

THE PROJECT ON JUSTICE
IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

PUTTING EXPERIENCE TO WORK FOR PEACE

**Facing Times of Change -
Their Role in the Peace-Building Process
A Workshop for Community Leaders in Northern Ireland**

**Thursday, April 23 - Saturday, April 25, 1998
Belfast, Northern Ireland**

Co-Sponsored by

**The Project on Justice in Times of Transition of The Foundation for a Civil Society
and The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust**

SUMMARY REPORT

A diverse group of over 170 community leaders in Northern Ireland discussed and analyzed the fears, hopes and multi-faceted challenges related to peace-building at a unique workshop held recently in Belfast. This program, entitled "Communities Facing Times of Change: Their Role in the Peace-Building Process," was co-sponsored by The Project on Justice in Times of Transition of the Foundation for a Civil Society and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT). The timing of the workshop was particularly auspicious as it followed the ground-breaking settlement that was reached in Northern Ireland on April 10 and afforded the first opportunity thereafter for representatives of a broad spectrum of community groups to come together in a forum about the consolidation of peace. Notably, this was also the first time that many of the representatives of community groups who attended the workshop, such as victims' and ex-prisoners' groups, had attended such a program together.

The workshop built upon the NIVT's previous programming on peace-building and utilized The Project's methodology of bringing leaders from around the world to speak about dilemmas they have faced and the solutions they have found as they addressed the issues surrounding peace and reconciliation in their respective countries. The workshop was structured so that participants could hear presentations by individuals from Croatia, Israel, Nicaragua and South Africa, as well as from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. In addition to the formal presentations, the program included sessions for participants to discuss what they heard and generate ideas about strategies that might be applied in their own communities.

The workshop was characterized by an unusual openness and honesty; speakers and participants described their own experiences, many of them painful, and spoke about their concerns and desires for the future. No less remarkable was the obvious commitment of participants to confront their emotions and attitudes, in order to engage in constructive dialogue rather than to simply grandstand or air grievances. The pervading sentiment of the workshop was not euphoria over the recently-negotiated agreement as some might have expected, but rather a feeling of caution and a tentative desire to be optimistic. Throughout the meeting participants stressed their concerns about the agreement --- not just the actual terms, though some did voice opposition to the content of the agreement, but about the fact that they felt removed from the negotiation process and disenfranchised from the nascent peace process. Workshop participants highlighted a number of immediate concerns about the distribution and explanation of the agreement prior to the May 22 referendum, as well as some of the provisions of the agreement that will be implemented if it is passed.

The handling of prisoner release and ex-prisoners was one of the issues that came up repeatedly throughout the workshop. Discussions on this issue touched upon not only the immediate fear related to an expected

release of prisoners, who some participants worried might commit violent acts again in the future, but on the broader issue of who might be considered "perpetrators" and "victims." Workshop participants, bearing in mind the insights provided by the speakers from Northern Ireland and other countries, considered the various ways in which the people of Northern Ireland have been affected by the Troubles, such as whether prisoners have also been victimized by circumstances or if thinking in such a way minimizes the validity of suffering of those people whose loved ones have been injured or killed. Marie Smyth, who has conducted the "Cost of the Troubles" study, provided a stark analysis of the traumatic effects of the Troubles on the population of Northern Ireland. The conclusions of her study were profoundly disturbing; she detailed the extent of the psychological damage caused to those affected by the Troubles even 22 years after an event, and described broader phenomena such as the correlation between substance abuse and violence. However, these conclusions were met with expressions of recognition and agreement, and workshop participants spoke at length about the need to come to terms with the reality of the effects of nearly 30 years of conflict.

Tlhoki Mofokeng who is a Community Services Coordinator at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg, South Africa, spoke about the South African tradition of conflict and the need to now move toward a tradition of dialogue and tolerance. The key to this, he maintained, is to "focus on what unites us but acknowledge that there are also issues that divide us." He also elaborated on the difficulties of acknowledging and accepting that South Africa had created a culture of violence and developing ways to change this mentality. Tlhoki identified three aspects of such a transition: encouraging dialogue will also necessitate dealing with pain; truth does not equal reconciliation; and the more truth is revealed, the more bitter people can become.

