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Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

FROM CONFRONTATION TO
CO-OPERATION:
GRASSROOTS CONFLICT RESOLUTION
Conference Report
23rd April 2008





CONFERENCE REPORT

FROM CONFRONTATION TO CO-OPERATION: GRASSROOTS CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Europa Hotel, Belfast

23rd April 2008

Organised by Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

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CONTENTS

Introduction and background to BCRC	Page 03
Conference agenda	Page 05
Welcome and opening address	Page 06
Address from steering group members, Sean Murray, Tom Roberts and Frankie Gallagher	Page 06
Keynote speech, Brian Currin	Page 09
Keynote speech, Avila Kilmurray	Page 11
Plenary session	Page 15



Introduction

This is a report of a conference entitled From Confrontation to Co-operation held on 23rd April 2008 by the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium. As an event jointly planned and addressed by traditional adversaries the conference marked a significant point in grassroots peacebuilding in the North of Ireland / Northern Ireland. The purpose of the conference was to address key questions about grassroots conflict resolution but also to send out a strong signal about shared working. The conference was addressed by two keynote speakers, Brian Currin and Avila Kilmurray and by representatives from the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium steering group, Sean Murray, Tom Roberts and Frankie Gallagher. The event concluded with a plenary session of questions and comments from the floor and responses from the panel of speakers.

The conference focused on a number of questions: How can conflict management at interfaces move to conflict transformation? How do grassroots conflict resolution processes relate to current political processes? Are communities at interfaces being left behind in the move to political stability? The speakers explored these issues and discussed community development approaches to conflict resolution and the connection between activism during the conflict and activism in peacebuilding.

Background to Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

The need for the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) was initially identified by local activists from loyalist and republican backgrounds engaged in direct conflict management at interfaces across Belfast. Their contacts began several years ago through intermediaries and developed over time into mobile phone networks and then face to face meetings. After more than a year of dialogue they came together to form the BCRC in April 2007 to ensure that interface communities were not left out of the ongoing peace process. During its initial phase the project went through a process of relationship building and the development of guidelines and strategies for future working. This also involved extensive consultation with local communities living in interface areas across Belfast, something which has been critical to the approach of BCRC.

The BCRC is a citywide cross-community partnership working to assist conflict transformation at Belfast's interfaces. The current phase of the project is supported by the Peace III Programme, managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the Community Relations Council / Pobal Consortium. The project builds upon the successful pilot that was delivered April 2007 - June 2009, supported under the Peace II funding stream.

BCRC has a twofold approach:

- 1) To provide an integrated response to tensions at interfaces and to prevent outbreaks of violence through fostering and expanding cross-community strategic alliances.
- 2) To enhance within interface communities conflict resolution skills, local leadership capacity, democratic involvement and reconciliation efforts and to share future work on the legacy of the conflict and social problems faced by these communities.

The project currently employs a team of 8 staff including a project manager. BCRC is supported by four partner organisations, Falls Community Council (lead agency), Intercomm, Charter and Epic and strategic direction is provided by its steering group. The project also relies on a Key Area Contact structure of practitioners who respond to incidents at interfaces across Belfast and work to prevent outbreaks of violence. The majority of BCRC's staff and steering group, and its Key Area Contact volunteers live in interface areas and are also extensively involved in local groups as members of committees and as volunteers.

From Confrontation to Co-operation: Grass Roots Conflict Resolution

Europa Hotel, Belfast

Wednesday 23rd April 2008

AGENDA

Welcome and introductions:	Liam Maskey, Director of Intercomm.
Opening address:	Belfast Lord Mayor, Councillor Jim Rodgers.
Background to and outline of the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium:	Steering group representatives Sean Murray, Tom Roberts and Frankie Gallagher.
Presentation on current BCRC work:	BCRC staff representatives.
Key Note Speaker:	Brian Currin, human rights lawyer and peace process consultant.
Key Note Speaker:	Avila Kilmurray, Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland.
Plenary:	Chaired by Gerry McConville, Director of Falls Community Council with panel: Avila Kilmurray, Brian Currin, Frankie Gallagher, Tom Roberts and Sean Murray.
Closing remarks:	Gerry McConville.

Liam Maskey: Introduction

The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium was formed because it was recognised that there was no joined up solution to the problem of conflict resolution in the broader Belfast area. It was set up with the support of a lot of groups that were involved in conflict resolution and also with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

The group has three main areas of work: practitioner work, training and research. There are currently two lead partners to provide operational support for the work, Falls Community Council and Intercomm. The staff at Falls Community Council are responsible for the training and research. The staff at Intercomm are responsible for the practitioner work. The aim is to have a unified, joined up approach with all the interested groups. We need to look at how we can be effective in delivering conflict resolution, minimising conflict, reducing conflict, and actually bringing it to a conflict resolution stage.

With all the other developments in the political field I think there is a responsibility on us to have a joined up approach. It's not owned by any one group or any individuals or organisations. This has to be a common approach of people working in conflict resolution. Thank you all for coming.

Belfast Lord Mayor Jim Rodgers

It is very apt that we are meeting in the Europa Hotel, because this used to be the most bombed hotel in Europe. This is an important day not just for you but for the whole city. I know the great work that's been done over the past few years and I, speaking for Belfast City Council, fully support all that you are trying to do. And you do need help, you need financial assistance to carry on, because the days of violence and terror have got to be over. This is a fabulous city, a city which is booming. And we have got a golden opportunity of sending out a positive message that those of us from different religions can work together to get the very best for all of our people.

Most of you come from areas of social deprivation, high unemployment, and where there's been a lot of paramilitary activity and bloodshed and we need now to work together. The three speakers coming next know a lot about conflict resolution and how things can move on. I want to give a categorical assurance that if I can be of any assistance don't hesitate to call on me.

Liam Maskey: Thank you for those words of encouragement. Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

is run by a steering group and we have three people from the steering group who are going to give a presentation.

Sean Murray, BCRC Steering Group

Thanks, everyone, for coming along here today. It's a fitting tribute to all those individuals and all those organisations who have worked in the interface areas over the years, having the difficult conversations when it wasn't the popular thing to do. It is important to recognise that and I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to that process over the years.

I'm here today secure in the knowledge that everyone here shares a common desire to improve the quality of life for all those who live and work in Belfast interface areas. Our Consortium's mission is to develop a holistic and inclusive approach to conflict transformation across the city of Belfast, underpinned by a community development ethos that comprises practitioners and grass roots organisations from North, South, East and West Belfast, all of whom have a long standing history in conflict management and conflict transformation.



It seeks to consolidate our peace process across each level, developing relationships and understandings by preserving vital lines of communication when tensions rise and conflict threatens. It fully recognises the essential role played by other similar grassroots projects. In association with them, and building on the groundwork laid down over the years we will endeavour to produce and promote a Belfast practitioners' model of best practice of conflict resolution and reconciliation worthy of international recognition.

We seek to identify the key issues and concerns impacting on the quality of life for Belfast working class communities. Where we have political issues that divide us, social deprivation, low skills capacity, poor educational attainment, high unemployment rates are common experiences and generational in nature, in all interface areas regardless of one's political aspirations or allegiances.

We also seek to identify gaps in terms of an absence of interaction or structure in any interface area, allowing us to sustain and expand an effective city-wide networking structure.

We will also focus on identifying, promoting and developing opportunities for collaborative intercommunity initiatives. Furthermore, we intend to ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to influence the design of policy frameworks of relevance to interface communities.

To this end we will endeavour to develop the skills capacity of practitioners, allied to the promotion of an effective lobbying capability, with the focus on key political and statutory bodies.

