

What works for reconciliation?

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Introduction

The following article distils research conducted this year, with the support of the Community Relations Council (CRC), and was published with the above title by Democratic Dialogue¹. It explored what constitutes good practice in non-governmental organisations working for reconciliation.

The author's hypothesis was that the diffidence of individuals involved with these organisations, arising from a tolerant disposition, and their idealistic commitment meant that they too rarely had the time and inclination to write down and disseminate the valuable lessons they had gleaned. So the project sought to draw out the tacit knowledge of experienced practitioners, with a view to identifying 'what works' in the pursuit of reconciliation, from which other new or improving organisations – and, in the context of *A Shared Future*, government departments – could learn.

To that end, 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals associated in various capacities with eight diverse NGOs:

- Ballynafeigh Community Development Association, sustaining a mixed neighbourhood in south Belfast;
- Co-operation Ireland, which stimulates north-south exchanges;
- the longstanding Corrymeela Community, whose focus is inter-faith reconciliation;
- Future Ways, a consultancy network transforming public bodies;
- Holywell Trust, working for reconciliation in Derry;
- the Nerve Centre, also in Derry, applying new technologies to cultural diversity;

- the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the development body for integrated schools; and
- the victims' group WAVE, which works with all 'troubles' victims, regardless of background.

Remarkably, despite the effort to seek out a range of perspectives in this way, the interviewees independently spoke very much from the same hymn sheet, suggesting the results were highly generalisable to other contexts. They manifested with great courtesy – and much passion – a rich seam of largely untapped intelligence.

Working for reconciliation

Earlier work for Democratic Dialogue by Gráinne Kelly and Brandon Hamber², supported via the CRC by the Peace II programme, developed a definition of reconciliation, enthusiastically taken up by the Special European Union Programmes Body. Kelly and Hamber identify reconciliation as a necessary process in the wake of conflict but also a voluntary act which could not be imposed. Their definition contains five interrelated strands:

- developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society;
- acknowledging and dealing with the past;
- building positive relationships;
- significant cultural and attitudinal change; and
- substantial social, economic and political change.

This research demonstrated the robustness of the definition, with all these elements being implicit in its conclusions.

To identify what might be *good practice* in reconciliation requires taking a step back and asking how communal divisions are sustained.

We have, as Amartya Sen argues, 'inescapably plural identities'.³ It is the process of stereotyping which denies the inherent complexity of every individual's identity, reducing him or her to a mere cypher for a group. Thus

various Protestants and Catholics become collectively counterposed as ‘unionists’ and ‘nationalists’, just as, at the onset of war in ex-Yugoslavia, Serbs were labelled ‘Chetniks’ and Croats ‘Ustashe’. A stereotype is ‘a highly simplified representation of social realities’ and stereotypes create ‘a black and white design’ that leaves no room for diversity.⁴ It is then a short step to enemy images and violence.

A modesty of self-regard can help prevent us engaging in destructive stereotyping: ‘We are likely to be more tolerant toward other identities only if we learn to like our own a little less.’⁵ By the same token, the more we can not only know of others but also the more empathy we can feel with them, the less likely are we to be dependent on stereotyped representations in intercultural encounters.

Good practice, then, is about challenging stereotypes through intercultural dialogue. David Stevens of Corrymeela encapsulated this when he said that ‘good practice is ultimately about giving people some capacity for self-reflection and a capacity to try to enter somebody else’s world’.

The interviews indicated that in reality this falls into four arenas. First, what are organisations working for reconciliation *about*? Secondly, what exactly do they *do*? – here the focus is on their key role in facilitating dialogue. Thirdly, how do they *multiply* the results, where their work ripples out into the wider society? And, finally, how do they contribute to the larger task of mending Northern Ireland’s damaged social fabric – and what can government and funders do to help them?

In the remainder of this article, these issues are in turn translated into concrete approaches. In each case an individual quotation supplies an illustration; in the full report a wealth of such comments is adduced at every point.

Having a compelling ethos

The first group of elements of good practice focuses on the ethos of organisations working for reconciliation. Inevitably, some of these apply to any organisation, or at least to any voluntary one. They include:

1. clarity of purpose

Tony Kennedy of Co-operation Ireland reflected that ‘maybe the most important thing is to be clear about what you want to achieve because I think that’s where we as a society blew the Peace money. If anybody ever comes to write an honest record of what happened with the European Peace money, you would have to conclude that we as a society blew most of it on non-peace programmes.’ If anyone came to him for advice on starting up a new group, he would say: ‘They would need to think about what they wanted to achieve by it. What is their aim?’

