Voluntary Action and Community Relations in Northern Ireland

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The Nobel laureat and Harvard economist Amaratya Sen asserts that simplistic notions of human identity promote and reinforce divisions between people.[1] Simplistic categories, he says, assume that identities are formed by membership of a single social group. Many people in Northern Ireland are members of voluntary and community organizations where they mix with people from both their own community background and the "other" community background. They are thus members of more than one group. Does participation in voluntary activity (where they may encounter people from the 'other' group) promote the shaping of new, parallel identities that will cause people to see themselves as volunteers or as members of a voluntary or community organization that crosses the divide? How does the voluntary and community sector reflect, challenge, or acquiesce in, the sectarian fault lines of Northern Ireland society? What potential has the voluntary and community sector to foster improved community relations?

This article reports on a recent research project at the University of Ulster's Centre for Voluntary Action Studies and School of Psychology.[2] This project explores the impact of Northern Ireland's ethnic and religious divisions on voluntary and community organizations and their work and analyses the implications that those divisions have for community relations as well as the potential that voluntary and community organizations have to foster improved community relations. These topics are of considerable interest and policy relevance within the context of the debate about the Shared Future[3] agendas and the government's Good Relations policies.

The theme of voluntary action and community relations has sometimes been described as "the elephant in the room". It had received little attention until a speech at the annual conference of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action at Armagh on 14 October 2003 when Frances McCandless, NICVA's deputy director, raised uncomfortable questions about the impact of sectarian divisions on the sector. This speech prompted a research initiative from the University of Ulster that resulted in the report, *Voluntary Action and Community Relations in Northern Ireland*.[4]

The focus of our research has been to try to assess the potential contribution of voluntary and community organizations, in particular those that are not community relations specialists, to community relations in Northern Ireland. We have addressed this task by looking at the extent to which these organizations are embedded in either the Protestant or Catholic communities, the extent that any of their activities reach across the communal divide, and by drawing out some of the factors that either facilitate, or hinder, cross community work.

Our central research questions concerned the contribution (direct and indirect) of voluntary action in Northern Ireland to mediating between the deep communal divisions between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Specifically we were concerned to explore the actual and potential contribution that was made by voluntary and community organizations to the building of trust between the two main competing communities in Northern Ireland. Our approach was informed by theory that emphasizes the capacity of organizations within civil society to encompass networks and norms that can generate such trust and thus underpin social cohesion and the democratic effectiveness of government.

Since 1993, and more particularly during the present decade, governments in Northern Ireland have affirmed the assumed value of voluntary and community organizations to the promotion of better relations between the province's two main ethno-religious groups. The 1993 policy document, *Strategy for the Support of the Voluntary Sector and for Community Development in Northern Ireland,* introduced into policy a theme not encountered elsewhere in the United Kingdom when it recognized the value of community development as a promoter of cohesion and acknowledged a responsibility on the part of government to support this. In 2005 the Good Relations Strategy of the government stated that "there is a clear recognition that the voluntary and community sector has made a powerful contribution to the achievement of better relations between communities. … The development of, and investment in, social capital – particularly bridging social capital – through community development can help promote relationships within and between communities".[5]

Since the early 1990s, we have seen a series of attempts by government to support the development of civil society, and then engage with elements within it to help manage the conflict, to address some of its social consequences and to help build the peace.[6] Funding from government sources to voluntary and community organizations increased from just under £17m in

1988/89 to over £70m in 2001/02, an increase in over 400%.[7] This was in addition to public expenditure to voluntary organizations providing contracted out public services, which also increased greatly over the same period. In addition it is estimated that over £50m went to the voluntary and community organizations between 1994 and 1999 from mainstream European Union structural funds.[8] This extraordinary investment in voluntary action was matched by a strong growth in the numbers of organizations. There are estimated to be in the region of 4,500 organizations or associations for a population of about 1.7 million people, and over half of these have been established since 1986.[9] Together, they provide employment for almost 29,000 people, 4.4% of the workforce, and have a combined asset base of over £755m.[10]

Of the 4,500 or so voluntary and community organizations, a relatively small proportion are either 'community relations' specialists or organizations such as the Orange Order or the Gaelic Athletic Association, that exist exclusively within the context of specific communal identities. Prior to the present research little was known about the extent to which generalist voluntary and community organizations actively involve people from both communities or indeed the extent to which their participation in wider networks (that are built on issues that transcend communal divisions and identities) influences cross-community relations. And nothing was known about the impact this might have or about its potential for future development.

