LEVERAGING A FESTIVAL TO BUILD BRIDGES IN A DIVIDED CITY

Adrian Devine, Bernadette Quinn and Frances Devine

Introduction

Events are communal celebrations, and because they bring people together they have the potential to create positive social outcomes for individuals and communities. In recent times this potential has received more attention from those bidding for and hosting events; however, despite all the well-intentioned rhetoric surrounding the social case for events there remains a sense that these outcomes are hoped for and desirable as opposed to being expected and planned for (Foley, McGillivary & McPherson 2012). This is in line with Smith’s (2012) argument that the social impacts are sometimes lazily cited by host cities to justify events when promised economic impacts have not materialised. To counter this and maximise the positive social benefits, pre-event planning and investment is required. This links to what Chalip (2004) refers to as event leveraging whereby governments (central and local), event organisers and other stakeholders agree on their social objectives at the earliest stage and plan how to achieve these. This chapter will discuss social leveraging in the context of Fleadh Cheoil, an annual festival which celebrates Irish culture through traditional dance, music and song. In particular, the focus will be on the 2013 edition of the festival, which was hosted by Derry/Londonderry, a politically and culturally divided city (McDermott, Nic Craith & Strani 2015). The chapter will discuss how the organisers of the Fleadh Cheoil strategically used the event to break down political barriers and open up the city both socially and physically.

Festivals, events and social outcomes

Traditionally the social impacts of festival and events and their measurement have been overshadowed by the economic agenda. In more recent years, however, the social outcomes of festivals and events have been recognised by policymakers, and there is increasing pressure on organisers to include social outcomes in their business case. According to Wilks (2011) these impacts can occur at a personal or community level. At a personal level, this impact could be as simple as a shared experience at a music festival. For some, however, this simple encounter can take on added meaning because it can assuage feelings of alienation and social isolation experienced in some of the most challenging community circumstances.
This links into Smith’s (2012) argument that festivals and events can provide a shared mission and help build cohesive communities by allowing new or excluded members to feel part of a collective identity. Smith goes on to state that even if some people are not interested in the events themselves, these occasions encourage reflection on the future direction of a place amongst the communities that live there and this can provide the basis for community development.

The development of community pride and subjective feelings of hope and renewed achievement are other commonly cited social outcomes of festivals and events (Misener & Mason 2006; Wood 2006; Foley et al. 2012; Quinn & Wilks 2013). According to Devine, Devine and Carruthers (2016), festivals and events also have the power to bring communities together by challenging stereotypes and changing perceptions. They discuss Féile an Phobail and how the organisers of this community festival incorporated a series of political debates into the programme which contributed to the peace process in Northern Ireland by encouraging cross-community dialogue. Boland, Murtagh and Shirlow (2016) in another study of an event in Northern Ireland, the UK City of Culture Derry-Londonderry 2013, found evidence of ‘transformative change’ in city image, civic pride and enhanced community relations. These studies lend support to Duffy and Mair’s (2015) argument that festivals can be used to increase tolerance and understanding of community diversity.

Leveraging for social outcomes

There is much evidence in the literature to that festivals and events can generate positive social outcomes for host communities. However, as Smith (2010, p. 163) notes, positive outcomes may not happen automatically; rather, initiatives need to be formulated and implemented to effect lasting benefits. The process of shaping events to produce specific, desirable outcomes that endure beyond the lifetime of the event is encapsulated in the term leveraging. According to Chalip (2004, p. 228) leveraging refers to ‘those activities that need to be undertaken around the event itself, which seek to maximise the long-term benefits from events’. For Weed and Dowse (2009, p. 13) leveraging implies a much more proactive approach to capitalising on opportunities ‘which differs from impact in that the latter relates to simply measuring outcomes’. Leveraging is thus inherently strategic. While the significance of leveraging is increasingly recognised and studies on the topic are growing, it remains under-researched (Quinn & Wilks 2013), especially with respect to domains beyond the economic. An aspect particularly in need of research is the strategic actions that event organisers can take to achieve effective leveraging.

For Karadakis, Kaplanidou and Karlis (2010), an important starting point in this process is to undertake a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of the host location. Undertaking and learning from a SWOT analysis lays a strong basis for planning and can ‘assist all stakeholders involved in the bidding, preparation, delivery and post-games management to target and prepare much more efficiently with the long-term needs of the host city’ (Karadakis et al. 2010, p. 182). Jago, Dwyer, Lipman, Van Lill and Vorster (2010) echo this holistic outlook, arguing that if benefits are to be long term, then the preparation for, and construction of, the event and associated facilities must be viewed as part of a long-term development strategy.

