

RECONCILIATION *and Social Inclusion in Rural Areas*

A Policy Discussion Document Prepared for the Rural Community Network

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“The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality”.

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“We are committed to continually improving the quality of our services to our members and the wider rural community and the standards of our work and organisational practices”.

A large type version of this text is available on request



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Introduction

I would like to introduce Rural Community Network's first series of policy discussion papers. This series has been produced for RCN by a number of leading academics in Northern Ireland. The aim is to promote policy discussion on issues that are of concern for rural communities and to create greater awareness and knowledge of rural issues.

RCN, for a number of years, has engaged in community consultations to inform different areas of policy. While consultations, conferences and resulting publications have been informative, the lack of research to support the proposals has often weakened the credibility of our case. To enable the voice of rural communities to impact on policy consultations these research papers provide an important independent backdrop.

The policy discussion documents outline issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality in rural areas and provide a baseline of the present situation. In the present series, five areas have been prioritised - Small Rural Schools; Rural Women; The Environment and The Farming Community; Planning and Settlement Patterns and this document, Reconciliation and Social Inclusion in Rural Areas.

Each discussion document scans the current research on each topic, informs our understanding, encourages questions and provokes debate.

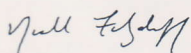
In this paper we would like you to explore issues and questions in relation to reconciliation, social inclusion and the effectiveness of the many approaches which are now being pursued.

Issues raised within the paper are linked to different levels of policy and suggestions are made as to how and by whom present challenges can be taken forward.

A series of questions at the end of document helps address what has gone before and helps to distinguish perception from reality. It is by no means the final word!

We intend to provide yearly updates on how effective the documents have been with regard to informing policy debate.

We look forward to receiving your views.



Niall Fitzduff

division and reconciliation¹ in rural areas: background

Political division and the structures of life in Northern Ireland

Political and religious tensions have a long pedigree in Ireland, especially in the North. It is hardly controversial to point out that religion, politics, education and cultural activities have been so closely bound together that it is impossible to pinpoint the precise point at which one blends into the other (Whyte, 1990). Indeed, division is so deep that it affects the whole structure of society and people in the most intimate details of their lives including who people are friends with and marry, where people worship and go to school, where people live and what they dare say to one another. Divisions at this level pervade and invade even those places where people from different parts of society meet such as the workplace, shared agricultural labour, town centres, places of entertainment educational institutions, community and voluntary organisations.

The axes of division have traditionally been nationality and religion. Both of these have a long association with violence. Whatever the precise causes, and they are naturally disputed, the legacy has been one where suspicion and fear of the other on grounds of political or religious affiliation has always been part of common sense. At the core of public life in Northern Ireland, therefore, is a deep split reflected in different experiences and feelings, sometimes about the same events. What marks Northern Ireland out politically is the degree to which this split has invaded not only the margins of society but all of it.

Communication about issues of tension

Drawing on years of practice, being polite in Northern Ireland is often identical with avoiding giving offence in public. Some of our political loyalties, cultural practices, religious beliefs and historical activities are considered offensive by those who live alongside us yet who are clearly outside our group. The rules of politeness imply that these very divisive issues are seldom aired with those people against whom the grievance is held, except by the loud hailer of the pulpit or political platform (Morrow, 1997). Communities whose members have experienced fear and anger, grief and outrage at each others' hands meet one another through this filter of polite avoidance. Paradoxically, things which can only be resolved by making new relationships are made difficult by the very coping mechanisms which common sense tells us make living with these tensions possible. Those places where there is contact between people of different backgrounds become places characterised by silence, wariness and subtle yet important boundaries and taboos. Social exclusion and inclusion are decided not only by economic factors, but by a climate of politeness, hesitation and anxiety: the measurable symptoms of chronic division and fear.

Division and reconciliation in rural communities

Rural areas of Northern Ireland and the market towns which service them have experienced their share of political violence (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth, 1999). As Rosemary Harris showed in her study of a rural area in the 1950s, sectarian silences and tensions are part of the fabric of the rural environment (Harris, 1972). No District Council area has escaped the last thirty years without bombing, shooting or rioting. Local historic memories stretch much further into the past, sometimes centering on memories of previous land-ownership patterns or on atrocities whose implications remain alive today. Less mobile property relationships and the continuity of family and community memory in rural communities mean that injuries in rural communities have an additional depth and length.

Every constituency outside Greater Belfast bar one (Strangford) returned both Nationalist and Unionist members to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. The same interface is politically present in the make-up of councillors and staff of rural District Councils. Rural communities in Northern Ireland all contain interfaces between different groups. No district is entirely Catholic or Protestant and in many districts the impact of political tension is evident in residential patterns, personal behaviour or institutional divisions. At the same time, in different areas, different groups find themselves in a numerical minority in a political system where decisive political power depends on gaining a majority. The combination of interface conditions with the power of politics has ingrained the tensions of Catholic/Protestant relationships into public life as Unionism and Nationalism, Britishness and Irishness.

