

Prioritising Change: Five-Year Reconciliation Imperatives for Northern Ireland

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The political leadership needs to be aware that if this just remains an aspiration, then it is endless. What we need is serious infrastructure put in place to make change happen. This requires both political and social goals and a timeline for action. Otherwise, it remains a vague aspiration.

The quote above is taken from an interview conducted by the author in June 2010, as part of a qualitative research study which aimed to explore the successes, outstanding issues and priority areas for intervention to contribute to the progression of good relations and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The motivation for this qualitative research project, which was funded by the Equality Research Directorate of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM), was to make a practical contribution to the future planning of ‘good relations’ and ‘reconciliation’ policy, grantmaking and practice in the coming years, through the identification of key themes and issues that require specific focus and attention.¹ This research study takes place at a key juncture in the ongoing process of building peace in Northern Ireland, with new policy priorities being developed by the Northern Ireland Executive and reviews being undertaken by some of the key internal and external funders of ‘peace and reconciliation’ work. The field research was undertaken between June 2010 and December 2010. This article summarises some of the key findings of the research² and concludes with a series of recommendations for consideration by policymakers, funders, researchers and practitioners alike.

Context

The recent history of conflict in Northern Ireland has left its mark on the whole society and few would argue that quick fix solutions can be found to address its multiple legacies. Significant political progress has been achieved.

Violence and the threat of violence have greatly reduced and there are positive indications that people are increasingly willing to break down the long held barriers of mistrust and fear between, and within, communities. Yet much work remains to be done. Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society, polarised along some of the most institutionalised and embedded of structures - housing, education, social and religious life, sporting and cultural activities - while the evidence points to the expressed desire of many that this were not the case. Social segregation remains a financial drain on ever diminishing resources. However, efforts to address inter-communal divisions appear painfully slow at times. Significant financial resources have been invested in the promotion of 'peace', 'reconciliation', 'equality' and 'good relations' and yet the society continues to wrestle with what these terms mean, and how they should be most effectively supported and achieved.

At political level, the establishment of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive has marked a sea-change in the relationships between political leaders, and has been lauded as a model of conflict resolution internationally. This process of coming to a formal political agreement has brought increased stability to the region and demonstrates a practical commitment to a shared political future, albeit, at times, fragile and tentative. At community level, despite the considerable successes associated with the peace process, the development of a 'shared and better future' can still be said to be incomplete, and long-term intervention is still required to support communities, organisations and institutions through the transition. At an individual level, the process of challenging prejudices, coming to terms with the past and imagining an interdependent future remains a highly personal and often private process, which nonetheless requires support and encouragement.

This research takes place at a key juncture in the ongoing process of building peace in Northern Ireland. At a policy level, it is envisaged that the *Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* document, introduced in 2005 during a period of direct rule, will be replaced by a new Executive strategy, led by the OFMdFM and collectively implemented by the devolved government. A commitment to this new policy approach has been given and a draft document entitled *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* was released for consultation in the summer of 2010. It has been widely acknowledged that differences between the political parties had led to delays in the publication of this draft policy framework and the reaction to the consultation document was certainly mixed. It was intended that a new document would be published following the May 2011 Assembly elections. At time of writing (March 2012), a new document,

which takes into account the public consultation process, had not been issued by the Assembly, although an all-party working group has been established to advise on the revisions and redrafting of the strategy.

Research Methodology

Qualitative in focus, the empirical research sought the views of 31 key individuals from within the political, legislative and policy-making sectors, the civic and business sectors and the community and voluntary sector. All fieldwork was completed between June and December 2010. Respondents were asked to consider, and formulate responses to a number of key research areas, including:

- What are the successes in terms of moving towards a ‘shared and better future’ to date?
- What are the outstanding issues which still require attention?
- What are the priorities over the next five years in achieving a ‘shared and better future’ and how can these priorities be achieved?

In addition to the qualitative fieldwork undertaken, desk-based research was conducted in the form of a review of recent academic and non-academic literature generated on issues of good relations, community relations, equality, community development and reconciliation. Broadly speaking, this literature contributes to the overall discourse around the broad themes of good relations and reconciliation, with specific foci on key thematic areas.