While there was some discussion of restorative justice and mechanisms such as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, most workshop participants felt that the task of acknowledging the past in Northern Ireland can not be accomplished without bridging the gap between the Nationalist and Unionist communities. The key to this process, many felt, is beginning with what is termed "single-identity work," namely work within one community to encourage understanding of and pride in one's community. It also allows people to explore perceptions about both their own community and those outside of the community. For some time the operational premise among community workers in Northern Ireland has been that single-identity work should precede "cross-community" work and the format of this workshop did not diverge from that approach, a method which was considered appropriate by participants. It was mentioned, though, that single-identity work must not be allowed to devolve into a way of reinforcing insularity or entrenched attitudes and stereotypes. Nor should people be allowed to forget that there are many communities in Northern Ireland, not just Protestants and Catholics or Unionists and Nationalists as the population is often portrayed.

Maya Kahanoff, from Jerusalem, Israel who works to promote tolerance among groups of Jews and Arabs, spoke about Israelis' and Palestinians' different views of history and the fact that even when the sides agree on historical facts, their perceptions are different. She echoed Tlhoki's assertion that dialogue must replace conflict, but conceded that this can be quite difficult as fear in societies in conflict is very real. Maya described the structure of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups and offered an explication of two actual scenarios as a way of illustrating the emotions experienced by group participants. She acknowledged the tension between desire for reconciliation and reluctance to change perceptions and collective memory. Maya's presentation spurred discussion about integrated schools, a topic that was raised repeatedly throughout the workshop. Participants agreed that some sort of educational work must be done if future generations in Northern Ireland will be able to live in a diverse rather than a divided society. However, participants did not feel that integration of the formal school system is the only, if any, way to achieve such education for tolerance. They noted that socialization occurs in many places other than schools and that the responsibility for changing mindsets in Northern Ireland can not be delegated only to the formal education system. Rather, they agreed, it is necessary to consider all of the factors that contribute to division in the society and to develop ways of changing them.

Throughout the workshop participants recognized that there are many groups in Northern Ireland who must play a role in reconciliation. The important role of young people was mentioned repeatedly as was the need for politicians and the media to behave responsibly and not to fuel the conflict. Accountability and

transparency were cited many times; many of the community leaders who attended the workshop expressed dissatisfaction with their elected representatives who are not considered responsive to constituents. This criticism was augmented by an expressed desire for community leaders to play a role in forging Northern Ireland's future. It was mentioned that the peace agreement contains a number of vague provisions for equality and involvement on all levels of society. Although workshop participants expressed frustration at the perceived ambiguity of the agreement's text, they also noted the potential that might be achieved if the opportunities afforded by the open-endedness are seized. A specific area of interest is the Civic Forum that will be created if the peace agreement is ratified. Community leaders expressed eagerness to engage in the development of this institution, as an opportunity is afforded by the lack of definition on this point in the agreement.

Branka Kaselj, Executive Director of the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights in Osijek, Croatia, also spoke about the process of moving from single-identity work to discussing issues of peace and reconciliation, to finally bringing different groups together. Yet she acknowledged how difficult it has been to achieve reconciliation in Croatia when politicians, clergy and the media use language of hate or sanction acts of violence. Despite frustration about this situation in her own country, which workshop participants found relevant to Northern Ireland, Branka was able to provide the perspective of her practical experience on a range of issues including methods of educating politicians about the needs of communities and the role of women in politics. This last topic drew a laugh when someone asked Branka to identify the main obstacles to Croatian women's advancement in politics and another participant called out "men!" Despite the humor at that particular moment, the subject of women's leadership was raised repeatedly throughout the workshop with unanimous agreement that women have played a critical role in the Northern Ireland peace process to date and should continue to do so.

With regard to the media, workshop participants repeatedly criticized the press for exacerbating the conflict in Northern Ireland and reinforcing stereotypes. Community leaders expressed a desire to eliminate labels and encourage the media to focus on the positive aspects of community work rather than only reporting bad news. There was little time at the workshop to develop specific strategies to achieve these goals, but participants seemed eager to engage in further discussion on the topic at a later date. Similarly, the issue of the police was highlighted as an area that will need significant reform if peace and reconciliation are to take root in Northern Ireland. The reconfiguration of the police into a non-sectarian force presents one of the greatest challenges and community leaders felt that it could be helpful to explore ways in which other countries such as South Africa have handled this problem.