In essence, our objective is to empower Belfast interface communities, working in partnership with civic society, affording them the opportunity to influence and shape their own destinies.

Tom Roberts, BCRC Steering Group

The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium combines grassroots practitioners from both the loyalist and republican communities on a Belfast-wide basis. The Steering Group of BCRC has representatives from both loyalist and republican communities. It is not the preserve of any one constituency, and policy can only be determined by consensus. There are many examples of good practice in conflict management and resolution by individuals and groups throughout this city, and this network should be seen as complementary to their commendable work. One of the primary aims of the project is to assist this work, and where applicable share the expertise that exists.

Much of the work that has been done has gone unrecognised for many years. Quiet marching seasons and relative peace at interfaces do not happen by accident. They are the result of activists, many of whom are here today, working tirelessly on the ground. It is time that this work became more recognised and visible. The establishment of political structures at Stormont is a welcome development that I believe would not have been possible but for the efforts of grassroots activists providing the elected representatives with the necessary space to negotiate their format.

Notwithstanding the outstanding work that has been done, many families' lives, in both communities, continue to be blighted as a consequence of the conflict, particularly on the interfaces. Clearly there is still considerable work to be done. It is the responsibility of all in our society to address the remaining issues.

The problems that exist in both communities are virtually indistinguishable. Surely, irrespective of our political persuasion, it makes sense to cooperate on areas of common concern. Only by meaningful and respectful engagement can solutions to our many problems be found. The alternative cannot be contemplated.

Finally, I referred earlier to the constructive engagement currently being shown by our political representatives in Stormont. Hopefully, encouragement and support will be forthcoming from that quarter.

Frankie Gallagher, BCRC Steering group

You've heard the different perspectives on what we believe we in BCRC are doing, what we hope to achieve, and what you can see, we hope, is the uniqueness of the BCRC approach, being a city-wide approach. It is representative of all sections of the community, but we're continuing to try and embrace each community. We are trying, every time we embrace another part of the community, to create another step further to create a more inclusive approach. So it is a continuous process. If there are people not involved at the minute, we will continue to work hard to try and bring more people in, to inform them, and try and work with them as partners.

It's not so long ago that we could all have said that this was impossible. There are three people from different unique backgrounds here sharing a platform and programme and you would have said that you're losing your mind to think that we would all be in the same room. But we're here, and this is reality. This project exists, it exists today, and we want it to go on.

This is where we're at in this moment in time. But what of the future? Obviously we in BCRC have a vision for Belfast. That vision is a peaceful city that is at peace with itself and where mutual respect and shared values are the norm. We are determined to develop a holistic and inclusive approach to conflict transformation right across the entire city, which is underpinned by that community development ethos.

Although not everyone here may be involved in conflict transformation I would say nearly everybody in this room is involved in community development and it's through that common approach and through that working together that we can learn from each other and create that wholly inclusive project.

In BCRC we believe that our future depends on thinking of innovative ways to continually engage and embrace communities in the decision-making process so we can collectively deal with the many challenges that will undoubtedly face us. In war we needed a weak enemy,

but in peace we need a strong partner. The pursuit of mutual destruction is no longer a viable option for the people of Belfast or Northern Ireland, and indeed for the people on the island of Ireland.

But we are not here to paint a rosy picture. That rosy picture, even though we could try to paint it, doesn't have any place in reality. We are here now talking about what is real. We know it won't be easy, and you've heard, it hasn't been easy. We have had some lively debates, very aggressive debates, and every section of BCRC has developed a mature way of listening to each other's arguments and opinions. And then, even if there are differences we've developed ways of dealing with and managing those debates, arguments, or disagreements.

But one thing that has come out of the process is that our communities, all our communities, have common issues as Sean and Tom have outlined. Dealing with poverty has to be the top priority and dealing with the causes of poverty. And also, and this is very, very important, dealing with the structural inequalities that exist in our community.



There is a direct correlation between those structural inequalities, the poverty that exists and the number of people in our communities that ended up in prison. Why they gave their lives. Why they joined up with resistance movements, or freedom movements, or whatever. Those people from those poor deprived areas were the people who fought wars, but they are also now the people who develop the peace. If we can develop a way, through BCRC and through the rest of the people involved in this project, of dealing with that poverty, it will be a way forward to ensure that we do not send any more people to prison, that we do not bury any more people through causes of violence. We can now develop a way forward where we can give our children a reason to live, or cause to live. And hopefully it's a common cause, and a good cause.

So dealing with these issues is seriously important. But it is also important to recognise that our communities

feel that they get no support for their work, and the risk taking that they do on a daily basis. We all talk about this new political dispensation, but I'll be honest with you, many of the people in my community, and I've heard other people in different communities say that they don't think that interface issues are a priority for that new political dispensation. It's as if these issues will go away on their own.

They have to refocus. We have to lobby to make sure that our new political dispensation and new political leaders – who I admit and understand are in transformation themselves, it isn't easy, we hope Stormont continues, we hope there is stability and prosperity – get their political eye off some of the other issues and get a serious, serious focus on interface issues and the causes of poverty, on the structural inequalities that we talk about.

There is a sense certainly within my community, a strong perception that interface communities have been abandoned, and some communities even feel they've been left behind. We cannot let that go on. It's an important part of conflict transformation that people feel they are part of future plans. If anybody is isolated or marginalised, we have to work hard to bring those people into a process where they feel they are part of the new future.

We've often said in the past that it's up to us in the future. And we have, for whatever reasons, left it up to others to facilitate our common issues and difficulties. And we must recognise and give thanks to those professionals who have worked on the interface, who have given dedication over the years of trying to resolve the issues, and for staying the course under some extreme conditions. But the buck stops with us. It ends with us and it ends with us here and it ends with us now.

The different partners that make up BCRC have already, as practitioners over the last decade and more, achieved massive reductions in interface tension and violence. We have trained for it, we have prepared for it and we've done it. The future will see these practitioners ready to step up to the mark and take their place to build a lasting peace that'll improve the quality of life for all the citizens of Belfast.

Gerry McConville: Introduction of keynote speakers

The first keynote speaker we have is Brian Currin. Brian is a human rights lawyer and peace process consultant. Brian qualified as a lawyer in 1978. He is a specialist in human rights, conflict management, and transitional

justice. From 1978 until 1995 he was the National Director of Lawyers for Human Rights in South Africa. He participated in the drafting process of South Africa's Bill of Rights, and the enabling legislation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1994 he was appointed by President Mandela's government to chair a review committee into amnesties not granted under the apartheid government.

He has worked internationally in Africa, the Middle East, the North of Ireland and the Basque Country. In Northern Ireland he has, since 1998 chaired the Central Review Commission that adjudicates on the early release of paramilitary prisoners. He has for the past six years worked as a consultant to InterAction Belfast on a number of community interface projects, including conflicts around parades. In 2007 Brian was appointed an international advisor to the Consultative Group on the Past, tasked with making recommendations on an appropriate mechanism for dealing with the past in the North of Ireland.

Mr Currin was until May 2007 a consultant to the Basque peace process. In October 2007 he was appointed Chairperson of the International Group for Dialogue and Peace in the Basque Country.

Brian Currin

It is indeed an honour for me to be here this morning to speak at this conference, and I would like to thank the conference organisers. I would like to thank BCRC for giving me an opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts.

I'd also like to congratulate the BCRC for this very important, far sighted and pro-active initiative. And I'm not saying that lightly. Despite the experience that I may have elsewhere in pre- and post-conflict transformation, my work and involvement in my own country's transformation process has gone on for some 30 years. And added to that, I'm not a novice in Northern Ireland. I want to spend a little bit of time, because it's a good backdrop to what I'm going to say later, to share with you my engagement and involvement in Northern Ireland since 1994.

