



Briefing Report

**Countering Divisive Narratives
and Strengthening Civic Dialogue
in Ireland**

Project Overview

The 'Countering Divisive Narratives and Strengthening Civic Dialogue in Ireland' project was a cross-border initiative implemented by Comhlámh and the Centre for Global Education. The project engaged more than 275 youth workers, educators, civil society organisations, and community leaders across the island of Ireland. Through workshops and collaborative activities, participants examined both the systemic drivers and the human impacts of misinformation and disinformation. They emphasised the urgent need for coordinated action to counter racism and far-right narratives across both jurisdictions of Ireland.

The project applied Global Citizenship Education approaches to link local experiences to wider European and international patterns. It aimed to strengthen civic resilience, support inclusive dialogue, and equip communities to address harmful narratives in a coordinated, informed, and justice-oriented way.

Purpose

This brief presents insights and actionable recommendations aimed at equipping policymakers, educators, and community actors to counter disinformation in Ireland, foster cross-community dialogue, and build inclusive, resilient democratic practices.

Implementing Organisations

Comhlámh and the Centre for Global Education



Executive Summary

THE CHALLENGE: DISINFORMATION AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

Disinformation is reshaping public debate in Ireland. It is driving racial tensions, anti-migrant hostility, sectarian narratives, and growing distrust in public institutions. The 2023 Dublin riots and the 2024 anti-immigrant unrest in the North of the Island demonstrate how harmful narratives can escalate into violence when historic grievances, algorithmic amplification, and political opportunism converge.

LINKING LOCAL ACTION TO EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS

The project connected local efforts to European Union mechanisms including the Digital Services Act, the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, and the European Democracy Action Plan. Participants examined how Irish civic actors use these mechanisms to strengthen democratic resilience. Insights highlighted how disinformation undermines social cohesion, exploits identity-based fears, and weakens democratic participation. It was recognised that structural inequalities, such as economic precarity, weakened social services, and systemic marginalisation, create the conditions in which far-right actors operate.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AS A RESPONSE

Grounded in Global Citizenship Education (GCE), the project integrated global justice perspectives, ethical communication tools, and participatory methods. These approaches emphasised critical pedagogy, reflexive learning, and transformative participation. GCE helps cultivate agency, solidarity, and systemic understanding. It ensures that responses to disinformation are not only reactive but proactive, nurturing critical, reflective, and empathetic citizens who can navigate complex social, political, and digital contexts. GCE also supports the linking of local experiences to broader European and international issues.



STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND POLICY INITIATIVES

This Project Brief supports the ambition of the Shared Island initiative and the reconciliatory commitments of the Good Friday Agreement by strengthening cross-border civic dialogue, public engagement, and community capacity. By connecting local civic action to EU frameworks, this project also advances the Communicating Europe Initiative’s goal of empowering communities to engage with European democratic processes. This contributes to sustaining a cross-border community of practice, ensuring that learning, collaboration, and public-facing action are nurtured and strengthened, while advancing justice, solidarity, and global understanding.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This project brief synthesises findings and offers actionable recommendations for Irish and European policymakers. It highlights the need for long-term, participatory, people-led approaches that place local experiences in a global context. It underscores the importance of embedding structural analysis and supporting communities to co-create solutions.

Key Findings



1 Disinformation Deepens Social Divisions

- Harmful narratives exploit long-standing anxieties related to identity, sovereignty, sectarianism, colonisation, and cultural belonging. The north of the island’s historical exposure to sectarian and polarised politics provides insight into how far-right groups manipulate identity-based narratives. Understanding these dynamics helps communities anticipate patterns of mobilisation and strengthens cross-border preventive strategies.
- Online platforms amplify harmful narratives by presenting complex social issues, such as migration and crime, as directly connected threats. Far-right actors distort these issues into oversimplified, emotionally charged stories that assign blame to certain groups, polarise communities, and mobilise support for exclusionary agendas.