Evidence from the late 1980s confirmed the patterns of cultural segregation, especially in public housing and cultural activities (Hamilton et. al, 1988). In rural areas and market towns, this can be reflected in districts, towns and villages which are overwhelmingly regarded as Catholic or Protestant or in internal interfaces within small towns and villages, where battles over territory reflect issues in the cities. Brendan Murtagh's detailed research in one interface illustrates how tensions shape the practical decisions of people in neighbouring rural areas about such apparently pragmatic issues as shopping, medical services and entertainment (Murtagh 1996) confirming other research into personal behaviour and political tension (Donnan and McFarlane, 1986). The depth and historical roots of division were underlined in Kirk's study of Glenravel in County Antrim where ethno-religious factors were found to be critical in the market for land (Kirk, 1993). Similarly, the farmers' and producers' associations are widely perceived to have distinct political and religious identities. While Murtagh's research found the letting of land, sharing of labour and machinery and the markets for livestock and produce were not similarly divided, it would seem likely that the farming community could not escape the social sectarian patronage. Community relations in rural areas are integral to the fundamental social and economic structures and continue to determine the scope for change and stability.

Cultural and community activity also reflect this partial yet deep tendency to segregation. Demographic evidence points to changes in residential patterns over the last 30 years, reflecting increasing fear and distance (Doherty, 1996). Churches, inevitably, are identified with specific political parts of the community (Morrow, 1991). Secular cultural organisations which have maintained close connections to churches or schools reflect this historic cleavage even more clearly. Of particular importance in rural districts are the Orange Order, which is often the cultural hub of Protestant

community life (Jarman, 1998), and the GAA which is of central cultural significance for many young Catholics (Sugden and Bairner, 1992). These organisations have also been the cultural bridges connecting people in market towns with their roots in the countryside. Marching, public subsidy for sporting events and even control of the use of public parks on a Sunday have therefore all been contentious, providing further evidence to many people of the irreconcilability of people from one group with another.²

Drawing on a long tradition in some areas, the property of these churches and cultural organisations have become symbolic targets for violent elements in both communities at times of tension. At the same time, many studies have also pointed to functioning inter-personal relationships which have been of critical importance in maintaining stability and social peace at significant moments (Murtagh, 1996. Morrow, 1997.) However, most rural communities have tended to rely on established family and personal connections more than intentional community relations strategies for the maintenance of this social harmony.

In a context where political divisions have had an impact on everything from friendship to land ownership, all public institutions are confronted with the difficult tasks of expressing the fears and hopes of divided communities, of managing and limiting the danger entailed in the resulting feelings and of seeking to find practical solutions to many of the social and political problems in this difficult context (Western Routes, 1999). Churches, sporting bodies and cultural organisations find themselves dominated internally by the experiences of one group but having to operate in a context which is mixed and uncertain. Other institutions, especially the agencies of government and commercial regulation such as District Councils and the Rural Development Council (RDC) have to accommodate these differences within their internal structures and programmes. In times of violence and tension, this management can be a difficult and energy-absorbing task, especially when polite avoidance is the norm.

Reconciliation between traditional enemies in Northern Ireland is a matter of practical as well as moral importance for everyone who lives in Northern Ireland and for all institutions and organisations who have been affected directly or indirectly by fear, violence and hostility. A serious search for reconciliation will therefore entail change not only in personal behaviour and relationships but in the form in which institutions are organised and structured, in the way in which hostility and tension are dealt with in public and managerial contexts and in the political and social organisation of rural life.

Building an inter-community infrastructure before 1994

Until the 1970s, public policy in Northern Ireland made little formal acknowledgement of the difficulties posed by chronic sectarianism. By the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, however, the Housing Executive had been established, introducing a merit-based system of allocations to abolish discrimination, the Fair Employment Agency monitored discrimination in employment and there had been the first parental initiatives for integrated education. These institutional changes took place against the background of rapid and violent segregation in public housing, ongoing political violence and economic decline.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 led to a significant boycott of political negotiation by Unionists of all shades. In the interim, the British Government embarked on a phase of administrative reform, openly promoting reconciliation. Among the measures stemming from this period were the creation of a Fair Employment Commission (FEC), the promotion of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), the establishment of the Community Relations Council (CRC) and the spread of community relations in District Councils through the appointment of Community Relations Officers (CROs) in every area (Morrow, 1997). All of these measures took place in the context of improving economic performance and of sectarian violence whose levels remained broadly constant. While this infrastructure represented a considerable increase in the attention devoted to community relations, the precise relationship between reconciliation and socio-economic policy was never formally clarified. As a result, the practice which developed tended to be highly differentiated and variable in quality and quantity (Eyben, Morrow, Wilson, 1997).

reconciliation and social inclusion

Social Inclusion as a concept

Social inclusion has become fashionable in British and European social policy debate in the 1990s. At times it has been ill-defined, being used by some as a vague synonym for anti-poverty measures and by others as a wider theoretical term embodying communitarian ideas of social cohesion and the rights and responsibilities of governments and citizens.

