



BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

Setting the Context

Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) is a citywide cross-community partnership working to assist conflict transformation at Belfast's interfaces. It was established in 2007 by a number of cross-community activists and its membership has recently been enhanced by the addition of representatives of statutory and other agencies. The project's mission is to empower interface communities to develop the tools and resources that can help them manage and address conflict transformation within their local areas and across the city of Belfast, underpinned by a community development ethos.

As acknowledged in the 'Together: Building a United Community Strategy' issued by OFMDFM in May 2013, sectarianism continues to form one of the main divides within society and we recognize that everyone has a role to play in tackling this issue. For our part we believe that the development of a Toolkit and Training Programme with a focus on sectarianism will help make a positive contribution towards the implementation of the strategy.

In line with its community development ethos, BCRC has designed this Toolkit to engage local residents, community workers and other key stakeholder in discussions on how we can address sectarianism at the 'everyday' level, across our society. By increasing knowledge about sectarianism, how it emerges, how it impacts on individuals and communities as well as how it shapes attitudes, BCRC hopes to contribute to an understanding of how the sectarian divisions within our society can be constructively managed.

As new communities come to live here, the Toolkit also aims to explore potential links between sectarianism and racism. Identifying how sectarianism and racism impact on quality of life outcomes, often for those most marginalised and disadvantaged, can then help people develop local solutions to transforming relations in divided and contested urban, rural and cultural spaces.

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

In addition, the Toolkit aims to provide learning of how sectarianism is defined and enforced by law. This is an important learning outcome as the difficulties that politicians have experienced in defining sectarianism, at the regional level, has led many statutory agencies to shape their own understanding of it so that they can address and manage the legal challenges which sectarianism presents in their 'everyday' working practices.

One of the key goals of the Toolkit is to encourage local people to not only reflect on their own attitudes, prejudices and experiences but also to ultimately promote Action for Change which begins at an individual level and permeates into our local communities and broader society through a 'ripple of influence'. As part of this Toolkit, BCRC will offer participants its assistance in developing a draft Anti-Sectarianism Charter that they may bring to their local organisations and communities for potential adoption.

Chris Maccabe
BCRC Independent Chair
Belfast, 20th May 2015

BCRC is supported by five partner organisations:

Falls Community Council |
Belfast Reconciliation Network |
Ex-Prisoners Interpretive Centre |
Intercomm |
Prisoners Aid Network Group |

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

Contributor & Participant Feedback

As part of our work to complete this Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit, BCRC has engaged with a wide spectrum of stakeholders ranging from representatives of statutory bodies, community activists, political parties, academics and faith-based individuals. Through brief interviews with 27 people, it was confirmed that sectarianism is indeed an issue that we need to address with some urgency.

When asked what they think of when they hear the term 'sectarianism', contributors' answers included words such as: 'bigotry, hatred, hurt, anger, vulnerability, demonisation, hostility, discrimination, exclusion, violence, intolerance, division, conflict, upheaval, aggression, separation, bitterness, deaths, suffering, racism, oppression, judgement' – all with negative connotations. (Many of these are also reflected in the image on the cover page)

Contributors were also asked to rate sectarianism as a societal problem. Overall, sectarianism was viewed as a pressing issue with the contributors rating it highly on a scale of 1-10, confirming the significance and necessity of a training programme and Toolkit such as that produced by BCRC.

During the initial phase of delivering the training (Jan-May 2015), feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive while also providing BCRC with constructive criticism regarding format, contents and various technical and logistical issues. The vast majority of participants welcomed the Toolkit and training programme, as indicated by the high score given to the training sessions.

When asked to provide comments, participants emphasized that the training "brought lots of points that had to be said, our own differences have to be said", that the "other sides views were interesting at times" and that the session enabled participants to find out "what everyone else was thinking on both sides of the community". As one participant put it, "before the session I was clueless to what sectarianism really was but thanks to the session ... I now have a better understanding of it". Another participant noted that as a result of the training he/she "understand the definition of sectarianism now, which in turn will allow

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

[him/her] to take this information into [his/her] home/community/workplace". In addition, other feedback stressed that the Toolkit "has great potential", that the training was "informative, challenging and self exploratory whilst providing opportunity to speak about sectarianism openly" and that it had provided relevant information which resulted in "a better insight into why this issue needs dealt with". In terms of the overall issue of sectarianism, one participant concluded that it is a "[h]ugely important issue, which unresolved makes all our goals harder to achieve".

Suggestions for future steps regarding the Toolkit were also made by training participants, such as "to keep groups mixed to hear how both sides feel", and that it "could be brought to a younger group ie school children" by tailoring the Toolkit to better suit this particular group.

Based on the initial feedback provided by training participants as well as the contributions made by a broad range of key stakeholders, BCRC is optimistic that the Toolkit can play a key role in addressing the 'elephant in the room' – 'sectarianism' – within Belfast and beyond as part of our society's broader conflict transformation process.

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

Outline of the BCRC Toolkit

To ensure that the BCRC Toolkit & Training Programme covers key areas and themes in relation to the complex issue of 'sectarianism' in our society, the BCRC staff team has engaged with key stakeholders, delivered pilot training sessions on a cross-community basis as well as had ongoing conversations within the project itself. We are most grateful to all those who have contributed to the Toolkit throughout this development and engagement phase.

As a result of this process, BCRC has identified **five key areas** that form the basis for the Toolkit's training modules:

1. **Unpacking Sectarianism**
2. **Am I Sectarian?**
3. **Impact & Consequences of Sectarianism**
4. **Sectarianism through an International Perspective**
5. **Action for Change: A Community Development Approach**

As the title suggests, the **first** training module aims to unpack the issue of sectarianism within the local context. Participants are for instance asked to examine definitions of sectarianism, to reflect on their own views of sectarianism as well as the historical context of the issue on the island of Ireland.

In the **second** module, the training focuses on self-reflection and increasing participants' awareness regarding their own prejudices, stereotyping and critical assumptions as well as exploring what triggers and sustains sectarianism at individual, community and societal levels.

The **third** module examines the impact and consequences of sectarianism at different levels in our society, including the human level, future generations, housing and mobility, as well as explores potential costs of sectarian divisions.

BCRC recognises that sectarianism is not limited to the local context and that it has also had an impact in numerous other areas around the world. The **fourth** training module therefore aims to look at this issue through an international and comparative perspective.

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

Finally, the BCRC Toolkit's **fifth** module explores the potential for 'Action for Change' at individual, community, civic and policy levels, applying a ripple of influence model. The module also includes discussions regarding the legislative framework for dealing with the issue of sectarianism as well as the development of an Anti-Sectarianism Charters. BCRC hopes that this module will encourage and enable participants to bring a positive message of addressing sectarianism into their own local communities/organisations and beyond.

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

Acknowledgements

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Eamon Phoenix (*Stranmillis College*)
Dympna McGlade
Jacqueline Irwin (*CRC*)
Chris Lyttle (*Alliance Party*)

BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

BCRC Steering Group & Staff Team

Following a recent review of its structure, the BCRC Steering Group has been expanded to include an Independent Chair, representatives of key statutory bodies as well as representatives of the project's five partner organisations.

BCRC Steering Group

Independent Chair

Chris Maccabe (BCRC Independent Chair)

Partner Organisation Representatives

Gerry McConville	Tom Roberts	Liam Maskey
Winston Irvine	Robert McCartney	Sean Murray
Jim Wilson	Denis Cunningham	Billy McQuiston
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Statutory Representatives

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BCRC Anti-Sectarianism Toolkit: A Belfast Model

Introduction

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