RCN

'You feel you'd have no say'
Border Protestants and Community Development

What is RCN?

The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality.

Formed in 1991, RCN is a membership organisation with over 500 members. It is managed by a voluntary Board elected every 2 years, made up of 2 community representatives from each of the 6 counties in Northern Ireland along with farming, environment, district council, cross border and voluntary organisation representatives. RCN attempts to reflect a broad geographical, gender and religious mix in both membership and Board. RCN is core funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development with the remainder of its resources coming from charitable trusts, membership fees and project income.

Contents

RCN Editorial Team
Tom Kiernan
Marion Green
Magaret Ferguson
Michael Hughes

A Rural Community Network
Action Research Project

Marie Crawley
(Research Consultant)

Quality Statement

"We are committed to continually improving the quality of our services to our members and the wider rural community and the standards of our work and organisational practices".

Rural Community Network (NI)
38a Oldtown Street
Cookstown
BT80 8EF

Tel: 028 867 66670
Fax: 028 867 66006
E-mail: rcn@ruralcommunitynetwork.org
Web Site: www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org

RCN is recognised by the Inland Revenue as Charitable, No, XR 17297

A larger type version of this text is available on request

Printed on Environmentally friendly paper

Introduction

In 1995, Rural Community Network (RCN) and the Rural Development Council were appointed as Intermediary Funding Bodies under the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. It has been the experience of RCN in monitoring and evaluating applications to two funding programmes it has administered (Peace and Reconciliation and 21st Century Halls for Northern Ireland) that there has been a noticeable difference in the level of applications or engagement by Protestant communities located in the border region, particularly in South Armagh, South Tyrone and South Fermanagh. While there a number of reasons for low levels of community activity, undoubtedly one of the key factors in this case is the effect of conflict on these communities. This has resulted in social isolation and community polarisation with a subsequent lack of capacity, confidence and cross community contact.

In focusing on Protestant communities in the border area, RCN is conscious of the extent to which these communities have been silent for a number of years and that very little is known in wider development circles about their experiences, attitudes, needs or concerns.

In Spring 2001, (RCN), as part of its commitment to addressing low/weak community infrastructure in rural areas[1] in Northern Ireland, embarked on an action-research project with members of Protestant communities living in selected border areas. The purpose of the research was threefold:

- To collate factual and attitudinal information on/from Protestant communities living in border areas with the purpose of identifying both their developmental needs and also the issues facing them as a minority community living in the border region.

- To identify recommendations on how these needs might be addressed, with particular reference to the implementation of future funding programmes and so sought to inform the work of RCN, the Rural Support Networks and other funding agencies.

- To encourage participants in the research to initiate some form of community activity with the understanding that they would be directly supported by RCN in doing so.

Essentially there were two distinct, yet inter-linked, elements to this project. The first was that which sought to document the views and opinions of members of Protestant communities living along selected border areas. The second was the animation and support of community activity in areas where there is no history of community development.

This report is therefore divided into two sections, the first presents the views and opinions of members of Protestant communities as expressed in eight workshops in four selected border areas. Recommendations for developmental work with this minority community are also identified. A full report on the findings from the eight workshops is available from RCN.

The second section of the report traces the community development activity in the four areas subsequent to RCN's intervention.

Following the workshops with Protestant communities, an overview of the findings was presented to members of the Catholic community living in four selected border areas. The purpose was to solicit feedback on some of the issues raised.

A full report of the findings from all workshops is available from RCN on 028 8676 6670 and on its website www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org.

Tom Kiernan
Programmes Manager
Rural Community Network

[1] For fuller discussion on low/weak community infrastructure see Network News Summer 2002 (No32)

Findings

Four communities were invited to participate in the research, all from areas in which the Protestant population has decreased over the years of the Troubles and now comprise a small percentage of the overall population. Two of these communities are located in very isolated rural areas.

Possibilities for a pilot community animation project were discussed subsequent to the workshops in each area. It was agreed that two of the study areas should focus on developmental work with women. An initial seeding grant was to be provided by RCN through the Department of Social Development's Active Community Initiative Programme.

Levels of Community Involvement

'I've never had any problems with them ('Catholic' groups), it's just in our own area we wouldn't get involved.'

All of the participants were involved in some form of community activity in their areas, but with a couple of exceptions, all were church related in some way. Some people referred to the diminishing level of interest among young people in the church. Given the previous point, this declining level of interest has added significance. Unless some other form of community activity is initiated people will have increasingly limited options for getting involved in anything of a communal nature.

"When you're a minority, such a small percentage, you feel that you'd have no say in the running of it."

There were powerful feelings against Sinn Fein members and supporters expressed in all workshops. This translates into a lack of willingness to get involved in any activity in which Sinn Fein members might be present. Given this, there are clear limitations on the extent to which Protestants will get involved in community development activity in their own areas. In geographic communities where a high percentage of the population comprises Sinn Fein voters, it is a reasonable assumption that many of the community activists will be Sinn Fein members or supporters (participants stated that they do not make a distinction between voters and members, if people are known to be Sinn Fein voters it is sufficient deterrent). This immediately sets a parameter for Protestant community involvement.