There is an obvious sense in which social inclusion and policies seeking to eradicate poverty are alternative ways of describing the same object. However, social inclusion in its full sense indicates a wider shift of emphasis. Among others, Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1998) argues that social inclusion must go beyond simple measures for the relief of poverty and include a general raising of standards in the public sphere to a level where the wealthiest in society also retain a direct stake and active interest in the operation of these services. Social inclusion in this sense adds to the central concern with poverty a commitment to the wider goal of maintaining social cohesion. This implies improving the quality of all central services, maximising participation and responsibility, ensuring continued opportunity for all and the active fostering of diversity. A focus on poverty and participation in the labour market is combined with a commitment to consultation, a general preference for public-private partnership over simple state intervention, a recognition of the centrality of lifelong education and a recognition of the very diverse nature of individual choices in a modern society. The social and the economic are therefore inextricably linked with one another. Together these issues represent the key challenges in raising the quality of life for individuals and communities.

Policy initiatives promoting social inclusion

Social inclusion and exclusion have become umbrella terms for policy measures aimed at mitigating the effects of poverty and securing cohesion in an increasingly diverse context. The emphasis on participation led to a shift in focus from direct welfare to ladders of opportunity whereby those who have fallen outside the social net can be enabled to return and prosper within society. Dissatisfaction with traditional models of welfare combined with an increasing unwillingness on behalf of the middle classes to pay high direct taxes have underpinned the emphasis on a hand up rather than a hand out. While traditional recipients of welfare such as the long-term unemployed, older people, disabled people and children in poverty remain central to social inclusion, recent solutions concentrate on increasing access to the labour market through improved training, enhanced mobility and childcare, an emphasis on basic literacy and help for isolated and disadvantaged areas.

In 1997, the Labour Government established a Social Exclusion Unit in the the Cabinet Office, responsible only for England, to co-ordinate government responses to poverty and marginalisation on an inter-departmental basis. The Unit was charged with devising policy solutions to the most serious issues of poverty and deprivation (Social Exclusion Unit 1998) summed up as joined-up government: long-term solutions involving inter-departmental and joint government/non-government initiatives. The focus was on creating routes to participation for groups which had not benefitted from economic growth in the 1980s. Critically, the Social Exclusion Unit set targets for improvement and put in place mechanisms for monitoring progress in a number of clearly defined areas (Opportunity for All, 1999).

In Northern Ireland, social inclusion was identified as one of five priority areas in the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation announced in 1994. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) extended this focus in 1998 when it launched the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) initiative, a key part of the new strategy targeting social needs (New TSN). As part of its consultation exercise, the NIO identified additional elements of social exclusion such as the difficulties faced by members of ethnic minorities, those affected by the violence of the troubles and people at risk of drug abuse or domestic violence as important locally (NewTSN, 1998).

Social Inclusion in rural Northern Ireland

The existence of poverty in Northern Ireland is obvious and has been well documented. Over two thirds of the rural land area of Northern Ireland suffers from some level of relative deprivation. Rural concerns and the deprived areas of country market towns are thus central to any serious debate about social inclusion in Northern Ireland. The exceptional dependency of rural areas on agriculture has become especially problematic as a result of the agricultural crisis of the 1990s. Relatively high levels of unemployment and low rates of economic activity still characterise much of rural Northern Ireland. Rural areas were therefore a central part of NewTSN and special

attention has been drawn to the problems of isolated rural communities suffering from low pay, lack of public transport, the specific residues of violence and conflict and the problems facing women in ensuring full access to public life. It should be added, however, that poverty indicators have often measured features more appropriate to urban areas and have used territorial units (Robson, 1994) which may even underestimate poverty when it is dispersed among more affluent areas, something characteristic of rural poverty.

Drawing on Government and EU Structural funds, the Department of Agriculture launched a five-year Rural Development Strategy in 1994 aimed at stimulating economic and social revitalisation of the most disadvantaged rural areas of Northern Ireland by increasing participation, public-private partnerships and local ownership (Progress Review 1999). Rural community organisations themselves highlighted the central importance of widespread participation in community development as well as local and regional networking in creating sustainable development beyond grant dependency. Since 1991, this has been the central focus of the Rural Community Network.

Combining social inclusion with reconciliation?

