

DEVELOPING A DIALOGUE – the contribution and impact of European Union funded projects in developing mediation processes in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.

Notes of the Keynote address by Pat Colgan, Chief Executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, to the European Mediation Conference, 10 April 2008, Belfast.

The European Union itself provides the world with compelling evidence of the achievements of the mediation work of men and women down through the last sixty years. Set up with the aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighbours, which culminated in the Second World War, it has united 27 countries economically and politically and secured a lasting peace. This achievement has meant finding a way through conflicts and disputes between nations and among communities to promote and deliver stable societies through the promotion of reconciliation.

Here in Northern Ireland its work in reinforcing progress towards a peaceful society has been underpinned by the PEACE programmes managed by the Special EU programmes Body, the organisation which I am responsible for.

Dealing with the past is a very difficult process and all the solutions are not available to us. It presents immense challenges and no one underestimates the huge amount of work involved in finding constructive ways forward.

The first PEACE programme which ran from 1995 until 1999 was the direct result of the EU's desire to make a positive response to the Peace process, following the cessation of violence by the main republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations.

Today we will mark the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 – an agreement which was the culmination of many years of joint effort by the British and Irish Governments to create an agreed political framework for a new beginning for Northern Ireland after three decades of violence and conflict.

The EU programme for peace and reconciliation has followed two objectives; to address the legacy of conflict and to take advantages of the opportunities as Northern Ireland moved from conflict to our current peace.

To address the legacy of conflict and build on the opportunities this creates, projects had to demonstrate how they contributed towards the promotion of mutual understanding and reconciliation between and within the communities and traditions in Northern Ireland and her border counties.

A key priority has been social integration, inclusion and reconciliation. This priority facilitates reconciliation and peace building activity, social and urban regeneration and training directed at children and young people and those who have been particularly affected by the conflict.

The range and diversity of the projects which were brought forward and received support are wide and varied and indicate the impressive commitment and dedication of individuals and groups across all communities in seizing the initiative to resolve conflict and create local dialogue.

When we look at Peace II Programmes we measure their output and achievements against the outputs against five priorities:

Priority 1 - Economic Renewal. Over 9,000¹ small to medium sized enterprises and community businesses have been supported, resulting in the creation of almost 3,300² jobs.

Priority 2 - Social Integration, Inclusion and Reconciliation. This priority facilitates reconciliation and peace building activity, social and urban regeneration, and training directed at children/young people and those who have been particularly affected by the conflict.

Of the 68,921 participants that have taken part in projects, approximately 22,000³ have gained qualifications, and over 6,900 have entered or progressed within either employment, education or further training.

Priority 3 - Locally Based Regeneration and Development Strategies. Over 2,300 projects have been supported by 26 Local Strategy Partnerships and County Council led taskforces. Almost 900 groups and over 22,300 individuals have participated in reconciliation projects

Priority 4 - Outward and Forward Looking Region. 22 networks have been supported, the majority of which are international. Other networks are specifically aimed at marketing both Northern Ireland and the Border Region as tourist destinations.

Priority 5 – Cross-Border Co-operation. Funding has supported 198 new/existing cross-border linkages/networks, with 122 small to medium sized enterprise linkages or clusters created as a *result* of the networks. In addition, nearly⁴ 130,000 people have participated in cross-border activities, of which over 8000 have received accreditation, and approximately 6,130 have progressed within employment, education or further training

Mediation Northern Ireland, one of the organisers of today's conference, whose work and impact is universally respected and valued, have been extensively supported by funding through the Peace programmes. The establishment of a Mediation centre for Northern Ireland was a very significant initiative by Mediation Northern Ireland, and EU support enabled this important physical contribution to civic society's work promoting reconciliation and promoting peace in Northern Ireland.

The scope of the work of Mediation Northern Ireland which has received support is far reaching, for example the developing good relations by civic leaders in local authority areas was an initiative aimed at developing the capacity for managing mediation projects within district councils. It has also integrated learning from projects outside Northern Ireland on good relations in a racial diversity context.