- Evidence from the Committee on the Administration of Justice’s (CAJ) ‘Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland’ report shows that such online narratives often lead to offline consequences, including harassment, displacement, and targeted violence.
- In the Republic of Ireland, anti-migrant sentiment surrounding the 2023 Dublin riot was rapidly intensified by online disinformation.
- Disinformation is linked to rising racism, hate speech, the othering of migrants, democratic backsliding, and debates about Eurocentrism and decolonisation.
- GCE practitioners observe that these harmful narratives often mirror global patterns of othering and securitisation. This illustrates the value of linking local dialogue with global justice education.

Participant insight:

“People are not reacting to facts. They are reacting to fear, history, and identity. Disinformation taps into emotions that have been there for generations.”

Policy relevance:

Interventions must reflect the historical and social context of each jurisdiction of Ireland while remaining coordinated across the island and connected to wider European initiatives. Understanding how local narratives fit within global patterns helps communities challenge stereotypes and build solidarity-based strategies. Actions must also address the deeper structural inequalities that allow disinformation to spread and enable far-right mobilisation.

2 Trust-Building and Reflective Dialogue Are Essential

- Countering misinformation requires more than correcting false content. It requires rebuilding trust, reducing fear, and strengthening emotional literacy.
- Structured brave spaces allow participants to safely explore biases and the emotions that shape harmful narratives.
- Trust-based learning should be embedded within participatory, dialogical approaches instead of short-term, fact-focused interventions.

Participant insight:

“We can only dismantle harmful narratives when we feel brave enough to be vulnerable together.”

Policy relevance:

Programmes should integrate relational, emotional, and community-building approaches. Facilitators should use participatory and creative methods to support critical consciousness, empathy, and collective agency.

3 Civic and Media Literacy Strengthens Democratic Resilience

- Communities need accessible tools to identify misinformation and navigate online platforms.
- AI-generated content, algorithmic bias, and the rapid simplification of complex issues present growing challenges.
- Economic literacy is necessary to understand how insecurity and political messaging intersect with harmful narratives.
- Germany's trusted flagger model demonstrates the value of national infrastructure for reporting illegal online content and supporting victims.
- GCE methods are important for integrating digital, economic, historical, and global systems thinking.

Participant insight:

"The media, especially social media, can stereotype entire groups and feed division across communities."

Policy relevance:

Media literacy initiatives should address economic inequality, digital governance, algorithmic awareness, and emotional resilience. These initiatives must be embedded within a broader critical pedagogy that examines power, privilege, and structural injustice.

4 Linking Local Action to EU Policy Improves Accountability

- Awareness of EU frameworks such as the Digital Services Act and the EU Code of Practice helps communities see how local issues connect to European strategies.
- EU mechanisms offer funding, regulatory support, and accountability pathways that local actors are not yet fully accessing.

- Strengthening EU-facing advocacy skills increases civic participation in European policy debates.
- Linking community initiatives with EU frameworks helps translate local experience into European policy contributions.

Participant insight:

"Tackling disinformation is not just local. It is part of a bigger European effort...by sharing our experiences, we could connect the realities on the ground with the bigger EU policy picture."

Policy relevance:

Local organisations need practical guidance on using EU mechanisms and on building relationships with European institutions. Engagement should be participatory so that communities affected by disinformation help shape advocacy agendas.

5 Cross-Community Dialogue Is Central to Inclusive Civic Engagement

- Encouraging diverse civil society cooperation supports richer dialogue and shared learning.
- Collaboration between civil society, migrant organisations, and GCE practitioners fosters richer dialogue, shared learning, and understanding grounded in global justice perspectives.
- Formal and informal sharing of intelligence across borders is crucial to identify actors and protect communities at risk.

Participant insight:

"Dialogue, when rooted in respect and listening, can be one of the most powerful tools for social change."

