

Fields, flags and future sharing: an overview of the rural perspective of community relations

**Katy Radford, with Joanne Hughes,
Padraic Murphy, Noelle Donnell, Joanne Murphy
and Peter Osborne**

Introduction

Background

In November 2007, the Rural Community Network (RCN), approached the Community Relations Council (CRC) to co-commission a number of papers based on a strategic review of a rural perspective of community relations issues.

Desk and field research, a series of round-table discussions and seminars with key stakeholders in February 2008 were used to ascertain views from the rural community, practitioners and service deliverers. A number of the themes under consideration had been explored the previous year in a research project using a similar methodology and those papers, framed within the context of the Government's strategy to promote good relations in Northern Ireland *A Shared Future* (ASF), were presented at a CRC conference 'Sharing over Separation' in April 2006 and subsequently published.¹

But by 2007, the proposed ASF strategy had clearly run aground in the ebbs and flows of shallow waters being negotiated by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) who indicated that a new strategic approach was to be drafted addressing a pressing need for a reworked approach to community cohesion, sharing and integration. When the Programme for Government was released by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2007, PSA 7 Objective 5 indicated the intention to "Implement a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future for all" – but yet it mapped a surprisingly 'good-relations-free' direction for departments and only two PSAs (Public Service Agreements) specifically

naming 'rural' concerns. These were to be mainly funded by the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007 -2013 worth £500 million and with the potential to impact significantly on rural good relations. However the RCN has concerns that possibly as little as 5% of that will be available to those rural communities not directly involved in agriculture, environment or business creation.² Furthermore, the Review of Public Administration announcement that the number of councils would change from 26 to 11 by 2011 flagged up that the proposed Partnership structures (council clusters) formed to roll out both the RDP programme and Peace III are not compatible with any of the proposed coterminous council scenarios laid out in the RPA announcement and which include responsibility for community planning and a new legislative power, known as the 'power of well being'.³

Current strategies explicitly linked to rural life include the Department of the Environment's (DOE) Sustainable Development Strategy and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) Rural Development Strategy. Furthermore, the objective of Sustainable Development considered within the principles of the EU LEADER programme (Axis 4) where building local capacity is highlighted, enables the potential not just for economic development and the political democratisation of rural areas, but also the possibilities for personal and community development.

It was in the context of these legislative, economic and policy transitions that CRC and RCN commissioned the new research recognising the need to revisit and revise some of the themes previously explored in 2006 through a specifically rural lens.

Rural communities in Northern Ireland have become increasingly segregated in recent years⁴ challenging the attempts of community development initiatives and rural institutions to address community relations issues. The manifestations of division are often more subtle than in urban communities and particularly acute in rural border areas, where the conflict and the existence of the border are deemed to have had a deep impact on the social, cultural, and economic connections between communities.⁵ While flags and emblems demarcate territorial boundaries that heavily influence choices made in housing locations, sectarian interfaces are more likely in rural areas to be understood in terms of shared 'mental maps' of 'no go' areas, which determine business, educational and recreational behaviour reinforcing division. Yet, with the proposed closure of a number of schools in rural areas families with children are increasingly going to find themselves engaging in curricular and extended schools programmes that span traditional divides.

The raft of equality legislation with protection against discrimination afforded to citizens on grounds of politics, religion, sexual orientation, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation and age does not make reference to rural differences. But yet there is evidence that rural areas have suffered differentially from policy decisions and commitments in terms of equality of opportunity that have not been rurally-proofed. The centralisation of many services, coupled with poor transport links in some rural areas determines the remit of some community groups and organisations offering local services through the development of service level agreement. And there is some concern that the value base of local groups might be undermined by statutory agencies in the interests of cost, with a related consequence of community capacity being taken up with activities that detract from community relations and community development concerns. In the absence of any clear good relations action plans to take forward the programme for government, it would be helpful to refine the commonalities and challenges to good relations work in rural settings by acknowledging that many of those living and working in urban areas have rural connections and vice versa.

This article is a synthesis of some of the key elements contained in those papers commissioned by CRC and RCN. It draws together areas of shared concern and opportunity outlined therein. In so doing it incorporates and unashamedly edits material from Joanne Hughes, Padraic Murphy, Noelle Donnell, Joanne Murphy, Peter Osborne and Katy Radford. It does not, however, claim to do justice to the style and theoretical content of their original material, some of which was written within a rights-based framework, others from a community development perspective. This paper further omits the rich fieldwork quotations, ethnographic examples and policy development recommendations offered by the original authors. As their papers were written initially for policymakers and politicians (both local and regional) and to key voluntary and statutory bodies, they offer a series of recommendations in relation to policy development and guidance to local council strategies to promote good relations and engage other social partners in good relations initiatives. They also consider practical interventions which might be implemented by RCN through the Peace III 'Rural Enablers Programme' in their search for a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous rural community with the aim of developing capacity building within communities for an increased skills bank and resources to deal with sectarian and race-related issues.