Research questions and Methodology

The research commenced in October 2004 with a comprehensive literature review and with some preliminary interviews. Six scoping interviews were first conducted with leading 'experts' in civil society and community relations in Northern Ireland, working in government agencies and major voluntary organizations. These were designed to elicit a range of views about perceptions of the central issues and were used to help design the research instruments. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed in full and subjected to a manual content analysis. The main phase of the research process comprised a two stage design. The first part was a postal questionnaire sent to a sample of 535 organizations and the second stage involved detailed interviewing in six case study areas. The sampling frame for the postal questionnaire utilized an earlier survey of volunteer management committees. In that study a questionnaire had been sent to the known population of voluntary and community associations in Northern Ireland.[11] The sampling

frame for the present project comprised all the respondents to the earlier survey, which had already been validated as representative of the population of organizations.[12] In the present study a total of 358 responses was achieved, a response rate of 67%. Of these, 135 (37.7% of respondents) supplied additional written comments. These comments were analysed using *NVivo* qualitative data analysis software.

The second stage of the research design comprised six area case studies. The areas chosen were two urban areas in each of (London)Derry and Belfast and two other towns and their immediate rural hinterlands, one in the east of Northern Ireland with a majority Protestant population and one in the west, with a majority Catholic population. In each area, semi-structured interviews were carried out with leaders (either paid staff or chair people of management committees) of between six and eight organizations, varying in type from large service providing or social economy organizations to small community-based self-help organizations. In each area interviews were also conducted with officials in local government offices. In all, thirty eight interviews were completed. Each lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. Most interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Two interviews comprised guided group discussions. These were recorded by notes, rather than on tape, as were two others, one at the request of the interviewee and the other as a result of technical failure of the recording equipment. The data was analysed using *NVivo* data analysis software.

Findings

We preface the discussion of our findings with a brief overview of the issues as identified by the six 'expert' witnesses whom we interviewed at the beginning of the project. These individuals were selected to represent a range of views on the core issues addressed in this research and to provide perspectives from within government, from practitioners within the voluntary and community sector and from political and policy commentators.

The complexity of the relationship between civic action, intercommunal contact and the conflict in Northern Ireland is emphasized in their comments. There was recognition that there is a strong tendency for civic associations of all kinds to be structured along ethno/religious lines. One interviewee (Interviewee 'A'[13]) suggested that the default position in Northern Ireland was avoidance and separate development and that in effect there was a 'huge societal effort' to diluting cross-community initiatives. It was just too hard – "like pushing water up a hill". Other interviewees reinforced this assessment.

Interviewee 'B'[14] noted that the organization for which he worked had emerged in the early 1990s as strongly male and Catholic in identity and had only been able to address this by a focused and self-conscious effort that had taken years of work.

Some respondents shared the view that voluntary action tends to be structured in quite different ways in the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. Interviewee 'A' emphasized the structural differences that are internal to each community:

> There's a Catholic model of community development, which is the parish taking responsibility in the absence of what the state should subscribe to. In the 1990s, Sinn Fein and Republicanism moved into that space in what is called community development. The Protestant community has got pockets of that. It strikes me that the history of Protestantism was that the government took responsibility for the whole and individuals or small groups took responsibility for the parts. There is a movement on the Protestant side to imitate the Catholic, and then at the same time there is rejection of that, because they can't make it work.. But structures are actually very different.