Writing in the context of sports events, O’Brien and Chalip (2008) very usefully develop a strategic framework premised upon identifying and exploiting the resources presented by hosting events. Thinking first from an economic perspective, they begin by conceiving of the event itself as a resource which offers opportunities to achieve a number of strategic
Leveraging a festival to build bridges

objectives through identifiable means. So, for example, an event might represent an opportunity to attract visitors, which can generate revenue, especially if there is a determined effort to increase length of stay and encourage visitor spending. Thinking specifically about social outcomes, Smith (2010, p. 163) picks up on the inherent sociability that events engender and recommends capitalising on ‘the goodwill, civic engagement and publicity that major events can generate’. In similar vein, O’Brien and Chalip (2008) identify liminality, and the communitas that can ensue, as an opportunity to be strategically exploited to achieve positive social outcomes. In his discussions of liminality, Turner (1982, p. 50) describes communitas as an ‘alternative and more liberated way to be socially human’. Festivals, and events more generally, are associated with communitas as their extraordinary nature can encourage people to step out of their everyday routines into settings characterised by goodwill and civic engagement. In turn, the ambience generated can represent an opportunity for enhanced communication and community bonding (Howell 2013). For Falassi (1987), communitas is associated with an increased sense of equality amongst community members, and as Turner (1982) explains, this sense of equality and the inclusivity of communitas contrasts with the exclusionary tendencies of the social structures that give sense and order to everyday life. It thus affords the opportunity for change to be effected during the event.

Therefore, if identified as resources, the enhanced social interaction and sense of communitas generated by events represent potential to underpin event leveraging strategies designed to achieve social, and perhaps other, outcomes. However, to date, little research has been undertaken to investigate if and how event organisers think about their events in this way. Certainly, there is a general understanding that in order to succeed, events need to acquire the support of their host communities. Foley et al. (2012) briefly reviewed a number of studies that critique events on the basis of failing to facilitate meaningful engagement for local populations, while Chalip (2004) argues that effective leveraging is best served by providing networking opportunities among key event stakeholders. However, much remains to be learned about how event organisations leverage social outcomes.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss how the organisers of the Fleadh Cheoil planned and managed to leverage positive social outcomes from this particular festival when it was hosted by Derry/Londonderry in 2013. It begins by setting the context and providing some background information both on this festival and, perhaps more importantly, on the host city, Derry-Londonderry.

Context

Fleadh Cheoil is an annual festival run by Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann in celebration of Irish culture through traditional dance, music and song. The first Fleadh Cheoil took place in 1951, and it has grown to become Europe’s largest music and traditional arts festival. Its seven–day programme attracts thousands of visitors, and its economic impact is the main reason why Irish towns and cities are so keen to bid for the right to hold this festival. In 2013 Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland’s second largest city, hosted the Fleadh Cheoil as part of its 2013 UK City of Culture programme. This was the first time the festival was held in Northern Ireland which is made up of the six counties which were partitioned from the rest of the island in 1921 and became part of the UK. It was this partition that ultimately led to the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998 as the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) community wanted to remain part of the UK, while the Catholic, Republican and Nationalist (CRN) community wanted independence.
Derry/Londonderry was one of the epicentres of violence during the ‘Troubles’. There has been substantial media focus on major atrocities such as Bloody Sunday, but this was only one of many horrific incidents. In total, there were 244 fatal incidents during the ‘Troubles’ in the Derry/Londonderry council area which equates to a death rate of 1.74 per 1000 of the population (Cost of the Troubles Survey 1995, cited in Derry City Council 2014, p. 45). A peace agreement was signed in 1998 (the Good Friday Agreement), but the ‘Troubles’ created a legacy of fear, distrust and suspicion between the CRN and the PUL communities. Indeed, 20 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, Derry/Londonderry is still very much a divided city. During the ‘Troubles’ there was a significant population shift within the city with the majority of the PUL community leaving the Cityside and moving across the River Foyle to the Waterside of the city. As a result of this population shift, the majority of the people in the city now live in segregated areas, i.e. CRN and PUL. This segregation extends beyond housing. With the exception of one school, the young people in the city are educated in segregated schools. Social and leisure activity is also significantly influenced by lines of segregation established in housing and school. In fact, for many the first sustained contact with ‘the other side’ may only come at third-level education or first employment experiences.