The synopsis of those papers are presented here in alphabetical order.

Community Relations and Community Development (based on work by Joanne Hughes and Padraic Murphy).

Hughes and Murphy's paper begins by revisiting the key findings pertaining to the rural context outlined earlier by Hughes and McCandless (2006) who recognised community relations to be a controversial policy concept, rejected by some in the community development tradition on the basis that it obscures the structural and systemic nature of poverty, disadvantage and conflict. But while many community and voluntary organisations are reluctant to have their work classified as community relations because of associated negative connotations, others support activity classified as building relations and tackling manifestations of division linked to core community relations objectives.

Despite considerable overlap between community relations and community development objectives and values, separate infrastructural and funding arrangements have evolved. These have often served to reinforce conceptual and policy silos not helped by volatile funding environments with an emphasis on short or fixed term interventions determined by EU funding programmes which in turn have served to reinforce a sense of competition between community development and community relations work. Additional causes for low community infrastructure identified by the Rural Community Network⁶ can be highly localized and the causal factors can be grouped under four categories: social need, social exclusion, social cohesion and community capacity summarized as follows:

- A lack of community involvement – many people in rural areas do not equate involvement in formalized community development/relations groups with being active members of their community;
- A skills and knowledge gap in relation to both awareness of relevant funding streams and the capacity to make successful applications;
- Minority communities (both Protestant and Catholic) are underrepresented in rural community participation, reflecting the tensions discussed above, *'the situation of communities within communities is not conducive to community activity or social inclusion and community cohesion'*⁷;
- Poor service provision in terms of access to transport and mobility;
- Higher levels of poverty and benefits dependence in rural areas.

There is no single definition of what is meant by 'rural' and this creates significant problems in terms of funding eligibility for rural community development and relations. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) published a Report by the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group in February 2005, which considered this question in depth proposing that settlements with a population of 4,500 or less should be defined

as rural.⁸ However, this definition proves to be to the detriment of community and voluntary organisations in many small market towns providing local hubs for community development.

Funding bodies and statutory agencies tend to employ a formulaic approach to supporting and monitoring community and good relations activities within a community development context usually based on the existence of a formalised group with the capacity to make application and to follow the (often-rigorous) accountability procedures required. This approach is not ideally suited to the rural community, where there is often low capacity and a rejection of formalised group membership in favour of informal participation facilitated by institutions that tend to have a strong identity association. It has also been suggested that the urban focus of the Department of Social Development's (DSD) work is to the detriment of rural community relations and community development and wider voluntary infrastructure in rural areas.⁹

A gendered understanding of community development and community relations is pertinent. Women represent 51% of the population in rural areas and play a particularly active role in society both economically and in terms of community and voluntary commitments in addition to being well represented in mainstream rural development activity. This can be evidenced by the high levels of women's participation in rural community development support networks and in the RCN.¹⁰ However there is an absence of women decision makers at higher infrastructural levels likely to impact significantly on community development within rural communities. In 2006, women comprised just 17.8% of elected councillors in rural areas falling far short of the 30% recommended as being needed to create the critical mass necessary to affect significant change.¹¹ Of the 20 rural councils in Northern Ireland, there is only one female Chair and one female Chief Executive. This perhaps reflects the limited support for community development initiatives which privilege the needs of women in rural communities working outside the home and who face not only the barrier of affordability but also the availability of childcare.

To address these paradoxes, it might be suggested that outcomes to support good relations in rural areas include:

- the good relations proofing of Management Committees and Boards to ensure they are representative and inclusive;
- the development of equality, human rights, anti sectarian and anti racist policies;
- and accountability procedures for addressing imbalances where they exist.

Flags and Emblems (based on work by Noelle Donnell)

Flags and emblems are used extensively in Northern Ireland to celebrate or commemorate contemporary and historical events. According to Bryson and McCartney (1994) they “are associated with allegiance, loyalty, territory and authority” and in so doing “can be used to challenge another group, to assert dominance or to seek a confrontation.” Consequently, flags (and emblems) can be considered symbolically intimidatory, reflecting deep-rooted community tensions.