A Word on Language and Meaning

Words and phrases used in Northern Ireland can be loaded with intended or unintended meanings. Their usage can be perceived as an indicator of political or religious affiliation or ideological position. It can result in invisible barriers to communication forming, as conversations become entangled with varying interpretations of positions and meanings. As noted in earlier work:

The language of ‘peace’ has not escaped the minefield of contested terminology – in which the connotations of certain words and phrases within different communities, and their popularity and appropriateness, wax and wane over time.³

The research was framed around the two key phrases of ‘good relations’ and ‘reconciliation’. This was in recognition of the dominant use of both phrases in the fields of policy, practice and grantmaking in Northern Ireland. Previous research by the author⁴ noted that the language of ‘reconciliation’ has endured in Northern Ireland, although in recent years it appears more commonly in the field of grantmaking than policy development. While referenced in both *The Agreement* of 1998 and the 2005 policy document, *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*, it did not appear in the *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document* of 2010. A number of responses to the 2010 consultation document called for its reinsertion and explicit articulation, as noted in the *Consultation Analysis* report.⁵

The legislative duty for the promotion of ‘good relations’ under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998 adds additional complexity to the language used. Over the past decade, this phrase has been increasingly adopted at both local government and community levels, and is more widely understood to go beyond the limited legal responsibilities of the Act. The term ‘community relations’ is also widely understood and utilised in reference to policy and practice and has endured since the early 1970s and the establishment of the Community Relations Commission. It has, more traditionally, implied a focus on relationships between Protestants and Catholics specifically. With the increasing recognition of the societal diversity of Northern Ireland, there now appears to be some confusion as to the distinction between these two most commonly used terms. ‘Good relations’ appears to encompass a broader understanding of relationships between multiple communities and identities, rather than the more typical bi-communal division associated with ‘community relations’.

Being mindful of the contestation in language and terminology, the research sought to work with, and allow for, the possibility of the interviewee defining the terminology used for their own purposes. However, as the recommendations developed during the course of this research indicate, we cannot avoid the impact of language when it comes to visioning a new future for Northern Ireland and the challenge remains to articulate the goals to be achieved in a manner which implies both commitment and ambition.

Key Findings: Successes to date

During the course of the interviews, research respondents were initially asked to reflect on what they view to be the successes (both broad macro

successes as well as specific policies, initiatives, projects or approaches) to date in moving Northern Ireland society towards a ‘shared and better future’. Undoubtedly, the most common responses related to the political changes which have taken place at both regional and local levels and the increasing evidence of stability and bedding-in of the political institutions. The changes in the security context, including the transformation of policing structures and the reduction in the levels of violence and the threat of violence, were also noted as key achievements. A range of responses focused on what could broadly be framed as changes in the social and economic context of Northern Ireland, and the impact and influence of such changes on the development of good relations. These included the targeting of socio-economic disadvantage and differentials, greater collaborative working across and between sectors and agencies, and the significant economic support provided by external grantmakers over the past decades. Notable successes were also specified in relation to inter-communal trust and relationship building, with indications of positive changes in attitudes towards the ‘other’, often based on increasing levels of contact. References to the levels of cross-community mixing in the workplace were particularly significant. At a practice level, achievements were also noted in the variety and creativity of approaches to addressing negative attitudes and behaviours within and between communities.

Key Findings: Outstanding Challenges

The second research question required the respondents to focus on the specific issues, themes and areas which they identify as remaining challenges which hinder the development of ‘a shared and better future’ for Northern Ireland. A broad range of issues emerged, which are expanded on in greater depth in the full report. Key outstanding challenges identified included:

- the perceived lack of political vision and leadership around the issue of inter-communal division in Northern Ireland. A sense of frustration was expressed as to the significant work which remains to develop a clear and agreed vision of the sort of society that should be created, post-Agreement. Respondents called for a clear set of social and public policies, with achievable goals and targets which would contribute to the achievement of this vision.
- the individual capacity, competency and maturation of some locally elected representatives to work effectively within the newly formed political institutions.
- the level and efficacy of cross-departmental working practices to provide a ‘joined-up’ approach to address the inter-connected challenges

