

## Community Relations in Northern Ireland

During Northern Ireland's history, relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities have often been characterized by separation, mistrust, prejudice, conflict and division. These negative relationships have been both a cause and consequence of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Significant efforts however, have been made by individuals, community-based groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and policymakers to promote understanding and peaceful interaction between the Protestant and Catholic communities. These efforts are generally referred to as 'community relations' work. This paper briefly outlines the concept, policy and practice of community relations in Northern Ireland. It then turns to consider the state of present and future relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities.

### A Concept

Relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland are not only a function of religious difference, but also a function of different political aspirations, different cultural identities and socio-economic inequalities. To promote understanding and peaceful interaction between the Protestant and Catholic communities, it is therefore necessary to address a tangle of interrelated problems. As Eyben, Morrow and Wilson suggest:

"In order for community relations to have any substantive meaning, it must be constructively linked with policies for equity and diversity. Likewise, if equity and diversity are to contribute to stability rather than heightened competition, they need to be brought together with an acknowledgement of interdependence between groups in Northern Ireland."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *A Worthwhile Venture, Practically Investing in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence in Northern Ireland*. K. Eyben, D. Morrow & D. Wilson, (University of Ulster, 1997).

Thus, community relations is generally defined as being based on three key principles which are inextricably linked to each other. These three key principles are diversity, interdependence and equity. According to this broad definition, community relations work means: promoting recognition, respect and tolerance for the variety of different communities within Northern Irish society; ensuring equality of opportunity and equality of access to resources, services and decision-making; and developing a cohesive society in which different interest or identity groupings recognize their obligations and commitments to one another.

## **A Policy**

In 1985, a review of existing strategies for resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland “found (community relations) work to be inadequate, unstrategic, and poorly funded, incurring...less than 1 per cent of the security budget.”<sup>2</sup> In response to this review, a Central Community Relations Unit was established at the heart of government to oversee the development of relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities. In 1990, this unit set up the Community Relations Council, an independent agency dedicated to “enabling a society free from sectarianism.”<sup>3</sup> The Community Relations Council currently provides significant support in terms of finance, training, advice and information to individuals, community-based groups, and NGO’s interested in community relations work. In addition, the Council plays an important role in encouraging government and statutory organizations to develop a community relations aspect to *all* their policies and practices, including areas such as education, planning, economic and community development.

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<sup>2</sup> *Beyond Violence: Conflict Resolution Process in Northern Ireland*. M. Fitzduff, (United Nations University, 2002), pxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Community Relations Council, <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/>

Recently, the aims and objectives of community relations policies in Northern Ireland have come under the spotlight. In 2002, the ‘Harbinson Report,’ commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, noted that:

“current policy and associated policy instruments were established at a particular period in the history of Northern Ireland between 1987 and 1990. The aims and objectives of community relations policies and actions were designed to improve relations between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland through the encouragement of greater contact and the development of mutual understanding and respect for different cultural traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

The Harbinson Report continues, “there is (currently) widespread agreement that the aims of community relations policy do not remain appropriate and that changes are required to existing policy instruments.” In response, the government published a public consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland entitled ‘A Shared Future.’ More than 10,000 people contributed to the consultation – an indication of the level of controversy the publication provoked. Much of the debate around ‘A Shared Future’ centred on the government’s presentation of the future of Northern Ireland as a choice between two stark alternatives:

“accept that the existing patterns of segregation and division is likely to remain for some time, and focus our efforts on stabilising and managing the worst consequences of division, both between and within the two main communities...Alternatively, we should try to promote rapid progress towards a more integrated and shared society.”<sup>5</sup>

Many people replied that, “integrated/shared communities is a middle class concept predicated on people having the resources to make choices to live in this way” and called for more attention to be focused on equality of opportunity and outcome.<sup>6</sup> Others argued that the two alternative futures presented by the government in ‘A Shared Future’ are, in fact, overlapping realities in Northern Ireland today. To date, the new government policy on community relations has not

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<sup>4</sup> “Review of Community Relations Policy,” J. Harbinson, 2002, <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/communityrelationsunit/harbinsonreport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> “‘A Shared Future’: A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland,” J. Darby and C.Knox, 2004, <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/exsummary.htm>

been finalized and remains subject to developments in the current round of talks between Northern Ireland's political parties.