2. a holistic, teamwork approach

Katie Hanlon of Ballynafeigh Community Development Association (BCDA) explained a perverse effect of funders’ focus on projects rather than the organisations delivering them: ‘Projectitis forced people to work for the project and forget the organisation was an organisation – it was a holistic thing. So you had to work in straight lines and people got absolutely focused on these straight lines to deliver their targets, their goals and all the rest of it, and their budget. So even the funder itself only saw the project; it didn’t see the organisation. So I was trying to run an organisation which was more like seven or eight different organisations and the holistic element was going, and so were some of the visions and ideals and all the rest of it. I had to kind of smash that in order to push people to realise that there was a higher body that they were working for.’

3. an idealistic and creative culture

Michael Wardlow of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) described the dynamic driving the founders of a new integrated school – a dynamic challenging the fatalism and powerlessness which, arguably, sustains sectarian division in Northern Ireland more than popular commitment to it. He said: ‘So there’s certain characteristics that determine those type of people and generally they’re bloody-minded. Generally they are people who really have considered this and really, having heard from us what this means, still are determined to take it on. And generally there are around four to six people. So you have a small core of bloody-minded people, in the

main people who have a child who they want to go into this system ... And there is this feeling that “if we don’t do it no one else will”, that “if I walk away from this today this will never happen”.’ From such a small origin, he said, ‘it becomes almost this unstoppable force’.

4. a long-term commitment to social justice

Corrymeela has entered its fifth decade and Dr Stevens said: ‘The task of reconciliation in this society is a 30- or 40-year task and that raises questions about what a reconciled society would look like, but it’s certainly not what we have at the moment!’ Yet funders are reluctant to operate with anything like the decades-long horizon of reconciliation in Northern Ireland in mind. ‘So this is long-term activity and therefore it needs long-term responses, and one of the difficulties is that the funding structure here is so short-term and the money is starting to diminish.’

5. individual and organisational ‘reflexiveness’

NICIE is committed, through schooling, to ‘the development of autonomous individuals with the capacity to think, question and research’.⁶ And one of the ways such an ability to reflect can be stimulated is through role play. Errol Lemon told of how Brownlow College had used this to address controversial issues: ‘You could have a situation where you would be doing a role play on the hunger strike and you could have a boy from Mourneview, a very loyalist area, being Bobby Sands, and having obviously done a bit of background reading and so on, but putting the case for the hunger strike. You could have somebody from the Garvaghy Road, from a very nationalist background, being Margaret Thatcher or the British government spokesperson. And that happens and they are quite capable within the safety, if you like, of the classroom, approaching that as an academic exercise and it hasn’t ever been an issue and people are quite happy to do that.’

6. values of interculturalism and cosmopolitanism

The ‘multiculturalist’ approach to community relations, which has dominated the thinking of successive British governments, is under increasing

international scrutiny, associated as it has been with continuing sectarian polarisation in Northern Ireland and inter-ethnic riots and even terrorism in Britain. Colin Craig of Tides Training gave a hypothetical example of what the new, *interculturalist*, approach means in practice: ‘We know multiculturalism doesn’t work because you get ghettoisation inside that. So how do we go for interculturalism? The big conversation is, “So I’m delighted that you as a Muslim wish to join the police force. No you can’t, under the circumstances of the work, pray five times a day, but where the shift pattern allows you we will put a room aside. Welcome, this is our cultural reality and we welcome you to it, but this is where you move to. But what we can accommodate and acknowledge is through a prayer room where the shift pattern allows you to take a short break for prayer.” Happy days. That’s interculturalism.’

Sponsoring effective dialogue

The interviews made clear that dialogue is the essential activity of organisations in this arena. And the next set of features concerns the conditions most conducive to effective dialogue. These embrace:

1. a sense of security for participants

Eamonn Deane of Holywell Trust described in very uncomplicated terms its Towards Understanding and Healing project, which has brought together individuals from all sides of the conflict for quite cathartic conversations: ‘This is a dead simple process. Basically it is telling your story, but telling it in a way where you’re just telling your story without trying to score points politically or otherwise – just saying this is what happened to me and my family. And the other people in the room, the small group, their contract is basically to listen to the story ... You don’t have to pass any commentary but when it comes your turn you tell your story, that’s all. No mystery and no psychotherapy and no psychobabble, just straightforward. It might arise that people begin to put themselves in the other person’s shoes; it might not if they’re not making that choice. Just let’s see. But what we will do is ensure safety, insofar as is possible. We will not try to impose any time limit on the person telling their story. We will not try to impose any structure which says “you can’t say this” or “you can’t say that.” You tell your story, your voice, you find it, tell me.’