- of building better relationships between individuals and communities.
- the ‘dissident threat’ and the dangers posed by groups which oppose the current political arrangements.
 - weak or absent community leadership within some loyalist communities which serves to hinder their self-confidence and development.
 - the need to support and encourage socio-economic development as a fundamental priority for the future success of the region and a key element in the delivery of cohesion and integration between and within communities, particularly during periods of economic contraction.
 - current levels of residential segregation and the limits this places on individuals’ and communities’ ability to interact with ‘the other’. It was acknowledged that residential segregation is the product of a range of complex factors, including historical patterns, displacement during the conflict, and patterns of fear and mistrust. However, it was felt that with the adoption of a staged approach, combined with good housing stock, a conducive policy environment and strong community commitment and infrastructure, greater progress is possible.
 - the continued existence and erection of physical barriers between communities and the tensions which manifest themselves at ‘interface areas’. While recognising that the removal of physical barriers is far from straightforward, the majority view was that ongoing work to facilitate communities to come together and build relationships of trust as part of a longer-term goal of barriers removal was possible and preferable.
 - the levels of financial support currently available to support work with young people in both formal and informal educational and developmental sectors, particularly focusing on the impact of inter-communal division. Four key threads emerged in this area. Firstly, the opportunities and challenges which face the formal education system in terms of levels and types of mixing between students from different religious and cultural backgrounds, and the impact of the predominately segregated education system. Secondly, the broad range of challenges facing young people as a consequence of the social and economic context in which they are growing up, the segregated nature of the society and the legacy of the conflict itself. Thirdly, the role of the non-formal youth sector and the provisions which are available, both through public sector and community-based avenues. Fourthly, the approaches and methodologies used in working with young people and outstanding issues emerging in relation to this.
 - confusion around the ‘practice’ of community relations, disagreement over ‘what works’, weak coordination between multiple interventions, poor utilisation of resources and lack of organisational memory

contributing to a lack of coherence and concurrence as to the value or effectiveness of interventions undertaken.

- the loss of hard-won knowledge and learning and the unnecessary duplication of activities and resources as a result. A significant number of respondents acknowledged that there may well be a wealth of good ideas, good practices and good outcomes in existence but that, for various reasons, this information is not being adequately documented and shared. Respondents spoke of the need for some form of taking-stock of what has been learned to date in order to ensure future investment of resources is strategically planned and based on solid evidence of impact.
- the need for clarity on the multiple roles and functions of the Community Relations Council, and the specific contribution the organisation makes towards the development of good relations and reconciliation in the future.
- concerns that the current financial commitments to support good relations and reconciliation practice may not be sufficient to tackle the remaining legacies of the conflict. Concerns were also expressed about the level of funding dependency that exists within the third sector, particularly given the anticipated reduction of external funding in the coming years.

Key Findings: Five-Year Priorities

While acknowledging that the work of transforming a society from conflict to sustainable peace requires long-term intervention and generational commitment, the focus on the next five years was strategic and intentional. Respondents were asked to consider the following five-year priorities in achieving a ‘shared and better future’ and how these priorities can be effectively achieved. Twelve key priorities emerged from the responses provided.

Clearly articulate vision and direction of travel

The most pressing priority articulated by respondents was the urgent need for an agreed vision, direction of travel and clear cross-party commitment to support the development of a ‘shared and better future’. This vision statement would require explicit agreement from the political parties as to their understanding of the issues to be addressed. It would clearly set out the overarching aims, objectives and outcomes and articulate the commitment required of the Executive to provide the financial resources to ensure its delivery.

Develop strategic agreement and practical implementation of cross-departmental working

Attention should be paid to ensuring that decisions made in one government department or agency are *complimentary* rather than *contrary* to another and to the vision and direction of travel. The development of a coherent strategic framework, with agreed objectives and targets should go a substantial way to increasing activity within individual departments. However, it is the coordination of work between government departments that requires active intervention.

