

**'A SHARED FUTURE' CONSULTATION REPORT**  
**Ballymena Community Forum Ethnic Minorities Project**  
**07 July 2003**

The facilitator began by explaining the context and purpose of the consultation. Participants decided to respond using the following questions:

- 1 What is your vision for Northern Ireland in twenty-five years? What are the main problems/issues which stifle good relations?
- 2 What do we need to do to get to that vision?
- 3 Who should deliver it?

**Q1. What is your vision for Northern Ireland in twenty-five years? What are the main problems/issues which stifle good relations?**

In discussing their vision for Northern Ireland, participants inevitably had to set the context for that vision and some of that context was about the discrimination minority ethnic people have experienced and continue to experience in the country.

Participants said they would like to see - before 25 years, hopefully - every District Council in Northern Ireland (perhaps in partnership with other service providers) resourcing at least one minority ethnic project.

Participants wished to see a Northern Ireland that will no longer be pre-occupied with religion, where disputes between the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities will have disappeared to be replaced with an understanding of and respect for each other resulting in people living peacefully together. Within that context, 12 July will no longer be "a big issue any more".

Participants believed that if indigenous people in Northern Ireland can get over their pre-occupation with a person's religious background, minority ethnic people may stand a chance of being accepted more. The result of decades of being suspicious has negative implications on minority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland because everything or everyone who comes from the outside becomes perceived as "a menace".

Participants' vision for Northern Ireland would be one where minority ethnic people are accepted as an integral part of society.

Participants, all of whom belong to minority ethnic communities, would also like a Northern Ireland where minority ethnic people will have equal opportunities in relation to employment, equal access to housing and healthcare and where they will no longer be discriminated against or ignored.

As one participant put it and which was agreed by all: "They look through you as if you are invisible". Another participant related how an electrician came to the house and he "spoke to my dog and to my partner, who is Irish but ignored me all together ... but I just kept talking to him ... in the end, I think I made a difference."

One participant said he believed that the above kind of behaviour comes from extreme ignorance, from not knowing what to say and from a sense of fear. Most of the participants agreed with him.

Other participants talked about people's negative perceptions about them. Women from Thailand and the Philippines are stereotyped as "free" and "easy". People who cannot speak English well are considered "stupid".

Participants agreed that the media has a lot to answer for with regard to creating and perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions. One participant shared that when he decided to come to live in Northern Ireland, his friends in England asked him if he was "mad" and whether he was trying to kill himself coming over to a country with such violence on the streets.

Participants believed that prejudice is the worst disease in the world and that it needs to be prevented rather than treated. The vision is for Northern Ireland people to free themselves from prejudice.

At time of interview, participants said that they felt that the systems that are in place tend to discriminate. There is little information being provided about how different systems work. The filling in of social security forms, for example, presents itself as "a burden".

Participants recalled how they find it difficult finding employment. Even simple jobs like cleaning require a person to demonstrate

their experience in this area of work in Northern Ireland. For many, it is a matter of getting a job they know they can do and do well but also, so they are not sitting idly. And where people come to this country with a university degree, they find their qualifications unrecognised/unacceptable and they then find themselves having to start below where they were before, mainly because their experiences and their qualifications are not recognised. One participant told of how his wife, in trying to finish off her university degree course in engineering, was told that she had to start at BTEC level.

Overall, participants expressed a deep mistrust for the police. In the words of one participant, "When the police are summoned the first time, they are quick to respond ... the second time, there is a delay ... the third time, they don't come."

Participants said they are unhappy that the police are saying that attacks on the homes of Chinese people living in Northern Ireland are not intentionally racist and that they are not dissimilar to attacks on white settled people's homes. The Ballymena Community Forum Ethnic Minorities Project argues that the police are not taking the attacks seriously even though, anecdotally, two-thirds of the Chinese population in Northern Ireland have experienced such racist harassment in areas such as Belfast, Carrickfergus, Larne, Glengormley, Antrim and Ballymena. Such racist attacks go back seven years and the recent attack on a family in their own home in Finaghy, South Belfast has increased the factor of fear present in the community. (From April to December 1996, thirty-two confirmed robberies had taken place on Chinese homes. This was documented by the Institute of Race Relations in 1996.)

