

Community relations

an elusive concept

an exploration by
community activists from North Belfast

compiled by
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Introduction

The working-class communities of North Belfast have been hit extremely hard – some would claim disproportionately hard – by the past 30 years of ‘Troubles’. Compounding the high levels of disadvantage and deprivation, North Belfast has been afflicted by ongoing, and often intensely bitter, sectarian conflict. One major factor undoubtedly contributing to this has been the way in which different Protestant and Catholic areas share a confusing – and often changing – patchwork of interfaces. Nearly a quarter of all the deaths which have occurred in Northern Ireland over the past three decades have taken place within the confines of North Belfast, each death further consolidating deep-seated fears and animosities.

Community activists in North Belfast have for many years been endeavouring to address and ameliorate the deprivation experienced by their respective communities. But while there have been undeniable successes, most community workers despair of ever being able to get on top of the numerous problems besetting their area. And alongside all the attempts at community development – and frequently hindering them – is the inescapable reality of sectarian division.

How can this reality be tackled? What role can ‘community relations’ work play? Indeed, *has* it a role to play when most people’s energies are fully occupied in community development tasks? It was to explore such questions that the Community Bridges Team at CDC (Community Development Centre) in North Belfast brought together a small group of community activists.

The series of discussions they undertook ended just before the summer of 2001. Those discussions reached no consensus on the questions which were addressed, but they certainly highlighted the issues involved and the complexity of the problems which existed at a grassroots level. That these problems *needed* to be addressed was confirmed as the subsequent events of the summer unfolded, culminating in the current situation in Ardoyne, embroiling primary school children, and the tragic death of a teenager in the ‘White City’ estate. These events have shown most dramatically that, irrespective of whatever community development work is ongoing, there are real consequences for not engaging at a cross-community level. Whether ‘community relations’ work as it is currently formulated is the best method of engaging is open to question, but – certainly for the people of North Belfast – such questioning must now begin as a matter of urgency. This pamphlet, even if its content might seem confused and negative at times, is nevertheless a genuine attempt to open up debate on that one basic question – how do our communities begin to engage more effectively with one another?

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

Community relations – an elusive concept

What is ‘community relations’?

The focus of the Think Tank’s deliberations was set out by one of its convenors:

For some time now, community development workers in North Belfast who are also engaged in what is termed ‘community relations work’ have been talking together, exploring ideas and ways of working more effectively with each other. And as a part of that discussion we thought we should spend some time exploring the whole concept of community relations. What *is* ‘community relations’ in our understanding and in our experience? How does ‘CR’ work? *Does* it work? And if it doesn’t work, then what’s wrong with it? We would not be trying, or pretending, to represent any groups or any communities, or any causes, we would just be discussing issues surrounding community relations among ourselves, as colleagues and workers – sharing our experiences and our perceptions. Hopefully from our discussions something might emerge which will stimulate further debate in the community. Hopefully, too, it will also challenge the perceptions held by funding bodies and decision-makers; give them pause for thought, make them see the need to consult more fully with people at grassroots level.

However, it was obvious that the task the group had set themselves would not be straightforward.

The other day I was sitting with 17 students from America who wanted to know what community relations work was all about; later we had our own staff discussion on community relations, and we were asking: *what is* community relations? And nobody had a clue, or at least we all had a different understanding of what community relations actually means.

That’s the whole problem. It’s hard to have a vision about community relations work when people’s perceptions of what ‘CR’ is differ so widely. Most of us here are involved in some way in community relations-type work, and yet we have no consensus as to what it is. There’s other people who reject it out of hand: there are Republicans who say they’re not getting involved in community relations because it’s about buying into the state, while there are Loyalists who say they’re not getting involved in it because

Note: All indented paragraphs represent a quote, and spaces between quotes indicate when a new contributor is ‘speaking’. In line with Think Tank procedure, no quote is attributed, a policy which experience has shown allows for more openness.

it's a shrewd way of moving them towards a United Ireland. The perception on both sides is that they'll find themselves having to give up something fundamental if they get involved in that crap.

But there is one perception which dominates, and that is the belief that community relations really means *cross-community* relations – working with 'them over there', and that's where a lot of the fear comes in for some people, the fear that they might lose something by engaging in that. And because they are only too aware of those fears within the community, a lot of people who are actually engaged in what could be termed 'community relations work' don't even want to say that they do it, or sometimes don't believe they do it. So, the very notion of 'community relations' is seen as a suspect thing, not a positive thing, certainly not something people – community workers included – willingly embrace.

That's true. I know a couple of people who are on the mobile phone network and they'll go out and stop kids from one community attacking kids from the other community. They've been right at the interface, they've taken flags from kids in their community to try and prevent antagonisms arising. Now, I suppose many people would see that sort of stuff as being very much 'cross-community', yet the workers themselves wouldn't necessarily see themselves as being involved in community relations work. Some of them would say that they are simply involved in 'community safety' work, protecting their *own* community and they don't want to be seen as involved in anything else.

I started doing community relations work maybe twelve years ago, and in the beginning I held that perception too – I did think that it was indeed all about Protestants and Catholics – but I've come to the point now where I feel that's a total misrepresentation. However, at the same time, I'm not really sure *what* I'd say community relations is any more, even though I'm supposed to be employed to do it, and I'd be as confused as the next person as to what it is and what the priorities are. And if the likes of us sitting here are confused, what does that say about all the people we're supposed to be engaging with? We're complaining that we can't reach them, or that they won't buy into it, yet we're admitting here that we're not even sure what it is we're asking them to buy into.

'Community relations' – as a means of 'reconciling' people – *has* got a bad name, certainly within sections of the Loyalist community, because it appears to be saying that for me to be friends with people from the Nationalist community, somehow I have to say that my Loyalism doesn't matter, or my Protestantism doesn't matter, I have to water that down, I have to set that aside. Yet, if we were really thinking in terms of genuine community relations, surely it's got to involve people who hold strong points of view – from whatever side of the fence. I was at a meeting recently, and there were people there from the Loyalist political parties, and we were being told by these middle-of-the-road community relations-type people that *we* couldn't really do community relations because we held strong political views. Their attitude

was that you had to hold the middle ground in order to do it; you had to have no strong opinions of your own. But that's a nonsense.

