Race/Ethnicity, Disability and Sexual Orientation in Northern Ireland: A Study of Non-Governmental Organisations

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Introduction

Racist and homophobic crimes, media coverage of migrant workers, the introduction of new Hate Crime legislation and increased promotion of 'good relations' have all focused attention on Northern Ireland as a diverse and multicultural place. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the growing number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) founded in the shared experiences of communities centred around race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability in Northern Ireland. These organisations play a critical role in working at the cutting edge of social issues, reaching out to sections of the population no-one else will, promoting the mental, emotional and physical health of these communities, challenging oppressive and discriminatory actions and attitudes, power imbalances, and unequal life chances, facilitating cross/inter-community engagement, promoting the empowerment and participation of individuals and communities, and assisting government in developing inclusive policies and delivering services successfully.

In the period from August to November 2004 INCORE's Local International Learning Project carried out a pilot study of NGOs founded in the shared experiences of communities centred around race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability in Northern Ireland. In consultation with a group of key policymakers, academics and practitioners, it was established that the purpose of the pilot study would be to develop greater understanding of these organisations' work, and identify their critical capacity building needs. A primarily qualitative approach was taken to the research. More than 15

interviews were conducted with relevant organisations, and related literature and documentation were also reviewed.[1] This report summarises key findings and recommendations from this research. It begins with a discussion of the value in comparing NGOs centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. The report then examines the impact of these organisations on Northern Ireland society before turning to the common challenges they face in relation to funding, human resources, policy development, community development and political engagement. Quotations from interviews are in italics. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality and therefore no individual is identified in this report.

Comparing Communities of Interest

People belong to many different social groups with respect to race, class, religion, sexuality, gender, background and life experience. Whether people identify with a particular social category, or a number of different social categories, is therefore a matter of choice. Where they have common needs or characteristics, however, individuals do often come together in what may be referred to as 'communities of interest'.[2] This pilot study focuses on relatively small, modestly funded, NGOs that serve communities of interest centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it rather unusually compares organisations that provide such disparate services as HIV counselling, English classes for adults and accessible transport for people with disabilities. This comparison remains useful however, because many of these organisations share goals such as achieving greater self-determination of marginalized communities, challenging and overcoming multiple forms of injustice and inequality, and reclaiming ways of understanding the distinctiveness of their communities without fostering separateness. Moreover, these organisations face a variety of common challenges in relation to core funding, staff recruitment, policy development, community development, and political engagement/representation. NGOs serving communities of interest centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation in Northern Ireland therefore form a loose 'community of practice', held together by a 'a real need to know what each other knows'.[3]

> *'We need to start linking communities of interest together in a way that benefits them all, so we do not create a hierarchy of victimhood. We need*

to recognise what different communities have in common around issues such as employment.'[4]

Impact

All the NGOs interviewed for this pilot study take action for the improvement of their respective communities of interest. Like the broader community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, they play:

'a particular role in tackling social need, disadvantage and addressing inequality and draw on much that is good in our society: voluntary effort, concern about fairness and social need and providing a willingness to invest energy and imagination to improve living conditions for us all.'[5]

More specifically, NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation in Northern Ireland reach out to those sections of the population no-one else will. They promote the mental, emotional and physical health of their communities; for example, NGOs working with gay, lesbian and bisexual people play a particularly important role in preventing the further spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. NGOs working with communities of interest also promote the empowerment of individuals and communities, supporting them in developing relevant skills and structures to be able to take action and participate effectively in society.

NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation in Northern Ireland play an important role in challenging oppressive and discriminatory actions and attitudes, power imbalances and unequal life chances. At the same time, however, these organisations also *constructively assist* government and other institutions in developing inclusive policies and delivering services successfully to their communities, for example through providing translation services for statutory bodies. NGOs working with communities of interest also facilitate critical cross-community and inter-community engagement.   In doing so, they help address the misapprehensions, fear and bigotry that underlie racism, xenophobia and discrimination in Northern Ireland.

