link seems feasible, contact your partner, but take care not to raise false expectations on either side.

Be guided by the principles of linking

Equality, mutuality, reciprocity, honesty, humility, critical thinking and reflection

- Don't rely on one person – form a working group to explore ideas and get things started
- Sensitise others in the school/community to your ideas and seek buy-in from other potentially interested parties
- Seek advice from those with experience of linking
- Decide what model of linking might suit your group and your purpose

- Write down your own detailed and practical plan of how the link might work covering aspects such as:
 - The purpose of the link
 - A profile of your potential partner
 - A description of planned activities
 - A realistic estimate of resources needed
 - A realistic budget
 - A mechanism for evaluation
- Present your plan to interested parties

- Establish good lines of communication with your partner and communicate frequently
- Each partner should establish a link committee
- Have a mechanism for handling finances that is accountable to both partners
- Be clear who is responsible for day-to-day administration
- Keep a record of all activities to facilitate monitoring, evaluation and lesson learning

Before you start what you want to achieve

As
Why do you want to achieve?
What are you hoping to achieve?
Is forming a link the best way to achieve this?

GET STARTED

FIND A PARTNER

PLAN CAREFULLY

AGREE ON THE LINK

DAY-TO-DAY ADMINISTRATION

EVALUATING THE LINK

FIGURE: GUIDELINES FOR LINKING
(see text for further detail)

Start – be clear on what you want to achieve
Ask:
 What do you want to start a link?
 What are you trying to achieve?
 What is the best way to achieve these aims?

Be aware of context
 Recognise the impact of differences in context between you and your partner - economic, cultural, political, historical

STARTED

- Decide what you are looking for in a linking partner
- Look for a potential partner through local contacts or national/international networks
- Having identified a potential partner, find out as much as possible about them
- Make initial contact and discuss your ideas
- Share your motivations and expectations and listen to theirs
- Consider 'no-strings-attached' exploratory and return visits to enable you to meet face-to-face

FIND A PARTNER

AGREE CAREFULLY

- If the plan seems realistic, discuss again with your potential partner
- Listen again to their motivations, their expectations and their plan
- Negotiate
- Decide if you want to proceed
- If so, **START LINKING!**
- Agree a common plan and consider drawing up an MOU

STARTING THE LINK

GO ON-DAY

- Build evaluation into planning
- Take time to evaluate
- Refer back to the objectives and ask:
 - Have they been achieved – if not why not?
 - What has been the impact?
 - Are the outcomes sustainable?
 - What improvements can be made?
- Analyse strengths/weaknesses and look for future opportunities

EVALUATING THE LINK

Box 1. Planning visits

Any visit from one partner to another requires careful planning and can be expensive. Costs may be prohibitive for southern partners. Visitors from the South may have the extra problem of procuring visas, which is generally not such a problem for Northern partners.

Exploratory visits

- Devote considerable time and resources to pre-departure orientation
- Attend to the practicalities - money, visas, vaccinations, malaria prevention, etc.
- The party should include people representing a range of backgrounds
- Try to stay with hosts in their homes
- Make sure that your behaviour is culturally appropriate
- Don't lose sight of the link objectives - write them down, bring them with you, and constantly refer back to them
- Make notes as you go
- Consider bringing a small gift
- See as much of the host community as possible and meet as many people as possible
- On return write to your counterparts and thank them for hosting you
- Report back to your own community
- Arrange a reciprocal visit if appropriate

Return visits

- Clarify your visitors' objectives before they arrive
- Arrange a timetable in advance
- Provide them with contact numbers
- Arrange transfer from airport to accommodation
- Provide a welcome pack with information on yourself and other useful information
- Decide on accommodation in advance - ideally host guests in your homes
- Show them as much of your local community as possible
- Organise some simple and typical entertainment
- Consider giving a small gift

Be sure to explain why you want to link and what you would like to do, and make sure that you give your prospective partner plenty of time to think it through. At this stage it may be worthwhile considering an exploratory and return visit, though this will depend on the model being adopted. Details of how to plan an exploratory visit and host a return visit are presented in Box 1.