One of the misperceptions about community relations – and it's shared by the funders – is that community relations is all about conflict resolution. But, let's be realistic, when people talk about conflict resolution, the only way you can 'resolve' the Unionist/Republican conflict here is for one side to surrender. The best we can hope for through community relations is conflict *transformation*, to transform the nature of the conflict from one of violence to one of dialogue, where we agree to respect each other and not kill each other over our differences.

I think much of the problem we're going to face, irrespective of whatever consensus *we* might reach as to what community relations is –and even that might not be possible –is that we're always going to be up against how it's perceived at grassroots level. It has already been pointed out that many people in the community are automatically put off when they hear you say you're doing 'community relations work'. Indeed, to be honest, whenever I first heard the term many years ago I could hear the sound of wee drums and nice poetry readings in my head, because I too had this notion that community relations was about getting people together in a 'nice', neutral environment away from it all, and engaging in 'cultural understanding'. Now, obviously there's more to it than that, but I would think there would still be, at community level, this type of perception. So, if you're introducing what it is you do as 'community relations' you run the risk that if people have this perception then they will back away from an engagement with you. If, on the other hand, you *don't* introduce what you do as community relations, when it is later seen as that, it can look like you were being manipulative or underhand. Yet, although I have real problems with community relations, I nevertheless feel it can be an acceptable part of the work we all do – as long as we can reach some level of understanding of what we mean by it, and how it can be utilised positively within each of the strands of work we focus on.

Some groups already use it in a positive way; there would certainly be groups who can actively engage in what could be termed community relations work without encountering any problems – taking children away on holiday schemes, for example. But for other projects, and I include my own, because people in the community know that you receive community relations funding, some of them are wary of you. They think you're trying to force something on them – who the Hell are you to say to us: let's all do nice things with each other – that's the impression that it gives out. Yet, on the other hand, they will be times when people *do* see the relevance of community relations-type work, for example with the likes of the mobile phone network, but even then it is only relevant to them at certain times of the year. And, of course, it doesn't necessarily represent what *you* yourself want to do – you might want to put all your energy and resources into community development work.

A divided society – but *which* ‘divide’?

The fact that many community activists preferred to focus on community development work reflected a widespread belief among community workers that there were other, more pressing needs in the communities they represented than a concern with the state of Protestant/Catholic relationships.

To be quite honest, if you walk up the Cliftonville Road people have more important things to worry about than community relations, and that’s the reality. For a woman who lives in a two-bedroomed house with six kids that’s the least of her concerns. And when funders come in with this stuff about ‘Equity, Diversity and Interdependence’ people just go: Equity? What the fuck’s that; is that something to do with money? I think community relations people talk their own language at times, one which is remote from the people who are living in the communities who are suffering the problems of social deprivation and derelict interface areas. In our area nobody wants to live there because it’s where problem families have been pushed, where it’s dangerous, and where people don’t want to bring up kids. These are the *real* issues people are facing – not these airy-fairy community relations issues. The problem is that a lot of the decision-makers seem to be living in a different world.

Even community activists rarely challenge the assumptions which underpin concepts like ‘community relations’. Government, the media, funders and others have decided that the ‘two communities’ in this country are defined along religious lines, not class lines. Hence, the ‘deep divide’ in this society is said to be that between Protestants and Catholics –and not between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. And *we* have bought into that as well; when we talk about the ‘other community’ we’re not even thinking about those who live around Cultra and the ‘Gold Coast’ but other working-class areas just across the peace line.

I would agree with that. As a concept ‘community relations’ – in my judgement anyway –is remote from the type of stuff that goes on in deprived working-class communities. To me, the whole community relations thing has largely been a waste of time. It’s all very fine bringing kids away to the likes of Corrymeela, where they can be encouraged to mingle with the ‘other side’ and see that there’s nothing wrong with them, in the hope that this new understanding will help them when they’re brought back to their own environments. But what use is this new understanding in those environments, when the main problems are *not* concerned with ‘community relations’, but deprivation, poverty and violence? And that doesn’t seem to be recognised by funders and statutory agencies, who, to me, don’t seem to have much real understanding of daily life in the more deprived interface communities. And

not only funders. I'm active in the trade union movement, and even amongst trade unionists, there's an attitude that the people who live, say, in Manor Street, on both sides of the interface, are all basically a bunch of bigots. So even trade unionists can't see beyond the religious divide at times.

Are we saying here that we don't see community relations speaking to the big questions around power and privilege and access, but only being concerned with the religious divide? If that is the case, and if, as community activists, we feel are responding to the lack of power in people's lives, just as much as to the existence of sectarianism, then we need to know what we are doing when we adopt a community relations strategy. I want to know *how* in our 'community relations' work we address this notion of power and privilege.

We would all accept that, as well as the political conflict, there are other 'conflicts' in this society – the ones in Mount Vernon and Tiger's Bay and the New Lodge and Lower Oldpark and elsewhere – concerned with deprivation and alienation, about a whole rake of things. And I would like to think that a 'community relations' approach *should* be able to help me in that. For example, in our union branch, we have developed an excellent relationship where we can work together on issues of employment, on issues of best practice, on terms and conditions of employment – there's a whole range of things we can work on together which can benefit both our communities. Or take housing, where people are suffering from poor housing and even no housing – that's a form of violence in itself. And if our housing workers can work to improve the quality of housing for people, that also helps to build community relations. So community relations could be an important part of the work we do when we try to tackle deprivation and disadvantage.

A few members of the Think Tank, however, while agreeing that the term 'community relations' had been utilised to focus in on one form of societal division to the exclusion of others, went even further in their analysis.

We are talking here as if the main problem is that the terminology is flawed, or that it's superficial – but maybe it actually *fulfils* the use for which it was originally intended. I think we're totally ignoring the historical context in which this terminology developed, and I think that context is vitally important. I believe it was a deliberate attempt by civil servants in the NIO to find a way of *redefining* the conflict here. They wanted to present that conflict as basically a 'problem of community relations'. And if the problem could be defined as one between Catholics and Protestants who couldn't get on together, then that allowed the powers-that-be, particularly the British government, to detach themselves from what the real problem was.

So community relations serves to obscure the true nature of the conflict and keep us all confused?