The impact of these structural differences was noted by interviewee 'E'[15]:

> The outcome of that has been very different with Catholic areas being much stronger, ironically, probably because they have a longer history of not depending on the state. If you look in Belfast, at present Protestant working class areas, they're all pretty grim areas that, I think, reflect much more the dynamics of socially excluded areas in England, Scotland and Wales. It's the Catholic areas that are unusual in how effective they are in, dare I say it, managing poverty. They're much more integrated.

There was a strongly held view that the influx of state and European funding into the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland had in practice done little to moderate the differences between the two communities. Respondents noted a "lack of willingness" on the part of government to prioritise reconciliation in policy. Government had followed "the path of least resistance to go just along the communal ground" (Interviewee 'C'). It was suggested that government funding structures actually inhibited developments even where there was a demand among community organizations to work inter-communally.[16] The view was expressed that the first European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, which ran from 1994 until 2000, represented a wasted opportunity to pin down the relationship between community development and inter-communal relationships.[17] The lack of a specific focus meant that it was too easy to avoid the issue.

Policy frameworks that ignored communal differences, no matter how worthwhile on their own terms, could also feed separate development by default. Interviewee 'A' highlighted this as a problem and noted that the current enthusiasm for partnerships can allow people to choose separate development and take the money, while offering no challenge mechanism. If participation is the primary virtue rather than solidarity, then segregation can be rewarded.

One result of what appeared to some as long-term government acquiescence in separate development was that much of the voluntary sector appeared ill-equipped for the challenge presented by the need to self-consciously and reflexively engage with community relations issues. Many ignored the problem. There was a "sea of indifference" (Interviewee 'A'). There was a general awareness, however, that despite the difficulties there was evidence of effective inter-community networking generated from local community-based organizations as the following remarks by three of the interviewees indicate:

> *A lot of stuff goes on below the kind of media waterline and huge amount of really positive stuff just never gets reported. There is a cadre of people in the voluntary and community sector who are committed to social change and, therefore, the broader raison d' être for the voluntary community sector in our free society has been about social change and challenge.*

> *You'll find people who have done more and more interesting projects in the voluntary sector than in any of the other sectors because they're committed and they do it… There are specific opportunities in the voluntary sector. This is around personal responsibility, around small-scale action, around real quality of life change, around risks which can be taken by other people, around reaching into communities which can't be done by the state or by anybody else, where you can get fairly good projects and where we need to work.*

In particular there was a recognition that, at the level of élites within the voluntary and community sector, there was a high degree of inter-community networking that had now become pervasive and "normal". This had helped create a leadership that had shared values and a shared recognition of the issues.

Quantitative findings

The key finding to emerge from an analysis of the community background of the members of management committees of voluntary and community organizations are contained in Table 1.

**Table 1: Community Background of members of
Voluntary Sector Management Committee**s[18]

Community background of members of management committees	Numbers	Valid per cent
Wholly Catholic	40	13.1
Mainly Catholic	69	22.5
Mixed	80	26.1
Mainly Protestant	75	24.5
Wholly Protestant	42	13.7
Total valid respondents	306	100
Missing	50	
Total	356	

Clearly, the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is embedded to a significant extent in each of the two main communities, in that 73.9% of organizations have management committees or boards of directors that are either wholly or mainly from one community (that is to say they have at least twice as many Protestants as Catholics or twice as many Catholics as Protestants). Just over a quarter of organizations (26.8%) are either wholly Protestant or Catholic in this respect.

Most respondents (70.9%) said there had been no change from their background. There were no significant differences between Catholic and Protestant organizations in this respect. Organizations that were wholly

Catholic or Protestant were the least likely to report any movement. Of those that believed they had moved away from their background, almost half (46.3%) gave the reason as having been involved in joint (cross-community) projects.

It should be noted, however, that the voluntary and community sector is an important site for cross-community mixing. Over 90% of respondents said their organizations provided opportunities for people to do things together and to cooperate on common tasks. Over three-quarters said these activities had indirect community relations spin-offs. Just 9% of respondents thought their staff or volunteers would feel anxious about cross-community contact in work-related settings.