Derry/Londonderry is thus a culturally divided place. McDermott et al. (2015) discuss how culture within the city constitutes a political issue which is often used to differentiate communities. In the past, cultural expression has often been the cause of conflict within the city, a notable example being the annual Apprentice Boys Parade. For the PUL community their cultural identity is linked to their sense of Britishness, while for the Nationalist community their identity markers evolve around Irish traditions. Shirlow et al. (2005) observed a common perception amongst the PUL community in Derry/Londonderry that their culture heritage was in decline and a tendency to accuse the local council of favouring Irish culture whilst denigrating their British culture. Unsurprisingly, when it was announced that Derry/Londonderry would host the Fleadh Cheoil in 2013 many within the minority PUL community looked upon the decision with contempt. The Fleadh Cheoil has always been strongly associated with Irish national identity, so for the Unionists this festival was another sign of CRN dominance within the city. This was the complex and difficult context within which the organisers of the Fleadh Cheoil sought to use the event to break down barriers and promote inclusivity.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach and mixed empirical methods in the form of in-depth interviews and focus groups. Critical case sampling, a form of purposive sampling, was used to select the interviewees. In order to gain an insight into the Fleadh Cheoil 2013 the authors conducted an in-depth interview with the Manager of An Gaelaras (the lead partner). During this interview, the manager discussed the partnership that was formed with the Londonderry Bands Forum during the planning stages. This prompted the authors to interview the Coordinator of the Londonderry Bands Forum. The Director of St Columb’s Park House Peace and Reconciliation Centre was also interviewed as it was felt that his experience of working with both the Nationalist and the PUL communities would leave him well placed to comment on the impact of the Fleadh Cheoil. To elicit as much information as possible from these interviews the authors combined the general interview guide approach with an open-ended approach. In conjunction with local community officers, the authors
also organised six focus groups with 58 members of the local community who differed by age, sex, occupation and religion. These focus groups encouraged local residents to discuss their experiences during the Fleadh Cheoil and to explain how they felt the festival affected those living in their neighbourhoods. All of the data were analysed using thematic analysis, and the main findings are discussed in the following.

**Discussion**

According to Chalip (2004) if the social benefits of an event are to be effectively leveraged they must be incorporated into the event strategic planning process. When Derry/Londonderry, a politically and culturally divided city, won the right to host the Fleadh Cheoil, one of the strategic objectives adopted by the Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann Executive Committee was to make the 2013 Fleadh inclusive of the entire community in the city. The lead partner in delivering the festival was An Gaelaras, an organisation established in 1984 to promote the Irish language and culture within the city and surrounding area. An initial point of note is that the decision to bid for the Fleadh was part of a pre-existing strategy to encourage social cohesion in the city. The Manager of An Gaelaras explained that hosting the Fleadh was a ‘natural follow on’ and an opportunity to continue pursuing this objective on a larger scale. Having secured the bid to host the Fleadh, the festival was thus understood as an opportunity to be exploited (O’Brien & Chalip 2008) and as part of a long-term strategy (Jago et al. 2010). At the outset, An Gaelaras met with various groups representing the PUL community in order to design a programme of activities which facilitated, enabled and encouraged the participation of the PUL community. This was not an easy process as the Manager of An Gaelaras explained:

One of the strategic objectives of the Fleadh Cheoil was that we would make it an inclusive event. So we met with North West Cultural Partnership and the Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership – but neither of them were overly enthused about it. But at one of the meetings we did meet with the Chair of Londonderry Bands Forum who was more open to idea of working with us.

The Londonderry Bands Forum was established in October 2010 to represent loyalist marching bands in the city. During the interview with the Coordinator of the Londonderry Bands Forum he discussed how all 14 PUL neighbourhoods in Derry/Londonderry have a marching band. These bands are held in high esteem within their respective communities as the music they play is seen as an expression of their Protestant culture and British identity. It should be noted that on occasions, marching bands have become involved in political demonstrations and protests, and Ramsey (2011, p. 2) describes how ‘this sometimes led them into confrontation with the CRN community’. In this context, and given that the Fleadh Cheoil was a celebration of ‘Irish’ culture coupled with the fact that the Manager of An Gaelaras was a former CRN politician, it was understandable that the members of the Londonderry Bands Forum had mixed feelings about collaborating with An Gaelaras:

When we went to the first meeting there was a lot of suspicion because some of the people involved in the Fleadh Cheoil committee were very much politically orientated. We were also suspicious of their motives – do they need us in order to get a
grant/money? But once we arrived at the state of the art cultural offices we soon realised they were miles ahead of us on anything we were doing and they genuinely wanted us to be involved in the festival.

