

**THINK TANK SERIES**  
**Building Community or Building Peace?**  
**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2005**

**Introduction**

The community and voluntary sector plays a crucial role in Northern Ireland. It faces many challenges in the near future – not least that of a new funding climate. The Think Tank Series provides opportunities for those committed to working in this sector to reflect on some of these issues. This first session focused on the role of community development and community relations in facilitating a sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. To this effect, Antoine Rutayisire, Vice Chair of the National Commission for Reconciliation was invited to relay his experiences of communal division in Rwanda, followed by Dr. Duncan Morrow, Chief Executive of the Community Relations Council. Local panelists – Eamonn Deane, Holywell Trust and Philomena Boyle, Tullyarvan Mill – contributed to a wider discussion and Q&A from the audience.

Helen Lewis, INCORE's Local International Learning Project Co-ordinator, welcomed everyone to INCORE and introduced Marie Taylor as the facilitator for this event. Marie highlighted the importance of the Think Tank Series as a forum for sharing ideas, reflecting on challenges and discussing creative ways forward. She introduced Antoine and invited him to speak about his experiences in Rwanda.

**Antoine Rutayisire**

Antoine began by posing the question: 'Building Community or Building Peace?' For him it was not a question of either/or, but rather a combination of both. He described the devastating impact of the 1994 genocide. One million people were killed in less than 100 days and average per capita income declined from \$260 to \$50. All infrastructures were destroyed and the social economy ground to a halt. Almost half the population (3 million) fled the country to refugee camps. More than 500,000 children were orphaned. Antoine also explained the divisive nature of the genocide – which turned the entire population into either murderers or victims.

Rebuilding the community after such devastation was a very slow process. Antoine emphasised the major role played by NGO's, as many governments chose to channel their money/aid through these organisations. However, while community development projects aimed at rebuilding infrastructures and encouraging small businesses were essential and attracted investments to the country, they alone were not enough. For example, micro-enterprise projects established in the wake of the genocide witnessed women who had been paying back their loans successfully over a number of years stop doing as the trauma of losing loved ones slowly began to emerge and they suddenly began to think 'well, what's the point, why not just spend it all today?'

Antoine explained that a 2002 survey highlighted the high levels of mistrust that still existed among the communities. This mistrust and suspicion were hindering community development in a country where one simply cannot afford to be independent of one's neighbours. Therefore building relationships became indispensable.

In 1999, the Unity and Reconciliation Commission was charged with a mandate to 1) monitor the temperature of social relations and provide a forum for discussion to avert tensions from spiralling out of control, 2) educate the population, particularly the youth, to slowly dissolve inbuilt perceptions of 'the other,' and 3) put together a reconciliation policy that outlined the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders in society that were working towards building a shared future.

In conclusion, it was Antoine's view that peace and development go hand-in-hand. We need to build relationships or else mistrust will hinder community development.

### **Duncan Morrow**

Duncan began by asking 'What is community relations?' While this encompasses a variety of ideas, in his view, it is often treated as a 'soft' issue. That is, people often steer clear of political, racial and religious issues if they meet someone new on the premise, 'don't go there or what good has been done will be destroyed.' But, in his opinion, we must face up to the responsibilities of community relations.

He asked why community relations are not yet the primary concern of public policy in Northern Ireland? He reasoned that vested interests in Northern Ireland are keeping communities apart.

Millions of pounds have been poured into Northern Ireland in an effort to promote and encourage community development whilst conflict has been ongoing. In the past this has actually solidified community divisions and delayed community relations. Duncan quoted Glen Patterson who said that 'community' taken in this context is just another word for 'sides.' In this case, there can be no justification for further investment by outside governments and agencies in Northern Ireland. This scenario has given the Northern Irish people the opportunity to live relatively wealthy and 'Westernised' lives without needing to change their political views. This model of community relations and community development is both unacceptable and unsustainable.

Duncan therefore challenged the notion that community development can be achieved without change. The challenge for politicians is to be able to deliver an overarching policy for *all*, rather than focus on their traditional, 'fixed' communities.

He concluded with three remarks:

- 1) Community development, as some form of participatory democracy, requires community relations.
- 2) This will be a long and difficult process.
- 3) Reconciliation is a core quality of life issue that is *everyone's* business.

