

THROUGH PEACE TO PROSPERITY

A VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PERSPECTIVE

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The Voluntary and Community Sector

- 1.1 The voluntary and community sector is a key player in any society. As a symbol of democracy and pluralism, as an 'outlet for outrage', as a service provider, or as an expression of citizenship, the sector plays a key economic, social, cultural and political role in any society.
- 1.2 The pace of peace is exciting, but it requires an acknowledgement of the remaining deep divisions in society; varying hopes, aspirations and objectives; a real tolerance of diversity and difference; legitimacy for all.
- 1.3 In areas of deprivation, social justice and the elimination of poverty will be crucial as targets for action and as indicators of progress. This is especially true in Ireland where the peace process must be enriched, broadened and deepened to become sustainable and to act as a springboard for the future. These are areas where the voluntary and community sector has particular expertise in all corners of the island and is eager to play its positive part.
- 1.4 In Northern Ireland, the voluntary and community sector has played a critical role during the last 25 years; it has provided a meeting point and forum for debate, negotiation, argument and bridge-building; it has encouraged and created a space for dialogue; along with the trade union movement, it has contributed towards the mitigation of the worst effects of violence, from whatever quarter; it has already made a strong contribution to the peace process.
- 1.5 The voluntary and community sector is vibrant and growing, also making a significant economic contribution. It is characterised by diversity, innovation and a commitment to participation.
- 1.6 Poverty and deprivation will come into sharper focus in Northern Ireland with the cessation of violence and as the spotlight turns to social and economic issues. This will expose questions of chronic neglect, under-investment and economic decay, requiring urgent action from all quarters. The key principle is that people must be the subjects of their development, not the objects. Economic policy must be subordinate to social objectives.

The Island Economy

- 2.1 The voluntary and community sector, in general, welcomes the evolution of an 'island economy' approach to development strategies. However, the absence of a social dimension can reinforce the exclusion of the long-term unemployed, women, Travellers, people with a disability and other vulnerable groups. The 'island economy' must be inclusive and of benefit to all groups in society. This requires an integration of social and economic strategies;

also that any mechanisms put in place to promote an island economy should reflect this integration through the inclusion of the voluntary and community sector as full participants in their structures.

- 2.2 The voluntary and community sector has a long record of exchange and development across the island, preceding most recent events and, indeed, preceding the recent Troubles. In particular, the sector has undertaken a range of activities to explore and develop frameworks for co-operation and organisation of mutual practical benefit. It is important that this process is given more priority and that it is acknowledged in giving the voluntary and community sector a role in the various developments of relevance to the peace process.
- 2.3 North-South co-operation within the sector has brought tangible benefits to those involved, particularly in project management, exchanged thinking and experience. However, the process is hampered by the lack of compatible structures and strategic thinking at an 'island' level for the sector to link into. Two different contexts can also result in different issues facing the sector.
- 2.4 The Common Chapter in the National Development Plan of Ireland and the Structural Funds Plan for Northern Ireland is one important foundation stone for the emergence of an 'island economy'. It contains an important acknowledgement of the social dimension in stating:

"both Governments recognise the need for economic regeneration to proceed in harmony with the principles of equity and equality of opportunity and the need to secure social cohesion."

At a strategic policy level the voluntary and community sector has identified this commitment as a key focus for its contribution to the island society. Although much interest has been expressed in the Common Chapter, there is no budget attached, not even for technical assistance. This should be rectified if North-South co-operation is not to be limited to discrete and fragmented projects. It would be particularly ironic if the fine words of the Common Chapter were now to be consigned to the shelf of history, as mere rhetoric. Words need follow-up action.

- 2.5 The European Union has provided an over-arching framework, which can act as another creative space, within which new alliances and relationships have and can be forged. Treatment of Ireland by Europe as one entity in certain respects has assisted North-South development and has promoted joint working to the benefit of those taking part. It has provided a learning opportunity, a lifting of horizons, and the opportunity for new alliances and partnerships.

Policy Issues

- 3.1 A range of policy issues of relevance to North-South co-operation flows from a lack of coherence between the North and the South in terms of the remit and structure of government departments and agencies, and in terms of legislation and policy-making. This runs counter to trends at an EU level. There is also the question that while Ireland has ratified the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, the United Kingdom has not. Developing some equivalence to facilitate communication and co-operation does not mean everything has to be exactly the same. It does, however, require change, North and South.
- 3.2 In line with a focus on 'the Single Market of Ireland' there is also a need to take steps towards the creation of a single labour market. There is a need to develop coherence in employment services, labour market policy, social security policy and taxation policy. An agreed minimum wage could also prevent the emergence of differential development. |?
- 3.3 Unless attention is addressed at the worst areas and the most difficult and intractable questions, progress shall be limited and ultimately unfulfilling. The British Government's priority of 'Targeting Social Need' has been a start, but has not been implemented and operationalised as quickly or as meaningfully as it might. It must now be put to the top of the agenda, allied to the key points of participation and involvement of local communities, especially the most marginalised. In the North it has been statutorily-led, in the South it has been negotiated.
- 3.4 Jobs are, of course, at the top of everyone's 'wish list'. But local communities quickly qualify that demand by a further demand for 'real' jobs, with decent pay levels and future prospects. This requires an integrated strategy of education (including adult, community and informal opportunities), structured and meaningful training, and various pathways to genuine economic development and progress, all areas of the sector's expertise.
- 3.5 In terms of inward investment, NICVA believes that Northern Ireland at peace will become a more attractive place in which international companies might locate. However, it is likely to take some time to pass through corporate planning and it could be a number of years before there is any significant impact. Government's announcement of the new Community Work Scheme is, therefore, crucially important. NICVA fully supports this idea and will argue that it must go further than early indications suggest. The central principle of the Scheme would be to give the employee a real wage above the poverty line in return for real work, and act as a bridge towards permanent employment. We have argued that the Scheme should be co-funded by the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department