Overwhelmingly, flags are not put up by communities, but by groups and individuals. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey suggests that most people do no more than tolerate the practice with over 50% of people believing that flags on lampposts (national as well as paramilitary) demarcate paramilitary areas. As local councils implement Good Relations Strategies there have been increasing levels of research and publicity surrounding the use of symbols as Councils become engaged in the flags/emblems issue as a result of working with bonfire committees. In rural areas, with lower population bases to contend with, individuals and groups have not been as keen to tackle the issue of flags and emblems in ways that have been modeled in urban areas.

Several initiatives address such visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism including the Joint Protocol on the Display of Flags and Emblems in Public Places, partnership approaches between councils and other stakeholders and, since 2005, work by the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen’s University, Belfast (QUB) to conduct flag monitoring on an annual basis for OFMDFM. Although its focus is on Northern Ireland’s main arterial routes, the QUB research still provides a useful regional barometer of patterns in the display of flags including an annual audit of flags flown and the attitudes to flags and emblems sampled through the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey. The *Flags Monitoring Project 2006* found that throughout Northern Ireland

A decrease in political symbolism was unevenly spread across District Council areas. Some areas evidenced effective local regulation of symbolism while others showed little or no decrease between census dates... (which) suggests variability in the effectiveness of political symbols management strategies at local levels.¹²

And the 2006/07 survey suggests that while there has been no reduction in displays on arterial routes and no great decrease in the number of paramilitary flags over Northern Ireland as a whole, there has been a significant improvement in the number of flags taken down.

In an attempt to reduce public displays of sectarian symbolism, The Arts Council, DSD, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) developed a Shared Communities' Consortium to support a "*Re-imagining Communities Programme*". This programme provides an integrated approach to community re-imagining. Its aim is to deliver environmental improvement through a partnership with key statutory bodies in order to provide a regional model to address flags, bonfires, emblems and sectional symbols. Three separate allocations of funding have been made with over £1.5 million in grant aid committed to almost 80 successful applications. Although the aim of the programme is to deliver environmental improvement through a regional model, there has clearly been a greater uptake from more urban communities. Of this figure, however, over £900,000 has been allocated to Belfast and Derry Council areas where there were in total 39 awards made. The remaining amount was allocated through community groups and councils in a further fourteen council areas, only three of which are west of the Bann. There were no successful applications from Fermanagh while there were 16 successful applications from primarily urban areas within Co Antrim.

The work of the NIHE will be looked at in the next section, however it is noteworthy that they have produced a guide along with the Inter Community Network to address displays of contentious symbols in the "*Good Practice Guide to Flags Emblems and Sectional symbols – A Community Perspective*." This gives some help and examples of good practice for those wishing to address the associated problems of flags and emblems, outlining the sensitivities involved and providing techniques to enable local groups to handle problems successfully, referencing that:

- the pace of change will be determined by the local community
- the process is dependent on local circumstances
- the process requires flexibility and review.

Housing

(based on work by Joanne Murphy)

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) launched its regional planning strategy 'Shaping our Future – The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland' (RDS) in September 2001, followed up with an 'issues' consultation paper, 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside', in 2004 which recognises that a pressing issue for rural dwellers is the issue of land development, rural planning permission and PPS14. In this it was claimed that there was an almost 50/50 split in responses to the issue of retaining or removing any presumption in favour of building in the open countryside. In

placing a moratorium on development in the countryside, PPS14 effectively creates a rural green-belt which does not acknowledge the sensitivities and complexity of rural life in Northern Ireland with the emergence of a diverse economy moving beyond conventional agriculture and the strong senses of locality.

The issue of shared housing is one that goes to the heart of any analysis of community relations and there is an acknowledged need to reframe rural development within the context of participative local solutions to address specific community problems.¹³ Many of those within small, tightly knit rural communities have great concerns about the impact of PPS14 on rural development, community cohesion, continuity and sustainability. While there is a great deal of research to suggest that many see such sharing as important and desirable in general, there is also a clear recognition that issues of safety and security take precedence when selecting preferred housing environments.¹⁴ A recent study by ICR and Trademark (2008) indicates that the motivation for developing shared housing varies considerably. 'For the public housing sector there is a clear ethos of community cohesion; for private developers economic returns are the prime motivators and their processes can only be primarily influenced in terms of good relations by changes to planning regulations; and for residents while there is much to commend shared housing initiatives, the emotional and historical connection attached to particular areas can act as an inhibitor'. Furthermore, in terms of the management of small shared housing developments, the balance of one community over another can alter dramatically and irrevocably with a change in tenancy or the sale of a very small number of properties¹⁵ thus rendering one community more dominant than another in numerical terms.