Organizations were more likely to engage in discussion about equality of access to their services (60.1%) than to discuss the issue of Catholics and Protestants working together in the workplace (29.9%). On both issues, organizations whose management committees were wholly or mostly Catholic were more likely to do so than wholly or mainly Protestant organizations. Reflecting the high proportion of organizations that provide opportunities for mixing, there is a widely held view that by *not addressing* the issue of the divided society directly, organizations were opening up a 'civic space' in which people from widely differing political and religious backgrounds could meet and tackle issues they could agree on. Some see this as a virtue, but this approach may mean that organizations risk ignoring the impact of community divisions on their missions and operations.

Some organizations in the study denied the relevance of ethno-sectarian divisions, but it was more common for organizations to assume that, because those issues that they deal with impact on both the main communities, the organizations have no need to make reference to community divisions and that to do so might be damaging and divisive. Voluntary and community organizations involved in meeting a range of welfare needs tended to put greater emphasis on the individual and his or her need in relation to the organization's purposes than on the wider social situation in which their clients or users lived. For some, it was important to build a "firewall" between need and politics and community relations issues.

More than 80% of organizations reported having experienced no external pressure to work in a more cross-community way, although more than half (57.8%) said there were people within their organizations who promoted cross-community work. The main barriers to greater cross-community engagement identified by organizations were their single identity origins

(where this was the case) and the segregated nature of living patterns in Northern Ireland. Many organizations felt they lacked the capacity to address the issue and some identified an unhelpful funding environment.

Lack of political agreement is a significant barrier to greater cross-community working. At local level a relatively stable political settlement with 'buy-in' from all political parties appears necessary for effective joint work between neighbouring areas with opposing identities. In its absence, Protestant communities in particular appear vulnerable to fragmentation and the influence of paramilitary organizations.

"Drivers" and "Obstacles" in relation to cross community working.

We now turn to a consideration of the factors that promote, and those that inhibit, cross community working in the voluntary and community sector.

Survey respondents were asked if they experienced any external pressure for increased cross community working or whether they could identify champions for change within their organizations. The summary results are reported in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2
Reports of pressure to work in a more cross-community way

	Frequency	Valid per cent
Experienced pressure	65	19.3
Experienced no pressure	272	80.7
Total valid responses	337	100
Missing	19	
Total	356	

Table 3
Internal champions for change

	Frequency	Valid per cent
Internal champions	190	57.8
No internal champions	139	42.2
Total valid responses	329	100
Missing	27	
Total	356	

These results show that more than 80% of organizations responding to the question reported experiencing no external pressure to work in a more cross-community way. There were differences between Protestant and Catholic organizations. Those that were wholly Catholic were the most likely to report external pressure for change, and those that were mostly Catholic, the least. Both mostly and wholly Protestant organizations were very close to the average figure of 80.7%. These results suggest that wholly Catholic organizations may be more sensitive to this issue than are wholly Protestant organizations, but it is very hard to interpret the results in the light of the much lower sense of pressure among mostly Catholic organizations. Very few organizations (n=50, 14%) indicated where the pressure came from. Those that did suggested funders as the most likely source (66%).

There was more evidence of internal promoters, and 57.8% of respondents reported that there were people within their organizations who promoted or 'pushed' for change. This disparity, as compared with the findings in relation to external pressures for change, suggests the possibility that there is a lack of external incentives for organizations to work in a more cross-community way. However, it is possible that, in a majority of organizations, the presence of champions for cross community working represents the potential to do more if they were to be given more direct incentives.

The generally positive views expressed about cross-community contact among respondents were also reflected in the low levels of responses to questions about barriers or threats. Just 17.7% of respondents (n=356) identified any obstacles to engaging in cross-community initiatives. Of these the commonest obstacle identified was a general reluctance or suspicion, followed by funding, lack of neutral venues and interface violence. Paramilitary threats were the least mentioned obstacle. Only 3.4% considered that engaging in community relations activities might be harmful to their other work. Of the rest 14% felt it might be a potential threat. In contrast to the 57.8% of respondents who identified people in their organizations who promoted cross-community work, only 7.7% were able to identify people in their organizations who opposed it.