Develop and strengthen coherent cross-sectoral collaborative structures

The strengthening of cross-sectoral and multi-agency working relationships through the development of effective structures, with decision-making authority, should be prioritised. This will ensure effective delivery of clearly articulated objectives at political, statutory and community levels. While respondents acknowledged that a variety of multi-agency and cross-sectoral structures do exist, they are often *ad hoc*, lacking in clear or specific terms of reference, are poorly attended or lack sufficient decision-making powers to ensure effectiveness. It was recommended that a thorough audit of existing networking mechanisms should take place, with the objective of rationalisation, re-structuring and/or formalising of structures which currently exist and ensuring new provision for gaps in networking opportunities which would enhance the delivery of identified good relations objectives.

Consolidate roles and responsibilities of local government to deliver on good relations and reconciliation priorities

Generally, respondents spoke positively of the increasing recognition and responsibility taken by local government to support good relations in their boroughs. However, most indicated that further investment is required to ensure this work continues to be supported and developed, in both the immediate, and long-term. This includes a review and renewal of the District Council Community Relations Programme to make it appropriate and relevant for the current context. Respondents indicated that local government should be further supported and encouraged to take on additional roles and responsibilities, as well as continuing with their current work, where it is successfully making changes to the local context.

Create effective coordination structures between funding streams

Greater communication and collaboration is required between grantmaking sources, including those from central and local government, the European Union, the Irish government, lottery and charitable sources, international and

private foundations, and the various other smaller pools of money that are distributed in Northern Ireland. In the current period of diminishing financial resources, it was recognised that greater coherence and cooperation is required to ensure that funding resources are being utilised as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Conduct broad based review of what works and why

The need to understand the impact of programmes and initiatives to date was identified by the majority of respondents as a key strategic priority, which requires immediate action. Despite a substantial investment of funding, resources and time in the development of programmes and projects, there is still a dearth of evidence and overarching analysis of what methodological approaches have most effectively contributed to the development of good relations in Northern Ireland. A broad scale review of what has worked, and a matching of communities' needs and appropriate programmes and interventions, was proposed.

Develop overarching strategy for work with children and young people

An overall strategic framework for work with children and young people, both within and outside of the formal education sector was identified as a key priority area requiring attention. This includes the development of strategically targeted resources that complement each other and are both multi-agency and multi-issue focused. Calls for a coordinated approach to youth intervention and investment in the development of youth leadership programmes and approaches were coupled with a proposal for a champion or strategic leader to develop work in this area. An overarching review of the contribution of the various service providers (schools, statutory youth and community-based youth sector) was proposed, as was the effective dissemination of the various methodologies and approaches developed to work towards good relations, equality and reconciliation objectives in order to ensure cross-sectoral learning and non-duplication of efforts.

Demonstrate active political support for integrated and shared education

Clearly articulated moral and practical support for the expansion of the integrated school sector was identified as a key priority for the coming years, as was support for the further development of collaborative working arrangements between schools located in proximity to one another. This desire for greater cross-community contact was underpinned by economic arguments, expressing what they felt were the significant savings which could be gained from increased sharing and amalgamation of schools, where practical. This would require a broad review of how teachers are trained and

supported to work within an integrated setting and that the taught curriculum reflects the needs of all young people, regardless of background or identity. Respondents also noted the need to prioritise the mainstreaming of externally supported programmes into formal public policy making and implementation to ensure that positive changes to current structures are firmly embedded.

Prioritise economic and social regeneration and investment and enhance opportunities for sharing

In order to effect real change in the delivery of social services, particularly in areas of high deprivation and community division, substantial changes in public spending are required which prioritises the sharing of services and resources across communities. This requires changes, not only in policy and practice, but also in the current cultures within government departments, agencies and public bodies that currently accommodate rather than actively address current inter-communal divisions.

Prepare the community and voluntary sector for new economic and policy context

The significant reduction in financial resources available to the community and voluntary sector was identified as a specific issue requiring prioritisation and preparation work in the coming years. A number of respondents have noted that the non-statutory sector appears particularly ill-prepared for the challenging economic times which have resulted from the financial downturn, coupled with the predicted reduction in external funding from a variety of sources. A key priority identified was the need for increased collaboration across the sector and a rationalisation of services, to ensure non-duplication and efficient utilisation of resources. This, it was noted, requires the active engagement of umbrella structures and the effective management of existing geographic and sectoral networks and partnership arrangements.