You will no doubt hear much more about the work of Mediation Northern Ireland and its many other initiatives supported by the European Union through SEUPB. In particular its ground breaking work on dispute intervention in areas which have experienced violence and polarisation has promoted reconciliation as a means to sustaining peace.

The Peace and Reconciliation Group working within the Derry City Council area has also been enabled to develop comprehensive mediation services by providing support for people living in interface neighbourhoods in developing an understanding of how to constructively resolve conflict. The aim has been to reduce levels of

¹ 9,354

² Ibid 3,269

³ Ibid 21,730

⁴ ibid127,690

sectarianism and racism while promoting the concept and values of equality and diversity within society.

In Belfast the Interaction Project works with communities surrounding the Falls/Shankill interface across North and West Belfast. The Interface is one of the longest in Europe and Interaction Belfast works to develop structures, programmes and mechanisms to support and empower communities to engage in dialogue and build trust. Using the mobile phone network this group has developed a close system of communications which have played a pivotal role in reducing tensions in the Interface area.

Another imaginative project is the Ballymacarrett Arts and Cultural Society. The project aims to underpin and develop Cultural Learning Partnerships between Community and Youth Groups and Schools in East Belfast and the six border counties. They do this through participation in activities together thereby forming Learning Partnerships. These partnerships promote, motivate and deliver activities that address the issues arising from the legacy of the conflict and contribute to Cross-Border Social and Cultural Regeneration.

Working with young people has been a consistent theme throughout the programmes and there are many examples of effective projects which have emerged from within communities and been supported. The Redburn Youth Club, near Bangor is one such example of where six local mothers run a voluntary youth club. They have undertaken child protection training and are working to address issues of conflict and challenge sexist, racist and sectarian attitudes within their community and those of the young people that participate in the youth club.

Supporting marginalised young people and developing the knowledge, skills and relationships that will enable them to accept diversity and become active and responsible citizens is at the heart of a range of initiatives.

Community leaders from Northern Ireland have much to share with other parts of the world coping with conflict. The Project called "Journeys Out" is an initiative⁵ which engages a new generation of community leaders in the debate about dealing with the past. Its participants are sent on a journey to undertake intensive conflict resolution training at the International Leadership Institute (ILI) in Jordan. The training includes workshops to facilitate discussion, reflection, learning and networking as well as providing an opportunity for the community leaders to share their professional experiences of dealing with the past on a local and international basis.

Building capacity among communities and facilitating the development of tomorrow's leaders is fundamental to much of the hard work being undertaken and where significant investment has been made. All of this promotes greater community cohesion and has been strengthened by a 'bottom up' approach which has encouraged participation and empowerment of the most marginalised.

The effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland, however, are still strongly evident. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, for instance, found that in 2005, almost one fifth (18%) of respondents had been victims of a conflict-related incident and almost a quarter (24%) of respondents considered themselves to be a victim of the troubles.

⁵ Run jointly by INCORE, the Peace and Reconciliation Group and Intercomm, and is funded through Measure 2.4 of the Peace II Programme

While recognising that victims and survivors of the conflict are a diverse group, many are experiencing long term difficulties such as chronic pain, trauma and isolation. In addition, victims and survivors continue to face complex psychological problems, a lack of support and recognition, social exclusion, and do not feel that they have a voice to express their views and share their experiences.⁶ Many victims of conflict also have fears of being subject to further violence and attack.

While the general security situation in Northern Ireland has improved over the last number of years 'lower level' sectarian crime is a significant problem in Northern Ireland. In 2005/2006 'hate crimes' with a sectarian motivation were collected for the first time and 1,470 were recorded. So we recognise that we are far from free from the prejudices and bigotries which are the barriers to social cohesion.

However, overall, data for the period 2000-2005 points to a strengthening level of community relations in Northern Ireland in more recent years. The Life and Times survey shows that in 2005, both Protestants and Catholics were more positive about relations between the two communities than they were in 2000. The survey also shows an increase in the proportions of both Catholics and Protestants who prefer to work in a mixed workplace.