*'It is crucial for us to break the ice with people and make direct, personal
connections to them. This really makes a difference when we can speak to
people and answer their questions honestly...We are most concerned about
those with whom we have never connected.'[6]*

Through delivery of a vast array of projects, programmes and activities in
both urban and rural settings, 50 per cent of the NGOs interviewed for this
pilot study estimate that they are currently reaching more than one thousand
people throughout Northern Ireland. NGOs working with communities of
interest are also facing increasing levels of demand for places in their
programmes, projects and activities. Four of the organisations interviewed
described how they could not expand their current programmes to meet
existing demand due to lack of funds, staff and, in two cases, due to premises
with no disabled access and lack of space.

*'... for 6 months of the last year, we had 750 people contacting us for
access to HIV information in both group and one-to-one sessions, we
received 1500 telephone queries, 180 accessed our residential services, we
had 1300 personal callers, and 200 condom packs/leaflets were given out
each week...'[7]*

All of the organisations interviewed for this pilot study have evidently
brought about positive change for individuals and communities on the ground.
However, aside from carrying out periodic evaluations for funders as required,
these organisations generally fail to measure or document this impact.
Government initiatives such as Best Value, and increased competition among
public, voluntary and private sector organisations, mean it is increasingly
important that organisations working with communities centred around
race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation demonstrate their full value,
contribution, and particular qualities and strengths to broader society:

*'there has been too much emphasis on funding projects and activities
rather than the impact of the change delivered...Improvements in how
outcomes of fund activity are identified and measured will build confidence
in the sector and should ultimately lead to less bureaucracy...'[8]*

Like the broader community and voluntary sector, NGOs serving communities of interest in Northern Ireland face challenges in measuring and documenting their impact. For example, it may be difficult to measure the more intangible or long-term outcomes of organisations' programmes, projects and activities, to identify a causal relationship between a particular activity and a particular outcome, and to find the resources to commit to this process. It may also be necessary to develop practical tools and approaches that pay special attention to the unique qualities of organisations working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation. For example, many of the organisations interviewed maximise impact and efficiency by being flexible, responsive and accountable to local/community needs. This ability to innovate may complicate measuring impact as the goals, objectives, outputs and outcomes of programmes, projects and activities are liable to change:

'We were running a 10-week training course and found that some of the participants were dropping out because it was too much for them. So we changed it and began providing pre and post-programmes. If something isn't working…we do not want to waste money so we change it.'[9]

Less formal sharing of knowledge and 'good practice' is also an important activity for NGOs working with communities of interest. Sharing knowledge helps organisations capture and reuse past experience (positive and negative) and therefore increases their efficiency and effectiveness, for example, by encouraging an exchange of ideas and strategies regarding how to solve common problems, how to build partnerships and how to avoid each other's mistakes. Exchange of knowledge and 'good practice' also helps cross fertilize ideas and thereby encourages innovation.

Funding

About 60 per cent of organisations interviewed working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation have an annual income of less than £100,000, with the average annual income being about £210,000. In most cases, the majority of this income was made up of project funding, with a small amount of income coming from core and contract

funding. NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation have familiar, but genuine, concerns about the lack and inconsistency of secure core funding available to them. Of the organisations interviewed, core funding (funding directed to an organisation's operations as a whole rather than to a particular project) averaged at 15 per cent of total funding; 50 per cent depended on OFM/DFM for core funding and several received no core support at all. The problem seems to be not only the amount of core funding made available by statutory organisations, but also the lack of consistency and confusion regarding when it will be provided. Subsequently, a climate of instability has developed which 'distracts organisations from their key purpose, deters strategic planning and leaches essential expertise and experience'.[10]

Furthermore, lack of core support undermines the effectiveness and impact of *all* available funding by: encouraging organisations to add programmes and projects simply to meet the year's budget; preventing organisations from responding to new opportunities and challenges; and generating costs, for example, through high staff turnover. The small size of most organisations working with 'communities of interest' renders them particularly vulnerable to the impact of the lack of core funding.

