



## WORKING TOGETHER FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE: THE CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL ACTION

December 4-5, 2003  
Templepatrick, Northern Ireland

On December 4th and 5th over 100 political and community leaders from throughout Northern Ireland came together to consider a range of issues related to reinvigorating the peace process, in particular to establish priorities for joint community and political action. The session occurred shortly after the November 26th elections for the Legislative Assembly which marked a new stage in the politics of Northern Ireland following a suspension of the Assembly of more than a year. As predicted, the elections resulted in significant gains for the two parties on opposite ends of the political spectrum, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party, and several of the other parties lost seats. While leaders in both the political and community sectors are eager to see devolved government return to Northern Ireland, at the time of the conference there were concerns about the conditions that would make this possible and the concessions and steps needed to effect change and achieve true peace. Accordingly, the Project on Justice in Times of Transition and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland co-sponsored a conference called **Working Together for Sustainable Peace: The Challenges for Community and Political Action**. The program afforded an opportunity to discuss the challenges facing Northern Ireland and enabled elected officials and community activists to consider which issues must be addressed, in what order, and how to do so independently and collaboratively.

The session featured presentations by individuals from other countries and from Northern Ireland who have first-hand experience with peace-building, governance and bridging the gap between political and community action. In addition, interactive exercises and facilitated small group sessions enabled participants to enhance their skills and discuss the strategies needed for peace-building. Although a greater proportion of conference participants were community leaders rather than politicians, both sectors were represented by people from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland. The range of participants' backgrounds, affiliations and opinions was wide-

reaching and, as a result, the conference sessions were engaging and thought-provoking.

Following welcoming remarks by **Sammy Douglas**, Chairman of the East Belfast Partnership, conference participants were regaled with the antics of the talented **Wolf and Water Theatre Company**. The troupe was invited by the Project on Justice in Times of Transition and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland after it received rave reviews at the "Rights, Inclusion and Approaches to Dealing with Differences in Northern Ireland" conference in June 2001; in some ways the December 2003 appearance was an encore performance. In its opening skit, Wolf and Water presented a satirical look at the issues surrounding conflict in Northern Ireland. This set the tone for conference participants to engage candidly around a number of difficult subjects including the role of victims and the difficulty of obtaining funding for peace-building work. After the theatre troupe's performance, **Louise O'Meara** of the Interaction Institute for Social Change conducted an interactive exercise designed to identify the growth and development of Northern Ireland community and political action.

**Roelf Meyer**, Chair of the South African Civil Society Initiative, and former South African Minister of Defense and Minister of Constitutional Affairs, then spoke on "Recognizing Differences While Seeking Common Goals: Cooperation Between Politicians and Community Activists". He observed that there had been a change in the political landscape of Northern Ireland and that this could provide a new opportunity to implement the Good Friday Agreement. Roelf speculated that there was a need for a paradigm shift in Northern Ireland, something that did not occur with the province's previous leadership, and asked how civil society could contribute to such a paradigm shift. Based on his experience in South Africa, Roelf listed the elements that he felt would be critical in Northern Ireland: developing trust; creating ownership of the problems and solutions; and proactive, pragmatic and

positive leadership. Roelf emphasized that in South Africa it had been crucial to retain support not only among politicians but from civil society, and that the key to the paradigm shift had been establishing a set of fundamental rights that were acceptable to everyone.

In order to bring a local perspective to the discussion, **Dominic Bryan**, Director of the Institute of Irish Studies of Queens University, spoke about the obstacles to development in Northern Ireland and outlined the areas in which he believes community and political leaders must conduct a careful assessment of needs and determine appropriate responses. He began by enumerating a number of contradictions: Northern Ireland is supposedly “stuck in its history”, yet change occurs remarkably quickly; the society has communities or tribes, yet there is a great deal of homogeneity; the place is known for violent conflict, yet people are friendly; the voluntary sector is extremely well-funded, yet there never seems to be enough money; so much has improved in Northern Ireland in the last 10 years, yet people say the situation is getting worse; and, finally, there has been so much research done on Northern Ireland, yet there is so much we do not understand. Dominic then went on to talk about several areas which he considers problematic in obtaining a sustainable peace. The first was the relationship between political conflict and social class or economic deprivation. With regard to social division, he wondered whether there is agreement about the true nature of the communal divisions in Northern Ireland and posited that depending on views of these differences, various policies suggest themselves. Dominic also asked whether it could be useful to look not at areas of Northern Ireland that had suffered frequent violence but at those that had been relatively peaceful, and to consider why.

