



INCORE 'INTERFACE PREVENTION' WORKSHOP
Tuesday 6th July 2004

Attendees:

Paul Carson - Teach Na Failte
Charlie Clarke - Teach Na Failte
Kate Clarke - North Belfast Interface Network
Mick Connolly - Teach Na Failte
Sylvia Gordon - Groundwork Northern Ireland
Ken Groves - LINC Management Committee
Helen Lewis - INCORE
John Loughran - Intercomm
Joe Marley - Ardoyne Focus Group
Conor Maskey - Intercomm
Rab McCallum - North Belfast Interface Network
Eddie McDowell - LINC Management Committee
Malachy Mulgrew - North Belfast Interface Network
Billy Mitchell - LINC Resource Centre
Roisin O'Hagan - INCORE
Gerard O'Reilly - Intercomm
Peter O'Reilly - Mediation Northern Ireland
Denis Ritchie - OFM/DFM
Gary Robinson
Tom Roberts - EPIC
Roberta Rogers - Northern Ireland Office
Margaret Smith - An-Eochair
Joan Totten - North Belfast Alternatives
Ken Wilkinson

The aim of the workshop was to discuss the 'Prevention' of Interfaces. A summary of the discussion is outlined below:

Demographic change

The issue of demographic change needs to be seriously addressed. There is a need for more fact-based discussion about the relative expansion/decline of the two communities in Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive needs to be brought into these discussions. As communities become increasingly territorialised, leadership on this issue will become increasingly important. More generally, it was felt that 'perceptions' and 'reality' regarding interface issues are often two different things. More work needs to be done to try and clarify the 'reality.'

Relationships

While interfaces are often assumed to be physical boundaries between communities, one member of the group suggested that the 'real interfaces' in Northern Ireland exist between people. Interfaces reflect

long-term breakdown in relationships between people and communities. It is therefore important for people to begin to understand each other's politics and experiences of living in Northern Ireland; to be able to look at issues through other 'people's eyes;' and to be willing to live together.

CCTV

The point was made that CCTV cameras are not a preventive solution to interfaces. While cameras may have a deterrent effect and reduce the number of attacks in areas where they are deployed, they may also displace violence to other areas and create new interfaces.

Media & commentary

It was suggested that comments by political leaders and policymakers about the possibility of a 'long hot summer' are not helpful and can exacerbate situations in interface areas. The media's portrayal of events in interface areas can also be problematic.

Flags & parades

Some members of the group felt that the issue of flags is not being adequately dealt with. While there is good work being done on the issue of flags e.g. in Derry/Londonderry, it was also felt that due to a lack of trust and honesty people may not be expressing their true feelings about flags and parades issues.

Good Friday/Belfast Agreement

It was noted that the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement failed to adequately plan for peace. The agreement focused heavily on institution building and did not provide for relationship building or engaging broader society in the peace process. Addressing the issue of sectarianism within broader society would help take some of the pressure off interface areas. Securing peace demands that *everyone* take responsibility for the conflict in Northern Ireland and everyone take risks to address its causes and consequences.

Conflict Management/Conflict Transformation

There is a need for a change of approach to the conflict in Northern Ireland - away from a conflict management or 'containment' approach and towards a conflict transformation approach. Conflict transformation means addressing the root causes and consequences of the conflict. We need to look at the causes of the conflict through a variety of different lenses and to face up to the hard issues. It is important to challenge each other and to have the 'uncomfortable' conversations and debates.

Changing political context

It was pointed out that interfaces are arenas where politics are often played out. Political leadership is crucial to preventing interfaces. It was noted that such leadership is unlikely to be forthcoming when politicians consider themselves elected to represent just 'one side.'

Armed groups

There was discussion about the perceived involvement of armed groups in interface areas and accusations regarding orchestration of violence. Government seems to have the attitude that if only the 'bad people' or paramilitaries would go away all the problems in interface areas would be solved.

It was pointed out however, that ex-combatants are making a significant contribution to solving problems in interface areas. For example, many have become 'mentors' for young people and are providing leadership for communities.

However, policymakers have a tendency to reject innovative projects and initiatives that involve working with ex-combatants. Policymakers need to redefine leadership as not simply taking charge of interfaces but also taking risks to address problems in the long-term.

Reference was also made to the IMC Report and the damage that it may have done in terms of engaging ex-combatants in peace building work.

Policing

The point was made that the police have become 'elevated' and removed from communities in interface areas. It was suggested that they have little vested interest in policing interface areas appropriately.

Government responsibility

It was suggested that the policy approach to interfaces is 'one size fits all' and short-term. Members of the group suggested that government try to be more proactive and not just wait until problems erupt in interface areas. The importance of a 'rights based' approach to interfaces was also emphasized e.g. people living in interface areas have the right to good housing, education, health services etc.

It was recommended that government communicate better with community groups and endeavour to keep them abreast of changes in policy. The group felt that government needs to have more of a presence on the streets.

Members of the group welcomed the development of the North Belfast Action Team. However, it was noted that the team does not include community people on the ground and that the CEP's do not seem to be addressing long-term issues in interface areas.

The 'Shared Future' document was also discussed. It was pointed out that the document fails to discuss the role and responsibility of the state in moving towards any 'shared future.'

It was noted that the Northern Ireland Grand Committee had met on 17th June to consider the matter of the future direction of community relations policy in Northern Ireland. Notes of the meeting are available: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmstand/nirelg/st040617/40617s03.htm>.

In the near future, Spellar will issue a new draft community relations policy and strategic framework for focused discussion with elected representatives and key stakeholders.

Members of the group also noted their interest in the outcomes of the Task Force on Resourcing the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Lack of funding/resources

Members of the group voiced concern that there no longer seems to be money available for diversionary activities that take people out of interface areas at times of high tension. Funding requests and proposals now have to be based on a 'planned programme' with no scope for fun activities that are crucial in first persuading young people to come forward and get involved.

The group noted the discrepancy between the amount of money being spent on security in interface areas and that spent on local community initiatives. Concern was expressed that North Belfast community groups are ineligible to apply to the Community Action Fund.

Positive Initiatives

Despite the negativity and, at times, hopelessness in interface areas, the group highlighted a number of positive initiatives that are working. Some of these are listed below:

- Gerard O'Reilly's single identity work with young people.
- Intercomm, EPIC, An-Eochair and Tar Isteach working together to address paramilitary and racism issues.
- The Conflict Transformation Forum - monthly forum for interface groups in North Belfast to meet together and practice collectively
- Intercomm's satellite sites project - as a result of the 'hands-on' approach adopted by Gerard O'Reilly in engaging residents, the group was able to demonstrate a 'unified community front' when approaching the Housing Groups and set-up satellite sites in North Belfast.
- Setting up liaisons with relevant groups e.g. Tesco, the churches, youth groups etc.
- Education and training programmes for youth.
- Parades issue in Derry/Londonderry - much progress has been made around parades issues, as a result of dialogue between community representatives and business leaders.
- Ardoyne Focus Group - provide a 12-week issue and activity based course for 13 young adults living at the interface.