2. responsiveness to targeted individuals and groups

WAVE describes itself as ‘a user-led organisation’⁷, and Sandra Peake explained how this allowed victims to enjoy different experiences from those they might have had with statutory agencies. She said that ‘some people, maybe, have taken that step and have found that avenue has in some ways been shut down, because the statutory person dealing with them is quite uncomfortable with what they’re hearing and they get that message that there’s an area really they shouldn’t progress to’. With WAVE, by contrast, ‘I suppose in terms of coming here, it’s about knowing that there is a mechanism for remembering and having some acknowledgment, which is quite important. I mean people will use those words and sometimes it’s what do they mean, “acknowledgement”, “recognition”? And yet they are things that people strive for, because they feel that those haven’t happened or those haven’t taken place.’

3. protracted projects

Stereotypes are not easily dismantled in one go. So, while contact across sectarian and other ethnic divides is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for successful dialogue. It needs to be recurrent. John Peto of the Nerve Centre did not see much value in ‘a one-day event for the group and then tomorrow they’ll probably forget all about it and move on’. Another way of making the same point was that projects need to be protracted – at least three years, many said – to be effective. Yet this would be at the very edge of any funding envelope.

4. a focus on the quality of exchanges

Working for reconciliation is not just about the quantity of contact (which, again, may be what funders are interested in counting): it is, more importantly, about improving the *quality* of the associated dialogue. Tony Kennedy gave as an example a local-authority cross-border programme called Pride of Place, saying that ‘for a while we did it with councils and it fell a bit into the twinning trap of “let’s everybody go and get pissed together and say how friendly we are”. So we tore this up three or four years ago, and then set up a group of chief executives from the associations north and south, who then work out what

priorities they want us to deal with. So we are working to their agenda but we're keeping their focus on the north-south agenda, and Pride of Place is about people working in their communities and doing what they can to make their communities better.'

5. creative use of the arts and electronic media

Dialogue is conducted through the medium of language. But it is also about 'body language' and it takes place today in a rich environment of sounds and images in the arena of popular culture. Martin Melarkey of the Nerve Centre contrasted the experience of young people inside it with their exposure to didactic communalist murals – 'Stalinist', he called them – on the streets outside. 'And it is thinking really about how you can give people some other potentiality, some other possibilities, and for us obviously our biggest one is the creative one – that young people can come in here, and they will still be exposed to a lot of that stuff, but maybe through digital photography and through this eclectic mix of media you can really be irreverent about anything or do anything and bring a sense of humour to bear on all this stuff, and bring the sensibility of young people and idealism of young people to bear on this kind of culture.'

Achieving wider impacts

Thirdly, the interviews drew out what might be called 'ripple effects' – aspects of good practice which allow of a wider social impact. These involve:

1. stimulation of wider networks, diffusing innovations

NICIE sees itself ideally as the hub of a network of autonomous schools—and autonomy for individual organisations, in general, is necessary for them to be creative. Michael Wardlow said: 'Now, what tends to happen is schools tend to grow and move away from NICIE for all sorts of reasons – it's a bit like cutting the umbilical cord and away they go. We tend then to come in if we've got a programme to offer or there's a particular issue of concern. What we would love is that we build up a network of the schools themselves,

because this is the only way this is going to work. And NICIE- a metaphor for it might be that we're like a heart pumping out, and we're maybe saying to Brownlow, "do you know Lagan are doing that?". We're finding ourselves being a conduit, we're actually telling schools "did you know so and so?". So it's a bit like a wheel and we're the hub and we're sending wee spokes out.'

2. new 'spin-off' ventures by practitioners

It was remarkable how often in these interviews individuals spoke of having had a stint with Corrymeela, even just as a volunteer – which goes back to the point about voluntary activism – before spreading their wings elsewhere. David Stevens described Corrymeela as offering an 'apprenticeship', which over 300 long-term volunteers had experienced since its establishment. A number of these had initiated new organisations, like Tides Training. It was 'a pattern of spin-offs', he said. Eamonn Deane similarly spoke of diffusion from the Derry base of Holywell. He said that 'people come along and say, "Look, I'm thinking about doing something here, what do you think?" and we help them to create their project. We would help them to go after the funding and sometimes we would give them space in here to start it off ... So we would have projects like that that were spawned in here by people and then take an independent wing and go on their own.'

3. training in the facilitation of dialogue

NICIE and Corrymeela have produced an extremely impressive training manual⁸, which demonstrates in an eye-catching manner how schools – all schools, not just those in the integrated sector – can and should set about addressing issues of interculturalism. Indeed, organisations outside education could also find it of use. And Future Ways has played an invaluable role in its work with public agencies. For example, Derick Wilson explained how some years ago he and Duncan Morrow had engaged those responsible for social work training: 'These were the trainers of social workers across Northern Ireland. And when they had sessions with Duncan and I on politics and scanning the environment here, that was the first time they had done it. Now it was liberating once they did it but they didn't know how to do it.'