'We need more resources, that is core funding, for stability and recognition.'[11]

There has also been a serious lack of capital investment in the organisations interviewed for this study, the majority of whom had neither adequate buildings nor office space. Several organisations were housed in temporary accommodation, a significant number had no disabled access and many had simply run out of space.

All of the organisations interviewed receive project funding from a relatively diverse base, typically including: Department for Social Development, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Community Relations Council, City Councils, Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the Community Fund. An important relatively new avenue of funding has been the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Many of the organisations interviewed also

generate small amounts of income through, for example, charging for provision of training and hiring out rooms. Several receive support from individual donations and a few have received sponsorship from banks and building societies.

This relatively healthy picture, however, hides several problems. Foremost, raising and accounting for funds from so many different funders takes up a disproportionate amount of organisations' time and energy:

'Our staff do have fund-raising experience but we could do with more support as it takes up a lot of time. A specific fund-raiser would free up the time for our other staff to do what they are employed to do.'[12]

Secondly, NGOs centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage to, and in competition with, older, more established members of the community and voluntary sector (sometimes referred to as the 'mainstream' community and voluntary sector) – many of whom have a sophisticated fund-raising infrastructure. Of NGOs interviewed for this study only two have dedicated fund-raisers and most simply fund-raise on an ad hoc basis, learning fund-raising skills on the job. These NGOs may also be at a further disadvantage as they may not wish to apply for certain funds, for example, lottery funding, due to their culture, traditions, values or beliefs.

A number of organisations interviewed also feel that competition with the broader community and voluntary sector is likely to intensify as EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme funding is reduced and as funding is increasingly distributed in support of 'good relations', between people of different religious/political beliefs and racial groups, rather than in support of 'community relations', traditionally defined as interaction between the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. Indeed, organisations once oriented towards 'community relations' are increasingly engaged in 'good relations' activities, for example, providing anti-racism training. The intention behind the 'good relations' policy agenda, however, is to move beyond a binary model of Catholic-Protestant relations in order to *include* broader concerns of people of different ethnic, cultural, religious and racial backgrounds. It is therefore a matter of concern that a significant

number of NGOs working with marginalized 'communities of interest' (and particularly well placed to *lead* the promotion of good relations), feel this policy agenda to be a threat.

Policy Development

NGOs serving communities of interest in Northern Ireland work closely with a wide range of public bodies and statutory organisations. Several larger organisations interviewed are involved in formal contracts with statutory agencies, whilst about 50 per cent state that they are regularly called upon by public bodies and statutory organisations to provide *informal* advice and guidance about managing relations with members of their respective communities of interest. In addition, nearly all organisations working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation play some role in facilitating access to public bodies and statutory agencies by members of different communities.

> *'We have started providing translations services. We have no funding to actually do this – staff have to take time off to do it at the moment so this is not an ideal situation. By doing the translation, we are helping the statutory bodies fulfil their obligation to help the community access services.'[13]*

Currently, there is widespread concern that government services are being 'downloaded' onto small NGO's that work with communities of interest and that these organisations do not have adequate resources to cope. Such feelings may have contributed to a shift in the focus of a number of these organisations – away from 'remedying gaps' in statutory service provision, and towards empowering communities of interest to access mainstream services directly. About 25 per cent of organisations interviewed described how they employ rights-based strategies to achieve this:

> *'We are overwhelmed by ethnic minorities coming to us for help and support in solving their problems. There is a general need to move away from problem solving and to encourage ethnic minorities to start going directly to public bodies, statutory agencies and other advice centres. This means educating people about their local legal rights and system.'[14]*

NGO participation in policy development is broadly accepted to be a key activity that should be adequately resourced. However, there needs to be greater support for mobilising NGOs serving various communities of interest in Northern Ireland to weigh-in on policy options and decisions that will affect them and their communities. Many of the organisations interviewed for this study have successfully established ongoing, working relationships with a wide range of public bodies and statutory agencies. However, very few organisations feel they have any real effect or influence over policy-making. Whilst organisations working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation are overwhelmed with requests to respond to consultations, most perceive their inclusion in policy-making processes to be tokenistic or an afterthought.

