

## **Ad – Hoc North – South Consultative Forum**

### **Response to “A Shared Future”**

**Report of Consultation Meeting held at Glendinning House – 27 May 2003**

**Attendees:** Tony Kennedy [Cooperation Ireland], Geoff McEnroe [IBEC], Niall Fitzduff [RCN], Robin Wilson [Democratic Dialogue]  
Olivia May [ITS] – Facilitator, Wendy MacLaughlin [ITS] Recorder

**Apologies:** Peter Bunting [ICTU], Andy Pollak [Centre for Cross-border Studies]. John Coakley [IBIS]

#### **1. Cross Border Context for *A Shared Future***

- The *Shared Future* makes a brief but rather ritualistic mention of the North – South (and East-West) Dimension. This is clear from the title – it is about relations in Northern Ireland. However it should be recognised that Community Relations in Northern Ireland are part of a broader context of relationships within Ireland and cannot be treated in isolation.
- In other words, whilst the problem is one for Northern Ireland to face, resolving it will need linkages, opportunities and inputs from the outside.
- In this context, it is not clear whether consultation on the policy to take place in the Republic

#### **2. Background**

- The spotlight of attention is no longer focused on North – South relations.
- The realities of the disappearing border and movement of goods and people in the border counties means that North – South cooperation may be making more progress in those areas of cooperation outside the Good Friday Agreement where constitutional aspects are not part of the picture.
- Community Relations is more of an issue in the 12 Interreg counties. Elsewhere in the Republic it – nor Northern Ireland in general - is not at the centre of the agenda.
- Community Relations policy needs to take these developments in cross border cooperation on the ground into account and also build on what has already been done, such as the Peace and Reconciliation Forum.

#### **3. The Vision of a Shared Future**

- The group believes that the statement of vision in the consultation document is very positive – asking people to make a clear choice about the future. Achieving the vision of a shared society will require government to actively focus on and favour initiatives to support this vision – a real challenge in a context of identity politics. Until now the support has been for separation.
- This raises the question of how central is this vision to government policy, whether it has in reality featured in government discussions and debate.
- Trust is the key to a shared society. The role of Government is in creating norms and networks, setting the tone and creating incentives – building bridging, over bonding, social capital. Only government can really create the context in which A Shared Future can be created.

#### 4. Actions

- There is complexity of North – South institutions which is sub – optimal in terms of their effectiveness. For political reasons, the North / South ministerial council is not taking a strategic overview of North – South relations. The most effective North-South cooperation takes place where there is a clear economic benefit to the whole of Ireland, not just the border counties. All Ireland reconciliation therefore needs to be linked to wider aspirations for development and growth.
- There is scope to build on many of the local level initiatives in North – South cooperation and there are numerous examples of North-South linkages being replicated in Northern Ireland on a cross community basis.
- East-West relationships are also an important part of the picture: they can help in taking the political “heat” out of North-South links. North-South cooperation in an East-West framework can be a helpful way of building relations.
- People need to be at the centre of the process: good relations start between people, they cannot be imposed top-down.
- It will be important to explore attitudes at all levels – not just in community groups, but for example in cross border organisations.
- The need for political balancing of the composition of boards and committees can create division, a focus on the two sides and tokenism. Whilst there has been a need in the past to ensure equality of representation now is perhaps the time to begin to aspire to selection on merit alone.