Community leaders expressed concern about several other contentious issues that will require attention in Northern Ireland such as parades and the upcoming marching season. Examination of the criminal justice system was also considered key to peace-building. However, community leaders also spent a good deal of time discussing the social and economic issues that underlie and contribute to conflict in Northern Ireland. General social needs and issues of equality and class as well as the specific problem of long-term unemployment were discussed both in terms of the role they have played in the Troubles and how they must be addressed if the peace process is to succeed.

Carolina Enriquez, of the Education and Action for Peace Program at the Center for International Studies in Managua, Nicaragua, provided insight on these issues based on her years of experience in both Guatemala and Nicaragua. She spoke of both the social injustices that contributed to conflict in Central America and the process of empowering communities following a peace accord. Carolina emphasized the need to learn to fight for social justice in a non-violent way, by strengthening community organizations' abilities to propose and effect change. She went on to say that "the struggle for peace does not make people non-political, it does not erase one's ideology, or change a community's set of values or position. On the contrary, it aspires to make them the leading players on the political stage, promoters of ideas, concepts, attitudes in which superior human values are expressed."

Carolina and the speakers from Croatia, Israel and South Africa all acknowledged how difficult it can be for community leaders to effect change despite their best efforts. Workshop participants voiced their frustration over the multi-faceted nature of their jobs as community development workers and the need to

possess an amazing array of skills and resources in order to be effective. Although community activists felt that sometimes the solution is a matter of identifying appropriate training for skill development, more often they require various support structures. This is a particular problem for community workers in isolated areas of Northern Ireland.

However, the need for support services is not unique to community workers in Northern Ireland. Throughout the workshop, participants noted that many of those who have been most directly affected by the Troubles (both men and women), for a variety of reasons, do not avail themselves of victims' services. Participants felt that everyone who has been affected should have the space to tell their stories in order to heal, yet this opportunity should be tempered by respect for privacy. They also noted that the needs of urban and rural communities may be different and should be addressed appropriately.

Another issue that community leaders raised was that of funding for peace-building work. They complained that funders have different and sometimes inappropriate or confusing criteria, requirements and timelines which make it hard for community groups to comply or cause them to develop projects that do not necessarily respond to community needs. Community leaders also expressed concern that the availability of funding will decrease now that a peace agreement has been forged. The fear that the international community will lose interest in Northern Ireland is complemented by an acknowledged need for the community sector to become self-sustaining rather than perpetuating the dependency culture that workshop participants attributed to the Troubles.

Community leaders had no doubt that the agenda they defined at the workshop would take some time to achieve. They were fully cognizant that the process of building peace and reconciliation and healing the wounds of the conflict will take many years. They noted, too, the incorrectness of the perception that if the violence is gone, the conflict is gone. Rather, peace and reconciliation are two distinct concepts and the people of Northern Ireland will have to change their mindsets in order to grapple with and internalize these ideas. Moving beyond the "culture of silence" and the trauma of the Troubles will be a long and difficult process. Early on in the workshop Tlhoki Mofokeng pointed out that "change of any nature often has an element of pain" and community leaders recognized the truth of this statement for Northern Ireland. Several people voiced fear that the changes that may come with the peace agreement won't go deep enough to transform the society, but there was consensus that communities must struggle for such deep-rooted change. In time, the community leaders hoped, the people of Northern Ireland will be able to focus on more conventional social problems.

Workshop participants were quite positive about the program and commented that it had been enlightening and useful to engage in discussion with their colleagues in Northern Ireland and from elsewhere in the world. This workshop was the first time that certain groups and individuals had come together which, in itself, was an accomplishment. Moreover, participants were thoroughly engaged in the discussions throughout the workshop and were reluctant to conclude workshop sessions even when meals were waiting! The Project and the NIVT have solicited formal evaluations of the program from participants and will determine the nature of possible follow-up programming in light of these responses and other considerations. In the coming months it may be appropriate to plan additional programs on specific topics of relevance to community leaders and include individuals from outside of Northern Ireland who have had direct experience with these issues. It may also be desirable to facilitate a meeting between a select number of Northern Ireland community leaders and political leaders. Much will depend on the outcome of the referendum and other developments in the coming months, but there is no question that Northern Ireland community leaders are facing great challenges and if programming of this nature can be of assistance, it will be organized.