Policy relevance:

Long-term support for cross-community and cross-sector partnerships is essential for a resilient democratic infrastructure. Structured knowledge sharing between GCE practitioners, civil society actors, anti-racism networks, and community organisations increases impact. Partnerships should prioritise the experiences of racialised and migrant communities and ensure that initiatives are co-created.

Policy Recommendations

High-Priority Actions

STRENGTHEN CROSS-COMMUNITY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Key action: Fund sustained cross-border and cross-community programmes, including brave spaces, intergenerational dialogue, and trust-building initiatives.

Responsible actors: Irish Government, Northern Ireland Executive, Local Councils, EU Cohesion Funds

INVEST IN CIVIC, MEDIA AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Key action: Develop integrated modules that address social media dynamics, algorithmic bias, economic inequality, emotional literacy, and youth peacebuilding.

Responsible actors: Departments of Education in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Civil Society Organisations, Youth Organisations

STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION WITH ANTI-RACISM NETWORKS

Key action: Build sustained partnerships between GCE actors, International Development organisations, and anti-racism networks including the Irish Network Against Racism, the Hope and Courage Collective, and the North-West Migrants Forum.

Responsible actors: GCE and International Development sectors, Civil Society Organisations, Anti-Racism Networks, Local Authorities

EMBED ALL-ISLAND COORDINATION WITHIN GCE AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Key action: Use networks such as the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) and Dóchas to mainstream cross-border approaches to anti-racism, peacebuilding, and anti-disinformation work.

Responsible actors: IDEA, Dóchas, Civil Society Networks, Departments of Education in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Medium-Priority Actions

STRENGTHEN EU-IRELAND POLICY LINKS

Key action: Provide guidance for civic actors on using EU frameworks such as the Digital Services Act and develop reporting pathways modelled on trusted flagger systems.

Responsible actors: Department of Foreign Affairs, EU Liaison Offices, National Digital Regulators

AMPLIFY COMMUNITY-INFORMED INSIGHTS

Key action: Integrate lived experience, reflective practice, and youth-led case studies into policymaking through participatory approaches.

Responsible actors: National and EU policymakers

PROMOTE LONG-TERM EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Key action: Develop systems to track behavioural change, community trust, digital engagement, and relational outcomes over time.

Responsible actors: Research Institutions, Civil Society Organisations, Funders

Conclusion

Disinformation threatens more than factual accuracy. It erodes social trust, deepens divisions, and exploits emotional and historical vulnerabilities. Insights from across the island of Ireland and Europe show that effective responses must combine the following:

- cross-community dialogue
- civic, media, and digital literacy
- emotionally aware youth work
- strong reporting and regulatory systems
- engagement with EU policy frameworks
- GCE-informed pedagogies that link local and global perspectives

Efforts must confront structural inequalities, embed global justice, and promote long-term participatory civic culture. Civil society organisations are already developing innovative approaches. Policymakers can strengthen this work by investing in long-term, community-led strategies that help people critically navigate narratives and build democratic confidence.

Immediate action should prioritise funding for cross-border collaboration, digital and media literacy, and trust-building initiatives. These responses must be participatory, co-created with affected communities, and grounded in long-term approaches to justice, solidarity, and empowerment. Framing local initiatives within a global justice perspective strengthens impact and ensures alignment with broader struggles for equality, human rights, and solidarity.

Sources and Background Documents






- Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). *Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland: Project Report*
- The Good Friday Agreement (1998)
- EU *Digital Services Act*
- EU *European Democracy Action Plan*
- EU *Code of Practice on Disinformation*
- Bundesnetzagentur (Federal Network Agency). *First approval for trusted flagger for online platforms in Germany*
- Comhlámh and Centre for Global Education workshop findings, reflections and participant contributions

About Comhlámh

Established in 1975, Comhlámh is the Irish association of international development workers and volunteers. As a membership organisation, we build and mobilise community around global justice issues. Comhlámh nurtures and supports work for change, locally and globally, and advocates for a world beyond injustice.

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