> *'We find that we are included at the beginning of a process but it is always as an after-thought. We feel we are often commenting on what's already been decided.'*[15]

There therefore needs to be greater focus on *quality* rather than quantity of consultation. Policymakers should be careful to consider what means are most appropriate to engage with small, under-resourced NGOs. For example, information may need to be made available in other languages or formats such as Braille, audio, and large print, and financial support may need to be provided for expenses incurred.

In general, the participation of organisations interviewed in policy discussions is ad hoc – largely depending on whether the Director of the organisation has the capacity or resources available to get involved. Only a small number of organisations interviewed feel they are proactive in engaging with policy-makers; only two have a dedicated policy officer on staff. It is worth noting, however, that a significant number of organisations feel they made a positive contribution to the recent Hate Crimes legislation consultation process - this may therefore be a model worth replicating.

> *'We exerted real influence on the Hate Crime legislation to ensure that homophobia was included.'*

A significant number of interviewees expressed deep concern about the lack of representation of communities of interest in public bodies in Northern Ireland. This is significant as:

'membership of public bodies enables the wider community to play an important role in influencing and shaping the provision of a whole range of services which are of critical importance.'[16]

Indeed, as of March 2004, there were 2,065 public appointments held in Northern Ireland in a total of 99 bodies, including those such as Equality Commission, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Northern Ireland Policing Board and District Policing Partnerships.[17] In 1999, the Central Appointments Unit of OFM/DFM began to co-ordinate a number of steps aimed at addressing under-representation of women, disabled people, ethnic minorities, young people and people representing grass roots interests:

'there is a need for more inclusivity if public appointments in Northern Ireland are to be seen to be truly representative of the community. Areas of under-representation are being actively pursued by all departments and it is hoped that this will provide encouragement for more individuals from all parts of the community to put themselves forward for appointment.'[18]

It is clear, however, that inequalities remain. In 2003/2004, 69 per cent of public appointments were held by men and 31 per cent by women. Only one of the 456 appointments made during 2003/2004 was from an ethnic minority background; three per cent of those appointed during the period declared a disability; and no figures are available in relation to sexual orientation.

'There is still no participative democracy here in Northern Ireland. It seems to be always about who can get "first past the post". In order to sit on QUANGOs you first need an acceptable status in society.'[19]

Human Resources

All of the organisations interviewed benefit from the contribution of at least one volunteer and 50 per cent currently employ more than 50 volunteers. These volunteers contribute hours, new skill sets, motivation and local knowledge of the needs and resources of their community; they increase the quality and level of services provided by NGOs while keeping costs reduced. As one interviewee noted, they are 'the success of the organisation'. While volunteers are not paid, NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation do struggle for the necessary resources to support volunteer work, for example for funding to recruit, screen, train, supervise and acknowledge volunteers. Moreover, dependency on volunteers can bring drawbacks. For example, several interviewees noted that it was difficult to enter into contracts with statutory agencies when they depend on volunteers (of which there is generally a high turnover) to deliver sustained services.

In contrast to their success in using volunteers, 80 per cent of organisations interviewed find it extremely difficult to recruit and retain paid staff. Interviewees cited a number of different reasons for this including: language barriers; lack of job security due to short-term funding of posts; members of minority ethnic communities gravitating towards 'professional' careers and careers in the private, rather than community and voluntary, sector; lack of funds available to be able to offer competitive salaries and attract quality applicants; and difficulty in recruiting staff with experience of working with relevant communities of interest.