Explore and test new opportunities for residential mixing

The persistent issue of segregation in housing was identified by many as a key priority area requiring strategic planning over the next five years. While no definitive view was expressed about the level of intervention that should be adopted to change the current patterns of division, a significant number of respondents called for a high level review of programmes of work to date and a specific policy commitment to ensure that future public housing is allocated on the basis of equal access, allocation on the basis of need, with explicit commitments to safety and sharing as key objectives.

Prepare for key commemorative events

The number of anniversaries of key historical events which are coming up over the next decade as a good relations issue was identified as requiring attention and preparation. Respondents acknowledged both the opportunities as well as the challenges of marking and commemorating events which have significance for particular, and often distinct, communities. They spoke of the opportunities to acknowledge and re-visit events of the past within a contemporary context and the possibility that it will open new spaces for engagement and dialogue between communities. Respondents expressed concerns regarding the perceived lack of preparedness of the society to manage the practical, financial and emotional issues which these anniversary events will raise. Respondents called for a strategic and inclusive approach to be taken to plan for the celebration and commemoration of events of special significance and for a mature and non-confrontational approach to be taken by our political and community leaders.

Recommendations

The larger research report, from which this article is extracted, concludes with a set of eight recommendations, based not only on the rich qualitative data collected during the course of this study, but also on an analysis of the more recently published literature, policy documents, media coverage and observations as to the challenge of working towards a more ‘cohesive, shared and integrated’ society. Each recommendation is intentionally broad and strategic in focus, highlighting the importance of building strong foundations over the next five years upon which more effective work will logically develop and progress. A range of actors is required to affect this change. Each recommendation should be viewed holistically and individual stakeholders should consider the contribution they can make to ensure their successful delivery.

- 1. Embrace the language of profound change.** Clear and unequivocal language is required to define both the process and the desired outcome. It is recommended that language of reconciliation used by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement be adopted, as it clearly articulates the depth and breadth of change required.
- 2 Adopt a strategic framework for action and a significant commitment of resources.** With urgency, the Northern Ireland Executive should adopt a comprehensive and well-resourced framework for action to address the challenge of reconciliation for the society as a whole.

- 3. Create efficient and meaningful structures through which progress can be achieved.** At public policy and implementation level, the commitment of all government departments and agencies to work towards the vision and objectives articulated in an overarching policy framework is required. This includes the establishment of a robust Ministerial Panel with sufficient authority and clout to set ambitious targets for action, identify and allocate resources, and impose measures and sanctions to ensure delivery on agreed objectives within agreed timeframes. A review of the fundamental function and purpose of the Community Relations Council and the District Council Community Relations Programme should be undertaken swiftly and efficiently. These reviews should be predicated on an acceptance of the importance of a dedicated, strategically-focused regional body that can retain both challenge and innovation functions and act as a central hub for partnership building, knowledge exchange and critical dialogue and reflection. It is also recommended that a workable structure is created to include departments, agencies, programmes and independent trusts which provide financial resources to support good relations and reconciliation work at sectoral and community levels.
- 4. Develop greater understanding of what works and why.** In order to develop greater clarity as to 'what works' in relation to approaches and methodologies to support reconciliation processes, a comprehensive review of practice, which assesses the knowledge, skills and resources developed to date is recommended in order to inform effective and efficient practices into the future. In the first instance, it is recommended that a broad-based working group representing government departments, relevant agencies, the Community Relations Council, funding bodies, researchers and evaluators, and community practitioners be convened to define the parameters of such work, isolate a methodological approach, identify the resources required and define a timescale for delivery. This should culminate in the development of an effective and adaptable mechanism for dissemination of learning and methodologies which can support the recurrent need for revision and refreshment of ideas and approaches, as the context continues to develop and change.
- 5. Integrate and mainstream options which support integration.** The major faultlines of inter-communal division in Northern Ireland society have been clearly identified. Over the next five years, it is recommended that, with the explicit support and commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive, all responsible government departments and public agencies identify the legislative and policy levers required to affect real change to the current and persistent patterns of segregation. It is recommended that

the Northern Ireland Executive takes the ambitious and courageous decision to make fundamental public policy decisions that place integration at the heart of government objectives.