I first came to Northern Ireland in 1994 as an invitee to a conference organised by NIACRA. And the objective of that conference was to look at the issue of politically motivated prisoners. There were a number of international speakers from different parts of the world, and the purpose was to see how the issue of prisoners and the release of prisoners could be connected to or interwoven with a peace process.

That conference in 1994 then resulted in me coming back in 1995 and 1996 to meet with the various paramilitary organisations which at that stage were obviously still involved in violence. (And I know that there had been the early 90's a peace process and then subsequently 1995 was the next cease fire.) Certainly around about that time I was meeting very confidentially and privately with combatants on both the loyalist side and the republican side. And I'm telling you all of this because it's those very people that have been instrumental in coming here together today to undertake this very pro-active and exciting initiative.

Meetings with those particular leaders resulted subsequently in a delegation of republican and loyalist military leaders attending a conference at the House of Commons in London. And I remember when we went to that there was a big debate as to whether they would fly in the same airplane or not. And eventually they did fly in the same airplane. And together we attended the conference. And the purpose of the conference was to talk about the establishment, and to make representations for the establishment, of a body which would deal with the early release of paramilitary prisoners. In fact I've seen two of the people who were part of that delegation here today.

In 1998 the then Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, appointed me to co-chair the Sentence Review Commission tasked with the early release of paramilitary prisoners. Prior to that I had been involved in advising and assisting the British Government in drafting the Northern Ireland Sentences Act which established the Commission. And I know why I was appointed. I was appointed because at the time the paramilitary groups from both sides suggested to Mo Mowlam that I was somebody who had no Northern Ireland baggage, and I was somebody who seemed, at that stage, to show a neutrality and would probably be able to do the job in an objective and neutral fashion. So in 1998 I then came to Northern Ireland and was here for almost a year permanently on a one-year project. It's 10 years later and I'm still chairing the Sentence Review Commission. So my engagement with the paramilitary organisations that were instrumental in setting up the BCRC has been going on for some 13/14 years.

Now whilst dealing with the brutal history of the conflict, in the course of considering more than 500 applications for early release within the Sentence Review Commission – and you must realise that for every single application one has to read all the court papers and go through every detail of the offence which resulted in the imprisonment, many of them life sentences – while dealing with that and becoming absolutely aware of the brutality of the conflict, I was privileged, from about the year 2000 onwards, to be

working simultaneously – while dealing with the past – on the present and the future, through some community-based organisations, and looking at some issues like parades, policing interface community violence and building trust and relationship processes.

During that time I think I can say that I've worked with most if not all of the stakeholders. Besides working with the paramilitaries, I've worked with the British Government, the Irish Government, the Northern Ireland Office, the Loyal Orders, the nationalist residents' groups, civil society organisations from both traditions, local political parties, the business community, church leaders and state bodies and commissions.

So it's really based on the knowledge and experience gleaned during that 13/14 year period, and also just being in Northern Ireland and witnessing the pain, the suffering, the commitment, the hope, the honesty, the hard work, of course the sense of humour – I can't not mention the stubbornness – but with that an acceptance that change must happen, and also based on my working life in South Africa, I say again, congratulations on this hugely significant initiative.

Three years ago I was asked by InterAction Belfast to write a review on one of their publications entitled *The Role of Ex-Combatants on the Interface*, and I want to read to you a paragraph from that because I think it's relevant to what we are talking about today (and this is now three years ago).

“On paging through the role of ex-combatants on interfaces, what struck me most forcibly was that the peace process on these islands may have collapsed long ago had it not have been for the generally unknown yet critical role played by key ex-combatants on the interfaces. I say that due to the spectacular and sustained failure by politicians in Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland, to deliver thus far a power-sharing deal based on the principle of equality of rights and of opportunity for all. The relentless grassroots peace and relationship building by respected ex-combatants within and between communities in conflict has kept those communities on board in spite of failed politics. On reading this report, one inevitably asks, who better to lead the peace and reconciliation brigade than the foot soldiers who were at the coalface of making the war. If that is indeed so, a question that comes to my mind is whether there is a case to be made for ex-combatants to become more involved in post-conflict transitional justice processes.”

Now in establishing the BCRC, the ex-combatants have accepted the challenge to transform themselves from being activists in conflict to being activists in peace and democracy making. What is truly remarkable and commendable is that you, loyalists and republicans

representing paramilitary organisations that were programmed to kill one another, are doing this together.

The question which now one needs to ask is, what is your role as a civil society organisation in conflict transformation and peace and democracy building? It's not for me to tell you what that role is, but what I can do is share with you experiences from my own country which might be useful in illustrating why it's important that you play a role. And that's really what I want to emphasize: why it is important for you to play that role.

The question that I pose, and which is being posed, is why did President Mbeki and his cabinet go from heroes to zeros in the short period of eight years? President Mbeki, at the African National Congress's conference eight years ago, got more votes than any other political representative within the African National Congress. At their last conference a few months ago he didn't even get onto the National Executive Council which consists of some 200 people.

What are the main issues that have made the people of South Africa's new democracy angry and disillusioned?

- Burgeoning poverty and unemployment after 15 years of freedom and democracy.
- Housing. It's inefficient, poor quality and there is corruption in the allocation of housing.
- Health care. Hugely problematic; inadequate, unhygienic hospitals, poor service delivery at local clinics, shortage of medicines, failure to deal with the HIV and Aids pandemic.
- Schooling and education. Lack of delivery of quality facilities and quality teaching for the vast majority of the children.
- Safety and security. The government has failed to provide an efficient and effective trustworthy community based police force.
- The flaws in our parliamentary system of proportional representation. Constituents do not have their own members of parliament. There is no direct engagement, you can't go to your parliamentarian and say, this is my issue, take it up.
- A government that is perceived to be far removed from its people and their views.

I just want to mention that when I wrote this I had not seen the summary of your findings that your staff undertook. And just to read from that:

“The most pressing issues for communities at interfaces were identified, and there was a lot of agreement across the workshops. The main themes included community safety and policing, youth, education, employment, health, housing and development.”

I had not seen that. It just shows that the issues are identical. But what is striking – I think it’s important to emphasize – is that I am talking in the South African context, of a country that is in a post conflict stage. We resolved our political issues some 14 years ago, but yet we still have those issues.

Now anyone who suggests that these very serious shortcomings are the fault only of the present African National Congress Government is either ignorant or a mischief maker. The causes are many, and they’re complicated, and this is not the time or the place to unpack all those causes. But let me identify some of the causes from which there might be a lesson to be learned, and which go to the core of the challenges you face at BCRC.

First of all, the issue of parliamentarians and political representation. Just to make the point – and I’m not saying that it will inevitably be the same here – certainly it is apparent that even those with struggle and activist credentials tend to get drawn into mainstream elitist political environments and they tend to lose touch with their grassroots constituents. We have noted that power tends to corrupt, sometimes for personal gain and sometimes morals and values. The trappings of status and perks of political office very often draw top quality NGO personnel away from civil society, leaving a very important or significant vacuum.

We’ve also noted, or I’ve noted, that some political activists, particularly those from paramilitary organisations who’ve spent their entire adult lives living on the edge and in breach of the law find it difficult to conform to life in a normal society, and choose crime for gain. Some do that.

There are also those from the political activist community who find it impossible to adjust to the radical changes that accompany peace and normality, and find themselves directionless and depressed.

And then, of course, fund raising is a problem in a post conflict environment. It becomes more difficult to raise funds, and only the strongest, only the smartest organisations survive.