Yes; one of my main problems with community relations stuff is that it never seems to take account of the political context. I think that's what's all-important, because it is the political context which determines people's

relationships –for example, a historical sense of injustice or discrimination, from whatever side. And I really believe that ‘CR’ was deliberately conceived by civil servants and government advisors as a ‘non-political’ way of disguising what was, in effect, a very political situation. We need to redefine it so that people acknowledge the underlying political context.

And quite apart from the much broader political context that you are referring to, I believe there is even an *everyday* political context –okay, maybe with a small ‘p’. Basically, ‘CR’ to me is essentially a cheap and flowery way of getting idjits like ourselves to deal with minor political issues on the ground. I mean, if a riot erupts... it happens every day, there would be a group of wee lads from Manor Street and a group from Lower Oldpark stoning each other and I would phone somebody up and we would go down and try to disperse them. But had that been left to fester the police would have been called, the riot squad would have went in, somebody would have been injured, and the whole thing essentially could have spiralled out of control, which could have cost a huge amount of money. But for a very small amount of money we were actually able to defuse that for them, under certain circumstances. So community relations funding is manipulating people in local communities, community activists, to do the dirty work on the front line, because it saves money on security, and overtime for RUC officers.

Institutionalised sectarianism

For many of the Think Tank participants it wasn’t so much that people within government, the professions and the funding bodies ‘hadn’t a clue’, but that they were just as culpable of the very problem they were supposedly seeking to address.

Obviously there *has* been bitter sectarian conflict between our two working-class communities – I wouldn’t try to pretend otherwise – but it’s too simplistic to put everything down to this, or to say that this is the main thing which needs to be remedied. I once found myself at a conference where most participants were community relations workers, and one of the questions asked was: what is sectarianism? Now in some of the areas represented at that conference – areas which I would perceive as more middle-class – the sectarianism they said they were confronting had a more ideological nature. Whereas in some of the more deprived communities, like around here in North Belfast, I actually think that sectarianism is more of a practical response to things that happen to you. If someone throws a brick from our side and hits a pensioner’s front window, the brick invariably ends up *back* on our side, and this time maybe goes through a single parent’s window. These so-called ‘sectarian’ actions come about because people on both sides have been hurt, but at least there’s an actual basis for it, as opposed to people just disliking other people because of their religion.

Yes, there's a great deal of hypocrisy among the middle class when it comes to condemning sectarianism. Middle-class people would preach to me that you have to be tolerant of your Catholic neighbours, but under their breath they were probably saying: Catholics are okay, as long as my son doesn't bring one home, or my daughter doesn't want to marry one. I don't think that what occurs at working-class interfaces can be solely put down to sectarianism. It's also a 'them and us' thing, a territorial thing. I mean, take the growing problem down South with the refugees coming in. There's a 'them and us' all over Europe ... and on the Shankill Road, or the Shore Road.

You even get the impression at times that there is this establishment view, or a view of the people in positions of power over us, that sectarian conflict is inevitable between 'those scum down there': it's a product of their lowly status, bred through deprivation and is only to be expected. And providing community relations money is just like throwing food into the cage – it's keeping them quiet. And there's an obvious pretence that the state is not responsible for making or having a role in this problem. The statutory agencies, the police, all those people who make decisions about our lives, are apparently not responsible in any way for these problems – this is just about behavioural deficiencies among the working class.

It would be fine for people at an institutional level to look down at the people in communities if they could only get *themselves* sorted out. But we only have to look at the conditions which gave rise to our conflict, we only have to look at the conditions which gave rise to sectarianism, we only have to look at the historical circumstances which led to people actually killing each other, to see how much a major part of the problem all these institutions were. Now they want to wash their hands of that legacy. But they *are*, and always have been, part of the problem.

We had the 'Spaces of Fear' workshop in here a while ago, and one speaker talked about going to the policy-makers – and those who put together discussion documents for the Assembly ministers – with the statistical evidence he had gathered which showed the implications of sectarian geography on patterns of movement and lifestyles within interface communities. He was trying to tell them they needed specifically targeted policies for interface areas. But they either refuted those statistics or refused to accept any responsibility for interface problems. He felt some of these people were from another planet, they didn't understand what an interface was and yet they have the responsibility to devise policies for interface areas – and that's scary.

Power still lies with the civil servants, and yet many of them are as sectarian as anyone else.

The establishment and those in government are always talking about wanting better relations between working-class communities, but they don't necessarily want those communities to be radically empowered in the process. In fact, if that seems likely, they will be the ones who will stop it. I'm thinking back to

the 70s and 80s and some of the grassroots initiatives to create dialogue which were thwarted by the establishment, or civil servants, or politicians. One community worker told me he was actually hindered by the security forces from bringing communities together. They told him: we want our maps to stay Orange and Green, we don't want you confusing the issue. His attempt to cross the communal divide didn't suit the security agenda at the time, for they had it all neatly mapped out in sectarian terms.

There was also a resentment that community workers were expected to engage in something which those in power were not.

You take Stormont and this 'new political dispensation', and the 'great new era' of Devolution: what's happening in communities is a reflection of what's happening up there. There's no co-operation up there, they're still highly segregated, there's still a great degree of mistrust, of cynicism, of injustice, of second-classery –all that kind of stuff. And that has rippled right down to community level. To be quite honest, there was no real trust built up throughout the political negotiations, there was no new understanding established, and yet suddenly the Good Friday Agreement and the new Assembly were being presented to the public as this great breakthrough, the dawn of a new era. It doesn't make sense to me: I mean, I don't see any urgency among the political parties to promote harmonious 'community relations' between those at the top of the political structures. Yet at grassroots level *we* are all supposed to be focusing all our energies on doing just that. Why are *they* not under the same expectations as we are? I don't see Trimble or Mallon or Adams, in return for being awarded their wage packets, being asked the type of questions we're all asked, such as: 'how many Protestants did you sit down with over the last year; how many Catholics?', or 'how effective/productive do you think your interaction has been?'

'Walking round the elephant'

There was a consensus among the Think Tank participants that 'community development' spoke more to grassroots needs than 'community relations'.

I think we all agree that a lot of the problems in inner city Belfast stem from this cycle of deprivation, alienation and violence we have already talked about. And I don't believe that community relations can break that cycle, because community relations – certainly as it is currently perceived – doesn't acknowledge the core reason behind social conflict: deprivation. It seems to think it is all about Protestants and Catholics 'not understanding' each other. But people don't always join paramilitaries or get involved in riots because the other side is Catholic or Protestant, it's because they're living within a cycle of deprivation, alienation – very often they're even alienated from their own community, and certainly from the wider middle-class community –and

community relations doesn't attempt to break that cycle. But *community development* does. Working on a common project, bringing jobs in, bringing training and employment, or education, helps to break that cycle. That's where our focus should be.