Plan carefully

Writing a detailed and practical plan or proposal for the link at

this stage is useful for two reasons. Firstly, the process of committing a plan to paper ensures that the objectives and practicalities of the link are well thought through. Secondly, it will help you to inform stakeholders, interested parties and potential supporters about the purpose and nature of the link. The plan should include details of the link's objectives, a profile of the potential partner (or network) involved, a description of planned activities, an estimate of resources needed (time, skills, staff), a budget and a mechanism for

evaluation. It is common for insufficient time and resources to be committed to evaluation, so plan for evaluation from the start.

Agree on the link

If the plan seems realistic discuss it with your prospective partner. Share your motivations and expectations. It is vitally important to listen to their motivations and expectations, to respect them, to try to understand their perspective and to avoid value judgements. Negotiation is key to ensuring that common ground is found.

If you cannot find common ground, it may be best at this stage to abandon the process and try again with another partner.

Assuming common ground can be found, and the link can be agreed, give serious consideration to documenting the aims, objectives and planned activities to be undertaken in the form of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or written agreement. Both partners should be involved in setting objectives, which may be challenging for several reasons. Firstly, in many cases the impetus has come from the northern partner, and the southern partner may feel relatively passive in the process. Secondly, more power may lie with the northern partner because of its material wealth. Thirdly, partners may have different reasons for linking. The MOU should set out the link's objectives and describe who will be involved and participate at each end, the activities that will be undertaken, and the timescale of the link. Avoid being over-ambitious when planning the

link's activities. Activities that have a development focus should take place in the context of any social and economic development plans already in existence for you and your partner. Activities should not take place in parallel with, nor duplicate, the activities of other groups or organisations.

Day to day

Good communication is vital for effective linking, and difficulty with communication is one of the most common problems encountered when linking. In some southern countries even postal and telephone communications may be difficult and slow, and Internet access may not be possible. Not having a common language can also make communications difficult. It is generally felt to be easier to link with a partner in a country where a common language is spoken. Some guidelines on communication are presented in Box 2. Each partner should establish a link committee to manage the link. It should be clear who is responsible for day-

to-day administration and all activities should be recorded in order to facilitate monitoring and evaluation. A budget should be drawn up and a mechanism for handling finances that is accountable to both partners.

Evaluating the link

Many linking projects fail to allocate sufficient time to monitoring and evaluation. Evaluations that do take place are often one-sided, with little input from southern partners, especially women. Accordingly it is important to build evaluation into the planning of a link from the start and to take time to evaluate. Evaluation can be internal or external, but must involve both partners.

LINKING AND THE CURRICULUM

Schools engaged in linking will need to decide whether activities should be intra-curricular or not. In many Irish schools, linking is an extracurricular activity. In the

Box 2. Ensuring good communication

- Recognise that how you communicate is dependent on your cultural background and that cultural differences will affect how you communicate with your partner. Remember the advice of Leeds DEC / DFID: "Don't just 'speak a little louder' if you think you are being misunderstood!"
- Agree a main contact person on each side, but try to be in contact with more than one person overseas to reduce the risk of breakdown of communication or misunderstandings
- Communicate by more than one method, e.g., email and post
- Communicate by whatever means is affordable
- Acknowledge the communication costs for southern partners and consider providing funding to support their ability to communicate
- If phoning, arrange dates and times that are convenient for both sides to talk
- If using fax or email, arrange a way of ensuring receipt of communications
- Explore options with regard to email and sending text messages
- Organise face-to-face contact if possible

United Kingdom, linking is frequently incorporated into the curriculum. Some argue that links that are part of the curriculum are more likely to gain support and that linking has the potential to enhance all curriculum areas. Others, while recognising the difficulties of extracurricular activities in terms of time and commitment, nonetheless recommend that it is best if linking is not subject or class-specific. It is generally recommended that it is best to involve the whole school in the link, through involvement of other teachers, parents, non-academic staff and management. It makes sense for the link to be integrated with other development education activities that the school may be undertaking.

SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Make use of organisations 'on the ground': Linking usually involves dealing with a partner whose circumstances are very different to yours, frequently on the other side of the world. The effectiveness of your link is likely to be enhanced and the risk of harmful effects is likely to be reduced if you can seek guidance from experienced organisations that are already 'on the ground' and familiar with your partner and their circumstances. Consider seeking the support of embassies, NGOs, missionary orders and groups experienced in linking. These organisations may be able to identify potential link

partners, provide important contextual information, guide the choice of activities, advise on fund-raising, help you and your partner explore issues such as power and personal motivation, ensure that activities are consistent with existing development strategies, and deal with the unpredictable.

