Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Inquiry into Building a United Community

Response by Co-operation Ireland

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1. Introduction

1.1   Co-operation Ireland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Building a United Community currently being undertaken by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Co-operation Ireland works to advance mutual understanding and respect through practical co-operation. We consistently promote peace-building across the community divide, providing innovative programmes which create opportunities for people to meet, share experiences and collaborate for mutual benefit with those of a different religion or tradition. Our programmes are focussed on:

> ➤ Increasing dialogue and understanding and co-operation at a community level
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> ➤ Increasing opportunities for disengaged communities to participate in cross community programme activity
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> ➤ Increasing the participation of young people in activities which develop their leadership potential and skills for living in a shared society

2. Good Practice in Addressing Community Division

2.1   Co-operation Ireland uses a range of methodologies and approaches in our work, tailored to the aims and circumstances of participating individuals and groups. Many of our programmes are based on the contact theory model, with the promotion of managed interaction and mutually beneficial co-operation at the core of our approach. Previous research and our own evaluations highlight the positive impact of appropriately structured contact on inter-group relations. In particular, contact has been shown to reduce anxiety about inter-group engagement, increase understanding, and address prejudice and stereotypes. Recent research in Northern Ireland has demonstrated that everyday interaction in mixed communities significantly impacts on inter-group attitudes, with people living in mixed areas more willing to engage in cross-community activity, feeling closer to the other community, and more likely to perceive relations between the communities as fair.[1] In contrast, people living in segregated areas had fewer friends from the other community, were more anxious about cross-community contact, and were more likely to perceive their community as threatened by the other. The research also found that superficial neighbourhood contact led to reduced anxiety about meeting members of the other community and that contact led, over time, to reduced prejudice. 'Indirect contact', where people are aware of others in their community involved in inter-group contact, was also seen to have a beneficial impact by changing norms about acceptable cross-community interaction and leading, over time, to direct contact.

2.2   Our programmes draw on a range of themes and vehicles for building relationships and supporting attitudinal change. Arts-based/creative approaches have proved particularly effective in facilitating exploration and discussion of difficult issues by encouraging perspective taking, deepening understanding, and promoting empathy. Practical community and active citizenship based activities have also been effective in encouraging recognition of shared interests and developing skills for negotiation and collaboration.

2.3   Addressing community divisions requires sustained, long-term interventions. Limited, intermittent programmes are not capable of bringing about meaningful change in attitudes and behaviour as they do not provide the necessary conditions for building capacity and developing sustainable relations. Effective programmes need to be designed around people's needs and priorities, securing their buy-in by demonstrating relevance to their current circumstances. Crucially, programmes need to have the flexibility to adapt to events and emerging issues and cannot be implemented in a rigid, unresponsive manner. The results of interventions can, given the nature and scale of the issues to be addressed, be uncertain. While effective programmes will be based on existing good practice and practitioner expertise, they also require openness to innovation and risk-taking.

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[1] Hewstone et al, 2008. Can Contact Promote Better Relations? Evidence from Mixed and Segregated Areas of Belfast. Belfast: OFMDFM.

3. Meaning of Good Relations

3.1   The provision of an agreed definition of good relations will be a crucial component of developing a supportive policy framework for the building of a united community. If properly constructed and implemented, an agreed definition can become a driver of change in policy and practice across the public sector and beyond. While we recognise there will be difficulties in finding a formula which can secure broad acceptance, we suggest the following should be key components of any vision for the future of community relations in Northern Ireland:

> Good relations should be understood as a **dynamic, transformative concept**. A shared and cohesive society is based on more than mere tolerance for difference and a settling for separate but equal communal groupings. Instead, the fostering of good relations implies an active repairing of inter-community relationships, a rebuilding of trust, and an overcoming of fears and suspicions. Crucially, it requires a progressive dismantling of the institutions and practices which sustain segregation and sectarianism.

> Related to this, a society characterised by good relations is one which has developed the **capacity to contain and constructively resolve conflict**. The theorist Johan Galtung has described how the development of such a 'peace culture', which legitimises creative, non-violent handling of conflict, is critical to the building of a sustainable peace.[2] In a Northern Ireland context, this requires acceptance of the legitimacy of opposing points of view and a movement away from zero-sum calculations to recognise that honourable compromise is possible.