However, it was admitted that even community development had its limitations.

I still think we need more than community development alone; let me give a hypothetical example. Say I am involved in community development and my area has regenerated superbly, it has all the facilities you could name, yet no-one in that community feels it is safe to take a bus down the road. In that sense, I *don't* have full community development there. So how do you overcome that? Obviously the question of how you go about building community relations with the people down the road needs to be addressed as *part* of my ongoing community development work.

You're right. The dilemma is that community development is fine, it will help move communities closer together, but we have to acknowledge that there are limits to what can be achieved at a local level, when the wider political picture remains unresolved. And how do we get people to engage in *that* conversation, because that is the 'big conversation'. How do we have this conversation about how we resolve the constitutional and other contentious issues here without seeming to be betraying your own community?

There was an acknowledgement that this 'big conversation' often never got off the ground because people simply avoided the need to engage in it.

Quite a lot of community workers would say that the reason we *can* go and do joint community development work is because we are *not* discussing our other relationships. So we might be getting on well with each other, and working together on practical tasks, and that's all beneficial, but we are not discussing the hard issues that we really need to discuss. Somebody once talked about 'the elephant' sitting in the middle of the room which nobody acknowledges. They just get on with what they're doing and step over it and walk round it, instead of saying there's something here which is dividing us. We are afraid of it, or afraid of it disrupting the work we do. A lot of people who are solely involved in community development work will turn round and say: community relations is way out of my field, it's too dangerous for me, it would impact on the rest of the work I am doing.

Community groups can get caught up in their own area's problems. Sometimes there could be a practical reason for that, for community work is very time-consuming, but it could hide a more insular attitude, with people preferring to avoid it. And when they say: 'oh, we don't want to deal with community relations because of the way it has been defined for us', privately they may be quite happy at not having to deal with it. The truth might be that they're actually running away from it.

There's other factors too. Some of the last research we did revealed that many people don't want to get involved in what happens in their own

community, they can't even name a community group that's in their community. If you can't get people to be aware of attempts within their own community to make that community better, how many of them are going to be concerned with attempts to establish better relationships with *other* communities?

I think there is a fear in community work, you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. It's grand sitting down with someone from the other community but I will not be 100% honest with them, and I think that's the norm, there is that sort of barrier. And worse: people walk away from their differences, they don't address them face to face, they bitch among themselves about the 'other side' but don't confront the other side when they have the opportunity and to me that only makes the problem worse.

Unless you can be comfortable with someone having their own aspirations you will never have a proper relationship with them. If you keep ignoring that you both have these differences then there will always be that mistrust.

On the other hand, many people are quite content to concentrate on community development solely within their own areas, community relations doesn't really affect them. More often than not it doesn't really affect anybody in Newington what's happening in Tiger's Bay, as long as things are alright within their own community. And, as far as they are concerned, that is what community development is about, and they would have a difficulty with anyone telling them that community relations should be an extension of this.

We facilitated a focus group in Ardoyne representing 14 or 15 groups there and asked them to name positive and negative stakeholders for the projects they were putting up and they listed everybody: police, schools, doctors, health workers... the only people they didn't mention were Protestants, they just were not seen as stakeholders, positive *or* negative. Now, certainly both communities do impact on each other, especially during stoning incidents or whatever. But nobody was asking what was going to be beneficial for both communities, how could they work together. And where would the incentive for such a desire come from? The only incentive we have seen so far for people to come together and recognise the other community is when violence occurs. And even then the primary need is to protect themselves from that violence, or create a safe space where they can stay apart. Where's the incentive for them to get involved with the other community, to have a relationship with them, so that ultimately they can reduce the violence? I don't see any.

There's a problem there not only for those engaged at community relations work, but for those involved in community development work. We have already admitted that at times even *we* don't talk about the conflict, in case it threatens to wreck our community development work. We prefer to deal with specific issues, socio-economic problems, housing, whatever. Everybody knows what I'm talking about, we've all gone to meetings where there's been people from all different communities and we have talked about everything,

about economic investment and community regeneration, but the moment someone has thrown a contentious issue on the table we find absolutely no agreement here, so therefore let's not do it again. So how do we deal with it, and just *who* is going to deal with it? And for me that's the whole dilemma about community relations work.

For example, there are housing crises facing both communities, but they involve a 'political' dimension so nobody wants to talk about it, and that's the reality of it. Housing involves peacelines and some communities losing out, others gaining. People won't come together to try and resolve housing issues because they want them resolved to the advantage of their own community, mostly because they believe that offers them the most protection. Which is understandable, although it doesn't get us any further on. Only when we tackle things as a community development problem *and* a community relations problem *and* a political problem can they be fully resolved.

'Natural' cross-community work

Despite the group's apprehensions and suspicions regarding community relations work, there was an acknowledgement that better community relationships across the sectarian divide *were* necessary for long-term progress and stability.

If we're not meeting people from the other community, we're not hearing about where they're coming from, so we're not getting near a resolution. I think there is something positive about engagement; I've always seen it as like planting an acorn seed: maybe in 20 years' time it will bear some fruit. There *is* a need to get to meet other people and get to know them, although I don't know how that's done differently from the way it was done before, when kids were taken away off for two weeks to meet kids from the other community. The only time I changed my opinions was when I actually got to *understand* somebody on an individual level, by meeting them *more* than once or twice, and really learning about where they were coming from.

But what was the best way to go about facilitating such an understanding?

I found that in some of the stuff we were involved with you get a more frank, open discussion with people when you actually sit down with them and listen to their personal stories. You get a better understanding of where they're coming from, and why they believe in what they do. And, because I have done that, I can honestly say I can live with that – on an individual level. But it could be entirely different for anybody else, and my experience could be entirely different to theirs.

I would agree that hearing each other's individual stories is the best way to move forward. Indeed, I often ask myself why we feel obligated to make this big effort to bring *whole communities* together? And we all do it, we all go

out and try and get this community to meet that community, whole chunks of them. Why do we do that? Why not work patiently with individuals? As you said, that might be more effective in the long run.