> *'We are trying to attract capable and committed staff but this can be difficult as a lot of the community are first generation Chinese so there can be a language barrier.'*[20]

About 50 per cent of organisations interviewed feel they have sufficient training and development programmes in place to support their staff upon recruitment – several are working towards the Investors in People Standard and have won Investors in People Awards.[21] Many, however, feel their provision for staff training and development is poor due to lack of time and resources, or there not being appropriate training courses available, such as

anti-racism training for trainers. It may therefore be helpful for NGOs working with communities of interest to supplement formal training and skills programmes with less formal coaching, mentoring, and secondments to other organisations.

Community Development

Community development can be defined as:

> *'a range of practices dedicated to increasing the strength and effectiveness of community life, improving conditions, especially for people in disadvantaged situations, and enabling people to participate in public decision-making and to achieve greater long-term control over their circumstances.'*[22]

However, there are a number of challenges to the development of communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. Many of the organisations interviewed for this pilot study described a profound lack of confidence within their respective communities. Interviewees generally attributed this lack of confidence to the recent spate of racist attacks and hate crimes, as well as to broader concerns regarding threats to community identity. Many interviewees described the diverse forms of assault, verbal abuse and bullying taking place, 'in people's homes, in the street, in the workplace, in schools and in social settings.'[23] Harassment in schools and the education system also seemed to be an area of particular concern.

> *'Our community is confident in some respects – many of our community members are doctors, lecturers, business people and are very highly educated. But the community is not confident concerning the education of their children and racist attacks...we are living in a culture of fear...'*[24]

There is no agreed definition of what constitutes a 'strong' or 'healthy' community. However, there is broad agreement that community connectedness and community cohesion are important factors in community

development.   During interviews, a significant number of NGOs serving communities of different ethnic and racial backgrounds noted that generation gaps within their communities have significant implications for their community development practice:

> *'The older generation is more work-focused and traditional, while the younger generation is more westernised and more Northern Irish in their thinking – so there is a generation gap which needs to be bridged.'[25]*

Indeed, migration amplifies variations in lived experiences between generations through language loss, the influence of peer groups, and introduction of different cultural reference points and values. These variations make it difficult for young people and adults to recognise each other's opportunities, constraints and unique experiences, and therefore for young people and adults to work together to address social needs – sometimes referred to as the Intergenerational Approach to community development.[26] Whilst communities centred around sexual orientation may not experience such clearly defined generation gaps, a number of interviewees noted that gay/lesbian/bisexual teenagers experience tremendous isolation in Northern Ireland due to there being few centres for them to visit, or role models for them to aspire to.

Political Engagement and Representation

Political engagement and representation gives communities the ability to influence the decisions that affect them, their community and their local area. However, 70 per cent of organisations interviewed for this study called for greater political support for their work and their communities. In particular, many requested that politicians go beyond moral condemnation of racist attacks and deliver policies and resources on the ground:

> *'Many (politicians) are sympathetic and speak supportively, but on the ground there is no support…Politics in Northern Ireland is sectarian…There is not enough space for the Muslim community to become involved.'[27]*

All interviewees who represent, or work with, just one community of interest in Northern Ireland describe their community as being entirely alienated and removed from politics. A number of different reasons were cited for this alienation. First, many interviewees noted that members of communities of interest are often reluctant to engage in what they perceive to be sectarian politics in Northern Ireland – a politics that demands they 'take sides':

'because of the political divide the political leaders only look after their own end of the community...political leaders seem to be able to incite racist comments and get away with it.'

Secondly, members of communities of interest may be unable to participate in the political process; for example, disabled people have encountered problems with voter registration. Thirdly, politicians are perceived by communities of interest as paying little attention to their concerns.

