

THE PROJECT ON JUSTICE  
IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

PUTTING EXPERIENCE TO WORK FOR PEACE

## Workshops for Northern Ireland Community Leaders

November 25 - December 1, 1998  
Northern Ireland

### SUMMARY REPORT

As a follow-up to the conference for community leaders that was held in Belfast in April 1998, The Project on Justice in Times of Transition of The Foundation for a Civil Society and The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) organized a **series of four workshops** that were held throughout Northern Ireland. These workshops were requested by those who attended the three-day program in April and felt that community leaders would benefit from another program in the form of a series of one-day workshops held in a variety of locations. As with the April program, the workshops featured a **blend of international and local experience**, affording an opportunity for community leaders from throughout Northern Ireland both to hear the perspective and insights of a community activist from Croatia, and to share and strategize with each other.

The four workshops were held in **Derry / Londonderry** (November 25), **Belfast** (November 27), **Craigavon** (November 30) and **Omagh** (December 1). As many as two representatives from local groups in each community attended for a total of 50-75 participants per workshop. In order to allow more extensive discussion on certain subjects, participants met in small groups that were facilitated by local community activists and individuals affiliated with the NIVT. All small group discussions were summarized and reported back to the larger group of workshop attendees so that everyone could reflect on the discussions regardless of which small group they chose to join.

**Branka Kaselj**, the Executive Director of the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights in Osijek, Croatia, participated in all four workshops in Northern Ireland. She has been with the Centre in various capacities since 1993 and has focused much of her work around providing support to community leaders and disseminating information about and among the projects with which she works. Ms. Kaselj took part in the April 1998 conference in Belfast and, as her remarks were quite well-received and participants requested an opportunity to engage in further discussion with her, she returned to Northern Ireland to lend her insights again for the November-December workshops.

At these workshops Ms. Kaselj described her work with the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights and some of the steps that she and her colleagues had taken to overcome fear and prejudice. These included personal development of activists, working with those who have been the most affected by the war, opening a dialogue among people from different communities, providing assistance to those deprived of their human rights, and laying the groundwork for the return of refugees. To facilitate its work, the Centre created three specific programs:

- Peace Education and Psycho-social Support
- Promotion and Protection of Human Rights
- Peace-building and Community Development

She described the special roles played by women, young people, ex-soldiers and religious leaders in the implementation of these programs as well as the challenges Croatians face as they work to create a culture of peace in the aftermath of conflict.

In addition to Ms. Kaselj's presentation, which was followed by a question and answer period, the community leaders at each workshop had an opportunity to explore several issues of particular concern. The morning of each workshop included sessions during which participants examined subjects related to different constituencies, namely **prisoners, youth, victims and women**. The issues of prisoners and victims are particularly salient in Northern Ireland and the recent peace agreement and resultant discussion of decommissioning have brought them even further into public discourse. While there has been much programming on this subject, including a series of meetings for prisoners and one for victims organized by the NIVT, the November-December workshops have been the only occasion on which members of the two groups came together to grapple with issues of concern.

In all four workshops the discussions about **politically motivated former prisoners** were charged but constructive. There was consensus that the issue of ex-prisoners is one that must be confronted not only by the ex-prisoners and their families but by society in Northern Ireland as a whole. Despite the peace agreement, participants noted, there is a climate of fear, and ex-prisoners face discrimination and stigmatization when they try to reintegrate after their release. One of the greatest difficulties they face is unemployment, in part because they are required to note their conviction on employment applications, a stipulation that many workshop participants thought should be eliminated. Another challenge for recently-released prisoners is rejoining their families after years of absence and confronting the tensions that result from families' readjustment. This is particularly difficult when family members' roles have changed over time and people have developed in different ways. It was noted on several occasions that families of ex-prisoners must be acknowledged as victims and receive the attention and support that they need. In general, workshop participants underscored the lack of adequate support services from and distrust of various agencies and statutory bodies. Ex-prisoners are often isolated and, in the opinion of many workshop participants, the suffering they have undergone and their potential to contribute to society are not properly acknowledged. Participants suggested that educational and legislative work is necessary to dismantle barriers for and eliminate demonization of ex-prisoners. Concurrently, ex-prisoners should get out into the community and tell their stories so as to break down stereotypes and prevent the recurrence of violence, particularly among young people.