A word of caution there – even working with individuals needs to be done sensitively. When you start talking about conflict you involve people's emotions and there needs to be expertise in handling any situation where you're engaging people in that kind of work. You can't mess with people's heads. At a seminar in North Belfast the other day, which was to do with mental health, I was talking about my own experience of the Troubles and having lost someone very close. And the fact that when my son was eight years old he slept with a baseball bat under his pillow. Now, that wasn't normal behaviour. But the person in the shirt and tie sitting up at the front said: we don't need to hear those stories. But those are the real stories which *do* need to be heard.

In case the group was felt to be too negative in its assessment of the efficacy of cross-community work, it was pointed out that important changes *had* been taking place.

With regard to my own Loyalist constituency, and then looking at the so-called 'enemy' constituency... they are still my political opponents, but I see great changes, I see genuine relationships being developed. And it's easy to criticise the unions, but I know some of the work that we do – in terms of the minimum wage, conditions of employment, whatever – I see a lot of positive outcomes there, which are only happening because some of us are prepared to work together. I am seeing things happening now which wouldn't have happened five years ago, ten years ago. I remember when L____ and I started off, and we went looking for financial support to initiate an inter-community project, and we were told: look, B____, you go your way and L____, you go your way, it'll never work, there's no way that people from your backgrounds can come together. This was just before the ceasefires. But I remember then there was just the two of us and it *was* difficult. L____ got stick from his crowd, his kids got stick at school, but gradually one person came along with me, another came along with L____, another couple came along, and gradually we built up a network of people, right out from North Belfast to Carrick. It was about building human relationships. Coming together *must* be an outcome of the community development work we do. If it isn't, then we might as well accept continued segregation.

Many people already work across the sectarian divide. Indeed, many people would have had cross-community relationships which were ongoing *throughout* the height of the conflict, they didn't need community relations people and a community relations industry to tell them that that was the way to go. Work was always ongoing that people seen was mutually beneficial.

In the area where I work there is a very strong cross-community women's group with over 50 women. But that coming together was not forced, it was something which happened naturally; the women were at a stage where they

felt: they're living at that side of the wall, we're living here, yet we're both facing identical problems. And so they sat down to discuss things they had in common; in this case it was health issues which brought them together, it was a health project. It wasn't a Catholic/Protestant thing, it was just a very natural way forward. Same with the mobile phone initiative: the circumstances at the time showed that that was needed so people accepted it.

Exactly – as you say, that cross-community contact had grown *naturally* out of the work you had all been doing at a community development level, it wasn't something inserted artificially to satisfy some vague funding criteria. What happened resulted from people involved in community development work identifying a real need they shared in common, and then acting purposefully and constructively on it.

Funders – a complicated relationship

Among many of the Think Tank participants there was a perception that what they were doing in their work was somehow at variance with funders' expectations.

North Belfast has been characterised very much by sectarian conflict; 25% of all the political murders over the past 30 years have occurred here. There's no real consideration given to the fact that it's going to take maybe 50 or 60 years to actually start to break down the cycle which gave rise to the conflict. One model for societies in conflict suggests that for every year of violent conflict it takes ten years to work it out of the national psyche, yet funders seem to give the impression that if you get all these people together in a room discussing community relations issues then that's the end of the problem.

I'm working in what is termed a 'community relations' job, and sometimes I say to myself: Jesus Christ, I'm not making a very good effort at this. My funders want me to have people engaging with each other; they want me to have so many 'bums on seats' from each community, and people actually wanting to listen to each other. Yet the reality is that I hear people in the community saying: 'I don't want to talk to them'. But I can't go back to the funders and say: 'look, those people don't want to talk to each other, can't you understand that; can't you accept that the most we can do is to keep them apart for a while?' We have to take notice of what the reality is for the communities we work in, what's been happening to them over the past 30 years.

Some people come into our communities and introduce themselves as community relations people and it's all very airy-fairy. But, and I have to be very honest here, I don't think they have a baldy shit what it's like living in North Belfast: having to lock your front door for years, having constant fears and all those things. But you have these people coming in –or some of them –

saying: let's all hold hands, let's bond together... But there's hurt and there's real anger with people, and that will take time to work through.

There's a danger here in letting funders' perceptions go unchallenged. Most of us admit that although we obtain community relations funding, we prefer to focus on community development work. Yet, to continue to satisfy the funders, community development workers could find themselves becoming ever more caught up with 'Prod/Taig' projects and start to move away from a focus on the deprivation people in these areas are living in.

But how accurate are the perceptions held about funders? And are they based on concrete evidence?

I think we need to have more clarity among ourselves, particularly if we are going to use discussions like these to challenge funders; we need to be sure that they cannot turn the tables and question our own understanding. From our discussions so far it seems evident that most of us assume 'community relations' to be something quite separate from what we do in our own everyday work. Yet more than half of us sitting around this table receive community relations funding of some form. That means that many of us are doing our work *with* community relations funding, while claiming that community relations is not something we do. So, what is happening here? Are we taking community relations money dishonestly? Or are we actually doing good work with that money, but either don't acknowledge the community relations component to it, or perhaps don't even see it?

Because of all the suspicions which exist at grassroots level about 'community relations', coupled with the fact that a lot of community relations funding has been spent on ludicrous things like yacht races and flower shows, I think there is a concern among community activists that we might somehow be seen as suspect too. And so we shy away from having a direct 'CR' label being attached to the work we do.

I can see a dilemma here even from the funders' point of view. What we seem to be saying is that because the concept and the terminology around 'community relations' isn't to our liking we distance ourselves from it, with the result that a lot of people who are actually engaged in what is genuine community relations work don't announce it as such. But that puts the funders in a 'no-win' situation. Some of the more progressive funders – and some of them have undoubtedly learned a lot over recent years – find themselves unable to engage more constructively because people aren't always aware that much of the genuine work being done at a grassroots level is actually 'CR'-funded. For example, I was talking to residents of the Shankill, in the aftermath of the Loyalist feud, and they were complaining: "the community relations people have just ignored our problems, they have no involvement there, you don't see any of them around." Yet I know that some of the organisations working away in the Shankill area receive community relations funding, so 'CR' funding *is* actually in there – but because everybody

shies away from this word ‘community relations’, it often appears as if it isn’t. The reality on the ground never goes back up the information ladder to challenge or change those widely-held perceptions. And the funders are caught in that web of misperception just as much as we all are.

