



Press Release

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'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' policy backward step for community relations

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT), a British foundation which has funded human rights, peace and equality work in Northern Ireland since the 1970s, has expressed its concern about the content and aspirations of OFMDFM's new 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' strategy.

The JRCT commissioned an independent comparative study of the new policy document and its predecessor, 'A Shared Future', to determine how this critical area of social policy is evolving.

The study, carried out by the Institute for British Irish Studies at UCD, Dublin, identifies three key areas of concern. Celia McKeon of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust discusses:

"Firstly, the research has indicated that the new policy framework abandons the previous strategic goal of reconciliation. It instead focuses upon creating shared and safe spaces, and encouraging 'mutual accommodation'. It is far from clear that this vision is sufficiently compelling to prevent a resectarianisation of society in Northern Ireland, especially among the young.

"Our experience of funding work in other transitional societies, such as South Africa, indicates the critical importance of strong political leadership not only on human rights and equality, but also on reconciliation. This is particularly important when the 'peace dividend' begins to wear off and when economic hardships begin to bite. With the looming spending cuts this is even more pertinent."

Celia continues: "Secondly, the new policy moves away from a fluid interpretation of culture and treats culture and identity as though they are fixed and given entities. This is a simplistic view, which fails to recognise the capacity of individuals and communities to make ongoing choices in ways which are open to influence and change. While this may suit political parties with a deeply rooted sense of conflicting priorities based on ethnic division, it overlooks the potential social benefit from processes that question traditional cultural identities."

Addressing the final area of concern, Celia said: "Thirdly, the new policy proposes four optional formulas for organising the community relations infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The IBIS study concludes that all four options are weaker than the current mandate of the Community Relations Council to push forward community relations duties and look critically at the role of existing political and local organisations. Yet maintaining an independent critical voice is a vital means of ensuring that government lives up to its responsibilities to bring about a peaceful and just society. While economic efficiencies are clearly a relevant consideration, the savings accruing as a result of any of these proposals would be dwarfed by the economic and social costs of failing to complete the transition away from sectarian violence."

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is a long-standing supporter of Northern Ireland's transition towards a more peaceful and equal society. JRCT commissioned the Institute for British Irish Studies, University College Dublin (IBIS) to compare and contrast two policy documents: A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland (March 2005) and the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (July 2010) and to comment on significant differences between the documents in light of current international scholarship and research on issues of identity, cultural difference and social division in conflict and post conflict situations.

A copy of the report and its findings is available to download from the JRCT website, simply click on <http://www.jrct.org.uk/>

The public consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration is open and will run until 29 October 2010.

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For further information on this press release or to arrange an interview with Celia McKeon, Assistant Trust Secretary, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT), please contact:

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Notes to editors:

1. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is an independent progressive organisation committed to funding radical change towards a better world. It makes grants of around £5m each year to individuals and to projects seeking the creation of a peaceful world, political equality and social justice. It is an endowed trust, with resources from a portfolio of investments, almost entirely held in UK and overseas shares. www.jrct.org.uk
2. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is one of the trusts established by Joseph Rowntree in 1904. For information about the different trusts see www.josephrowntree.org.uk
3. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is a Quaker Trust. For more information about Quakers in Britain, see www.quaker.org.uk
4. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has been funding work on human rights, peace and social justice in Northern Ireland since the 1970s. www.jrct.org.uk
5. JRCT commissioned the Institute for British Irish Studies at University College Dublin, to conduct the research. Professor Jennifer Todd and Professor Joseph Ruane led the study with assistance provided by Mark Dunne.
6. The IBIS report draws three main conclusions:
 - *Cohesion* abandons the strategic aim of reconciliation which was at the heart of the *Shared Future* document
 - *Cohesion* treats identity and culture as given and stable entities, rather than as a process of ongoing choices made by individuals and communities which are constantly subject to changing influences.
 - *Cohesion* proposes four different ways of organising the community relations infrastructure, all of which are weaker than the current mandate of the Community Relations Council to push forward community relations duties and look critically at the role of existing political and local organisations.
7. The full text of the IBIS report is available on the JRCT website at www.jrct.org.uk