In a session called “Peace-building: Northern Ireland Perspectives”, three individuals offered comments. **Duncan Morrow**, Director of the Community Relations Council, **Avila Kilmurray**, Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, and **Mary Bunting**, Director of Equality in the Office of the First Minister / Deputy First Minister, reflected on the complexity of the situation in Northern Ireland and the need for work on many levels in order to truly build peace. Duncan noted that not everyone in Northern Ireland has the same analysis of the conflict; there are many lenses through which it is viewed. Accordingly, there are a number of issues that must be addressed (relationship of the state to its citizens; the

future of any particular group and each community’s feeling of belonging; and sporadic inter-faith violence and paramilitarism) and therefore the peace process must be multi-textured. Avila suggested that the relationship between economically disadvantaged areas and the conflict was not the whole story in Northern Ireland, nor was the issue of separation between the communities. Instead, she maintained, peace-building is a challenge to society as a whole, not just to particular areas. There is, then, a need for (1) collaboration and complementarity between the political and community sectors, (2) improved institutions, (3) recognition by individuals and groups of their own roles and responsibilities and those of others, and (4) development of agreed-upon areas of policy, though room should be left for debate. In her presentation Mary also emphasized the need to deal with a number of strands in the process of peace-building in Northern Ireland, and described the more than 500 responses her office had received to the “Shared Future” document it circulated. Mary identified several themes that stemmed from the consultation process. First, it is clear that Northern Ireland must be a shared society so the question is how to do so. Second, separate development of communities is inherently unstable. And, third, the conflict has left a profound legacy that must be dealt with in any plan for a way forward. Given the tremendous engagement she had seen during this public consultation process, Mary felt that it was critical to maintain dialogue despite the uncertainty about political arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Over dinner, conference participants heard from **Gorka Espiau Idoiaga**, spokesperson and Deputy Director of Elkarri, the Social Movement for Dialogue and Accord in the Basque Region, who gave a presentation on “Collaborative Efforts Between Politicians and Community Activists in the Basque Region”. He began with an overview of the conflict in the Basque Region, explaining that the region is autonomous and has its own police, education, health and tax collection systems. However, the community is divided into groups: those who identify themselves as Basques and those who consider themselves Spanish or both Basque and Spanish. And a portion of the first group, those who feel Basque only, believe that using violence is an acceptable way to achieve political goals including a new agreement about the relationship between the Basque Region and Spain. Elkarri was created in 1992 to give voice to the demand for dialogue among people from different backgrounds and political traditions, and to explore possibilities for a new

agreement. The organization has 4,000 members and 100 groups of volunteers who work with community groups, political parties and on an international level. Gorka described a particular initiative of developing a document asking the political parties to engage in a “peace conference” that will enable representatives of all the political parties to gather and to try to reach an agreement that could be supported by the society. Over 56,000 people signed the document and most gave the recommended contribution of five Euros to demonstrate their commitment. Then Elkarri organized regular meetings between representatives of all but one of the political parties, in order to negotiate and prepare a draft document which could serve as a prelude to official, all-party talks.

The second day of the conference began with welcoming remarks by **Jim Cooney**, Executive Director of Harvard University’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and another skit by the **Wolf and Water Theatre Company**. Then the group heard from **Naomi Chazan**, Professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and former Deputy Speaker of the Israeli Parliament, who addressed the topic “Strategies for Managing Fears and Dealing with Disappointments”. She described the frustration of the Israeli and Palestinian peace camps over the last several years as their hopes for a just resolution were dashed by violence, and spoke about the coping mechanisms they developed as a result. Naomi contended that the first thing to do was to analyze the obstacles in the Israeli-Palestinian context. She identified five obstacles: (1) a tremendous crisis of leadership, (2) extremists taking over the agenda, (3) break-down of trust, (4) division within each society, and (5) international interest that is marked by inactivity. And, in order to deal with these obstacles, she explained that peace activists had developed five strategies: (1) dealing with public opinion in order to change the discourse, (2) developing horizontal linkages within civil society, (3) developing vertical linkages between the community and political sectors, (4) conceptualizing a political platform, and (5) whittling away the opposition. Naomi contended that it was necessary to utilize all of the strategies she described in order to address all of the obstacles.

In an animated and engaging session, a panel of community and political leaders offered comments and responded to questions from conference participants. The panel included: **Eamonn Deane**, Director of the Holywell Trust, **Jackie Redpath**, Chief Executive of the

Greater Shankill Partnership, **Pat Convery**, Social Democratic and Labour Party Councillor, **Patricia Lewsley**, Member of Legislative Assembly for the Social and Democratic Labour Party, **Jim Wells**, Member of Legislative Assembly for the Democratic Unionist Party, and **Monica McWilliams**, Leader of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition. The speakers commented on the gap between the political and community sectors and posited some of the reasons for this gap. They included, among others, differing visions, fear, lack of communication, flawed mechanisms and institutions, and issues related to funding. The discussion was quite provocative and conference participants got involved by asking questions and citing examples of situations that they felt supported or contradicted the views of various panelists. Although this session had no clear conclusions, it offered a welcome opportunity for those in attendance to examine and react to a range of opinions.