Now what can the consequences of some of those causes be? Certainly the consequences can be arrogant, out of touch, unaccountable politicians, and on the other side a weak, under-resourced, depressed and divided civil

society.

So, what is your challenge? Your challenge is to be committed, strong, resourced, vibrant, unified and visionary. If you can be all of that you’ll play a significant role in moulding, through partnership and through engagement, politicians who are neither arrogant nor out of touch nor unaccountable. The quality of your politicians, the quality of their representation on your behalf is directly related to the quality and the strength and the vibrancy and the vision of the civil society sector. It calls for leadership, it calls for courage, the challenges that confront you.

There is one last – and most certainly not least – important point that I want to make. And that is, the role of activists. Post settlement in conflict transformation is not for cissies. It’s complicated and it’s challenging. And I want to take the issue of parades just to illustrate that point.

The position which the Loyal Orders took not so long ago, and which some of you sitting here today would have supported, was: we have an absolute right to walk the Queen’s highway. On the other hand, let’s consider the position taken by nationalist residents, also not so long ago, and which others here would have supported, and that is: there will be no Orange feet on our road.

All of us here today know very well that the issue of parades is far more complicated than those simplistic one liners. Now in a post conflict environment you are challenged to find realistic solutions, and solutions which can deliver, and satisfy the needs and expectations, the hopes and the desires and the fears of both communities. On that note, I’ll say to BCRC, don’t underestimate what you signed up for. I wish you good luck, strength and wisdom. Thank you.

Gerry McConville

Thank you Brian. You have given us a lot to think about. Let me now introduce our second keynote speaker. Avila Kilmurray is Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (previously the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust) since 1994. Born in Dublin, Avila holds a B.A. (Hons.) degree from University College Dublin and a M.A. in International Relations from the Australian National University. She also has qualifications in Public Administration and a Certificate in Welfare Law (Queen’s University, Belfast).

Avila has been working in Northern Ireland since 1975. Initially employed in Derry in community work, Avila worked in a Community Education Project in Magee College, was active in establishing the Women’s Aid organisation and was involved in a range of anti-poverty

initiatives.

Since 1980, Avila has been based in Belfast, working for a period with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action and subsequently as Co-ordinator of the Rural Action Project (N.I.) - an EU Second Anti-Poverty Programme initiative. In 1990, Avila was appointed the first Women's Officer for the Transport & General Workers' Union (T.G.W.U.) (Ireland). She served on the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (I.C.T.U.) and on the Executive Council of the I.C.T.U.

Avila has written extensively on community development, women's issues and civil society.

Avila Kilmurray

I want to thank you for your kind invitation to share some thoughts with you today at this public launch of the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium, which I know has been carrying out its work for some time now; and I also realize the importance of taking the time to put understandings in place and to build the necessary confidence, to allow a venture such as this the time and space to put down roots. I do feel that it is a particular credit to all those individuals, and their sponsoring organisations, that have shown a willingness to undertake community level engagement, and to show a willingness to address sensitive, and often controversial, issues. And there has been little that can be counted more sensitive and controversial than the issues of interface violence, and related issues such as territoriality and inter-communal tensions.

What I hope to contribute to the discussion this morning are some personal thoughts and reflections on (i) Narrative (the stories that we tell ourselves to make sense of our own circumstances and challenges); (ii) on Codes and Messaging (not 007 – or at least not always – but rather how we communicate with both ourselves and others); and (iii) Truth(s), and I deliberately say truths rather than truth, because in a society rooted in conflict and division, what I may see as the truth may be in diametrical opposition from what someone, from a different background and community, may see as the truth. I then want to conclude my contribution with a couple of strategic and tactical quandaries that we might face in seeking to engage effectively in conflict resolution/transformation, or even in conflict management.

The context for my thoughts is as an outsider-insider. I have in my time lived on an interface area – in Bishop Street in Derry - between the Bogside and the Fountain – but that was many years ago. However in the more recent past, as Director of the Community Foundation

for Northern Ireland, we have been in direct contact with many interface communities, and indeed have had regular engagement with the Political Ex-Prisoner Groups, from a wide range of constituencies, whose members have been actively involved in interface issues, certainly across Belfast, and even beyond. I also spent a period of some eighteen months/two years chairing the direct talks between the Apprentice Boys and the Lower Ormeau Concerned Residents Group in the mid-late 1990's: talks, I might add which were inconclusive. But I want to make clear that I have not lived and breathed the intimacy of the day to day interface work that other individuals, and a small number of organisations, have been immersed in; and I know the toil that this has taken on their energy and imagination, not to mention endurance and patience.

But first, let me share a few thoughts on the subject of narrative – the stories that we tell ourselves to make sense of our reality, and that we sometimes – but generally all too rarely – share with others: those from outside of our community. Over the past three years I have been involved in interviewing some 75 people for a study that I am doing; community activists in Nationalist/Republican West Belfast; from the Greater Shankill area and from the Civil Service/ even a few from the NIO – and what has been fascinating is how the three sectoral view points as to what has happened over the past 35 years are so different, and in many ways contradictory.

The narrative from the civil service/the state is essentially that they were doing a difficult job, as impartially as possible, trying to bring forward policies to improve conditions and to present the situation as being as normal as possible, despite some clear abnormalities that were unfortunate to say the least. Essentially, Northern Ireland was projected as having genuine social and economic problems; an image problem; and poor relations between the two main communities that resulted in violence. That was the public narrative – it was the fault of local community fears and antagonisms – although a NIO interviewee did acknowledge privately that not alone were they talking to everybody behind the scenes all of the time, but also they tried to portray Northern Ireland as basically a normal society having a mid-life crisis, sometimes verged on the absurd. As one of my NIO interviewees said, and I quote – “I mean for years I was writing answers to Parliamentary Questions saying that the RUC is normally an unarmed force but in certain circumstances officers are required to carry guns, when you had Inspectors running round with bazookas. .” Now, the thing about the official, or the state narrative, is that it has a great ability to change when the political circumstances change, and of course, truth – which I'll come onto later – rarely gets in the way of such change.

The community narrative from West Belfast tended to be focused on the struggle with Britain and the state – what was striking was the relative lack of attention given to loyalist areas. The narrative held loyalists as dupes; collaborators; political proxies, or if you were a good Marxist, as suffering from ‘false consciousness’ – i.e. dupes with hint of determinism. As one community activist summed it up – “I just would not believe what I was seeing in front of me, just the viciousness of the system and how powerful they are. And you know, the whole paraphernalia of the tanks, the weapons, the uniforms, all of that there. The structures, the jails, the courts, just the huge monolith that is that power. And at the end of the day, our people were good people, they weren’t bad people; they were good decent people – my family were decent people and we didn’t deserve it. It was completely wrong and unjust. I’m not taking away from the wrong things we did as a community too, we did plenty of it, but what kept me going was probably that. You’ve got to really believe that you can make things happen.”

Now clearly, not everybody in Nationalist/Republican areas, let alone those living at the interfaces, would agree with everything this person said, but there was a belief that they were treated as second-class citizens by a Unionist State; they were intimidated into single identity communities by loyalist pogroms; they had to take on the might of the British state, and on top of all this there was the irritant sectarian attacks by loyalist paramilitaries. In this narrative, the Nationalist/Republican community are on the one hand, victims (both politically and in social and economic terms), but on the other, produced a gallant band of Freedom Fighters, whose role was both to protect a beleaguered community and to assert a national identity and aspiration. There were, of course, many within the Nationalist/Republican community who would have disagreed with this position, but their voices were to become sidelined over the years.