A number of studies have also shed light on issues of minority community experience in a rural context.¹⁶ And information extrapolated from the NILT Survey (2004) illustrates attitudes within the general population to new housing in rural areas where it evidenced that 48% of respondents would discourage new housing development. In RCN consultations¹⁷ around rural housing, issues of rural sensitivity and balanced development were also key messages from the participants:

With the increase in development in rural areas there was a feeling that people welcome small sensitively designed estates rather than privately owned and designed developments which are often large and do not fit in with the area or can even double the population overnight.¹⁸

Terms such as ‘mixed’ and ‘shared’ are often inter-changeable for tenants, community development workers and community relations practitioners, but within the context of housing studies they refer to different concepts. The NIHE classifies an estate as mixed/integrated if it has a minority population of more than 10 per cent of either Protestants or Catholics. Most recently Deloitte¹⁹ determined that an area was either predominately Protestant or Catholic if more than 60 per cent of the population was from either community, while a mixed community background has between 40 and 59 per cent of Protestant or Catholic residents. The NIHE use the following definitions:

- **Segregated Housing:** A large majority of residents are drawn from one ethno-political background
- **Mixed Housing:** Residents come from a variety of different ethno-political-religious backgrounds and may also have a wide range of socio-economic circumstances.
- **Integrated Housing:** In addition to the breakdown outlined under mixed housing, residents also share a number of local services and resources.
- **Shared Housing:** In addition to the breakdown outlined under integrated housing, residents actively develop and forge links within the community irrespective of community background.

The typology is used in NIHE’s key shared housing strategy, the Shared Neighbourhood Programme, (funded through IFI) and targeted at thirty shared estates throughout Northern Ireland in a rolling three-year initiative.

Little research exists on shared housing in rural areas and it is not always desirable or appropriate to draw parallels from existing urban-based research in relation to the cost of division in terms of duplication of services, inefficient home allocation in the public sector and issues around the purchase and sale of property in the private sector. Given the rapidly changing prices of developments in rural areas, it has been suggested that new private led developments should be forced to include a quota of social housing/affordable housing.²⁰

Globalisation and recent migration to Northern Ireland by migrant workers has had an obvious impact on the development and character of good relations in some areas. Rapidly rising populations have serious consequences for housing provision and an increase in houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs) in rural areas is an emerging trend, as is the need for larger housing units. While NIHE has been working for sometime to develop clear policies for HMOs in urban areas, some of the issues that arise may be different in a rural

context. and there remains a clear-cut good relations issue to be considered within the social housing sector.

Interfaces (based on work by Peter Osborne)

Interfaces in Northern Ireland, by definition, exemplify some of the poorest examples of community relations and to reduce tensions there is a need to address the challenges facing communities and individuals living and working at interfaces in terms of dialogue and communication, sharing resources, and social and economic renewal.

Interfaces are often considered to be an urban, territorial and estate-based or working class phenomenon. The Northern Ireland Office (2003) recognises 37 interface barriers in Northern Ireland – 27 in Belfast, five in Portadown, one in Lurgan and four in Derry/Londonderry. However, it also accepts 44 barriers exist in Belfast alone reflecting a different emphasis between interfaces and the number of barriers that are used in one particular location. Since 1994, nine barriers have been erected and another 11 heightened, lengthened or extended. None of the locations identified, however are in rural areas, and no reference is made to an interface in a rural area.

In general, funders and recipients of the benefits of Peace II and III projects have recognised the particular nature of interface problems and the additional support needs for groups and individuals working at and close to interfaces. However, for the main part, this is focussed in particular in urban areas where the interfaces are physical, tangible and well-known, and where there has been a concentration of sectarian and conflict-related incidents over several generations.

The concept of interfaces in rural areas is less well explored and defined, and the outworking of divisions within rural communities can be harder to categorise and make tangible. Indeed, rural interfaces could be related to townlands, extremely localised physical features, or a mindset that impacts on people's behaviour, trust and social patterns, replicated over generations, on both sides of the community divide. However, in rural areas, the distance between facilities and residences and the physical proximity between people from one or another community may make relationship building more problematic with extreme responses to expressions of cultural identity and feelings of security.²¹

The definition of an interface simply as a physical barrier that keeps communities apart is inappropriate. The rural community may have a

different appreciation of physical space and how communities are separated than in urban areas and may be understood in the following terms:

- Physical division – which may manifest itself through townlands and a patchwork quilt of communities, villages and even farms, or through the use of community and other venues rather than a wall or fence;
- Mindset division – as affiliations differ and people feel a sense of belonging in communities;
- Patterns of behaviour – manifest in how those from different backgrounds attend social, sporting, church or cultural organisations;
- Background – as people from different ages, gender, racial background, sexual orientation or other categories interact differently with people from different religious/political background and have differing views and behaviours.