The subject of **young people** was one of concern in all four workshops but the discussions were not contentious. Rather, workshop participants identified a number of problems that young people face and articulated possible ways to address them. The greatest concern was the perception of young people in Northern Ireland which workshop participants considered unfairly negative. Participants said that youth feel "devalued" and are seen by the community as a problem and the source of anti-social behavior. However, it was noted that the violent tendencies that are exhibited by youth are the result of the society's culture of violence and the Troubles that have caused young people to become more polarized, extreme and suspicious. This disengagement results in young people's distance from political processes which, in the minds of workshop participants, is a significant loss. It was agreed that some of the issues related to young people could be addressed by changes in the educational system as well as resources that would create sustainable programs and safe spaces for young people. It was felt that with greater facilities and attention paid to young people, their opportunities could be maximized and their talents recognized.

The sessions on the subject of **victims** were among the most difficult as the issues discussed were particularly painful and few workshop participants were able to offer solutions that could be easily implemented. The first point that was raised in several workshops was the use of the term "victim" and whether "witness" or "survivor" was more appropriate or desirable. There was also discussion at each workshop of who should be considered in the category of victims. Many participants thought that all residents of Northern Ireland (and some people included the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain) have been victims of the Troubles, though to varying degrees. Some discussion occurred about the different ways in which people have been affected by the conflict, such as whether ex-prisoners should be considered victims or how to take into consideration people like those who witnessed a bombing but were not physically hurt. There was, however, consensus that victims --- however narrowly or broadly defined -- - have not received adequate support and, in some cases, have suffered further as a result of politicians and the media. It was also agreed that as part of coming to terms with the past, Northern Ireland society must listen to victims and acknowledge their feelings. Although silence has been a coping mechanism, it has also hindered the healing that is necessary for all of those who have been affected by the conflict. Workshop participants recommended that increased attention and resources be provided to survivors of the Troubles so that victims' pain can be acknowledged and addressed.

Workshop participants identified a myriad of issues as concerns for **women** including childcare, domestic violence, education, single parenting, unemployment and low pay, lack of confidence, sectarianism, mental health and sexism. Although some of these issues were characterized as "women's issues" there was recognition that many are actually broader issues that must be dealt with by the entire society, not just women's groups. Participants noted, too, that there are massive expectations of women, especially the pressures of family responsibilities. Also, the nature of a patriarchal society can discourage women from speaking out or becoming involved in politics or other male-dominated systems. One participant attempted to get to the crux of the problem when she speculated whether women's image as loving and caring prevents them from fighting men for resources and representation. Several women commented that these stereotypes are held by women as well as men and that women must confront their own prejudices on a variety of levels. Workshop participants recommended that resources and support structures must be provided for women --- particularly young women and those in rural communities --- to build up their capacity.

The afternoon sessions of the workshops featured a **video presentation called "Communities in Transition"** which was initially developed for the April conference and has been updated and refined to include the individuals from Croatia, Israel, Nicaragua and South Africa who took part in the conference as well as community activists from throughout Northern Ireland. The video was developed in conjunction with a workbook and is now available for use in communities in order to spur discussion about and encourage activity related to the consolidation of peace in Northern Ireland.

Following the video presentation and discussion, the workshop participants broke into smaller groups in order to examine questions of **how the community relates to broader issues of peace-building** and make recommendations. Group members identified a number of skills that the community sector has developed, particularly the abilities to network, mediate and create inclusionary, consensual decision-making processes. Several people felt that community work both contributes to peace-building and has many of the same elements; both are about creating a just and equitable society. However, there are many challenges for such efforts which must bring people together around common problems, a process which can contribute to the demystification of the other side. Obstacles include real and perceived risks, lack of resources and time. Workshop participants indicated that single-identity work is a necessary basis for peace-building and that differences between various communities must be recognized. They noted the need for continuity of funding, projects and people involved, and suggested that community workers must be realistic about what can be accomplished. They should also bear in mind that "less is more" if it means entrenching positive change among a smaller group rather than simply encouraging change on a superficial level with many.