Then, of course, there is the narrative within the Unionist/Loyalist communities which so often, despite expressing abhorrence of Nationalist/Republicanism, was clearly fixated on what they were up to and on what, if any, the relationship was between these communities and the British Government: always expecting the worst. My last little quote comes from the Shankill – “I think in the early days it would have been seen as . . . the more monolithic Republican, Catholic, Nationalist – you know that they were together on this, and that they’d been running a state within a state anyway, and that they were geared up and tooled up; whereas over here we’re really needing to build capacity for all our little pockets of stuff that was going on. I think there would have been a perception that we’ll be looked after; the Government will – but the realization came that this isn’t the case. In

fact there would be a perception that the Government are actually buying the peace on the Republican side, that there’s much more investment of money going in there in order to get stability on the Republican side, whereas over here we’re not as crucially involved.” Again, the perception of victimization, marginalization, being up against the monolithic powerful ‘other’, with the added ingredient of a sense of betrayal. But of course, as Unionist/Loyalists, if your betrayer is also your ultimate protection and home, the focus for attention will invariably be the rebels that are seen as the ultimate cause of all this angst.

Of course, what we are talking about here are perceptions – and in some cases perceptions that have been deliberately fuelled by political manipulation – but no less powerful for all that. And it is these very different sets of perceptions – or stories, or narratives – that create our communal commonsense understandings of what is happening to us. Understandings that are particularly honed when we come to discuss sensitive interface issues; or matters of perceived control of territory; and certainly when divisive symbolic issues are on the table.

So our conflicting narratives – which, of course, we rarely articulate to each other – are drawn from our very different lived experiences of both the Troubles and the legacy of Unionist rule, are fuelled by mistrust and hurt, while also fuelling further mistrust and fear. If I had a pound for every time I have been told in loyalist communities about the Republican masterplan to take over areas of Belfast and Derry – joining them up geographically to add to that ‘state within a state’ that is West Belfast, or the West Bank of Derry, then I would be wealthy. How new housing at the edge of Ligoniel is forming a new interface with Glencairn; how houses in small Protestant enclaves are being bought up by private developers who will then rent them out to ‘anybody’; how an expanding Catholic/Nationalist population has colonised South Belfast, and is putting pressure on the established lines in North Belfast – with Torrens being taken as a case in point; how ‘gentrification’ is losing Protestant territory.

And yes, there are aspects of this narrative that have the ring of truth – but is it planned and what are the push/pull factors? And is there equal mention of those areas – often outside Belfast – in the Ahoghill, Carrickfergus and other areas – where Catholics still feel under threat? All of us are selective in our narratives; but when applied in interface areas these narratives can, in turn, make people who live there political hostages of our narratives.

And this brings me on to my second point – the codes that we use and the messages that we send out, and

particularly when we are discussing sensitive or divisive issues. After we have got beyond the famous Tommy Sands maxim – ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’, then we have to get beyond the fact that we spend so much time talking to ourselves within our own communities, in our own terms, that we assume that the other community actually understands what we are implying, if not actually saying. Or, worse, we misinterpret what the other community is saying. There is the danger that if Republicans have been having interminable debates within the pages of An Phoblacht – or even in gaelic on the back page of infamous Skibbereen Eagle – then there is an assumption that everybody else should be up to speed with their position, and indeed, difficulties.

However, notwithstanding the revelations made by Blair’s Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell recently, getting inside the phraseology of P. O’Neill, may have become an art form – but not necessarily one shared by the regulars of the Rex Bar or whatever the Grapes of Wrath is called now. So we need to be able to create a common language to share the very genuine fears, hopes and concerns around sensitive political issues and interfaces. Even before the heightened interface issues of the 1990’s, I noticed a little piece in the Shankill Bulletin, from June 1985 which perhaps summed up the prevailing perception: “The Shankill Bulletin phoned the House of Orange this week. Well we knew the Wee 12th was coming up and we like to keep you all informed. ‘Could you tell us the route of the Wee 12th this Saturday?’ we asked. ‘Hold on please’. Pause. ‘Is that the Sandy Row parade?’ ‘No’, we said, ‘The Whiterock Parade’. Pause. ‘Oh I’m sorry we don’t have any details about that but I can give you a phone number’. Maybe we should have phoned the Sinn Fein Advice Centre.” (Shankill Bulletin, 28th June 1985). Enough said about perceptions.

On the other hand the messages that emerge in negotiation with the Loyal Orders is that ‘We are the people’ and these are our traditional routes, in our state, and no rebellious and rebel infected community is going to stand in our way – I paraphrase of course, and in so doing undoubtedly do an injustice. The problem is the confusion of message allows misinterpretation and injustice. Is the Order cultural, religious, social, an employment bureau, political, historical – all of these, or a combination, or none? It has certainly marched against Thatcherite employment policies – again in the mid 80s. It has not been behind the door in making political and constitutional pronouncements. From time to time it has made its views heard on religious issues. Some Lodges have worked hard to respond to community needs; and the Nationalist narrative certainly recalls its close connection with previous Unionist Governments and administrations, hence the message that it is purely a cultural/historical association does not always ring

true and colours the ‘other’ community’s reaction to its demands.

Getting the message clear, to reflect changing realities, is the onus on all organisations that are party to interface negotiations otherwise the ‘other side’ – whoever that may be – will always be at liberty to read their worst fears and suspicions into whatever message is put forward. How often have you heard people saying ‘Well they are saying that, but what they really mean is. . .’ We are good at implying messages to each other, and often we find grounds for doing so.

And then there is the issue of truth and truth(s). And I say truth(s), because the first casualty of a violent conflict is complexity – we tend to simplify things into my truth and your falsehood, and vice versa. We establish simplified polar opposites. For example, if the conflict was merely an aggravated crime wave to those in society who accepted the British Government truth-claim, then what’s all this hooaha about ex-prisoners and peacebuilding, let’s all just get back to the norm of rule through law and order; whereas, other sections of society experienced if not a war, then certainly political violence and even warlike conditions.

So we still need to establish the nature of the abnormality of the last 35 years that became our normality. And by far the best place to do this is within and between working class areas, which at least had certain elements of shared experience. Because again, as in the case of narrative, the consolidation of single-identity community memory, without testing these memories against the remembered experience of the ‘other’ community, may only serve to aggravate division and the inherited historical supremacy of victimhood. And one of my concerns is that in looking at communities across Belfast there is a clear discrepancy between Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist communities in the attention given to the collection of memories and to the related creation of history.

I want to conclude my rather random offering with a number of both strategic and tactical quandaries which I feel may impact on the work of the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium. My first strategic quandary is that segregated communities continue to exist because in some sense they seem to work – and in working, serve to provide the basis for our current political settlement. And yet this stands at odds with the repeated findings of various Life and Times Surveys that suggest that more than 60% of the population of Northern Ireland would prefer to live in more integrated residential communities. So I have to ask myself is it just a question of giving power-sharing time to bed itself down before the issue of the interfaces can be addressed in any detail and what does this say about the nature of our political leadership?

My second strategic quandary then is how do we go about improving living conditions and life opportunities for people in interface communities who have become living symbols of our societal divisions, without subscribing to the apparent inevitability of the peace walls? Just putting in a nice shade of brick and a better building design, as was done in Springmartin, is not enough. And my third strategic quandary is who should be talking about these interfaces? Yes, it is clearly a societal issue, and it is not good enough that so many people just take their holidays in July, and yet the very communities that comprise the interface areas must be core to any discussions about their future; and I am here talking about the totality of these communities.