Jarman (2006) identifies seven different approaches to addressing problems at interfaces and while writing within the urban context the typology is applicable within the rural context:

- Communication – within and between communities;
- Relationships – between individuals from both sides can lift tension;
- Networks – with a variety of stakeholders that can engage in preventative work and intervention;
- Inclusivity – of all actors through discussion and the community's ability to choose its own representatives;
- Young people – as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem;
- Trust – to sustain relationships and networks;
- Connections – link to other forms of community activity including social and health issues.

While focusing on urban interfaces, many of the approaches are relevant to rural areas and community development work generally.

Murtagh's (1999) work on rural interfaces reflects the tensions that shape the decision making processes of people in neighbouring rural areas in relation to shopping, entertainment and medical services. The uptake of service provision is core to any discussion about interfaces. In rural interface areas, community division impacts significantly on how individuals use or feel the need to avoid public and private service provision. Providing services in innovative ways that promote integration might be expected to have a significant contribution to make to promoting good community relations. However, present perceptions of poor or non-existent rural public transport complicates the issue further and is particularly relevant for planning policy if it is to support integration rather than further community polarisation.²²

Given the lack of significant financial investment in rural areas where divisions and "interfaces" exist, it may be that local authorities find the rural dimension in community planning more difficult to measure and plan for than in urban areas and therefore may not include them as fully in strategies as other areas.

Race and Ethnicity (based on work by Katy Radford)

An emerging issue for many rural communities is the increase in migrant workers and the new dynamics and challenges they bring and which have been accompanied by an increase in racist attacks. The link between the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland and racism is recognised as underlining an endemic culture of intolerance and violence²³ and reflected in the introduction of Hate Crime Legislation (Criminal Justice (No.2) Northern Ireland Order 2004).

The needs of black, migrant and minority ethnic groups (BME) groups are not homogeneous. Migrant workers committed to employment for a finite period will have very different service delivery needs²⁴ than, for example, those seeking asylum, and more longer established, or second generation communities who in turn may not understand the challenges faced by those whose identities are principally defined by their belonging to faith-based communities. Into this equation must be factored the experiences of the indigenous Traveller community (recognised in Race Relations Order (NI) 1997) and who still have no hardstand transit sites which provide a requirement for basic amenities such as water and electricity to pull on and off. This absence of facilities along with the Unauthorised Encampment legislation (2003), which gives police the power to remove vehicles and force families to move, effectively criminalises the practice of nomadism, a distinct and defining characteristic of Travellers' culture.

In 2005 the Equality Commission and OFMDFM funded a series of 'Race Questions' on the NILT Survey. Based on these findings, an accompanying research paper²⁵ reported that almost 68% of respondents thought that Northern Ireland was becoming increasingly racist and that twice as many Protestants (33%) than Catholics (18%) reported being racially prejudiced. The controversial findings were raised in the press adding to earlier speculations that Northern Ireland was the 'race hate capital of Europe' (BBC 2004).

It is well recognised that the Northern Ireland Census figures of 2001, indicating that 0.85% of the respondents (14,279) of a total population of 1.68 million are from minority ethnic communities, are well outdated. While there is no one universal way to record and monitor the population changes with any degree of certainty, ongoing work by ICR working closely with rural non governmental organisations representing minority ethnic communities consider the different ways in which a system of minority ethnic monitoring might be introduced.²⁶ They also give consideration to the good relations factors necessary to any process of integration and the processes of social cohesion in terms of new migration have been documented for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.²⁷

NISRA (2007) reveals that the Home Office Workers Registration Scheme used to register migrant workers from May 2004 indicates that individuals from the A8 countries account for two thirds of Northern Ireland National Insurance numbers with the highest numbers given to Poles, Lithuanians and Slovaks. Between May 2004 and March 2007, 24,000 people (4% of UK total) registered with the Workers Registration Scheme to work in Northern Ireland with the majority in Belfast, Dungannon, Newry and Mourne and Craigavon. There are also significant numbers of Work Permit Registrations being given to Filipinos and Indians in the Belfast, Ballymena, Newry and Mourne and North Down areas. And these districts also reflect the areas with the highest figures of those registering with GPs, with the Central Services Agency now providing registration forms in these areas in Portuguese, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Czech. Furthermore, it is a pertinent trend for service planners and those committed to integration to consider that births to mothers from outside the UK doubled between 2001 and 2006 from 700 to 1,400.