As discussions had been so extensive throughout the day, the conference ran somewhat behind schedule and the final presentations had to be condensed. Nonetheless, **Seamus McAleavey**, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, spoke in impressive detail about “PEACE III: The Prospects and Challenges”. He described the structure of the program, the process of seeking and obtaining funding, and some of the especially thorny issues related to PEACE III. As an appropriate complement, **Dave Wall**, Director of the Voluntary and Community Unit of the Department of Social Development, then gave a presentation on “The Challenges of Sustainability of Peace-building”. This fit in well with the workshop’s goal to strengthen the interface between political and community leaders. Dave spoke candidly about the obstacles confronted by many of these community and political leaders in Northern Ireland and offered a fascinating perspective on the issues they must tackle in their efforts to create trust and social inclusion as well as to address divisions in Northern Ireland.

The conference also featured two sessions of skills development workshops, one on the first day of the conference and one on the second day. Participants selected a total of two sessions which were held on the following topics:

- *How to Influence Decision-Makers* facilitated by **Quintin Oliver**, Stratagem

- *How to Raise and Deal with Sensitive Issues* facilitated by **Jacinta De Paor**, LIVE Programme Co-ordinator, Glencree Reconciliation Centre
- *Developing an Action Plan for Peace-building* facilitated by **Stevie Johnston**, Director, Workers' Educational Association
- *Building Agreement: The Practical Tools* facilitated by **Louise O'Meara**, Regional Director, Interaction Institute for Social Change
- *Networking: To Help Develop and Sustain the Work* facilitated by **Niall Fitzduff**, Director, Rural Community Network, and **Colm Bradley**, Director, Community Technical Aid
- *From Violence to Politics* facilitated by **Joe Law**, Co-Director, Trademark
- *An Arts Approach to Dealing with Sensitive Issues* facilitated by **Wolf and Water Theatre Company**
- *The Dimensions of Success in the Development Process* facilitated by **Louise O'Meara**, Regional Director, Interaction Institute for Social Change
- *The Challenges of Working in Communities with Weak Capacity* facilitated by **Monina O'Prey**, Programme Manager, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- *The Interface between Community and Politics* facilitated by Dr **Fionola Meredith**, Training and Policy Worker, and **Isobel Loughran**, Training and Education Worker, Women into Politics
- *The Challenges of Truth and Reconciliation* facilitated by **Mark Thompson**, Director, Eolas, and **Martin Snoddon**, Director, Conflict Trauma Resource Centre

Since the conference was attended by over 100 people, these facilitated small groups gave participants an opportunity to examine issues of particular interest in a more detailed manner and to exchange ideas and strategies.

In the closing session of the conference **Avila Kilmurray** and **Jim Cooney** offered their thoughts about the topics that had been raised and how they should be considered for the future. In particular, they commented on the possibility of a paradigm shift that had been mentioned by Roelf Meyer, and whether that was possible in Northern Ireland. Even though it was

late in the day, many conference participants remained after the final session, talking in pairs and small groups about what had been discussed and what should come next. The "Working Together for Sustainable Peace" conference was not long enough to allow participants to formulate a cohesive plan of action, but the discussions formed a good basis for collaborative work in the coming months and years. The session enabled political and community leaders in Northern Ireland to voice opinions and, as a result, recognize the full range of views and approaches that must be taken into consideration when solving problems. This understanding of how various individuals and groups view specific issues will be critical as politicians and community activists attempt to set priorities and collaborate on building peace in Northern Ireland.

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The December 2003 conference, which was the Project's 17<sup>th</sup> programmatic initiative focused on Northern Ireland, was part of a multi-faceted three-year plan launched in February 2001. Four parts of the program take the form of conferences or workshops for political and community leaders in Northern Ireland, and the fifth element involves the development and use of materials documenting the experience of Northern Ireland. The overarching goals of the Project's programming in Northern Ireland are to:

- afford an opportunity for a broad representation of leaders in Northern Ireland to spend a concentrated amount of time together focused on issues of relevance to the consolidation of peace and democracy
- encourage the development of connections among the participants in order to increase trust and facilitate collaborative and complementary work on a range of subjects of concern at both the political and community levels
- provide political and community leaders in Northern Ireland with an impetus to develop solutions to some of the challenges facing their society by exposing them to examples from other societies in the world.

## Acknowledgements

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This report was written by Sara Zucker.

## The Project on Justice in Times of Transition

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The Project on Justice in Times of Transition is an inter-faculty initiative of Harvard University under the auspices of the Kennedy School of Government, the Harvard Law School, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Originally founded in 1992 as part of the New York-based Foundation for a Civil Society, the Project assists states emerging from repression or conflict to engage in dialogue across national, ethnic, religious and ideological boundaries with the intention of preventing legacies of the past from jeopardizing their progress toward democracy and peace. The Working Together for Sustainable Peace conference was the 38<sup>th</sup> of the Project's distinct initiatives which have provided an extraordinary stimulus to pragmatic problem-solving by offering a broad spectrum of individuals exposure to international experiences in ending conflict, establishing peace, and building civil society. Among the countries and regions in which the Project has worked are South Africa, Northern Ireland, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central America.

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