And this then brings me to my tactical quandaries. Clearly over the years a number of political ex-prisoners, often due to their local standing, have been at the forefront in taking the risks of becoming participants in intra and inter-community dialogue, however this has rarely been acknowledged. There is an issue as to what organisations get funded for such dialogue, yet who do they then rely on to carry it out; there is also an issue of, on the one hand, the political marginalization and demonisation of ex-prisoners and/or ex-combatants, but come the summer the call goes out – where are the community leaders? Perhaps we need, as a society, to have the courage to be a little more honest with ourselves.

The second tactical quandary, however, is how do we increase the pool of such community leaders – too much seems to depend on too few people. How can we involve people who were at middle management levels of organisations and communities during the Troubles? Is it an issue that people at the middle management levels aren't interested, or is it that dialogue and negotiation is still something that is so sensitive that it needs to be tightly controlled?

And my final tactical quandary, how do we demystify the conflict resolution/conflict transformation aspects of peacebuilding and bring them together with the

more generic community development approaches that are so needed to improve living conditions in interface communities? There is still the adrenalin rush associated with the former - which is in part linked to the burn-out syndrome that we are also seeing locally - but it is important that our high octane community negotiator does not exclude – whether consciously or unconsciously – the local community volunteer (in the non militarist sense) who is a local community activist. It is sometimes hard to shake the habit of organisational tradition and discipline; but even harder, perhaps, when there is only tradition and very limited discipline.

But then, as everyone knows, it's easy to be the hurler on the ditch, or the critic on the touchline, and as a self confessed failure in achieving resolution between the Apprentice Boys and the Lower Ormeau Residents, I can only share my thoughts rather than offering any magic formulae. I do, however, welcome the recognition within the Consortium that, whatever the difficulties experienced, it is only by achieving consensus that we can move our political quandaries forward – and that invariably consensus requires us to replace the zero-sum game that has bedevilled our politics – the win-lose syndrome with a win-win solution, that invariably requires an element of compromise.



I want also to congratulate the Consortium members on being prepared to take a public position on the need for contact and dialogue across some of our most intractable divisions – this takes courage, but it also creates an important area of space for others. And finally, I want to wish the Consortium not only well in its work, but also to assure it of the Community Foundation's support in both building alliances and achieving a recognition of the role of those political ex-prisoners that are committed to peacebuilding, social justice and a future, that is not only shared between two main communities, but that can be inclusive of all.

After a presentation on the work carried out by BCRC to date the conference moved to the plenary session chaired by Gerry McConville.

PLENARY SESSION

From the floor: Was it deliberate, or why, are there no politicians here to hear what's being said today? My other question, coming down to the groups at grassroots level and the training that Mark and others talked about is, is there a body of people within BCRC who will come to any location to talk to any age group in connection with this whole business of conflict resolution?

Sean Murray: It's my understanding that all political parties were contacted in relation to today's event.

About conflict transformation and the role of our consortium, we are inclusive. We, in a Belfast context, will go out and talk to any group in relation to conflict management, conflict transformation, conflict resolution. We wish to give the benefit of our experience, and we also wish to gain experience. There's no individual within this group who would claim to know it all, in relation to the issues that I have outlined. So it's a question of listening and learning for everyone. No one has all the answers. We are willing to engage with any group who will dialogue with us. Our consortium is open to every group which shares the essential ethos of the group. We work in a non-violent approach to conflict transformation and resolution and we are totally inclusive of all groups, and working with all agencies and statutory bodies. I do recognise some political faces here.

From the floor: Could you touch more specifically on how BCRC works in relation to the more established groups working in the interface areas prior to the establishment of your consortium? I'm thinking of the phone network that would have been established in my own area in East Belfast and parts of North Belfast?

Tom Roberts: As I said in my presentation, we've recognised many examples of good practice in conflict resolution of which the phone network is one. Our mission is to enhance those mechanisms that do exist, and make them more efficient. And where practical, to share them throughout Belfast. We shouldn't be seen as a threat to any of those organisations that do exist. I commend the work that already goes on, but sometimes it's a bit disjointed and we feel that we can make a contribution to joining it up better.

Avila also touched on the issue of groups who are more readily funded, who are given the funds and resources to address interface issues, but invariably would have come to people like ourselves and our colleagues to sort out the problems. So perhaps with us having a more direct engagement, we can become more efficient in resolving the undoubted problems that continue to exist.

Frankie Gallagher: I think BCRC's unique city wide approach captures the imagination of people to give a wee bit of hope to people who thought this may never have been possible. We are still working on relationships. We are still trying to understand the best way to connect. We've got a legislative assembly at Stormont at the minute, they're in transition, they're still trying to work out how to reconnect with communities, because they've been disconnected for many, many years. And I think civic society is the same. BCRC is a manifestation of that, where we in the community who have been working on the ground have to reconnect with ourselves. We need to do it sensitively, we need a degree of understanding, and we have to learn how to develop the mechanisms with which we can relate to the people on the ground.

One of the things that came out of some of the talks is that we're taking the time to build the roots, or sow the seeds of developing the way forward. BCRC cannot move too fast, it can't jump in, it has to listen to the sensitivities. You probably know as well as anybody else, one shoe doesn't fit all, anywhere in Belfast. That's an argument right across Northern Ireland. No one shoe fits everywhere. Everywhere is a different problem with unique approaches. BCRC has to learn how to move through those different approaches. Different people's attitudes produce different circumstances on the ground. I think we're doing it the right way. We're doing it slowly, we're doing it sensitively, and we're doing it in a way that respects those communities and those people who have undoubtedly provided that type of resource for at least two decades.

Sean Murray: We recognise the vital work done by all existing groups. Many of these groups have been around for quite a few years and they have done invaluable work. Because it's adopting a city wide work for the first time ever it's important that BCRC identify any gaps that may exist within that context, and where there is a lack of interaction, a lack of structure, that we should fill that void in association with local people on the ground. So it's not an attempt to take over other organisations or pose a threat to them, we are there to complement them.

One of our key priorities at the present time is to identify and promote a strong lobby capacity for interface areas, and that has to be done in association with all existing groups. When we can develop that approach, when we can get all the key individuals, all the key organisations to sign up to that approach, then it puts interface areas in a very powerful position to design and shape their own futures.

From the floor: I'd like to congratulate the Consortium on their efforts to date and the programme they've presented. It gives us a very important opportunity to continue good interface practice throughout Belfast. We're working with an ex-prisoners consortium which has a broader constituency base than maybe is present here today. Have there been efforts to bring in some of the other constituencies in interface communities, or will such efforts be made? If people are talking about inclusion, and I think that's very important, are there other people who could be included in the work of the Consortium at some stage in the future?

Sean Murray: Our ethos is, we have to be inclusive, because it won't work if we're not inclusive. So we adopt an open door approach. Any individuals, any organisations who can sign up to our essential ethos in terms of being inclusive and in terms of a non-violent approach will be welcome as part of this process. And we are at pains to get that message out there. We've done a number of workshops in areas throughout Belfast, and I thought it was a fascinating approach which I personally learned a lot from. Because the number of issues of common concern throughout the interface communities was unbelievable. And you had to attend those meetings to appreciate the strength of feeling around those issues. We may have political issues which divide us, but more and more we are finding there are social and economic issues which we can unite on. Because we are all suffering from the consequences of social deprivation.

From the floor (Winston Irvine, BCRC Steering Group Member): Just to give a 'for instance', we recently had a quite serious incident in North Belfast over the course of the last number of days. I was the first port of call. The mechanism that we have agreed within the structures of BCRC is to alert the key area contacts that have been established in each of the compass point areas. Once that is done, the PSNI are also contacted in tandem with that early warning system, and then wherever the location of the incident is, those key area contacts make their way to the incident and try to restore calm to the area, get a bit of breathing space, and then get ourselves together with other people to see not only how do we deal with the incident that has just taken place, but also how we should strategically look at the issues, and what are the underlying issues that need to be addressed.