> **Positive relationships** between individuals from different community and cultural backgrounds, based on meaningful engagement, should be at the core of our conception of good relations. In culturally diverse societies, cross-cutting ties deepen mutual respect and understanding, foster recognition of common interests, and increase awareness of interdependence. While respecting individual freedom of choice, interaction and integration should be the norm in a shared society.

> Good relations are based on, and require, a foundation of **social and economic equality**. Attempts to set up a false opposition between good relations and equality must be avoided.

> The concept of good relations is future-orientated, entailing a **shared vision** for society. While communities can hold divergent long-term aspirations and different narratives of the past, there is recognition of common goals and priorities. There is also agreement on basic principles and values which will govern inter-community relations, regardless of any possible future political and constitutional changes.

> Good relations also imply a **society at ease with itself**, where all share an equal sense of security and belonging. Regardless of background, people feel they have a stake in society and have confidence that their cultural identities are recognised and held in esteem.

3.2   The work of Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly could provide a useful starting point in framing an agreed definition of good relations. While focused on reconciliation, their model remains very relevant to conceptualising community relations in a society emerging from conflict. In addition, valuable insights are available from the experience in Great Britain of developing community cohesion in the context of cultural and ethnic diversity. Key elements in GB definitions include shared aspirations and recognition of commonality, respect and appreciation for diversity, positive relationships and meaningful interaction, equality, a sense of belonging, and a sense of mutual commitments.[3]

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[2] Galtung, Johan, 1996. Peace by Peaceful Means. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute.

[3] For example, see Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007. Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion.

4. Recommendations

4.1   Building a united community in Northern Ireland will require sustained commitment and partnership between government, civil society, and local communities. Given the scale of the challenges to be overcome, progress will be measured in decades not years. The key role of government in this process will be to provide strategic and consistent leadership – to direct, coordinate and resource the efforts of individuals, groups, and organisations on the ground. Publication of Together Building a United Community is a welcome first step towards development of an agreed good relations policy. However, TBUC would be greatly strengthened by incorporating the strategy into an extended 10 to 15 year road map for change which can guide actions over the longer-term and provide milestones against which progress can be assessed. This would include long-term goals and targets for the promotion of integration, building of relationships, and addressing intolerance and prejudice.

Recommendation 1: The Executive should develop a long-term road map for the building of a united community in Northern Ireland, with measurable goals, targets, and milestones for the promotion of integration, building of relationships, and addressing intolerance and prejudice.

4.2   The building of a united community can only be progressed with a supportive policy and institutional framework for good relations. While work is currently on-going to implement the infrastructural changes proposed under TBUC, the provision of an agreed definition of good relations will be essential to guide and transform policy and practice across the public sector and beyond. This would give substance to the proposed introduction under TBUC of an enhanced good relations section for Equality Impact Assessment in all policy areas across government. In addition, an agreed definition of good relations would inform assessment of progress towards a united community and assist target development.

Recommendation 2: The Executive should, following public consultation, develop an agreed definition of good relations to guide policy and practice across the public and private sector and inform monitoring of progress towards the building of a united community.

4.3   While public policy and practice have key roles to play in creating a momentum towards a united community, real change can only come about through a shift in the attitudes and behaviours of individuals and groups across Northern Ireland. Initiatives, including those proposed under TBUC, which address divisions and provide opportunities for greater cross-community interaction will be central to this process. However, on the ground change will also require the development of a supportive institutional structure for good relations at local level. There is a need to build capacity for communities to network and work together around common issues, raising confidence and developing skills to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and engage positively with diversity. This will require the nurturing of the next generation of community leaders and equipping them with the skills and perspectives necessary for working with others in a shared society. In particular, there is a need to support the development of alternative leadership structures in areas still under paramilitary influence.

Recommendation 3: The Executive and other funders should develop and resource sustainable, flexible, and innovative initiatives to build capacity at community-level for working together in a shared society, including supporting development of the next generation of community leaders.