6. **Articulate link between good relations, reconciliation and dealing with the past.** For too long ‘dealing with the past’ has been treated as a separate, often mechanistic, process involving specific structures, actions, objectives and constituencies, disengaged from the wider good relations and reconciliation objectives in Northern Ireland. What is required is a clear articulation of the connections, commonalities and intersections between dealing with the past and broader reconciliation processes at individual, community, political and societal levels. This should replace the current siloing of dealing with the past and relationship-building processes into separate grant programmes, policy documents and community projects. In continuing the development of a framework and action plan for good relations policy and practice work, the report of the Consultative Group on the Past should be revisited and cross-referenced to ensure coherence and consistency of approach and objectives.

7. **Seize the opportunity presented by upcoming commemorations to make space for engagement, dialogue and learning between communities.** The forthcoming decade will be marked by a series of political and social anniversaries which have particular resonance and significance for individuals and communities in Northern Ireland. In relation to commemoration in the public realm, it is recommended that new lines of communication, dialogue and partnership are developed between key stakeholders. These connections should serve to explore the challenges and opportunities arising from the forthcoming period of commemoration and remembrance. It is recommended that this key period is viewed as an opportunity to create new ways of working, foster greater and deeper understanding within and between communities, to develop new opportunities for dialogue, and to acknowledge diversity, difference and interdependence. In practical terms, it is recommended that all stakeholders begin with a process of education and understanding as to how individuals, groups and communities wish to commemorate the events of the past and agree ways in which this can be achieved, taking into account existing legislation, public order restrictions and norms related to events in public space. At grantmaker level, it is recommended that potential funding of commemorative events is assessed so as to take into account an agreed set of principles which will serve to support, rather than hinder reconciliation processes. At a civic and community level, it is recommended that cultural identity be presented as a fluid and progressive process.

- 8. More effective utilisation of existing information, statistics and research data.** Research and data collection on the causes, consequences and long-term impacts of the conflict has been relatively well resourced in Northern Ireland. Effective utilisation of relevant research data requires a two-way process of engagement between researcher and end user. It is recommended that further exploration of the processes through which research and information collected on themes of significance to reconciliation processes is disseminated and made use of. In doing so, blockages that exist between the collection of quality data and its potential utility to relevant audiences can be identified and addressed and new ways forged which satisfy the needs and expectations of both the research and policy and practice communities.

Conclusion

When asked to reflect on the task ahead to move Northern Ireland towards a shared future, one interviewee, from the grantmaking sector, noted:

This is a long-term process and we are looking for long-term gains. This is the work of generations. The financial investment to date has not been wasted, but there is always the possibility that the ship might need a little adjustment. We should be looking for constant examination of our ways of working.

This quote conjures up an image of a ship's captain remaining constantly alert to the particular course of the vessel under his or her command, so as to make informed decisions on its overall direction of travel, taking into account the prevailing weather conditions and the needs and expectations of the on-board passengers, among other considerations. The findings from this research study indicate that, currently, few respondents are confident of the ability and/or commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive to fully commit to the profound changes which are required to ensure the ship not only remains afloat, but does not drift into danger, either due to a lack of vigilance or an inability to read the charts provided. It is hoped that, without further delay, a new vision for shared society in Northern Ireland can be clearly articulated, properly resourced and given political and public backing, so as to ensure the long-term move into calmer waters, for the sake of the next generations who will remain aboard this collective vessel.

Notes

- 1 The research was subject to review by the University of Ulster's Research Ethics Committee and approved to proceed in May 2010.
- 2 The full research report, of which this is an abridged version was published by INCORE / University of Ulster in February 2012, and is available for download at http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/pdfs/projects/55_Reconciliation_Research_Report.pdf.
- 3 Hamber & Kelly, 2005: 24
- 4 Hamber & Kelly, 2005
- 5 Wallace Consulting, 2011.

References

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