Common to all conceptions of social inclusion is the conviction that poverty and exclusion undermine stable and pluralistic societies (Combat Poverty Agency, 1995). There is no doubt that there has been a strong correlation between areas with high levels of political violence and social disadvantage in Northern Ireland. Indeed, at the level of immediate symptoms, the direct costs of violence have largely been borne by urban areas of deprivation, contested rural districts with a history of political violence and the security forces (Fay et al., 1999).

Much political resentment is fuelled by a deep-seated sense of exclusion or potential exclusion with which all strategies towards reconciliation must deal. Likewise, social inclusion in Northern Ireland will be inadequate if it does not confront the reality that issues emerging from sectarian confrontation are critical factors shaping social exclusion in Northern Ireland (Working party on sectarianism, 1993). The visible connections include:

- restricted residential choices
- association with one's school and recreational past times
- limited access to public services
- the deepening plight of those directly affected by acts of intimidation and violence
- the specific problems of inter-community interface areas
- the endemic crisis over policing and public order
- the lack of cross-border infrastructure, especially in rural districts
- the lack of confidence and experience in dealing with issues of cross-community tension
- the multiple deprivation effects of poverty and violence

Advocates of social inclusion point to the serious implications of social and economic inequalities for the cohesion of societies. In most circumstances, the existence of a prosperous core from which many are excluded is assumed. The additional problem of reconciliation in Northern Ireland points to a further and equally difficult cleavage. This cleavage runs not between the margin and periphery but between people of different political persuasions at every level of society. The term social inclusion begs the question of inclusion into what? The fact that Northern Ireland has been so deeply divided implies that social cohesion demands an attention to the issue of reconciliation at all levels at the same time as the issue of poverty and economic exclusion are addressed.

While both anti-poverty measures and policies to alleviate and eliminate political fears and tensions are critical elements in any serious strategy aimed at social cohesion, they are not always the same. The emphasis on social inclusion stands as a necessary corrective to the deterministic assumption that the creation of general economic growth without reference to equality will somehow create reconciliation, but social inclusion has too often been used to divert attention from other complex and difficult requirements of peace-building in Northern Ireland. These implications reach into the structures and practices of public and private institutions and into the assumptions which underlie the strategies of polite avoidance. The theory that if we get people together to do 'joint projects' as a way of promoting reconciliation does not stand up to scrutiny often because of the polite avoidance of the issues.

Eyben, Morrow and Wilson found that the focus of community relations work on marginal areas, young people and children had led to a caricature of reconciliation work and an absence of any significant models of practice among more powerful groups and organisations. The direct focus on specific groups took away from the need to negotiate, identify and realise the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence in the practice and structures of organisations and relationships at every level in Northern Irish society. In consequence, the relationship of peace and reconciliation to the practice of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland went unrecognised and untackled (Eyben, Morrow and Wilson, 1997). Most critically of all, those at the margins were de facto charged with saving Northern Irish society from itself without the active participation of the much more powerful elements at the economic and social core of the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Where social inclusion and reconciliation are synonymous, the risks are that peace and reconciliation will become regarded as a task for the most marginal in society alone and also that social inclusion measures aimed specifically at complex and taboo issues of peace and reconciliation will disappear within a general strategy to alleviate poverty, thereby losing some of their edge. This is not to say that the lion's share of financial assistance should not be distributed on grounds of need. However, peace-building efforts should not give the impression that division only affects those on the social and economic margins.

Reconciliation is a central goal in any worthwhile social cohesion strategy in Northern Ireland. In this context, therefore, policy for reconciliation must connect three conceptually distinct issues in theory and practice: long-run investment in socio-economic stability, social inclusion measures to target and engage all elements in society and a distinctive strategy for peacebuilding which supports and enhances partnerships, practices and relationships which can sustain and build relationships beyond traditional antagonisms. Uniting all three strands and the huge diversity of contexts which demand to be addressed must be a consistent practical commitment to common core principles in every area: equity, diversity and interdependence enshrined at all levels of policy and practice.

social inclusion and reconciliation policy since 1994

Rural Policy Developments

With support from the Northern Ireland Single Programme of the European Structural Funds, rural development achieved renewed priority. Local Economic Development Partnerships were established in each District Council area. Under the Interreg cross-border programme, three cross-border networks of local authorities in the border region developed, affecting many rural areas. In addition the LEADER II Programme established 15 local action groups to underpin community development while the Department of Agriculture also established a number of Area-Based Strategy Action Groups (ABSAGs) aimed at responding to local community development needs in rural areas.

Until the ceasefires of 1994, community relations work necessarily concentrated on groups outside formal politics, often small and consisting of committed pioneers and on policy initiatives intended to facilitate long-term structural change. Following the ceasefires, reconciliation ceased to be the Cinderella of public policy and became the dominant theme of party political, government and international interest. Funding for economic and social initiatives aimed at reconciliation was offered by the European Commission. The British Government sought a peace dividend and the Clinton administration backed up its direct political involvement with support for economic investment and social change especially targeted at women and community development. A much larger reconciliation industry then emerged with substantial international financial backing (McWilliams, 1996).