The Forum's Ethnic Minorities Project calls for research to be carried out to establish whether or not the attacks on Chinese families and other minority ethnic communities in their homes are racist.

The Project also argues that Simon Tang's death on 23 June 1996 is the result of a racist attack and institutional racism, the latter in that local authorities did not follow up the implications/evidence being presented. The Project drew comparisons between Simon Tang's death with the death of Stephen Lawrence.

The Project pointed out that a Centre for the Study for Conflict report found that up to half of the four minority ethnic groups interviewed believe the ceasefires have made matters worse for their community, while a sizable proportion of the Chinese population reported dissatisfaction with the police.

Participants pointed out that recent news have highlighted the severity and extent of racist attacks in Craigavon and South Belfast on African and Muslim families and Ballymena as an area for Nazi racist activity. The Project hopes that 'A Shared Future' could eradicate such racist activity and that local government would play an active role in resolving the situation and promoting equality.

Participants said they would like to see Government fund language schools for 'community languages' such as Cantonese, Mandarin Arabic and Portuguese to the extent of the successful Irish language schools and Ulster Scots language projects or to include 'community languages' in the Curriculum. This would benefit all communities, promote good relations and promote trade and investment in NI through trading with other countries thereby improving the NI and the global economy.

Participants also said they would like to see a Northern Ireland of twenty-five years from now that will not have need of monitoring forms because discrimination no longer exist.

## **Q2. What do we need to do to get to that vision? What would help to build good relations?**

The Forum's Ethnic Minorities Project believed that the vision cannot remain a strategy. There must be a proper and practical working rolling programme of action, which is to be reviewed annually, and comprehensively reviewed every five years.

Furthermore, participants were of the view that in order to get to that vision:

- Northern Ireland needs to promote cultural diversity and Government needs to fully resource and support this.
- Education of children and young people must be the essential starting point in terms of creating a change in outlook towards cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

- People in Northern Ireland need to recognise that they have prejudices and work towards changing those attitudes.
- Policy- and decision-makers in Northern Ireland must recognise the need for moral and spiritual development to become a part of social and economic development. It is the role of religious, political and community leaders to take the lead but each individual must also accept responsibility for herself or himself.
- Public, private, community and voluntary sector service providers must learn not to consult only with NICEM and be under the illusion that they have properly consulted as a result.
- Politicians in Northern Ireland need to recognise the business opportunities contained within the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity.
- There should be more provision of integrated schools but the motive behind those schools must move from being an attempt to integrate the Protestant and Catholic communities to the integration of people of all or no religions.
- There must be a Minister of Equality in place. It is the view of participants that if there was such a person in post, there will not be that passing on of responsibility from one Department to another whenever a query about equality or a request for funding is submitted by a minority ethnic organisation or project.
- Minority ethnic people need to be enabled to become more involved in politics.
- Minority ethnic people need to be represented in all types of occupation and at all levels of seniority in an organisation.
- There needs to be acknowledgement of sectarianism and racism and that the problem is a shared problem. Moving alongside that reasoning must be that all individuals are able to acknowledge that they have a role to play, to show that they are all human beings and to give in order to teach about the value of giving.
- Parents must (be enabled to) take responsibility for teaching their children about their own culture/religion.
- Universities in the UK should look at models from other countries about the recognition of equivalent qualifications, an example being New Zealand.
- There needs to be close monitoring of the implementation of the Race Equality Strategy Action Plan.

### **Q3. Who should deliver the vision?**

When asked who should deliver the vision, participants were of the view that there needs to be one new body placed within and fully resourced by Government. That body should be staffed by people with the following criteria:

- people who are informed at grassroots level or who have grassroots experience;
- people who are not academics in the area;
- people who are informed about what is happening in the community;
- people who are open to learning;
- people who are inclusive in their ways of thinking and working.

Participants said there must also be representation of minority ethnic people within the different layers of the new organisation.

*Facilitated and recorded by: Fee Ching Leong*  
*Report prepared by: Fee Ching Leong*