Mending the social fabric

Lastly, the canvas can be widened to the broader social fabric. And organisations working for reconciliation play two key roles in this regard:

1. building trust in a mistrustful society

Future Ways, along with Mediation Northern Ireland, carried out crucial work behind the scenes with senior officers during the programme that transformed the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Explaining its success, Duncan Morrow said that ‘fear generates fear and trust generates trust’ in what he called a ‘multiplier effect’. What had happened with the police was that ‘the ones who wanted this [change] started to pile in on the back of trust, believing we would back them, and all of a sudden you got a virtuous circle of people articulating what the issue was’.

2. establishing the warp and weft of cross-communal relationships

BCDA has been all about sustaining a fine-grained fabric of relationships in Ballynafeigh. Gerry Tubritt of the association explained how these relationships had constrained tensions in a mixed residents’ group, following an argument at a meeting over the issue of Protestant-communalist parades. He said: ‘What happened was at the next meeting – which I didn’t even think was going to happen – everybody turned up, it was a lovely summer’s evening. There was fairly frank discussion and they said, “Let’s talk about a way of managing this situation, of managing the march, of managing the relationships”. And what happened was that yes, there were Catholics and Protestants who had strongly-held views on a number of things and issues to do with the march, yet the higher value was that they were neighbours in that street – and that they agreed that, however they did this, they would try to respect the views of the other, whatever that may be.’

Conclusion

If the salutary lesson of the Balkans was that neighbours could become enemies, good practice in working for reconciliation is clearly about turning enemies back into neighbours. And the organisations on which this research was based can point to key achievements in this regard, for which they were at least in part responsible:

- the settling of the parades controversy in Derry, ahead of Belfast;
- the process of change by senior officers, implementing the Patten report, from a Protestant to a public police service;
- the sustained growth of integrated schools, representing an alternative based on mutuality to segregated education; and
- the modelling of integrated living in a neighbourhood in south Belfast, without any of the ‘peace walls’ that disfigure that city.

What is lacking is the official and political support these hugely worthy and selfless endeavours, on any objective assessment, clearly merit. Government, other funders and the CRC could all do more to support and develop good practice in the pursuit of reconciliation. This would primarily be in brokerage roles – not substituting themselves for organisations with credibility working on the ground but acting to enhance their overall effectiveness. In particular, government needs to offer much more financial support for tackling sectarian division – preferably via the CRC, which knows how best to spend it – while the CRC itself can enhance its developmental role.

Extraordinarily, it became evident during the research that one of the organisations involved was facing a cash crisis, another had recently undergone such an ordeal and a third had only been saved by a big private gesture. Yet, as Nick Acheson⁹ points out, generic public-expenditure support for voluntary associations in Northern Ireland has increased substantially in recent years – on the implicit, but unevicenced, assumption that associationalism itself breeds social trust – while intercommunal divisions have significantly deepened. *The clear implication is that there must be a much more targeted investment by government in non-governmental organisations specifically and explicitly committed to tackling those divisions head-on, over and above EU programmes.*

But perhaps the greatest frustration revealed in the interviews for this project was with the Northern Ireland political system. This was not coming from a group of political *naifs*: these were very politically engaged and knowledgeable individuals. Yet not one of the 37 volunteered any association with a political party.

Sandra Peake intimated that WAVE continued to receive some 600 referrals per year, a figure that showed no signs of decline. In the most recent report on its work she writes: ‘Anger, disbelief and feelings of isolation are perpetuated due to the political stalemate.’¹⁰

Derick Wilson of Future Ways said that ‘if we’re talking about building a civil society where the public space is that sort of space where people engage, or where people bounce off one another – where, if you like, the hard edges are softened a little – that’s only possible in a public space that is relational and that’s not what this society has ... [Political figures] don’t have a sentiment for one another, so they don’t even see the importance of public space. They just have a conflictual space where they bounce off one another as arrogant adversaries.’

And yet this is ultimately an uplifting story. For it was not hard to detect, in the emphases of the often very moving testimonies of the interviewees, the outlines of a different political culture in the making, more attuned to our reflexive and intercultural times.

Notes

- 1 Wilson, 2006.
- 2 Kelly and Hamber, 2005a, 2005b.
- 3 Sen, 2006, xiii.
- 4 Bauman, 2005, p.115.
- 5 Ignatieff, 1999, p.62.
- 6 NICIE, 2006.
- 7 WAVE, 2005.
- 8 Potter and Lynagh, 2005.
- 9 Acheson, 2006.
10. WAVE, 2005.

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