A large majority of organizations (71.1%) said that the question of Protestants and Catholics working together did not come up in discussions about organizations' work, notwithstanding the reported presence of internal champions. The majority of those that did discuss the issue said it was not a contentious issue for them. However, a much larger proportion of organizations reported addressing equality of access to services. 60.1% of respondents reported having done so and, for the large majority of these (78.1%), it was not at all divisive. These results suggest that the broad issue of Protestant / Catholic relations is most readily addressed within the context of the service functions of organizations, but that there is a resistance to confronting the issue in more general contexts.

There were differences between the responses of the Protestant and the Catholic organizations to these questions. Taken together, and comparing organizations that are wholly and mostly Catholic with those that are wholly and mostly Protestant, it is evident that the Protestant organizations are much less likely to engage with issues to do with cross-community working.[19] The summary results are set out in Table 4. They show that a notably higher proportion of the all-Catholic organizations are both willing to discuss working together in general and to address the issue of equality of access to services than is the case for the all-Protestant group of organizations.

Table 4
Proportion of organizations indicating a willingness to engage in cross-community discussion by Catholic and Protestant

	Catholics and Protestants working together: % saying 'yes'	Equal access to services for Catholics and Protestants: % saying 'yes'
All Catholic organizations	41.5	71.4
All Protestant organizations	25.4	49.1
All organizations	33.2	60.0

The composition of management committees thus appears to have a bearing on the openness of organizations to address directly the relationship between communal divisions and their work. From the evidence presented the reasons are hard to deduce as the observed relationship is likely to be affected by other factors, for example the type of organization or other defining features of the management committee members. It is also important to stress that this is not a causal relationship. Although organizations relatively more resistant to addressing the issues are predominantly Protestant, this is not to say that the latter feature causes the former feature.

Extent and type of cross-community contact in organizations' work

Most respondents indicated that the activities of their organizations provided opportunities for people from the two main communities to do things together and cooperate on common tasks. This was reflected in the 72.2% of all respondents who thought that the activities of their organizations had community relations spin-offs and the 77% who thought their organizations undertook community relations work indirectly, although when asked a more specific question about community relations focused work, rather fewer responded positively. There were no significant differences in the responses of Protestant and Catholic organizations. The summary results are set out in Table 5.

Table 5
Organizations providing cross-community opportunities: Numbers answering 'yes'

	Numbers	Valid per cent
Opportunities to do things together	325	96.2
Opportunities to co-operate on common tasks	304	93
Encouragement to work on cross-community issues	202	65

Our results confirm that the voluntary and community sector is an important site for cross-community mixing. In particular the fact that 65% of respondents who thought their work encouraged people from the two main communities to work on community relations focused projects might be considered an encouragingly high proportion even if, in the light of the evidence already set out about the reluctance of organizations to discuss the issues internally, it is hard to work out what respondents had in mind in completing this section of the questionnaire. There may be a tendency to interpret activity that involves some degree of cross-community contact as having a community relations aspect; in retrospect it might have been worthwhile to ask respondents what they meant by the term 'community relations' in this context. But at a general level at least, there is evidence that the sector itself feels its work has community relations impacts.

In addition our findings provided evidence that some single identity committees meet regularly with other organizations on a formal basis, although most do not. The numbers were small in each case, but almost one third (32.4%) of wholly Catholic organizations and 30% of wholly Protestant reported that they meet with other organizations on this basis.

One measure of the impact of cross-community mixing is the extent to which friendships develop as a result. Overall, just under two thirds of all respondents (65.7%) said that friendships had developed as a result of the activities of their organizations. Examples were given by 35% of respondents,

the commonest being friendships and socializing (20.5%), but opportunities provided by working together on joint projects were cited by a further 10% of respondents.