None of the above data delivers an exact science. GP registration data is particularly useful as an indicator as the process connects with people of all ages and indicates an intention of the length of stay in an area. However the figures do not accurately represent particular cohorts – for example young

men tend not to register unless necessary.

A 2006 NISRA press release projected that over the next 5 years there will be 19,000 more people coming to live in NI than leaving. But it remains a challenge to acquire figures in relation to outward migration. Some might hazard a guesstimate through the NINOs (Northern Ireland National Insurance) numbers no longer in use, or through GP de-registrations. But again they are random. Interestingly, most GP deregistration appears to be in Belfast, Derry and Newtownabbey – and this poses three questions:

- Are rural areas more appealing than Belfast, Derry and Newtownabbey or do they stay for shorter periods in urban areas?
- Are there less opportunities for people from minority ethnic communities to register in other areas with GPs?
- Are those working and living in rural areas people with less mobility options?

There is very little, if any evidence about the living conditions and social life of those people who are coming to Northern Ireland specifically to work in small businesses and on family-owned smallholdings, farms and other agricultural concessions. It is anticipated that some information will be forthcoming from DARD that is useful to gauge the impact of labour in the agricultural sector after the Department included a question on migrant labour in the 2007 Farm Structure survey. But to date no research, no needs analysis and no connections are being proactively sought with individuals or small groups of people who are not connected to any community support networks and who are anecdotally to be seen living, often in temporary accommodation, on farmland in the border areas. It is noteworthy that DARD has the responsibility for the monitoring and legislative arrangements of the Gangmaster Licensing Act 2004, making it an offence for gangmasters, (otherwise referred to as labour providers) to operate without a licence in the field of agriculture including cropping, harvesting and shellfish-picking. These last points flags up some very real concerns in relation to the employment and housing conditions of some of the potentially most vulnerable in society.

Rural Institutions (based on work by Joanne Murphy)

This section considers the role and influence of ‘rural institutions’ from an organisational strategy perspective, and not as the other papers have done, through a thematic, conflict resolution or community development approaches.

Defining 'rural institutions' is a difficult task with the need for a distinction to be made between 'rural' institutions (such as Young Farmers) and institutions which have a particular impact on rural life (such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive). Institutions such as the Orange Order, the GAA, Comhltas, Ulster Scots and the PSNI are identified by the Rural Community Network as gatekeepers to social change in rural areas and this analysis is supported by findings from recent reports on community development in rural Protestant and Catholic areas.

RCN (2003) report that whilst almost all participants to their research engage in some form of community activity, almost without exception, this is Church related. Hence, Churches and associated organisations/groups (such as, for example, the Orange Order, and women's groups) tend to provide the main channels of communication for Protestants in rural areas. More formalised community based development/ community relations activities funded through external sources tend to be associated by rural Protestants with the Catholic community and a Catholic 'ethos'. A consequence of the widely-held belief that community development is 'irrelevant' in Protestant areas, alongside community association that is fragmented by the sheer number of different Church denominations, is a lack of leadership at local level. Linked to this, the RCN report on rural Protestants identifies a 'striking and consistent' lack of awareness of funding streams that could offer opportunities for building community infrastructure in rural areas.

It has been suggested that it is almost impossible to pinpoint the precise relationship between religion, politics, education and cultural activities in NI because they are so closely bound together.²⁸ In order to begin to disentangle such allegiances within organisational frameworks, it is necessary to understand the development of organisations within their embedded social context.²⁹ The social context in which organisations operate and with which they interact allows them to influence the environment around them and they operate networks often outside the remit of more formal structures and reach social groups (like the young and the elderly) who are difficult to reach otherwise. As such they represent potentially significant influencers for community cohesion and good relations.

Contrary to what might be expected, based on Protestant perceptions of community development in Catholic areas, a parallel report on Catholic minority communities³⁰ found that community association and participation in Catholic rural areas tends to be centred on sporting and cultural activities. The GAA in particular, plays an important role.