*(Coordinator, Londonderry Bands Forum)*

From a PUL perspective, feelings of scepticism and mistrust gradually began to dissipate as they realised that the Fleadh Cheoil could provide them with a unique opportunity to display positive aspects of their culture. Admittedly, the first few meetings were ‘heated’ as both parties were encouraged to express their concerns. However, both sides persisted, encouraged perhaps by the extraordinary ‘once-off’ context provided by the event and the enhanced communication that this can engender (Howell 2013). In the long term, thrashing out their differences was vital as it helped to remove some of ‘political baggage’ that could have later created a deadlock. It also helped to build up trust and respect between the two organisations, something which Devine et al. (2016) described as critical in a collaborative setting:

The meetings were very straight talking. As a former CRN Mayor of the city I would have had a very strong republican image and they (the band members) would have regarded me as the ‘enemy’. Likewise some of them had strong loyalist backgrounds but we managed to overcome this.

*(Manager, An Gaelaras)*

What really came out of the Fleadh was trust – that is how it worked – we realised straight away when speaking with Gerry (Manager of An Gaelaras) that it was never tokenism. We knew what the Fleadh Cheoil was about and they knew what the bands forum was about.

*(Director of St Columb’s Park Peace and Reconciliation Centre)*

Muir (2011) discusses the importance of leadership and how individuals can bring groups from a divided community together. In the case of Fleadh Cheoil the friendship that developed between the Manager of An Gaelaras and the Coordinator of the Londonderry Bands Forum proved invaluable. These two individuals were the driving force during the formative stages of the partnership and key to strategically leveraging the social impacts beyond the festival:

Gerry O Hara (Manager, An Gaelaras) was very good privately – behind the scenes encouraging the members of the community to come and sell the idea of an inclusive Fleadh Cheoil. He made us realise its potential and how it could be mutually beneficial.

*(Coordinator, Londonderry Bands Forum)*

After these initial meetings, An Gaelaras formed a very strong working relationship with the Londonderry Bands Forum. Significantly, representatives from the PUL community were invited to sit on a number of organising subcommittees to help develop the Fleadh Cheoil engagement programme. This ensured that the Bands Forum would be able to offer input on the planning and that they were in a position to address any concerns raised from within the PUL community.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the ‘Troubles’ had left Derry/Londonderry a segregated city, with the majority of the Protestants leaving the Cityside and moving across
the River Foyle to the Waterside. During the planning stages it was agreed that in order to make Fleadh Cheoil 2013 inclusive it would have to be physically staged in both sides of the city. Accordingly, venues were located in both the Waterside and the Cityside. Perhaps even more significantly, four loyalist bands took part in the official programme, including a performance on one of the main stages at Ebrington Square. McDermott et al. (2015) described this as a ‘symbolic gesture’, but as the following quotes would suggest, it was more than a gesture, serving to open up the city physically:

It was notable that during the days when our band were playing there was a lot of PUL people from the Waterside over watching giving them legitimacy and a reason to come out and watch rather than say it was an event for the other community.

(Director of St Columb’s Park House Peace and Reconciliation Centre)

The fact that four loyalist bands played at the Fleadh was crucial as it opened the door for members of the PUL community to come over to the cityside and enjoy the event.

(Coordinator, Londonderry Bands Forum)

More generally, events and activities like this created new opportunities for social engagement, enabling the sense of communitas (Turner 1982) to emerge. The data showed that the Fleadh encouraged residents to move around parts of the city that are perceived to be closed off to them on religious grounds. The Manager of An Gaelaras told of extensive anecdotal evidence showing how bands’ performances encouraged people from PUL communities to socialise in CRN districts of the city. For some residents, specifically some band members, this meant revisiting parts of their city lost to them for decades because of conflict. Cross-city movements like these, and the heightened social relations that they fostered, were intentionally stimulated by programming decisions taken in respect of where and when events were scheduled, in line with the objective of encouraging inclusivity.