Survey respondents' comments

The survey respondents were invited to submit their comments on the issues raised by the questionnaire on the back of the questionnaire document. 135 replied, representing 37.7% of respondents. The comments were amalgamated into a single file and analyzed using *NVivo* data analysis software. Many of these comments were very illuminating and amplified the themes addressed in the questionnaire, providing an additional evidence-base for our findings and conclusions.

We discuss the evidence with reference to two broad themes. First, we consider the range of types of response under three headings: the *deniers,* the *complacent* and the *engaged*. Second, we discuss the kinds of barriers that respondents identified. This section concludes with a brief assessment of what is needed to change things, based on this evidence. It was apparent that responses tended to fall into one of three categories although these should not be considered mutually exclusive and respondents were by no means internally consistent. First, there was a group of respondents that *denied* that the subject of the questionnaire was at all relevant to their work. The tone of their responses tended to be defensive.

Respondents in this category tended to work with organizations that addressed the perceived needs of a group of people with a particular physical impairment or medical condition. Most are small and reliant on volunteers, although this was not always the case. The concern of some of these organizations is to assert the primacy of the medical condition as the focus of the organization's activities. There appears to be an assumption that any attempt to address topics such as the cross-community impact of the work of the organization would pose a threat. It may simply be easier to work on the assumption that because the condition can affect anybody, the organization's neutrality and accessibility is self-evident.

The largest of the three categories was composed of those that tended to assert that their work was cross-community, but who offered no evidence to support this statement. Some responses were more thoughtful than others but, in general, this assumption tended to be made on the basis of the non-communal focus of the organizations' purposes. There thus appeared to be a

tendency among respondents from thematic or issue based organizations that cut across communal divisions to assume that this meant that their work was cross-community in fact.

In the eyes of many, it would seem that there is a perception of a direct pay-off between effectiveness in achieving a mission that cuts across communal divisions and in opening up an issue perceived as a threat. This reflects, we believe, a widely held view within the voluntary and community sector that, in turn, reflects an important strategy of general conflict management in Northern Ireland as a whole whereby everyday life is conducted on the principle that certain topics should never be alluded to except among close friends or within families and certainly never with strangers. As the respondents quoted here make clear, the fear of the consequences of breaching this etiquette keeps certain matters off the agenda.

In the face of such constraints, it was, however, noticeable that many of the respondents showed a clear and reflexive view of the impact of divisions on their organizations' work and a determination to engage directly with its implications. Sometimes this involved self-conscious monitoring of cross-community availability of services and/or their impact.

Barriers to cross community work

Many of the respondents provided reasons why it was difficult for their organizations to develop cross-community work. Their comments are consistent with the findings from the interviews conducted in the six case studies undertaken at the beginning of the project. Three kinds of barriers were identified: those that were internal to the organizations themselves; those that were a feature of the communities in which the organizations operated; and those that were a feature of the broader political or administrative environment. It should not be surprising that in a context where respondents may have felt they were laying themselves open to judgement, that very few mentioned difficulties within their organizations as a barrier, although one did mention a lack of capacity in a volunteer management committee, an issue that might be considered self-evident and one that would merit further investigation.

Respondents were more forthcoming about external barriers. One important theme in this respect, mentioned by several respondents, concerned difficulties in overcoming and addressing a sectarian background in their organizations' histories. Organizations that had emerged from either one or the

other community found it challenging to change, often for understandable reasons.

Although the community mix of the regional committee appears to be mainly Protestant, this simply reflects an historical situation where the volunteers seem to come from that background. Volunteers on the regional committee seem to go on for ever, so there is little in the way of a turnover. The criteria for service on the regional committee are task related and perceived experience and competence is the paramount requirement.

The problem was felt particularly among thematic organizations that had emerged from the Protestant community and that were addressing particular issues. Doing something about this could be seen as just too difficult and beyond the organization's capacity. Some respondents also mentioned a lack of reciprocity. One victims' group noted that it was difficult to work with other groups that harboured grievances and "insisted on keeping their members in a state of fear and resentment".