## **A Practice**

Community relations work is perhaps, above all else, something that people have felt driven to *do* throughout Northern Ireland's history. There are countless stories of individuals acting to develop positive relationships between the Protestant and Catholic communities – for example, by attending the funeral of a member of the 'other' community. Beyond the individual however, there are a large number of community-based groups and NGO's involved in community relations work in Northern Ireland. These groups vary in the issues they seek to address, the type of work they carry out and whom they target. For example, the Corrymeela Community is an inter-church group that promotes reconciliation by providing opportunities for dialogue within and between communities, and by supporting victims of violence and injustice. Counteract is an organization established in 1990 by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, that aims to end sectarianism in the workplace through programmes targeting both employers and workers. The Intercommunity Development Project, Intercomm, was established in 1995 to address the social and economic problems, which had developed along the 'Peace Lines' of North Belfast. Its work includes programmes targeting the long-term unemployed and disenfranchised. Other community relations groups focus on: cultural traditions; justice and human rights; the interface between the security forces (police and army) and communities; anti-intimidation work; and mediation within and between communities, between politicians and between paramilitaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Why does Community Relations Matter?

Critics often accuse community-relations of promoting social engineering, of being a multi-million pound industry, or of simply being irrelevant following the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and a scaling down of paramilitary violence. However, as Morrow suggests, community relations is not a choice: “our predicament is that we will share the future: the only question is what kind of future.”<sup>7</sup> The price of continued sectarianism is high, including “loss of lives, jobs, homes; injury, illness, absenteeism; destruction of business premises; lack of inward investment; loss of expertise and innovation through emigration; multiple delivery of services; (and) reduced productivity and efficiency.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, positive relationships between the Protestant and Catholic communities increase the potential for *sustainable* agreed political solutions to the Northern Ireland conflict. Furthermore, surveys and research demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of both Protestants and Catholics consistently express their desire to live and work in mixed-religion environments.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in housing and education, segregation has recently become more acute, particularly in working class areas.

Northern Ireland is also becoming an increasingly diverse and multicultural place. Migrant workers, for example, are a growing category of employees in Northern Ireland and “are a necessary factor for many employment sectors due to a shortage of available local labour.”<sup>10</sup> While Northern Ireland is commonly portrayed as a society dominated by tensions between a majority Protestant and a minority Catholic community, in fact at least 60 ethnic minorities are present in Northern Ireland. High levels of racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance

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<sup>7</sup> “On the far side of revenge?” D. Morrow, [http://www.corrymeela.org/Articles/on\\_the\\_far\\_side\\_of\\_revenge\\_.html](http://www.corrymeela.org/Articles/on_the_far_side_of_revenge_.html)

<sup>8</sup> “A Good Relations Framework, An Approach to the Development of Good Relations,” Community Relations Council, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See p9 of this paper.

are currently being directed at these communities. In the last year, for example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland reports that the number of racist incidents recorded doubled.<sup>11</sup> A recent Racial Attitudes Survey suggests racial prejudice is around twice as significant as sectarian prejudice in the attitudes of the population in Northern Ireland.<sup>12</sup> For example, twice as many respondents in the survey stated that they would be *more unwilling* to accept and/or mix with members of minority ethnic communities than they would be to accept or mix with members of the other main religious tradition (i.e. Catholic or Protestant) to themselves.<sup>13</sup> Both sectarianism and racism emanate from the same reluctance to embrace a politics of ‘difference’ in Northern Ireland. It is the task of community relations to address intolerance of any form of difference, including difference in terms of race, religion, disability and sexual orientation.