Initial euphoria gave way to increasing realism about the scale of the task of reconciliation. Social inclusion remained a technical term for many, exacerbated by deteriorating relationships between different communities in some areas. Events surrounding Orange Order parades illustrated the gulf in perceptions between nationalists and unionists about many issues. In 1996, events in and around Drumcree set off riots in many unionist and nationalist areas and led to boycotts of commercial premises, pickets outside places of worship and stand-offs and roadblocks in many places. These issues were particularly severe in a number of rural districts and small towns. The new tensions added to an already difficult situation. The absence of mechanisms for dialogue between ordinary people on the difficult subjects of violence and division exposed the degree to which social peace in Northern Ireland relies largely on a combination of avoidance and forbearance rather than on a mature and inclusive culture which fosters and encourages real mutual understanding.

The European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation

In 1994, the European Commission announced a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (P&R Programme) whose prime purpose was to maintain the momentum for peace and to reinforce progress toward a peaceful and stable society. One of two strategic objectives of the whole programme was promoting the social inclusion of those who are at the margins of social and economic life and a focus on those areas and sections of the population most adversely affected by the violence and suffering the most acute deprivation (European Commission, 1994).

The new programme was established at rapid speed and broke new ground in its structures and forms. Money under the programme was distributed by central government, by 26 District Partnership Boards, one in each District Council area and by nine Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs) with special responsibilities under different measures of the Programme. While many of these structural innovations were regarded as successful (Harvey, 1997) the result was a huge multiplication in the number of agencies, programmes and schemes. Agriculture, Rural Development, Forestry and Fisheries was named as a specific priority of the programme, alongside social inclusion and integration. Thus rural areas were eligible for programmes administered by the various local Partnership Boards, Northern Ireland-wide measures aimed at rural economic development and at fisheries and water-based tourism run directly by the Department of Agriculture and by the programmes of a number of IFBs. Rural regeneration was the direct interest of a programme jointly administered by the more formal Rural Development Council and the voluntary Rural Community Network (RDC/RCN) who shared an emphasis on reconciliation, community development and social inclusion as central to rural prosperity and confidence (RCN Strategic Plan, 1999). Rural communities could also benefit from programmes run by other IFBs for employment, training, young people, community development, cross-border activity and community relations. (All of this on top of other initiatives.)

From the outset it was clear that insufficient thinking had been done on the precise relationship between the promotion of peace and reconciliation and the chosen methods (Stutt, 1996. Harvey, 1997). As a result, each distribution agency devised their own criteria without specific reference to a set of common core goals. As Brian Harvey reported, it seems that the programme's design confused the aim of promoting peace and reconciliation on the one hand and investment in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic on the other. This has led to the situation in which any investment in the twelve counties concerned may be seen not only as justified but, ipso facto, as contributing to peace and reconciliation. Later, in the same report, he remarked It is evident that a substantial part of the programme has little to do with peace and reconciliation. The degree to which peace and reconciliation has been operationalised has depended on interpretation at a number of levels (Harvey, 1997).³

There is still a lack of systematic thinking about how social and economic policy can be used to promote peace and a perceptible weakness in theoretical knowledge about the precise links between the different elements in the programme - economic development, social inclusion and reconciliation. While economic development and social inclusion strategy could draw on recognisable policy-making frameworks in the UK, Europe and beyond, the implications of peacemaking remained specific to Northern Ireland. In these conditions, social inclusion has a tendency to become a catch-all phrase allowing funders to justify non-economic expenditure. Thus, by October 1999, 69% of funds distributed by local Partnership Boards had been spent under the heading of social inclusion (NIPB, 1999).

The Agreement and reconciliation

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 was aimed specifically at reconciliation and peace-making. It sought to do this through a series of radical political and constitutional changes: creating a cross-community executive, forming an Assembly whose workings would be subject to cross-community consensus, establishing a number of formal cross-border bodies, enshrining the principle of government by consent, altering the constitutional claim of the Irish Republic to the territory of Northern Ireland and committing Northern Ireland to internal equality and human rights.

Nevertheless, no political agreement can guarantee reconciliation. A substantial minority rejected the Agreement in a referendum. Secondly many of the terms of the Agreement were deeply controversial throughout rural and urban Northern Ireland, especially the early release of paramilitary prisoners. In addition, the implementation of the Agreement was bedevilled by serious difficulties about the future use of arms. Finally, the Agreement foresaw ongoing reforms in a crucial areas of social and economic life which proved particularly controversial when reforms of policing were proposed.