From the floor: That issue there is very core, because there are mechanisms set in place all over the city, and there are gaps in those mechanisms. One of the roles of BCRC is to try and identify the gaps and then to fill those gaps.

From the floor: Brian, it was very interesting what you said about the South African context. You were

indicating a breakdown, in some sense. Would you want to say any more about that in this context? You have alluded to the lessons that we need to learn in terms of building a civil society, and do you have anything to say specifically for BCRC to take into account?

Avila, I was interested in what you said about the invisibility of this kind of work that BCRC carries out. Would you have anything to say on why that is the case?

Avila Kilmurray: One of the things that is core in this work has to be the involvement of ex-prisoners, ex-combatants, those in some sense that have linkages and the ability to deliver on the ground. The way our politics has developed from the voluntary side, is that they are the groups that are coming forward, and all we need to say is Stephen Nolan, in terms of the reaction that is taken when we say, actually it's ex-political prisoners that are involved in this.

What has happened over the last 10 years is that broader society has packaged its view of what happened over the Troubles – whatever you want to call them – as the fault of a very small minority of people and nothing to do with the rest of society. We have scapegoated. That's one of the reasons why there is the invisibility of the work. It is much easier to find an acceptable, respectable recipient in the broader society to move the work forward.

In terms of the interface between this work and the local area work, one of the reasons why I was really keen to see BCRC getting off the ground is when I was working at the micro level, Apprentice Boys in the Lower Ormeau, I was very aware that what was not on our negotiation table was the political context of our work. And I was acutely aware – at that stage, okay, the politics were different, we were coming into the late 90's – that if one of those parties had compromised it wouldn't have been the local people in those areas that would have complained, it would have been somebody in another area of Belfast that would have complained.

They were having to work to an agenda that was never spoken, and the importance of getting the people who are around the table that are involved with this initiative, to get a deeper understanding of where each of you are coming from . . . is that it will give a facilitative context to the local work. Getting back to Claire's point, for that reason, I believe, we need to be more honest about who can actually make things happen in our society.

Brian Currin: A unique aspect of the political settlement in Northern Ireland is that it is a settlement that has not resolved a political ideological issue. What it does is that it manages the conflicting ideologies that

exist on this part of the island of Ireland. And to that extent, if the communities, the two traditions, don't work together and identify the common problems which Sean has alluded to, if they don't come together and they don't work together I think it's inevitable that the focus will be on resolving conflict and resolving disputes that will continue to exist within the interfaces.

It's essential that you do identify those common issues, those socioeconomic issues, and you focus on those. Through focusing on them you will find your commonality, and that will help to manage this interesting dynamic of the political resolution here in Northern Ireland.

That is one point that I was really wanting to emphasise. And the other one is to say, immediately in the aftermath of a settlement you always have political leaders who themselves were activists, who themselves were involved in politics because they were committed to a cause. And that is something which is unique. Generally the world does not have cause politicians. They are professional politicians . . . My word of warning is, beware. You are not going to have cause politicians forever. But use that, the fact that you've got them today. If, within civil society, you are able to have that sort of engagement, you have a quality civil society, you are able to engage with politicians, you hold them accountable – and you will I think for a much longer time have politicians that do provide the sort of quality service that you need, because the quality of your political sector reflects the quality of your NGO sector.

From the floor: Congratulations. It's been wonderful to listen to how long you've been established, the wonderful work that you are doing. It's very encouraging to hear that this sort of work is going on, and how long it's been going on for. My question is, do you actively encourage community people to get involved with the District Policing Partnership? It's now all fully representative of all political parties, and all communities are now on board.

The second part of my question is on the training that your staff members have been involved in. Are they using a capacity-building method to spread this training around which encourages more and more people to get involved and to be trained in conflict resolution?

Chair: Could I divide that question into two, and ask the Steering Group members about the Policing Partnership Board? And Claire, to answer the training element of it?

Tom Roberts: From our perspective, as a society in transition, the police are also in transition, and unfortunately there are no quick fix solutions. But we

do encourage our people to engage constructively with the police. In the past, for policing in a lot of the areas most acutely affected by the conflict, local communities turned to the various armed groupings to solve their problems for them in relation to crime and antisocial behaviour. And the police, at one time, were quite happy to allow that to happen. But in transition, and certainly in the aftermath of the violent conflict, one of the symptoms has been an increase in criminality. And unfortunately, with the police service not being used to dealing with that type of thing, they haven't got it quite right yet. And in saying that, we don't want to put the blame entirely on the police. We all have a part to play in that and we all have a part to play in the solution to give the societies that were most affected by the conflict a better quality of life. And we'll not be failing, we'll step up to the mark in getting acceptable policing. And the short answer to your question is, yes, we do encourage our people to become involved with the Partnerships and hopefully it will bear fruit in the not too distant future.

Sean Murray: I referred earlier to the various workshops that we're doing around Belfast. One of the key issues coming up in every area was policing. And as Tom said, policing is in transition, our communities are in transition. And that requires a sustained period of dialogue. We need to be good listeners, we need to be able to adopt fresh approaches to deal with the complex issues that we face. Deirdre in her presentation referred to the issue of community safety. It's a massive issue. Not only in interface areas but in many areas throughout this country. And it's something that we in interface areas have to face and deal with, on a daily basis. And the lesson we've learned is that there is no substitute for dialogue, and that has to be an open and honest process. There are complex problems that we deal with. They are not going to be resolved in going out from here. Unless we sit down and engage with the police, with all the key statutory bodies, we're not going to bring a resolution to those complex problems. Because they all impact on the quality of life for our communities. And that's a challenge ahead for all of us. But the Steering Group or the practitioners on the road can't resolve this. The communities in association with all the groups who work in those communities have to come together and identify issues of common concern and work out a strategy for dealing with them.

Frankie Gallagher: I can't add much more than what my two colleagues have said, but if you listen to what Avila said earlier, the dangers of trying to deal with issues on a micro level, and that micro level means that there's somebody else in a small district or somewhere else who does not add to the overall solution and can in fact bring it down. BCRC as it develops needs to develop that macro approach, and Belfast is probably a

good framework for doing it, for identifying common issues. Those common issues are policing, and community safety, and a whole myriad of other issues as well. So I think that lobby that we talked about earlier, a collective voice identifying common issues, this is part of the transition of where we're at in civil society. Policing is a high priority, and the District Policing Partnerships, which we do support, are a high priority. But yes, we definitely engage with anyone in debate in relation to any of the issues that the lady brought up.

Chair: If it's about representation, and getting their voices heard, the DPP is a mechanism, it's working to different degrees. But in a developmental process, and a transformation process, we still have to work out ways of how the police relate to the people on the ground, especially in those marginalised, isolated areas, high levels of deprivation. How do we include them? So I think District Policing Partnerships are a good step, but there's more to do. Is BCRC a vehicle to try and help develop that common approach? Well, it's up to the will of the people within the room and involved with BCRC if they want to do that.

From the floor: The reason I asked about politicians earlier is that I've noted the danger of disconnection and that's why I enquired about politics. Grassroots people, when they get into politics can sometimes make a difference. I was wondering, as we move forward, how we can say to community people that politicians are somehow represented here? Even if we can't say that we need them here definitely on the day, maybe we could say that there needs to be people who are here to represent them, so that we have that shade of opinion. It's important to bridge the gap between the people we've elected and the people who elected them. I noted what Sean said about the lobby, and that is very important, and what Brian said. But I was just thinking that on an occasion like this, how good it would have been if people were able to say, we're all together here.