I think it *is* largely a misperception. I have not read anything in the documentation that has been put out, whether by CRC or the other funders, that states that community relations work is separate from community development work, or that community relations projects need to be concerned with ‘yacht races and flower shows’ or ‘peace and understanding’. So if the funders don’t appear to have defined it that way, who *is* defining it that way – has it been us as practitioners who have done so, a knee-jerk reaction on our part?

I don’t think so. The funders are the ones, after all, who focus on the ‘peace and understanding’ bit. Otherwise why would they ask questions like: ‘of the people you worked with in the past year, how many of them were Protestants, how many were Catholics?’ When dealing with the funders you were always left with the feeling that, irrespective of the amount of movement you had assisted among those who you *did* work with, if their number didn’t include the required balance of Protestants and Catholics, the chances were you wouldn’t get any more money.

I agree; that’s what the funders push – that community relations means bringing Catholics and Protestants together. Some funders agreed to broaden it out to include ‘single identity’ work, but you get the feeling they aren’t very happy with that as a concept, they justify it to themselves as a sub-category of the primary Protestant/Catholic focus, something that is meant to prepare communities, as they see it, for ‘proper’ community relations work.

I would support that; I think that some of the funders have to accept responsibility for where we’re at as well, for a lot of the funding seems conditional on us all ‘gelling’ and bonding or whatever at community level. That would seem to be their bottom line: you will get funding if you work at this concept we have laid down, if you meet this or that criteria, or whatever. And what happens? A lot of community groups who have great problems with ‘CR’ still claim to be doing it, purely to fit into funding criteria. So has it come down to a funding-chasing exercise? Is it a genuine thing at all?

But why shouldn’t you play the system if you are a community group? If you see that funding can benefit your community, why not play their game?

But that’s an admission that it’s not about community relations as such, it’s about getting access to funding to sustain your own community development programme.

And let’s be honest: some of the funders aren’t even interested in genuine cross-community work – just tokenism. We were once given money to take kids away together and a bit of conflict developed between the kids – they ended up aggressively bantering each other, singing rival songs, etc. And we

received complaints from the funders! So we informed them that that was *why* we had requested funding in the first place, because these kids *needed* to be taken away, to begin to confront their prejudices. But no, the funders wanted something ‘nice’ and hassle-free. They wanted a ‘PR’ job really, a nice photo-opportunity to include in their annual report – that was all.

I think that, as practitioners, not only do we have to determine what *we* want out of community relations, we also have to determine what it is that *other* people want *from us*. Funders in particular seem to want us to develop entirely new relationships between communities which for decades have been in conflict, and ‘peace, understanding and love’ coming about. And I say that’s not realistic, I can’t deliver that. I think a lot of funders have totally unrealistic expectations about what the reality is out there and what can be expected from communities and cross-community programmes.

Maybe the problem actually lies with those who define the nature of those programmes and the nature of our work.

I am presuming that by ‘those who define the nature of our work’ you mean the civil servants who are primarily involved in determining how the funding from Brussels or wherever is utilised, and not ourselves, or even CRC – who are merely acting as funding administrators. The way these civil servants see the nature of their task will have a direct bearing on our own perceptions at grassroots level. The people who are determining funding policies mainly come from middle class or academic backgrounds and we need to know what their expectations are. Okay, they might not say it has to be about ‘love and understanding’, but when they ask us in our reports to ‘give a breakdown by religion’, it doesn’t take a genius to see what it is they’re looking for, and the best way to package a funding application.

I am still not convinced. What I would like to know is how do we as practitioners use, in a meaningful way, the brief that’s actually set down in the funders’ policy documents? As I said before, I have not seen anything there that says it must be about flower shows and ‘love and understanding’. So how do we use what *is* set down in a way which actually allows us to shake up the foundations around power, privilege and access and that kind of stuff? Or are we not yet at a point where we feel strong enough to do that, and instead allow ourselves to be continually sucked into this game where it *does* become about love and understanding, rather than institutional and structural and fundamental change?

I think groups work on two different levels. They engage in constructive community development work, as a long-term aim, but they also throw in a bit of ‘CR’ stuff to keep the funders happy in the short term. There’s no doubt that funders expect us to get these ‘bums on seats’, Protestant and Catholic, so while you’re out there trying to help communities build up their capacities, at the same time you throw in these sorts of things piecemeal: yes, we did this or that, or we ran this seminar on conflict or something. But in the long term your *real* work is done much more quietly.

But is the community relations work we *do* engage in of so little value that it is only thrown in ‘piecemeal’, as a sop to the funders? I think it is far more important and substantial than we realise.

The opinion was also voiced that some of this critical analysis should be directed inwards as much as outwards.

I think there is another important aspect which is often ignored. We repeatedly assert that the problem is ‘out there’ – with the funders or the politicians or government, etc – but surely part of the problem lies within ourselves. For a start, there’s the territorial and organisational competition which exists between many community development and community relations groups and organisations. Okay, the environment here does make you paranoid and we are all left chasing the same money, but this competition is leaving us increasingly fragmented. And we are quick to accuse others of being ‘gatekeepers’ who are preventing progress, yet quite often we act in the same way. I would go even further, and ask whether some of us really practice what we preach. We walk around telling other people to get together and build more effective relationships, as if we have a real vision for a new society, but do we ourselves *live* that vision, whether in our personal lives or in our daily work practices? If some people at community level are known as people who cannot be counted upon, or people who bully or know how to play the funding game, what does that say about the value of what we are doing? The problem is that to even have such a conversation with many people at community level would be extremely difficult, and would be perceived as undermining. We endlessly slag the funders, politicians and others but we rarely subject ourselves to the same critical analysis.

Redefining community relations work

The seeming impossibility of reaching a consensus with regard to what community relations meant as a concept was acknowledged by the group members.

It gets ever more confusing. I thought that through this series of discussions we could get some answers as to what community relations is, even to what we could agree among ourselves, but I don’t know that we will now, everybody has different interpretations.

Perhaps we shouldn’t have expected definitive answers; what we’ve been engaged in is an exploration, and hopefully, even if it has wandered off at odd tangents at times, it might prove useful to others elsewhere in the community who are trying to address similar issues.