Nonetheless, the Agreement focussed public attention on the costs and practical meaning of reconciliation on an unprecedented scale. The depth of the differences over central questions such as policing and the creation, almost from scratch, of a significant public policy infrastructure whose primary goal was reconciliation exposed and illuminated the scale of policy and practical change which will be contained within what is sometimes seen as a rather pious and sentimental concept.

towards peace and reconciliation

Achievements of Peace and Reconciliation initiatives to date

In the absence of general performance indicators, it is still not possible to assess progress in this area with precision. Nonetheless, programmes aimed at peace and reconciliation have all grown considerably since 1994. While there is wide agreement that the various initiatives have played an important part in underpinning political change at local and community level (eg Harvey, 1997, RCN 1997, Youthnet, 1999, RDC 1999), the depth of this change remains obscure.

Improvements have been both psychological and tangible, providing a sense of dynamic change and possibility and ensuring that the peace process has had a definitive impact on all communities. There is considerable evidence that old barriers to practical co-operation have lessened through active and common membership of local and regional partnerships, sustained dialogue about complex and controversial issues and a growing recognition of the application of peace and reconciliation principles to a wide variety of areas (Eyben, Wilson and Morrow, 1997, NIVT 1999, RCN, 1997, Cambridge Policy Consultants, 1999). Peace and reconciliation programmes have also engaged a far wider group of adults and young people in active consideration of the requirements and opportunities of reconciliation stretching the meaning and remit of peace and reconciliation programmes into ever more diverse and complicated territory (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 1999). Both politicians and local figures have talked about a new language between politicians and local groups in areas of practical co-operation (McWilliams, 1996, Western Routes 1999). The very existence of a Peace and Reconciliation programme has forced the issue of policy response and effectiveness to the forefront of policy-making, so that debate about all of the central issues has become commonplace for leaders in many areas of social and economic life (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1999).

Among the greatest successes of the Peace and Reconciliation programme has been the promotion and growth of public, private and voluntary partnerships in Northern Ireland. Although these were set up without detailed prior planning, with consequences for initial clarity and efficiency, partnership has become an accepted response to modern social and economic problems in Northern Ireland. The demands of bureaucracy have also resulted in greater attention to performance indicators than was previously the case (eg Youthnet, 1999, Cambridge Policy Papers, 1999). Evaluation reports on early peace and reconciliation projects indicate that there is also a growing appreciation of the cultural depth of divisions and a wider recognition of the need to learn new skills and habits in dealing with divided societies (RDC, 1999). Since 1998, there has also been increasing emphasis on the need to support and encourage those who have suffered most from the impact of political violence (Fay et al. 1999).

In rural areas, there has been a particular emphasis on social inclusion through

1. improving community development capacity
2. strengthening the rural infrastructure to reduce isolation and poverty
3. increasing levels of economic activity and employment outside agriculture
4. emphasising the importance of the participation of vulnerable and marginal groups such as women, young people and those from minority backgrounds such as travellers (Progress Report, 1999, RDC 1999, RCN 1997).
5. the establishment of Rural Support Networks

The Rural Community Network (RCN) identified and targeted areas with low community infrastructure. In general these were areas which had no historical tradition of community development and suffered multiple deprivation as a result of economic factors and pressure resulting from sectarian tensions (RCN, 1999). Peace and reconciliation funds were targeted to reduce problems related to remoteness and segregation which were met with general local appreciation (Cambridge Policy Consultants 1999). The Rural Development Council (RDC) supported new partnerships through its community-based action schemes on both a single-identity and cross-community basis by encouraging the deliberate organisation of youth partnerships, women's groups and campaigns on issues of mutual importance such as welfare and drugs (Youthnet, 1999. RDC, 1999. NIVT, 1999).

Northern Ireland has now developed a complex and overlapping infrastructure devoted to reconciliation and social inclusion. Inevitably, there is an increasing emphasis on effectiveness, sustainability and learning which was not always evident in 1994. Nevertheless, these undoubted achievements have to be set against the problems and gaps which still remain. As the Rural Community Network commented,

Never before have the issues of reconciliation and social inclusion been higher on the agenda at grass-roots level. The Peace programme has allowed a range of relationships to be developed but these relationships, given the history of this land, have to be nurtured and given more support (RCN, 1997, p29).

Outstanding issues in peace and reconciliation

In many ways the spotlight on peace and reconciliation since 1994 has highlighted the paucity of the mental, physical and human resources devoted to this goal beforehand. Furthermore, the ups and downs of the political negotiations have illustrated the complex interdependence between political rapprochement and social and economic change.

At a general level, financial support for peace and reconciliation projects has not yet secured its primary goal. Peace remains a fragile plant, illustrated graphically by the bomb which devastated Omagh in 1998. Furthermore, the tension around marching and the territorial considerations which it implies has not disappeared. As a result, tension returns to rural and urban districts in an annual cycle associated with the marching season, up to and including pressure on particular families to leave certain districts because of their religious or political background.