Notwithstanding improvements in overall community relations, Northern Ireland remains a divided society.

In managing such a wide ranging and complex programme of distribution of funding under the now concluded Peace II programmes unique and valuable experience was established and valuable lessons learnt.

I would like to point to a few today which I feel you would find useful:

Peace building is a long term and multi-dimensional challenge and we must recognise that this is a more long term generational issue that cannot be resolved within the confines of the programme periods over the 10 plus years - future initiatives need to be linked into other broader government initiatives.

With regard to Strengthening Peace Building and understanding reconciliation we experienced a degree of confusion over what exactly reconciliation actually meant and how it could be addressed. In 2004 a definition of reconciliation was agreed⁷ and this has helped clarify the term, encouraging more understanding of reconciliation and defined the "uniqueness" of the programme.

Briefly, our working definition of reconciliation regards it as a **Voluntary Act, which cannot be imposed** and involves five interwoven and related strands:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent society
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past
3. Building Positive relationships – addressing trust prejudice, intolerance, engaging those different to us
4. Significant cultural and attitudinal change
5. Substantial social, economic and political change

⁶ Interim Commissioner for Victims Survivors (2007) support for Victims and Survivors – Addressing the Human Legacy.

⁷ Hamber, B and Kelly, G. (2004) A definition of reconciliation. Occasional paper published by Democratic Dialogue, Belfast.

Going forward with the third Peace fund we will have a continued emphasis on reconciliation and will specifically focus on reconciling communities and contributing towards a shared society.

With regard to reconciling communities we will support the implementation of strategic models of collaboration between the public, private and community sectors; there will be promotion of a bottom up approach involving those in the decision making that directly affects them, and there will be an emphasis on partnerships with identified groups.

In the focus on contributing towards a shared society we support the creation of shared public spaces – the graffiti, flags emblems and the existence of demarcation lines in cities, towns and villages reflect our underlying sectarian and segregational attitudes and exacerbate our social divisions and tensions. All these factors inhibit economic growth. The projects we will support will reclaim public spaces for all the community and will seek to enable the emergence of vibrant, economically active and engaged communities.

In contributing towards a shared society we recognise the significant segregation that exists in Northern Ireland in terms of residential patterns and interface areas. Indeed as inter-community mobility is generally low, particularly in densely populated, socially disadvantaged regions, people are less willing to cross into areas perceived as dangerous or unwelcoming to avail of public services. This has exacerbated the lack of contact on a cross-community basis and impacted on the development of a shared society as policy and services are in some cases duplicated in both communities. This includes services such as community health centres, job centres, public housing, education and public transport. In the border region, problems of isolation, lack of participation and integration, and economic and social linkages also exist.

In addressing this through the Peace III Programme we will be supporting projects which create shared public spaces and we will also support the development of the capacity of institutions to deliver services in a manner that contributes to a shared society.

European Union Commissioner Danuta Hübner who visited Northern Ireland towards the end of last year in her role as Commissioner for Regional Policy called for Northern Ireland to reach out into Europe and beyond to share the lessons learnt from the peace programmes. We are endeavouring to respond to this responsibility.

In October the SEUPB hosted a seminar in Brussels to share insights into peace and reconciliation gained during the past decade in Northern Ireland.

More than 150 delegates from across the European Union attended the “Lessons learnt and shared” seminar, the event where we had presentations about the Northern Ireland’s post conflict experience as well as speakers from Cyprus and the Balkans.

We were delighted by the interest shown about our insights and lessons on peace and reconciliation from a Northern Ireland perspective.

A result of this was an agreement to develop a Europe-wide network of organisations engaged in peace and reconciliation.

Much of the SEUPB's future plans and objectives can be attributed to its many past successes. Together with all of its partners and thousands of funded projects, the PEACE programmes have made a lasting social and economic impact in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.