In an attempt to make it ‘useful’, the group endeavoured to at least redefine the concept of community relations in ways more meaningful *to them* and the work they were engaged in.

We talked earlier about community relations work being somehow ‘separate’ from community development work. Certainly, we assume that government and funders perceive community relations work as work which brings people together to improve mutual understanding, rather than assisting them to confront their socio-economic circumstances. But let me throw in a few quotes from the *First Annual Report* of the Community Relations Commission –the predecessor of the Community Relations Council –published in 1971. It is laced throughout with a strong community development linkage. It states that ‘community relations depend upon unimpeded economic development and a reliable sense of security’; it is concerned with ‘those who suffer deprivations through lack of employment, poor housing or inadequate amenities’; it talks about ‘the relevance of community development as a strategy for community relations’. And as for the comment made at a previous meeting that community relations was a smokescreen which hid the culpability of institutions, it states: ‘the responsibility for the improvement of community relations must be seen to be a central and continuing responsibility for every department of government.’ It is even more radical than that, in that it calls for ‘the formation of local community councils’ to represent the community and encourage ‘participation of the citizen’. Now, such a clear linkage between community development and community relations seems to be entirely absent today, especially on the part of many funders. Why is that? Is this change of focus something we need to look into more deeply? Why did such a strong change of emphasis come about, and to whose benefit was it?

From what you read out there, it seems that the community development-oriented work that we all do is actually closer to how ‘CR’ was initially envisaged, than with how it is currently presented by government and funders, not to mention some community relations workers themselves.

We are sitting here trying to come up with a definition of community relations, but why do we *need* a definition? At present the very vagueness surrounding ‘community relations’ allows us to do a whole myriad of things within the community. There’s a whole bunch of things being done by community groups which are fundamentally different in each locality, both in their focus and in their scope. And that, to me, is a very positive thing. It is often academics and others who want to tie things up in nice little definitions, because they want to institutionalise and professionalise it.

I would agree; what we are lamenting as confusion is, ironically, maybe a strength at community level. If ‘CR’ was straight-jacketed into one particular formula, it is liable to only reflect the perceptions held by government or funders, and that could be very detrimental. The very diversity of work done by people engaged at ‘community relations’ tasks is actually its strength, because it is harder for government and other agencies to get a handle on it. It also allows us to keep at bay those who would want to professionalise it for their own ends.

We might also have to define what it *isn’t* in case it *does* become professionalised.

There is already a growing bureaucracy of middlemen seeking to ‘service’ the community in different ways. The last thing we need is for yet more of these people to turn ‘conflict resolution’ into a profession too, for it would undoubtedly become remote from the people they’re supposedly there to serve, remote too from the likes of us and the work we are trying to do.

I wouldn’t like this process of reflection to be held hostage by current confusion as to what people actually mean by ‘community relations’. Instead of shooting ourselves in the foot and saying that we haven’t really done what we were supposed to, or that we had lied about what we were doing in order to get needed funding, we should be taking a different approach. We should be saying: this is what we are learning, this is us taking stock and coming up with some critical indicators for the work that we are doing. First of all we are saying that ‘community relations’ cannot stand separate from all the community development work that’s going on within communities, helping to transform those communities, enhancing people’s capacity to do things. Secondly, community relations work needs to impact significantly, not only on levels of fear and trust within communities, but on questions of community power, on access to resources. I would also like us to acknowledge those quiet things we do and are doing, and celebrate it amongst ourselves, even though it may never go down on any report. Things like actually building people’s psychological confidences to acknowledge who they are and what their real needs are.

Neither community is in favour of homelessness, or unemployment, or a lack of economic development, so on ‘bread and butter’ issues you will find there is widespread agreement. But the problem is that we’re not divided on those things, what we’re divided on is the issue of identity, the issue of the conflict. I don’t think it is a question of trying to come up with an alternative definition of ‘community relations’, but to come up with a community relations strategy which is much more clearly community development-based, so that it doesn’t turn the community off. I mean, some community relations-type projects have come up with what I see as dopey ideas –from paper peace doves to Christmas trees – which bear no relation to all the stuff that happens at the interface or where the conflict is. Things that just don’t impact on people at that level or on areas like that. But if we could develop a community relations approach which was much more firmly based on the reality of people’s lives then I think we could begin to turn around people’s suspicions and antagonisms.

I think that is important; we need a definition of community relations work which, above all, is *realistic*. I think we have got this unrealistic expectation which we can’t achieve. The current conflict resolution approach is a bit like the 11-plus exam. Some groups or communities are good at it –for example, those who organised the yacht races and flower shows which were referred to – and they ‘pass’. Other communities, like the ones we work with, keep failing. And why? Because we have set the wrong definition of what it’s meant to be about, we have set the wrong criteria as to what needs to be

achieved for a 'pass'. I think we need to be totally realistic as to what it's about, and say: *this* is achievable for you as a community, here is something you *can* do, not this thing that's out there, this wishy-washy stuff that only those sections of our community who haven't suffered the real trauma of the past 30 years can readily buy into.

It's no use presenting slogans like 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence' to communities who still feel threatened or deeply hurt. People in those communities are sitting there going: well, if I'm going to get involved in community relations it means I will have to accept Orange marchers parading past my house; or I will have to accept Sinn Féin activists on residents groups telling me where I can and can't walk. Working-class communities were forced, by very difficult circumstances, to become independent communities, purely to survive. What benefits are we offering them when we ask them to relinquish all that independence and become 'interdependent' with the other community? That might be okay around the affluent parts of North Down, but not around here in North Belfast.

I believe that 'community relations' is nothing more complicated than establishing effective relationships between *all* sorts of communities. And the Protestant/Catholic thing shouldn't even be the major focus; it's merely part of a much wider set of social relationships.

I think that we have only just scrapped at the surface of the work which needs to be done, at either community development or community relations level. We've been dealing at a crisis level with what has been going on at a community level, but some real hard work is now needing done.

Everyone has different priorities. Some are into community development, some are into economic development, some are working on trade union issues, and some are involved in schemes which bring adults or children from different communities together. And 'community relations' –in the sense of building relationships with people within a community context – is involved in *all* of these. Trying to create jobs, or capacity-building, whether for individual or groups, is *all* a form of community relations. There isn't one single strand that makes up community relations, I think we all do it.