This pressure was illustrated most graphically when three boys were murdered in Ballymoney in 1998. The peace process has not yet removed the sense of threat which fuels the need for defence. Military operations continue in some rural areas against a background of insecure ceasefires or threats from various splinter groups. Population movement continues to reinforce local community division and the peace process has highlighted the number of families directly affected by violence. Finally, it was clear from the political and public reaction to the Patten Report, that there was no consensus on crucial issues of public organisation, even after the Agreement.

In 1997, Brian Harvey noted that the depth of support for an agenda based on community relations had not been tested and indicated that community relations thinking had been marginalised in the EU Special Programme in preference for economic investment and social inclusion goals. The common assertion that pragmatic co-operation on matters of common interest is unproblematic may be deceptive, however. It is now clear that any co-operation, no matter how practical will ultimately raise delicate issues which have traditionally been regulated by taboo and politeness. In the medium run, the superficial difference between practical co-operation on matters of common interest and the direct and honest acknowledgement of the difficult legacies of history collapses, as each ultimately implies the other.

At the level of policy-making, the central problem remains the elusiveness of agreed concepts of peace and reconciliation. Peace and reconciliation cannot be delivered: it can only be encouraged and supported. It is this elusive quality which makes it so difficult for policy-makers to grasp, explaining the preference for more quantifiable goals such as the reduction of poverty, increased participation and a growing economy. Unfortunately, it also explains the preference of policy-makers, funders and activists for investment and social inclusion and makes the combination of peace and reconciliation and social inclusion such fertile ground for dissembling.

The combination of social inclusion and reconciliation confuses two distinct and valid aims and introduces a degree of confusion as to the appropriate measurement of outcomes where the two are not synonymous. It may further allow more powerful institutions and organisations to evade practical engagement with reconciliation issues. Brian Harvey identified this same confusion for economic policy when no distinction is drawn between promoting peace and reconciliation and promoting investment in Northern Ireland (Harvey 1997). Given the severe social and cultural difficulties associated with facing the costs of reconciliation, it is our conviction that this confusion too often allows real measures towards inclusive reconciliation to be rationalised as secondary to other legitimate ends.

This confusion is reflected in the weak objectives of many of the institutions and agencies involved with peace and reconciliation funding and practice. Research on the effectiveness of much of this work is sparse and there has been only limited progress on the development of appropriate measurement for each of the projects. There is a notable absence of a designated group charged with ensuring that good practical and learning from the peace and reconciliation programme is sustained, researched and disseminated.

Throughout much of rural Northern Ireland, the emotional pull of specific groups of victims and cultural segregation are tied up with deep family loyalties. Betrayal of deep wounds inflicted over many years is an ever-present concern. As elsewhere, small efforts are always threatened by changes on the wider political picture. The cultural and historical development of Northern Ireland has left a legacy of many venues where either Protestants or Catholics feel safe but few where both regard the venue as entirely neutral (RCN 1997). This barrier creates a strong physical boundary marking those who belong from those who do not, creating so-called single identities. Much work that is justified as single-identity work for peace and reconciliation never progresses beyond the initial confidence-building phase, with the concurrent worry that increased funding for community development might even reinforce community divisions at a more complex level of infrastructure. Politeness remains deeply rooted in Northern Ireland and many agencies report a lack of confidence and skill in addressing divisive issues. This has led to accusations of tokenism, where cross-community identity is secured by the presence of a single and unrepresentative member of the minority community. Going beyond single-identity norms remains a persistent challenge to policy-maker and practitioner alike.

As part of a reflection process, some of the groups funded by the Rural Community Network reported a need for greater training and support and a tendency for programmes for peace and reconciliation to be tailored to urban needs and not adapted to fit rural and specific local contexts. Furthermore, the interface between statutory agencies and local and voluntary community groups remains complex and gives rise to different expectations and experiences (RCN 1997).

The RCN consultation confirmed the broad welcome for the innovative funding-structure of the Peace and Reconciliation programme. At the same time, the risk of diversity remains duplication, complexity and even contradiction. In addition, the influx of money designed to support reconciliation and social inclusion has created a degree of dependency, especially in areas of traditionally low economic activity and the path to transition remains difficult for vulnerable groups and individuals in a number of areas. This was always a predictable problem, but thinking on self-sustaining community development remains weak.