Poor, or unavailable, infrastructure was also mentioned by a number of respondents. This was often a result of the segregated nature of the areas in which they worked. A lack of neutral space for meetings was a problem for some and one respondent argued strongly for more single identity work to remedy deficiencies in infrastructure which were holding back development. Another respondent considered that the propensity of government agencies to fund small single-identity organizations was holding back work that would encourage more cross-community contact. Poorly targeted, and inconsistent funding, or simply inadequate funding was also considered to be a barrier but there was also alleged to be a lack of consistency and long-term commitment in funding arrangements. A more frequently mentioned barrier lay in the lack of province wide political agreement. Several respondents believed this made it very difficult to make progress on the ground.

Improved community relations will become more of the reality when our politicians begin to work with each other again and do the job for which they were elected.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the findings of this project reveal, many voluntary organizations try to ignore the issue of communal difference. At the end of this article it may be appropriate to ask what would need to change to encourage and enable voluntary organizations to move forward in the area of community relations. We make some suggestions about the features of a much more facilitative

context that might emerge from a fresh approach to community relations policy.

Firstly, we suggest the introduction of a requirement in the letting of contracts or service agreements for the delivery of public services that all organizations contracting for services should have equality impact assessments in place based on the requirements of Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act. Next, we suggest the establishment of a special fund to support any external facilitation considered necessary or appropriate to enable management committees and staff groups to implement the necessary changes in attitudes, problem definition or structures. Such a fund would constitute a public acknowledgement of the potential of service delivery voluntary organizations use in the way they bring people together as a source of reconciliation and overcome some of the criticism of the European Union Peace Programmes that they effectively discount or ignore this potential.

Further, in line with the aspiration in *A Shared Future* that public administration should become a driver for change, we emphasise that government departments and agencies, through which the bulk of public funding for voluntary organizations flows, must change also. Voluntary organizations could be invited to help lead this change process by developing demonstration models of good practice. Such opportunities might help to reinforce the necessary cultural shift within voluntary organizations themselves by providing further incentives for a model of good practice that would have equality of access and dealing with difference at its heart. Public policy can create a more facilitative context, but voluntary and community organizations, as independent actors, must also recognise their own profound responsibilities to make the shared civic space, that they have created, into a more effective means of taking forward the task of reconciliation in Northern Ireland society.

Notes

1 Amartaya Sen, 2006.
2 Professors Maurice Stringer and Ed Cairns of the University of Ulster's School of Psychology were members of the research team which planned and undertook this project.
3 OFMDFM, 2005.
4 This project was funded by the Community Relations Council (under the European Union's Peace and Reconciliation Programme) and by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.
5 OFMDFM, 2005, p.57.
6 Kearney and Williamson, 2001.
7 Acheson, Harvey, Kearney and Williamson, 2004.
8 Ibid.
9 NICVA, 1998, 2001, 2005.
10 NICVA, 2005.
11 NIVDA, 2003.
12 Ibid.
13 Interviewed, 13/12/04
14 Interviewed, 10/12/04
15 Interviewed: 05/01/05
16 Interviewee 'F', interviewed 15/12/04

17 The first EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation was approved at the Berlin Summit in 1994 and channelled 350m ECUs into Northern Ireland between 1994 and 2000 in addition to the Structural Funds. Just under 60% of this was allocated to voluntary and community organizations, mostly around broadly conceived programmes of social inclusion. A perceived weakness of focus on addressing inter-communal relationships in this Programme was addressed by the much tighter criteria applied by its successor Programme 'Peace II', running from 2000 to 2006.

18 Note: wholly Catholic=100%, Mainly Catholic = Catholic Protestant ratio > 2:1, Mixed = Protestant Catholic ratio < 2:1, Mainly Protestant = Protestant Catholic ratio > 2:1, Wholly Protestant =100% Protestant.

19 The two questions asked were: 'Does the question of Protestants and Catholics working together in your organization ever come up in your discussions of your organizations' work?' And: 'Do people in your organization ever discuss how to make the services you offer equally available to people in the Protestant and Catholic communities?'

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