I prefer to see a lot of the work we do within a paradigm of community peace-building, but something that is interlinked with the political process as well. I see that all this kind of work –should it be after-school creche clubs, community development programmes, economic regeneration schemes, whatever – as purposeful steps in a process that is going to bring us to a new future.

So, what you are saying is that if we take any organisation which is based in the community and is working at development issues, then one of the key tasks for that group's community development workers is to determine how different aspects of 'community relations' impacts upon the work they do,

whether at individual or group level, within that community. So community relations would not exist as a separate entity that maybe only one worker is engaged at, but something every worker would be expected to take on board?

Community relations should be the outcome of all of our work rather than a separate task. It should be fully integrated into the work we do, which is aimed at building a more cohesive community.

We also need to be realistic about what we are trying to achieve. We also need to determine our own expectations, and be prepared to challenge those held by others, including funders and government.

A note of caution, however. We sit in this room and have all these discussions and debates, and yet if you look out that window you see all these people and their kids coming walking down from school. While we're facing all these 'big dilemmas', they're just getting on with their lives. And if you see a group of men standing at the top of the road they talk about the weather, jobs... but not about community relations. We have a very small number of people who get involved in community development, an even smaller number who get involved in community relations, and yet we have all these great debates among ourselves.

An Overview

Although the series of discussions the members of the Think Tank had entered into had not really answered the questions they had set themselves, they felt that the exercise had nevertheless been valuable. They also felt that the main points raised should be listed in this final section, in the hope that it might stimulate other groups to embark upon a similar exploration.

- At a grassroots level there is no consensus as to what the concept of 'community relations' really stands for, or even what the main funding bodies mean by it.
- Furthermore, there are deep suspicions within both communities regarding the purpose behind community relations strategies. To some, 'community relations' is an attempt to get people to relinquish deeply-held aspirations so as to move into some 'middle ground'.
- There is also a suspicion that 'community relations' was initially a strategy designed to *redefine* the conflict here as basically one between Protestants and Catholics, ignoring the fact that it has deep historical and political roots.
- Because of such widespread uncertainty and suspicion many community activists who engage in community relations-type work feel uncomfortable about acknowledging the fact.

- Many community workers see community development work, rather than community relations work, as being more immediately beneficial to their communities.
- Some community activists feel that being ‘obligated’ by funders to work on community relations issues can actually hinder the constructive work being done at a community development level.
- Community activists differ in their opinions as to whether ‘community relations’ and ‘community development’ are compatible: Some feel they are not; others feel they are – indeed, they feel that a community relations-type approach could be an integral part of all work done at community level.
- There is a widely-held perception that community relations work is largely presented by the funders as meaning *cross-community* work.
- There is a feeling among many communities, but expressed most strongly in Protestant areas, that they have enough socio-economic needs of their own to address before they can get themselves on their feet, without the distraction of having to work across the divide.
- The Protestant community in particular feels it is in retreat and disarray, and experiencing increasing disadvantage; it needs urgent assistance to build up an adequate infrastructure.
- Even on identity-related issues, there is a belief that communities have to engage in much more *internal* debate and dialogue before they can gain the self-confidence to discuss such issues across the religious divide.
- Community relations as a concept, therefore, shouldn’t be limited to cross-community relationships, but to all problematic relationships within this society. For example, in the light of recent events, community relations work is clearly needed *within* the Shankill, as much as *between* the Shankill and the Falls.
- Many community workers believe that community relations work can only be successful in circumstances where community development work has *preceded* it and prepared the ground.
- To some community groups, funders are considered part of the problem, with their unrealistic expectations of what is possible from cross-community programmes, even as to what constitutes ‘movement’ and ‘progress’. Others feel that some funding bodies *have* taken on board grassroots realities in recent years and can work productively with community groups.
- Most are agreed, however, that funders have to be clearer about their objectives and their expectations – even their organisational agendas. Likewise, community groups have to be clearer as to why they are applying for, and accepting, community relations funding. Funders and community groups should be engaged in an ongoing dialogue.

- The way funding is dispensed often has groups competing against one another; this is highly counterproductive.
- Funders often use ‘acceptable’ organisations –the churches, the Partnerships, etc – as the primary conduits for their funding. If a small community group is not attached to, or is out of favour with, one of these larger organisations, it can find itself effectively put out of the funding loop. Even some energetic community groups which have been working away for many years have found themselves edged out of the funding loop by newer consortiums.
- Funding decisions must be far more transparent. If a group is turned down for funding an adequate explanation should be provided. If there is value in the work a group is doing funding bodies should liaise closely with such groups and assist them to make a new application.
- Some of the best community relations work has developed naturally, out of people’s everyday needs, and not according to some funder’s criteria.
- There is a feeling that much of the community relations criteria set down by funding bodies stems from a middle-class, civil service perspective and often bears little relationship to the real needs of working-class communities – disadvantage, deprivation, low esteem, poor educational achievement, inadequate housing, drugs, alienation, violence, etc.
- In particular, the community relations ‘language’ of some funding bodies seems quite remote from the everyday reality of working-class areas.
- Some communities are not ready for community relations work, they still feel deeply hurt. Are they going to be denied funding for their needs if they refuse to engage with the other community?
- Even people who have no problem engaging with the other community often have more than enough local problems of their own to contend with. Will they too be refused funding if they do not incorporate cross-community elements into their programmes?
- Why does community relations funding not speak to the questions of power and privilege and access? Would funders allow it to be utilised to this end?
- Underlying the community relations agenda is the assumption that the state is an honest broker, but is this really the case?
- Institutions are every bit as guilty of sectarianism, yet they are rarely brought to account for this and are rarely targeted by the funding bodies.
- The continued existence of sectarian attitudes within the political parties poses a real danger to this society. The animosities fostered at this level, on all sides of the political divide, filter downwards and are reflected in sectarian confrontations at grassroots level. Yet the political parties are rarely, if ever, targeted by the funding bodies.
- Despite the uncertainties and misperceptions what is clear is that a very rich body of community relations work *is* being done at grassroots level, and

rather than disowning this, community activists should see it as very positive and productive.

- The task is to come up with a community relations strategy which is realistic and useful – and therefore more acceptable – at community level; one which is more compatible with existing community development programmes.
- If such an acceptable definition of what community relations work is all about can be arrived at, many community activists would have no problem incorporating community relations strategies as an integral part of their work.