'Politicians are perhaps not interested in the Muslim community because they don't see them as having big enough voting power...'[28]

In order to break this vicious circle, resources need to be devoted to building the foundations of political engagement in communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation. This means increasing these communities' knowledge and interest in politics, encouraging their action and participation, and ensuring efficacy and satisfaction from their political engagement. A starting point may be to establish mechanisms whereby members of communities of interest can present their complaints and viewpoints to politicians. It may also be worthwhile to conduct further research into voter engagement among communities of interest in Northern Ireland.[29] Finally, politicians need to be challenged concerning their attitudes and actions on racism, xenophobia and discrimination in Northern Ireland. They need to be encouraged to focus not only on laws and regulations, but also to work on the ground to educate and change people's attitudes in relation to

communities of interest in Northern Ireland. For their part, NGOs working with communities of interest could work together to challenge the different political parties to (1) make sure they incorporate anti-racism strategies in their party programmes, (2) lobby the parties during election periods and (3) follow up after the election to secure implementation of promises made.

'We haven't been approached by any politicians; then again, we haven't approached them.'[30]

Conclusion

Recent attention devoted to racist and homophobic crimes, migrant workers, Hate Crime legislation and the 'good relations' policy agenda, suggests Northern Ireland is inexorably becoming a more diverse and multicultural place. The reality is that communities of interest, including communities centred around sexual orientation, disability and race/ethnicity, have *always* been a part of Northern Ireland society. It is only more recently, however, that many of these communities of interest have become significantly better represented, recognised and subsequently more visible. NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation in Northern Ireland evidently have much to offer each other and broader society as a loose 'community of practice', held together by a 'a real need to know what each other knows.'[31] Furthermore, as Hinds suggests:

'leadership for the vision of a new, inclusive Northern Ireland is to be found in groups representing the most marginalized among which there is willingness to celebrate diversity, transcend differences and build common cause in their search for equality and parity of esteem.'[32]

For this leadership to prove forthcoming however, NGOs working with communities centred around race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation must overcome the challenges they face in relation to: chronic shortages in core funding and capital investment; documenting their impact and sharing their knowledge/good practice; influencing policy-making and development;

recruiting and retaining staff; alleviating crises of confidence, connectedness and cohesion within their respective communities; and breaking the vicious circle of political alienation experienced by communities of interest in Northern Ireland.

> *'we believe that every one of us is a human being and as such we are entitled to the same rights. We believe in participation and working with people, not for people.'*[33]

Notes

1   Interviews were conducted with: Amnesty International, Belfast Islamic Centre, Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group, Jewish Community Centre, Ballymena Community Centre, Chinese Welfare Association, Disability Action, Diversity Matters, Indian Community Centre, Intercomm, Multicultural Resource Centre (MCRC), Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), Rainbow Project, S.T.E.E.R (Support Training Education Employment Research), Wah Hep Chinese Community Association. Many thanks to Roisin O'Hagan, Project Worker, INCORE, who undertook interviews together with the author and compiled findings.
2   For further information about this concept see Davis, 2004.
3   John Seely Brown in Allee, 2000.
4   Author interview.
5   Ibid.
6   Author interview.
7   Author interview.
8   Ibid.
9   Author interview.
10   Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector, 2004.
11   Author interview.
12   Author interview.
13   Author interview.
14   Author interview.
15   Author interview.
16   Secretary of State cited in OFMDFM, 2002.
17   OFMDFM, *Public Appointments Annual Report: 2003/2004.*
18   Ibid.

19   Author interview.
20   Author interview.
21   The Investors in People Standard is a framework for delivering business improvement through people. Further information about the framework and how to put the Standard into practice is available on the Investors in People web site: http://www.investorsinpeople.co.uk (Accessed 10 January 2005)
22   Banjoko, 2005.
23   Jarman and Tenant, 2003.
24   Author interview.
25   Author interview.
26   ICRW, 2003.
27   Author interview.
28   Author interview.
29   This research could contribute to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's ongoing investigation into 'Worrying Trends in New Arrangements for Voter Registrations'.
30   Author interview.
31   Brown in Allee, op.cit.
32   Bronagh Hinds on BBC NI Eyewitness.
33   Author interview.

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