Channel the experience appropriately: Linking, particularly if it involves exchange visits, can be an intense experience. For northern partners particularly, exposure to significantly lower levels of material wealth can result in the (perhaps understandable) desire to prioritise fund-raising and aid donation. This risks converting a linking relationship, characterised by equality, mutuality and reciprocity, into a one-way donor-beneficiary relationship. It is important to remember that linking is primarily about mutual gain. It is also important to realise that your group may not be sufficiently qualified or experienced to engage in such aid donation and that you may do more harm than good. Inappropriate and potentially damaging activities should be avoided. Being rooted in clear objectives will help in such circumstances. According to Friendship North/South, you should recognise that development assistance is a professional business, best left to the professionals. In addition, take time to reflect and engage in informed debate about the experience and how best to

channel the emotions generated. Teachers, schools, NGOs and missionary groups that support linking often facilitate such activities. If possible separate aid donation from other aspects of the relationship to reduce the effects of power imbalances due to aid donation.

Maximise the opportunities for personal contact: As discussed earlier there are many different models of linking, not all of which involve direct personal contact. However, direct personal contact adds significant value to linking and enriches the impact of linking. According to one African teacher, "If you tell them (pupils) something they forget it, if you show them, they may remember. If they experience it, they will never be the same".

Recognise the costs for your southern partner: Costs for southern partners can be disproportionately high. A visit to the North may be prohibitively expensive; computers, audio-visual equipment and Internet access may represent a significant cost; even postage costs can be a burden. They may also incur costs when hosting their northern friends. Northern partners should pay all the costs associated with their own visits. They should also consider, if appropriate, assisting with the communication costs for their southern partners, and perhaps assist with the funding of South-North visits.

Take your time and be flexible:

Don't underestimate the time and work required to develop and sustain a link. Linking is a dynamic process and objectives may change with time. Take a flexible approach and be prepared to amend link aims and activities as appropriate. It is not a process to be rushed. Follow the advice of Leeds DEC/DFID: "Start small, be flexible and be patient."

USEFUL RESOURCES

Useful books and guidelines

A Quick Guide to North South School Links. Leeds Development Education Centre / DFID.

Closing the Gap. A Guide to Linking Communities Across the Globe for International Solidarity and Mutual Benefit. UNV/IULA, 2003. UNV/IULA/FLACMA

Experiences of North-South Community Linking. Farmer S. UKOWLA.

Links Manual: A Guide to Starting up and Maintaining Long Term Health Partnerships. The Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET), 2005. THET.

North/South Linking, Who Benefits? Bond B, 1996. UKOWLA.

Take your Partners: The Local Authority Handbook on Twinning and International Partnerships. Handley S, 2004. Local Government International Bureau (UK).

Steps to Town Twinning. Institute of Public Administration (Ireland). Available from the IPA, Dublin.

Thinking of Linking (pamphlet). UKOWLA. Available from UKOWLA.

Useful websites

British Council Global Schools Partnership
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/globalschools/>

Council of Europe North-South Office
http://www.coe.int/T/E/North-South_Centre/

EU Directorate-General for Education and Culture
http://europa.eu.int/comm/towntwinning/index_en.html

EuropeAid Cooperation Office
http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/index_en.htm

Institute of Public Administration (Ireland)
http://www.ipa.ie/international_twinning

Link Community Development
<http://www.lcd.org.uk/>

Soesterberg Declaration on North-South School Linking, 2000. Issued from the International Conference on North-South School Linking, Soesterberg, the Netherlands, May 2000.
<http://www.schoollinking.net/uk.htm>

UK One World Linking Association
<http://www.ukowla.org.uk/>

UNESCO Associated Schools Project (ASPnet)
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=14694&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

UNICEF
<http://www.unicef.org/teachers/researchers/exchange.htm>

United Cities and Local Governments
<http://www.cities-local governments.org/uclg/index.asp>

Vennskap Nord/Sør - Friendship North-South (Norway)
<http://www.vennskap.no/index.php?Path=English/Friendship/0/0>

This is Our Time Project (the Netherlands)
<http://www.timeproject.org/>

Tropical Health Education Trust (UK)
<http://www.thet.org/>

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