Given the trend in rural areas for community activity to be based around institutions and organizations that have a strong 'single identity' association, it is worrying that since 2001 the number of attacks on 'symbolic' premises has increased. For example, there has been an upward trend in the number of attacks on churches and chapels from 30 in 2001 to 83 in 2005 and over the same period attacks on Orange Halls have increased from 16 to 35. In addition, the level of disturbances and disorder surrounding Orange parades has also increased. The number of parades at which disorder occurred increased from 15 in 1996 to 34 in 2005.³¹

In terms of rural based institutional frameworks in Northern Ireland, initial good relations work was developed in a single identity context and often with a cultural traditions methodology.³² Small grants have often been used as a way to engage institutions in processes of reflection and capacity building. While such work has at times been controversial, it has had a degree of impact within some communities and organisations. A number of initiatives already exist that illustrate aspects of good practice in relation to promoting good relations in rural areas within existing institutional frameworks, for example, *Diversity Challenges* is currently engaged with both the Loyal Orders and the GAA to facilitate positive change and engagement along good relations principles. Given the sensitive nature of such work, the speed at which work develops and the difficulties associated with engaging organisations including building trust and the impact on practice, there is an obvious need to identify 'Good Practice Principles' in the development of such institutional work. These principles should be built on existing research, be developed within the context of creating organisational change, and based on good relations principles. There is a need to develop a long term strategy to engage rural institutions in the development of good relations and community cohesion. Within this process, a key aspect would be the cultivation of 'change agents' within key rural institutions and this relates to both institutional leadership and 'follower-ship'.

Young People (based on work by Katy Radford)

Some ten years ago, Geraghty et al (1997) suggested that the specific needs of young people in rural areas in relation to youth work and training were largely neglected – regrettably little seems to have changed since then when looking through a good-relations lens.

The 2001 census reveals that of a total NI population of 1,685,267, 34.6% (584,174 people) live in rural areas and that of the total youth population for Northern Ireland aged between 4 and 25 (172,013), that Protestants account

for 33.4% of the population, Catholics 46.4%, other religions 5% and non stated religion 14.2%. For young people in some rural locations, the lack of social and infrastructural resources, the reduction in farm sizes, the threat of closure to small schools and the decline in public transport has resulted in growing social exclusion and isolation with unacceptable distances being travelled by many young people not just wishing to pursue their right to be educated, but simply to access post offices, leisure facilities and play facilities³³ and to seek employment. To take that one step further, rural isolation, therefore can be seen as a key barrier to developing friendships and extending social networks.

The restrictions on young people living with disabilities and on young rural carers can be particularly demanding, with the lack of affordable and accessible child care adding further family tensions to existing challenges for those in rural areas. And it has previously been reported that ‘young lesbian, gay or bi-sexual people living in rural and small conurbations experience more isolation and report facing more difficulties in coming out and living openly as gay.’³⁴

Social segregation in Northern Ireland has produced considerable fear and immobility in particular in rural areas. A legacy of the conflict in rural areas³⁵ and the brutality and separatism in border areas, in particular, saw an entrenchment and polarisation of views that has left an inter-generational legacy of mistrust and intransigence of the ‘other’.³⁶

The sectarianism that this has engendered in border and other rural areas has left children and young people increasingly vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Despite the committed work and aspirations of many good relations officers in councils and of the dedicated youth-workers in single identity and cross community initiatives whose aim it is to broker and bridge the gaps between young people, many in rural areas still have little reason or motivation, opportunity or desire to forge connections with those outside of their ‘comfort’ zone. But while political tensions still exist, the divisions and unions in rural communities are dynamic and changing³⁷ unalleviated by the impact of poverty and structural inequalities.

Whilst the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is committed to anti-poverty measures in rural areas, it is not clear from the Programme for Government how much of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 will be earmarked for rural communities as opposed to being committed to agricultural and farmland use. It is further noteworthy that DARD have committed a minimum 5% spend on children and young people,

but given that children and young people comprise 24% of the rural population a significant increase on this figure would be welcome. The JEDI (Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence) model of much youth work that was launched in 2000, and that developed in the wake of work by Eyben, Morrow and Wilson (1997), has attempted to address the ‘caricature’ reconciliation work in marginal areas with young people in the ‘absence of any significant models of practice among more powerful groups and organisations’³⁸ and despite earlier concerns about the importance of the participation of young people³⁹. But the fact that there are no funds ring-fenced solely for ‘good-relations’ work for use in children’s services planning does not augur well for the future or an answer to that question.

In the Review of Public Administration, Government announced a series of changes in relation to Education that will impact on children and young people. Many of these relate to the transfer of administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities between organisations - for example, the setting up of a single Education Authority for Northern Ireland (which will become the employing authority for all teaching and other staff employed in grant-aided schools and with responsibility for the functions performed currently by the Education and Library Boards) and the appointment of a Director of Children’s Services (to co-ordinate the Education and Skills Authority’s responsibilities for children).

