

Breaking Barriers through Youth Work (by Duncan Morrow)

Paul O'Connor, a man who has made a significant impact on the city of Chicago to enable it to overcome its social and ethnic divisions, said during his recent visit here that it was critical to making our way forward in Northern Ireland that we start to make inroads into what he called our "signature weakness". By this he meant the sectarianism and the segregation.

Building a shared society here will cost a lot more than the small budget which is currently allocated to community relations. The critical issue for the Community Relations Council has been to say that the shared future project we are engaged on is not just for a few youth workers desperately trying to do something at the interface but involves much, much more. It is about housing, education, policing, culture and how the big budgets of all of these and other areas of government can be mobilised to start to build a shared future. The question of whether we build a shared future should not even be on the table; it's how and what kind of shared future we are going to build.

This is why it is deeply dispiriting that the Department of Education, in the week before Community Relations Week, announced a 70% cut in the youth and schools budget for community relations. Everybody knows that there can be no shared future without an investment in young people. Unless there is youth work and schools work that supports young people to challenge and change the abnormal sectarian cultures that shape our society we will not go forward.

The current reality for many young people is that their world is constrained by sectarian forces. In Lurgan some say they cannot actually go to MacDonaldis at night because only Catholics go there. Others say that they can't use the park because only Protestants go there. In Coleraine young people say they are bebo-ing to organise riots in the Dunnes car park. In Antrim young people say the defining factor in where they are prepared to go at night is sectarianism. The argument about whether we should be funding community relations youth and schools work should not even need to be made. The only thing we should be talking about is what shape this work should take.

In the current global financial crisis of course the political pressure from London is to reduce the cost of the public sector and develop the business economy. But cutting community relations work is a false economy. Last July the policing cost for one riot in Ardoyne was £590,000. Additional costs would also need to be factored in for the cost of taking a lot of young people into the care of the criminal justice system as a result of what happened in that period, not to mention the lost tourism and investment opportunities that were turned away.

If the real agenda is that people want jobs, businessmen want customers, and politicians want to be seen to be delivering projects, none of this will happen without going through a shared future. We will not sustain jobs if this is a place whose signature story is still violence, instability and threat. We will not attract customers unless everybody, including

tourists and visitors, can move about safely. Projects will no longer attract international support unless they are aimed at seriously breaking down the signature weakness of our society.

Shared space is not a vacuous concept; it means a place where everyone can go, live, work, play and do their business. It is not a small question. And young people being on the pitch is actually a critical factor of whether it is working or not.

(The above article is based on the author's closing remarks at the CRC/Youthnet conference on 27 April at the Odyssey, Belfast)