Policy Options for Reconciliation and Social Inclusion in rural areas

1. Sustainable development in Northern Ireland requires a commitment by government to core principles of equity, diversity and interdependence whose practical implications need to be articulated and rewarded at every level of public and private organisation and policy. This applies directly to practical and policy initiatives for rural development.
2. Investment, peace-building and social inclusion should all be recognised as linked yet separated areas of policy concern in Northern Ireland. If development is to be sustainable, rural areas need all three areas to be given due weight. Both the differences and the inter-connections are important and policy-makers need to aim for ever-greater clarity about the nature of each and their dependence on one another.
3. In the long run, real reconciliation implies the engagement of all groups in Northern Ireland. Social inclusion remains an essential element in a worthwhile reconciliation strategy, ensuring that those who have often borne the brunt of the human, social and economic cost are included in the future. Indeed, many of the most innovative projects aimed at reconciliation stem from the economic margins and sustained community development. Without this element, work for reconciliation loses its innovative edge and fails to reach those who have suffered its worst effects.
4. At the same time, peacebuilding which focuses solely on the weakest puts responsibility for change on those least able to achieve it. Supporting social inclusion must not be an excuse for larger and more powerful institutions avoiding the challenge of change and discomfort. Significant public effort to engage these constituencies should parallel all efforts aimed at social inclusion. In rural areas, the physical isolation of many areas adds an extra dimension to this requirement for institutional support.
5. Social inclusion and peace-building are both aimed at the wider goals of sustainable development and social cohesion. Cohesion, after conflict, includes the recognition of the many bitternesses which continue to inhibit the full participation and integration of all. It is essential that public policy initiatives recognise and openly address the often divergent demands of diversity and interdependence, thereby generating ongoing debate about the shape of the future and enabling public choice to be conscious and coherent.
6. Both social inclusion and reconciliation are processes not events. In rural areas of Northern Ireland, they may challenge deep historical patterns of relationship requiring time to evolve and develop without overhasty expectations of change. At the same time, peace-building efforts need to be monitored and assessed against realistic and appropriate goals. There is a need for more precise performance indicators which focus not only on the amount of violence in a given area but also on the effectiveness of groups to increase trust and build a shared infrastructure and on the historical and cultural context of any area.

7. Territorial and cultural segregation have increased in recent years and the number of people who feel themselves to be part of local numerical minorities has followed suit. Many rural districts of Northern Ireland have been deeply affected by this process. Reconciliation work must aim to enable minorities to participate fully in the public life of their locality. It must also address questions of freedom of movement and of respect for the culture of others. Advances in these areas should also be measured against realistic targets.
8. There are enormous fears around the work of reconciliation. The need for safe space continues to be urgent whether created by political co-operation, workplace initiatives, neutral or common community venues, or by high quality local projects and group work. Peacebuilding in rural Northern Ireland takes place in a context where safety has traditionally been sought by avoiding the difficult issues and by focussing on what is not divisive. There is a need to support, spread and learn from ventures which develop new practice allowing difficult issues to be raised in safety in a wide variety of contexts.
9. Very few countries have made internal peace-building a goal of public policy. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that all work in this area is characterised by novelty, innovation and risk-taking. The tendency to avoid hard issues can hardly be exaggerated. This applies also to organisations with public responsibilities, policy-makers and even to single-identity groups. The acknowledgement that everyone is learning and that experiment is welcome is the first step in learning in this context. Measurement of progress must include this assumption.
10. Reconciliation work is not a single piece of practice. Models for rural areas need to be developed which take different histories and traditions into account. Diverse practice should be encouraged provided that all practice can clearly trace its purpose back to the key principles of equity, diversity and interdependence and that progress towards these can be observed.
11. A formal mechanism should be put in place to capture and develop important learning from attempts to foster reconciliation. Unless this happens, small groups remain isolated and are always liable to expend unnecessary effort reinventing the wheel. This is especially true in rural areas which often lack the community support infrastructure of urban areas.

End notes

- 1: The term reconciliation is used in a variety of different contexts and situations. The first question on page 22 indicates the need for clarification on its usage.
- 2: The function and the role of the GAA and Orange Order in rural society is one which requires further discussion and analysis.
- 3: The programme was also one which allowed for genuine risk taking and experimentation. However we should remember that many projects failed because they were pitched at the level of polite avoidance.

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Issues for Further Consideration

1. Is peaceful co-existence an acceptable definition of reconciliation in Northern Ireland?

2. Is there a difference between reconciliation issues in rural and urban areas? If yes, what are the differences and similarities?

3. What should be the baseline measures for the development of reconciliation strategies?

4. What are the short term strategies which are presently in place for reconciliation within rural communities?

5. What are the long term strategies which should be put into place for rural reconciliation?

6. Do funders, institutions and the community itself avoid dealing with reconciliation? If so, how and why?

7. What steps has your organisation/agency put in place to address sectarianism?

8. What are the challenges for individuals in promoting reconciliation?

Vision

"Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society."

Mission

"Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged."

Strategic Aims

- To articulate the voice of rural communities.
- To promote community development and networking in rural communities.
- To work towards social inclusion and peace building in rural communities.
- To support the building of sustainable rural communities.

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