Another important intervention taken by the Fleadh Cheoil organising committee was to place restrictions on the flying of flags in order to make this a festival for ‘everyone’. While this may have seemed a rather draconian measure, the organisers were aware that flags like the tricolour (the Irish Flag) would have been off-putting and intimidating to members of the PUL community. This is because, as Nic Craith (2013) has discussed, cultural symbols like flags and murals are used by both CRN and PUL groups in Northern Ireland to mark their territories. Preemptive measures like this were important in encouraging inclusion and participation from across the different communities in the city. This was just one of the many actions taken by the Fleadh Cheoil organisers to exploit the ‘atmosphere of potentials’ (Pløger 2010, p. 853) that festivals represent in an attempt to tackle social divisions in the city. In using the festival to subvert social norms (Bakhtin 1968), the individuals from both communities who acted as leaders were taking risks. The Manager of An Gaelaras, for example, spoke of programming the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) Pipe Band to perform in one of the city’s main civic squares, without any knowledge of how the performance would be received by the public. However, the rewards that accompanied the risk-taking were clearly communicated in the ‘community focus groups’ data:

There was a lot of people from the PUL community who attended the Fleadh Cheoil. I know from my contacts through the Women’s Group that they had a ball.

(Greater Shantallow Area Focus Group)
Adrian Devine et al.

Our band (The Irish Street Band) took part in the Fleadh Cheoil and it was so nice to see them involved…. both sides celebrating together.

(Irish Street Focus Group)

During the Fleadh Cheoil I saw people in Fountain Street (PUL) sitting outside their homes enjoying the music…. there was so much positivity and goodwill in the city at that time.

(Outerwest Focus Group)

These quotes support Quinn and Wilks’ (2013) argument that festival settings foster social connections. However, for a divided city like Derry/Londonderry this has added significance because the Fleadh Cheoil allowed people from the CRN and PUL communities to widen their social circles beyond traditional communal barriers and realise that it does not always have to be a case of ‘us and them’. Long et al. (2004) suggest that festivals may also provide opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. This was certainly the case with the Fleadh Cheoil 2013 when culture provided participants with a shared focus and interest which transcended prevailing perceptions of difference and division.

Earlier it was noted that the organisers of the Fleadh Cheoil, when bidding for the event in 2012, saw it as an opportunity to pursue their objective of building bridges between communities in the city. In the event’s aftermath, they took steps to maintain and strengthen the goodwill, social engagement and enhanced community relations generated. A key undertaking was the establishment of the Droichead project, ‘droichead’ being an Irish word meaning ‘bridge’. A cross-community project, Droichead is designed to promote inclusivity and awareness of cultural diversity. As the lead partner, An Gaelaras, in conjunction with the Londonderry Bands Forum, developed a number of initiatives, the most notable being a Learning Resource Pack for schools. This pack included a 15-minute film which told the story of engagement between An Gaelaras and the Londonderry Bands Forum during the Fleadh Cheoil. The pack also included tasks which were designed to encourage students to discuss the film and how this festival challenged stereotypes, changed perceptions and encouraged dialogue, diversity and inclusion in Derry/Londonderry. When it was launched this learning resource was well received by the schools in the city and surrounding area, and at the time of writing it is still being taught as part the Global Citizenship Curriculum (Key Stage 3). In 2017 the Droichead project remained ongoing.

Conclusion

The Fleadh Cheoil hosted in Derry/Londonderry in 2013 had a clear objective of tackling the social divides that continue to characterise the city post conflict. An Gaelaras, the lead organising partner, already had a pre-existing strategy to promote cultural awareness and encourage cross-community activities in the city. Bidding to host the Fleadh was viewed as an opportunity to further advance this strategy. While the organisers may not have had a formal leveraging plan in place, the study has identified a range of outcomes. These include a clear intent to leverage positive social outcomes through the festival; an approach that was distinguished by traits that included clear and simple strategic thinking that was operationalised before, during and after the festival; strong leadership; a commitment to cross-community dialogue, networking and partnership; persistence in the face of obstacles; and risk-taking. The study further identified a range of proactive steps taken by the organisers to avail of the once-off and extraordinary context created by the festival. Availing of the good will
and civic pride in the city engendered through the festival, and tapping into the relative neutrality of music and arts, the organisers managed to work through obstacles and encourage positive cross-community social interactions. The relationships built during the festival continue through the auspices of the Droichead project established specifically to further the advances made during the Fleadh.

References