## Questions and Answers

Marie summarised the two talks as a series of mutually exclusives. She put a few points to the audience to provoke thought and stimulate discussion. For example, are we part of the problem or are we part of the solution? Are we at the cause or the effect of the future? Questions were then taken from the audience:

- Is community relations a separate issue to community development? Do we need to define what we are talking about? The group agreed that there is a need for straight talking. Young people and the poor are generally treated as the 'guinea pigs' in community relations work whereas the reality of community relations as a set of values is that it must accommodate diversity and work to the benefit of *all*. Also Duncan recognised that the history of differential relations to power is difficult for the nationalist community to get past. The group acknowledged that the Women's Movement in 1974 started out from a community relations point of view.
- Antoine was asked to qualify what he meant by community development? In the Rwandan example, community relations did not feature in community development projects. The difficulty lies in trying to measure relationships. Funders want to see projects that can generate measurable outputs.
- Antoine was asked to explain the relationships between the Hutus and the Tutsis before the genocide. He told how, despite stereotypical accounts, it is very difficult to ascertain physical differences between the two communities. Animosity began in the 1930s when the Belgians gave out identity cards to distinguish between the two peoples. The Belgians were unhappy when the Tutsis requested independence and turned the population against one another. Simplified, the genocide was an accumulation of these politics.

## Panel Discussion: The Challenge of Creating / Building Communities and Peace?

Antoine and Duncan were joined by Philomena Boyle, Tullyarvan Mill, and Eamonn Deane, Holywell Trust, to facilitate a group discussion.

- The group suggested there is a need to address the emotional impact of post colonialism on an individual and collective level, and to develop a language of accommodation that suits all.
- The group suggested there is a need for a more holistic approach to community relations. That is, parallel processes, whereby all levels of governance are working toward the same goal in unison, are critical. We need to work on the principle of addressing our problems together.

- The panel was asked to discuss the definition of ‘trauma’ and the importance of relationships. Philomena highlighted the need to talk about our traumas, find out each other’s fears and address them - although she acknowledged that this is inevitably a very slow process. She recommended focusing on parents, as they play a huge part in sustaining the conflict by passing on their prejudices to their children.
- Antoine was asked whether the intensity and scale of the Rwandan conflict enabled a more active movement towards reconciliation as compared with the Northern Ireland conflict that seems to lack the public and political commitment needed to move forward? Antoine acknowledged that Africa is so poor that it can’t afford to ignore relations with each other. Relationships are necessary for the survival of their people and this acts as an impetus toward reconciliation. Secondly, as reconciliation demands getting rid of presuppositions, you need to provide a platform for people to voice their cause and concerns. The Rwandan government has made this a priority by attaching the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation to the Office of the President.
- Duncan proposed that Northern Ireland is just as reliant on relationships. But money and wealth has allowed us to think we could move forward without repairing relations. The time has come for what he called ‘disillusionment.’ At the moment everyone is avoiding responsibility. We need to make the choice to address reconciliation.
- The panel was questioned about the importance of dialogue with parents and their role in reconciliation. Antoine acknowledged that they are still struggling in Rwanda about how to get hold and initiate contact with parents. But he suggested that they need to discover their fears and address them. There is a need to create a community that is safe, prosperous, sustainable and inclusive where everyone, both parents and children, have a universal interest in their society. It is this type of engagement that you can then link to policy.
- It is accepted that public funding and peace money is beginning to dry up. Therefore the people of Northern Ireland cannot afford to ignore community relations anymore. We need to make economic choices.
- Antoine was asked about the involvement of women in the Rwandan government. Under the new Constitution, women have to occupy 30% of all decision-making bodies in Rwanda. They currently dominate the Rwandan parliament.

## **Conclusion**

Marie thanked all the participants for a lively and thought provoking discussion and special thanks was extended to all members of the panel. She encouraged all participants to sign up for the next event in the series ‘The Edge or the Precipice?’ which will take place on Tuesday 8 November.

## **Points Captured on Flip Charts during Group Discussion**

*Emotional DNA*

*Language of accommodation*

*Defensiveness and History*

*Beyond Antagonism*

*If we had safety how would we know – what would it look like?*

*Parallel process*

*Relations – integral or separate?*

*Working with parents and grandparents – ‘trauma’, fears*

*Holistic approach*

*Time - do we have it?*

*- recognise it?*

*- think about it?*

*Is there a public commitment to reconciliation?*

*Have we got used to not having it?*

### ***Presumptions and prescriptions***

*(Do we base our knowledge and ideas on assumptions?)*

*The poor are best at building their relationships*

*Are we doing to or doing with?*

*Is reconciliation the priority?*

*Is money the sticking plaster?*

*Presuppose a shared future*

*Where do we begin with parents – what’s the nature of dialogue?*

*Are we focused on what rather than now*

*Cultural conditions?*

*Building on universal interest – the lives of parents*

*- the future lives of our children*

*Creating possibilities and developing positive stories*

*Language and symbols definition are key*

*We need a reality check*

*Roles and responsibilities – what are they? Can we document it?*

*Waging Peace?*

*Educating children about ‘our wrongs’*

*‘Where we went wrong’*