### **How are Community Relations today?**

The Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey records the attitudes, values and beliefs of people in Northern Ireland. It therefore provides a variety of indicators of the current state of community relations in Northern Ireland. Results suggest that people generally feel that relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities are improving. In 2003, for example, 49 per cent of Catholics and 42 per cent of Protestants felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than they were 5 years ago.<sup>14</sup> Figures further suggest that there has been a gradual increase in the number of people who feel that community relations are better than they were in the past:

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<sup>10</sup> “Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland,” K. Bell, N. Jarman & T. Lefebvre, 2004, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/icr/reports/bell04migrant.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Report of House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on ‘Hate Crime’: the Draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, May 2004, <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk>

<sup>12</sup> *Racial Attitudes and Prejudice in Northern Ireland*, P. Connolly, and M. Keenan, (Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Results from Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/>

*Are relations between Protestants and Catholics better now than 5 years ago?*

<b>2003</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Better</b>	49	42	41
<b>Worse</b>	9	13	10
<b>About the same</b>	37	43	39

<b>2002</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Better</b>	37	26	28
<b>Worse</b>	19	26	25
<b>About the same</b>	41	45	40

<b>2001</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Better</b>	33	25	30
<b>Worse</b>	13	22	20
<b>About the same</b>	48	49	46

There also seems to be increased optimism as regards the future of community relations. In 2003, 56 per cent of Catholics and 41 per cent of Protestants felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics would be better in 5 years time. Over time however, this figure has been as high as 75 per cent of Catholics and 53 per cent of Protestants in 1998, and as low as 33 per cent of Catholics and 25 per cent of Protestants in 2001 – likely in response to political developments such as signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the first suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>15</sup>

As regards the search for peace in Northern Ireland, in 2003, 40 per cent of Catholics and 29 per cent of Protestants felt optimistic about the future. These figures mark a gradual increase in both

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

communities since 2001. It is important to note however, that in the same year only 13 per cent of Catholics and 5 per cent of Protestants felt *confident* about the future. These figures suggest there is a need for more ‘single-identity’ work, that is, work aimed at increasing the confidence of *either* Unionist/Protestant or Nationalist/Catholic communities. Recently, there have been calls for more to be done to increase the confidence of the Protestant community in terms of its identity and capacity because, “many Protestants in Northern Ireland feel beleaguered, misunderstood and outmanoeuvred.”<sup>16</sup> There are other reasons for single-identity work. For example, single-identity work may be the only option available when people do not feel safe enough to engage in direct contact with the ‘other’ community. Furthermore, it can act as an important first step to ensure that when contact is made with the ‘other’ community it does not prove hostile and counterproductive. Single-identity work may also help develop the leaders who will eventually reach out to connect with the ‘other’ side.<sup>17</sup> In the long-term however, single-identity work must challenge participants to look beyond their community’s problems to understand those of others, or run the risk of creating “educated bigots.”<sup>18</sup>

Hence, government and the community and voluntary sector have made significant efforts to combat discrimination and promote equality *for all* in Northern Ireland. For example, an independent public body – the Equality Commission – was established in 1998 and there have been a number of important changes made to Fair Employment legislation. This work appears to have impacted on the attitudes of the Protestant and Catholic communities. In 2003, when asked “do you think that, in general, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are treated equally?” roughly 50% of both Protestants and Catholics answered “Yes.”<sup>19</sup> Over time, there has been a decline in the percentage of Protestants who feel that Protestants and Catholics are treated

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<sup>16</sup> *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People*, S. McKay, (Blackstaff, 2000)

<sup>17</sup> Single-identity work is often referred to as ‘uni-national’ work internationally.