Of particular relevance to children and young people in rural areas are the outlined intentions to:

- transfer ownership of the controlled schools estate, currently with the Education and Library Boards, to the Education Authority;
- establish a new statutory Education Advisory Forum to act as a unified advisory interface between the Department and the education sector;
- establish a new Regional Library Authority;
- see youth services administration placed within the new Education Authority, as well as the functions of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland.

With this latter point comes a particular concern that youth service provision will be eased into the remit of district council offices, whose understanding of youth service will steer work away from the educational and into the leisure sectors.

A challenge remains for those seeking out young people in most government strategy whose presence is implied rather than explicitly presented. Within wider frameworks such as the Programme for Government

there are general commitments to youth to be found in the Public Service Agreement (PSA 6) to children and family but no explicit reference to those who are most marginalised within the rural context.

Young people in rural areas have a number of ways in which they can explore their shared rural heritage. This can sometimes occur through the exploration of explicit cultural and historical traditions. Sports and leisure activities can be a core component of finding such a shared heritage and the positioning, accessibility and programmes offered can be key to breaking down sectarian divisions and promoting both physical and emotional well being with and across communities. An audit of the existing use and reach of such activities coupled with a needs analysis compiled by young people, might work towards the rationalisation of services where duplication is limiting the opportunity to break down sectarian divisions.

Conclusion

For rural communities in Northern Ireland change has been rapid and radical over the past decades and the diseconomies of division and poor community relations have become ever more untenable. New demographic patterns coupled with changing attitudes and fluctuating house prices have had a significant impact on community relations in rural areas⁴⁰ and the outworkings of these dynamics needs to be reflected in any strategy that seeks to enhance community development and promote good relations.

There exists a vast repository of academic and practitioner research, evaluations and other material that could be used to inform the development of good practice resources and to embed community relations principles throughout rural Northern Ireland. But if the learning remains 'untapped' there is a danger, exacerbated by the piecemeal approach to funding, that community relations activities will fail to reach their full potential. At the time of writing, no strategy is in place to ensure that the current budget, Programme for Government or the Investment Strategy are committed to tackling sectarianism, building shared institutions and spaces, and growing good relations. It is, however, the view of all those contributors to the papers reviewed above, that investment in locally-based interventions, informed and supported by regional and international policy community relations development initiatives, will bring the highest quality results to areas facing unique challenges within rural settings.

The Department of Agriculture has made a commitment to 'defining the role of the Rural Champion', to enhancing any Rural Proofing process, and to

developing proposals for a Rural White Paper by the end of 2008 when it is anticipated that the Rural White Paper will provide a policy framework and a government commitment to building sustainable rural communities based on strong community relations. Yet, while it is essential that DARD takes a lead role in simplifying the route by which rural dwellers can be heard and can exert influence on policy, the Rural Champion Role should primarily be managed and resourced by the Northern Ireland Executive within the Department of the First and Deputy First Minister thus enabling all Departments to adopt a rural champion role of their own to ensure that departments collect and analyse their data on a rural/urban basis.

Notes

- 1 CRC, 2006.
- 2 RCN, 2008.
- 3 ECNI, 2007.
- 4 RCN, 2003a.
- 5 SEUPB, 2007; Boydell et al, 2008.
- 6 RCN, 2006.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 DARD, 2006.
- 9 RCN, 2008.
- 10 Macauley and Laverty, 2007.
- 11 Crawley, 2006.
- 12 Bryan and Stevenson, 2006.
- 13 ARK, 2002.
- 14 Doherty and Poole, 1999.
- 15 ICR/Trademark, 2008, p.62.
- 16 RCN, 2003, 2005.
- 17 RCN, 2006.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Deloitte, 2008, p.9.
- 20 RCN, 2006.
- 21 Boydell et al, 2008.
- 22 Murtagh, 2001.
- 23 OFMDFM, 2005.
- 24 Toucas and Martynowicz, 2008
- 25 Gilligan and Lloyd, 2006; Gilligan, 2008.
- 26 Martynowicz and Jarman, 2008.
- 27 Hickman et al, 2008.

- 28 Whyte, 1990.
- 29 Dawson, 2003.
- 30 RCN, 2005.
- 31 Peace III, Operational Programme, 2007.
- 32 Crozier, 1990.
- 33 Kilkelley et al, 2004.
- 34 Radford et al, 2006, p.65.
- 35 Fay et al, 1999; Templer and Radford, 2007.
- 36 Boydell et al, 2007.
- 37 Morrow et al, 2000.
- 38 Morrow, nd.
- 39 RDC, 1999; RCN, 1997.
- 40 ARK, 2002.

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