of Economic Development. It will require the transfer of financial benefits to the host employer from the Department of Health and Social Services, and the provision of an adequate top up from the Department of Economic Development. £10 per week is not adequate for a main wage earner. A top up payment of around £30 is more likely to make the Scheme a success. Other fringe benefits, eg housing benefits, would be guaranteed and retained by the employee. Again, to make a real impact, this Scheme needs to be available to some thirty to forty thousand people. It is critical that it offers the employee dignity through a living wage and by offering meaningful work which makes a real contribution to society.

- 3.6 Any strategy must also be based on a firm framework of equality and rights. The cornerstone must be laid, which will create a framework for freedom from extraordinary legislation, temporary provisions and restrictive administrative procedures. The concepts of rights and anti-discrimination must be central to this strategy.
- 3.7 'Development' must be a component of such a strategy - local development, community development, economic development, rural development, women's development, cross-community anti-sectarian development, all must be facilitated and resourced within a coherent and integrated strategy. Partnerships, including cross-border and multi-sectoral alliances must be developed, from a position of equality and accountability. The extension of democracy beyond solely a parliamentary exercise must accompany such strategies, extending opportunities through the involvement and participation of citizens in a variety of fora. Peace can thus be underpinned.
- 3.8 Concentration will obviously be on areas of population, inevitably being drawn to the magnets of Belfast and Dublin, especially if complemented by the important Belfast-Dublin economic corridor. However, areas to the west and all rural areas must not be neglected, or a two-speed society of a different sort will quickly develop. Rural strategies, often assisted by European Union policies and funds, have been tested in Ireland, North and South, and can be further developed and integrated into the mainstream.
- 3.9 'Partnership' has become something of a buzzword. But it needs to be clarified and explained, and different models need to be unpicked so that it can clarify, rather than confuse. It certainly must not be used as a figleaf for little real change in reality. This in turn will stoke up resentment and frustration.
- 3.10 The broad role played by the statutory sector in everyday life, allied to the increasing complexity of government and decision-making, requires accountability, transparency and democratic participation to include but go beyond regular

elections. Social partnership has been advanced at a number of levels as the most appropriate strategy for including a participative dimension to our model of democracy. As such, it is urgent that the voluntary and community sector be accorded social partnership status. This requires full participation in all the various arenas for social partnership - it is only half a partnership if a seat is not available at all negotiating tables. Lessons from the South include:

- Partnership should not be seen as an alternative or replacement for a strong and independent voluntary and community sector. Good partnership requires strong partners.
- Partnership should not be confined to a single model. Different formats should evolve at different levels and for different purposes. The voluntary and community sector has developed interesting models of partnership relating to different social groups - such as men and women, or Travellers and settled people.

3.11 In the North, partnership has been developed, but often on a 'grace and favour' basis. Government has recognised the need to involve the voluntary and community sector and has, indeed, published a forward-thinking 'Strategy for the Support of the Voluntary Sector and Community Development in Northern Ireland' (February 1993). However, in the wider sense, social partnership has not been accorded to the sector, nor to the trade union movement. Lessons from the North include:

- The sector can play a key and critical role in contributing to debate and decision-making, both before and after the cessation of violence.
- Such a role would be immeasurably strengthened and deepened if appropriate structures were developed for institutional recognition of the sector (and of the trade union movement), so that appropriate support, training and accountability could in turn be developed within the sector.

3.12 Where possible, partnership models should facilitate the delegation of power and resources to the most appropriate community level - thus helping to empower previously excluded groups and communities.

Key Demands

4.1 Recognition of the role of the voluntary and community sector - institutionally through 'social partner' status; use of 'partnership' not just at the macro institutional level, but as a day to day approach in locally-based,

multi-sectoral partnerships, underpinning the regeneration of society.

- 4.2 Targeting need, disadvantage and poverty - investing in people and 'human capital'; investment in community infrastructure.
- 4.3 A legislative framework of rights - including strong anti-discrimination and equality principles.
- 4.4 Effective cross-border development within the context of the island society and the European Union.