<sup>18</sup> “Resolving Community Relations Problems in Northern Ireland: an intra-community approach,” J. Hughes, 2000.

equally, and an incline in the percentage of Catholics who feel Protestants and Catholics are treated equally:

*Are Protestants and Catholics treated equally?*

<b>2003</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Yes</b>	54	50	58
<b>No</b>	24	24	22

<b>2000</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Yes</b>	32	55	40
<b>No</b>	36	26	37

<b>1999</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Yes</b>	38	64	53
<b>No</b>	40	21	27

<b>1998</b>			
	<b>%</b>		
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>No Religion</b>
<b>Yes</b>	43	61	62
<b>No</b>	33	21	21

These figures likely reflect the erosion of discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, as well as new concerns that affirmative/positive action policies discriminate against Protestants. For example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland's '50/50 recruitment policy' has attracted criticism from Protestants, as it mandates equal intake of qualified Catholics and non-Catholics in an effort to compensate for under-representation of Catholics in the force. Indeed, research

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<sup>19</sup> Results from Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/>

demonstrates that *both* Protestants and Catholics agree that job opportunities is the most important area in which Protestants and Catholics should be treated equally.<sup>20</sup>

As discussed earlier in this paper, there are signs that the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland are interested in greater integration. For example, in 2003, 84 per cent of Catholics and 60 per cent of Protestants stated they would not mind if one of their close relatives were to marry someone of a different religion; 87 per cent of Catholics and 78 per cent of Protestants said they would prefer to work in a mixed-religion workplace; and 56 per cent of both Protestants and Catholics said they would prefer to send their children to a mixed-religion school (young people express similar levels of support for mixed-religion workplaces, neighbourhoods and schools).<sup>21</sup> At the same time however, roughly 40 per cent of both Catholics and Protestants said they would avoid applying for a job situated in an area dominated by the ‘other’ community.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, only 5% of the school going population currently attends a total of 57 integrated schools.<sup>23</sup> The benefits of meeting the demand for greater integration are high. While community relations practitioners have always argued that increased, direct contact between the communities leads to positive relationships, recent research demonstrates that just having *a friend who has a friend* from the ‘other side’ significantly reduces levels of sectarian prejudice.<sup>24</sup>

### **How will Community Relations be in the future?**

While there seems to be widespread support for greater integration between the Protestant and Catholic communities, this may not extend to members of other communities in Northern Ireland,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “In Support of Integrated Education,” M. Wardlow, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, <http://www.nicie.org/archive/publications/in%20support%20of%20integrated%20education.doc>

such as ethnic minority communities or gay and lesbian communities. In surveys, 60 per cent of respondents say that most people in Northern Ireland would mind if one of their close relatives were to marry a person of Chinese origin, and 48 per cent of respondents think that most white people in Northern Ireland would mind if a suitably qualified person of Chinese origin were appointed as their boss.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, 33 per cent of respondents stated that it is impossible for people who do not share the customs and traditions of Northern Ireland to become fully part of it.<sup>26</sup> Yet as discussed earlier in this paper, Northern Ireland is becoming an increasingly diverse and multicultural place. The challenge is therefore to open up the concept of community relations to focus on the whole of society rather than just the Protestant and Catholic communities.

There has been some movement towards this with the introduction of ‘good relations’ through legislation that obliges public bodies in Northern Ireland to:

“promote equality of opportunity-

- (a) between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- (b) between men and women generally;
- (c) between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- (d) between persons with dependants and persons without.

(and)...have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”<sup>27</sup>

This concept of ‘good relations’ between people of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation is beginning to permeate government and other sectors of society in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>24</sup> “Getting by with a little help from your friends,” Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, [http://www.nicie.org/newsroom/news\\_details.asp?id=54&ntype=news](http://www.nicie.org/newsroom/news_details.asp?id=54&ntype=news)

<sup>25</sup> Results from Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Section 71 (1) & (2), Northern Ireland Act 1998

While good relations looks set to eclipse, or at least force a radical redefinition of community relations, this is not to say that efforts to promote peaceful interaction and understanding between Northern Ireland's Protestant and Catholic communities are any less important. Current political talks look set to deliver an agreement that will enable greater self-government of a deeply divided society. However, much work remains to be done to develop a strong, cohesive society that will facilitate the establishment of durable peace in Northern Ireland.