Sean Murray: As I said earlier, we're not able to ascertain just how many political heads are here. But as part of the lobbying process which you referred to, and as part of the engagement process which I mentioned earlier, as the political parties fall within that remit, I think it's incumbent upon us all to ensure that interface areas are high on the political radar. Because unless people from interface areas are taking up concerns and issues, nobody else is going to do it for them. So that's part of the political lobby that we aspire to in association with all political groupings that represent these areas. And then, politicians, even if they are elected, have to recognise how important those issues are, and, more importantly, they have to have the political will to resolve those issues.

They are complex issues but they need to be dealt with. There is a generation who are growing up now and who have never experienced conflict, and they're looking for instant solutions. That is why it's important that we deal with issues like youth alienation and that we don't take anyone for granted within those communities. They have to see something tangible resulting from peace processes. And I make a distinction between the peace process and the political process. And at some time they have to merge. And people have to see the benefits accruing from both processes, and that has to be in tangible form for interface communities.

From the floor: I live in one of the interface areas, and it is young people, a minority of young people in our own areas that are causing trouble. What does BCRC offer those young people in terms of training and youth programmes? Is it just conflict resolution training, or is it encompassing all sorts of training?

Chair: We forgot about Claire answering the second part of Valerie's question, about training, so could we link those two in?

From the floor: (Claire Hackett, BCRC staff) Training is given within our own group of practitioners, but also reaching out to young people and communities. To date, we've created more than a hundred training places. That training is about core conflict resolution skills. But leading on to the next question, it also includes training in the other areas that are needed. So there are negotiation and mediation skills, but also areas of the training dealing with the past, equality issues, human rights, creating shared strategies. We have identified young people as a particular target group. Our focus at the minute is youth leadership, getting young people involved in doing youth work and in leading youth work. That's our focus at the minute, but we would be interested in any ideas on how to expand beyond that.

From the floor: I'd like to congratulate BCRC on their city wide initiative and their very good presentation. I can't help but feel that the lack of political representation here today is more than just a coincidence. I think I can pick at least one party in government who would like to see much safer hands than those in the room today, but my experience is that ex-prisoners and ex-combatants are the ones who delivered the real peace on the ground, especially in interfaces. And the panel has touched on lobbying political parties, but what if lobbying doesn't work? How then do we establish initiatives like this and get support from government?

Tom Roberts: I would share the concerns that you have. Thankfully, and hopefully, the violent conflict is behind us now, and particularly, probably, from our own point of view on the unionist side, the politicians want to claim

the responsibility for doing that, and not acknowledge the work that was done that gave them the space to arrive at where they're at today. But actually, I feel that it's worse than that. Because now that we have relative normality and peace here, the civic society in general is looking for a convenient hook to hang the blame for the conflict on, and we happen to be that hook. So I would share your concern around that. But BCRC, due to coming together strategically on common issues, has created a powerful lobbying force that will put pressure on the politicians to recognise the work that has been done and continues to be done, and hopefully they'll give us the resources to continue with that.

Frankie Gallagher: In terms of political representation we invited political elected people to come along. And they are busy, they're in transition themselves. If you listen to the words of caution of Brian earlier, at the moment we have more politicians who are cause based, and who are there because they were involved in a cause, whatever it may be. The political landscape is changing, those people are now being replaced with pragmatists, and pragmatism is the absence of principle. As they take a more pragmatic approach to the issues, the social ills and all the economic regeneration issues the political landscape will change. There's already movement. But the next 12 months or so will be a telling 12 months. Whether they want to transform and come out of the trenches and come into groups like we're doing now, or whether they want to stay in their trenches.

This is an opportunity for political representatives – and I suppose we'll get more opportunities, in terms of common purpose or common issues right across Belfast. And I think that's what we should do, present more opportunities for political representatives to come to these events and see how change is impacting on the ground. And if they're left behind that's their lookout.

Sean Murray: The challenge for interface communities, both individuals and groups, is to come together to identify the key issues of concern and work out a lobbying strategy, work out a political strategy in relation to what do we do to bring some relief to those conditions.

I believe that the politicians will listen, because they have to listen. Because if interface areas come together from all traditions that's a powerful lobby. And today's event is an excellent start. And if you get an indication of the support for projects like this, and for all other groups who work in interface areas, if we do adopt that partnership approach we can all draw strength from one another. And that is the only way we can do the work. Because even politicians on their own, with the best will in the world, can't deliver unless we focus them, because they're dealing with massive issues, they're dealing with

a number of priorities. And it's up to us as a lobbying group to articulate our priorities and to put forward ideas and suggestions as to how we deal with them. And put the pressure on.

Not only political parties, all these statutory bodies need to deliver as well. And they have to develop a partnership approach. It is very difficult to get the statutory bodies to come together in a partnership approach. So that's a challenge ahead for us all. But unless we grasp that challenge, unless we grasp that nettle, there won't be a resolution. Brian referred to the example in South Africa. They may have settled their political differences, but unless you have a focus on the key social and economic issues history will come back to haunt us. Make no mistake about it. Young people have to see a difference, and they have to see that in tangible form. Don't take anyone for granted.

From the floor: I'd like to commend the organisers and the panel for a very interesting morning. I'm from Gerry Adams office and in his constituency offices on the Falls and the Shankill and Suffolk, we've been involved in issues right across the whole constituency. Because our politics is very much about empowering local communities, and about bringing social and economic change through all those areas. Gerry attaches a very particular importance to engaging and reaching out to all citizens within the constituency. So be assured of our encouragement and support for what you are doing.

From the floor: (Joe Marley BCRC staff) I'd like to address a point that was made from the floor earlier and it's basically an add-on to what Frankie was saying about the mechanisms we use. A large part of conflict management strategy is about community interventions, and there's the more strategic part, looking at some of the social issues that might come up in the next election. But what I want to say is that there is a structure there, with the key area contacts, and the values that underpin that process is honesty and accountability between those involved. None of that is done in isolation. All of us that are practitioners within the BCRC structure are also involved pro-actively at a local level. So it's not BCRC doing anything in isolation. It's all done in partnership with and in collaboration with local networks and local structures.

And just to give an example of BCRC's approach - a lot of the issues that we're going to be driving forward are issues not defined by our steering group, or the BCRC structure. The four geographic workshops that we held had about 76 organisations across the city involved in that process. The process was to prioritise what the local issues were and also to try and identify models and methods that could be exported to different parts of the city, and trying to consolidate what best

practice is currently there. The issues we're talking about are issues that are defined by people, the talk back from workshops. Over 100 people attended and 76 organisations were represented at the workshops. So we're trying our hardest, and we're at pains to be as inclusive as possible.

Chair, closing remarks: That only leaves me to conclude today's proceedings. I'd just like to thank our steering group members, and our two guest speakers, who brought two very different dimensions to the work that we do and certainly gave us a lot to think about. In terms of BCRC, we will be taking back into the steering group the experience that we learned, not only from them, but from the questions and the comments that were expressed today. It would be very remiss of me not to thank our key funder, the Peace II Programme, managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the Belfast Local Strategy Partnership, who fund both the Falls Community Council and Intercomm. They have been very helpful and very supportive of us. Because this hasn't been an easy project. It hasn't been one of those projects that you just get up and go and it runs itself. There have been many challenges, and those challenges have also reflected in terms of procedural issues with our funders. We have a very good working relationship with them and I'd like to thank them for their support.

The whole thing about BCRC is that – Avila mentioned earlier about perceptions, perceptions are really someone's reality – and what we're trying to do is build a framework where we can deal with those perceptions, unravel perceptions, and bring common understanding to the issues that face us.

Thank you for attending.



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