In the main, there was an extremely low level of knowledge of the activities or purpose of community development groups in the area while sometimes there was a vague almost sub-conscious awareness that these groups existed. The discussions highlighted a number of factors which contribute to this lack of knowledge and indeed interest. These includes:

• Attitudes within Protestant communities to community development activity (which some stated is a *'Catholic thing to do'*) and related to this is the perceived lack of relevance of community development activity to their lives.

• The fact that for the most part, the two communities in these areas do not interact. There is therefore no tradition of either working together on joint ventures or of attending events in each others' halls. There would appear to be no 'neutral' venues. The latter is important not only in terms of what becomes common practice, but more specifically in terms of the issue of safety. Many of the participants clearly stated they would not get involved in the activities of community groups because of the venues or areas in which the meetings are held. When asked whether it was also to do with individuals who may be involved, respondents for the most part were not aware of whom they were, the location was sufficient deterrent.

It was suggested that the fact that these community groups are led by Catholic members of the community means that the publicity is primarily targeted in places where Catholics access information, such as the 'Catholic' papers, Catholic churches, etc. In some cases, activities are advertised in local shops and other public places in the local town or village, and one would therefore assume, visible to both sides of the community. However some of the participants would not and do not shop in the local village.

Cross Community Activity

'What is she doing here?'

Broadly speaking, the attitude to involvement in cross community activity (in the guise of local partnerships and community groups as opposed to activities which seek to explore cross community issues per se) was not positive. This was based on a combination of personal experience, perceived experiences of others and perceptions of groups.

While for some the barrier to getting involved in cross community activity is related to the agenda of the group, to an extent its composition, and for some, geographical location, for others there is also a concern for personal security.

"I know several Protestants who went for a year. They were only being used. Things they said in the meetings didn't come up in the minutes. They were token Protestants, they were never listened to, so they left."

Leadership within Protestant Communities

Related to the issue of community development activity is that of leadership from within the Protestant community itself. The issue is quite a complex one. Many of the participants throughout the four communities considered the disparate nature of the Protestant Community 'split' as it is into a number of different churches as being a militating factor against the emergence of community leaders. Subsequently, although a number of other factors were also taken into account, the lack of community development activity was attributed to the lack of leaders.

Others referred to the need to maintain a low profile within the community as a whole. To do otherwise, they suggested, was to set yourself up as a target for a paramilitary attack;

> *"we slipped along quietly with our heads down. Our attitude was 'don't get involved in case you draw attention to yourself."*

"In the years of the Troubles, we were persecuted; we slipped along quietly with our heads down. Our attitude was 'don't get involved in case you draw attention to yourself."

There was a high degree of awareness of the differences and indeed a number of perceived differences in the social structure of Catholic and Protestant communities. The fragmentation of the Protestant community is an issue that participants were acutely aware of. Participants compared this to their perception of how things are organised within the Catholic community where they see the priest as playing a key role - linking the community together.

Sense of Belonging

'Everybody takes it for granted you're a Catholic.'

The sense to which people felt they 'belonged' to their communities varied considerably from one area to another, despite the common denominator that all participants could trace their families or their spouses' families back for generations. (One woman traced her family back to the 1700's and her husband's to the 1500's). In one area, while participants felt an absolute 'right' to belong to the community given the history of their families in the area, there was no sense of this right being translated into a feeling of belonging. In fact, people felt that because they live in those particular areas, there is an assumption that you're a Catholic and that being a Protestant isn't 'legitimate'. This manifests in a number of ways such as people feeling there is a limit to what they can do, where they can go, the degree of comfort around social conversations and their freedom to express their identity, such as choosing to wear a poppy.

"We would like Catholic neighbours to respect our views... we would like that on the Twelfth, the minority should be allowed to parade."

Participants spoke about the affects of this on young people and the extent to which it limits their opportunities for socialising in their areas. In most cases, there was a clear distinction between day and night time activities. There was unanimous agreement in all workshops that it is not safe for young people to go into the local town or village in the evening. There are two implications, one is the limit this places on the quality of life young people can enjoy within their own communities and the second is in relation to the future of those areas. If young people build their social infrastructure elsewhere, as appears to be the case, it is highly likely they will also build their futures in other areas.

One of the communities linked a 'sense of belonging' to the issue of Twelfth Parades and suggested that to be made to feel welcome and 'part' of the community' is difficult when you cannot express yourself as a minority.

Relations with Roman Catholic Neighbours

'Things have changed so much. We've lost faith, lost trust in them.'

The issue of relationships with Catholic neighbours and work colleagues is a complex one. The diversity in responses to this question varied not so much between areas as between individuals and the responses appear to be more likely to reflect individual experience rather than a situation within a given community. However, in the three areas where Protestants are a small minority within a larger Catholic community, any relationship which does exist seems to be determined by necessity rather than choice.

There are a number of common factors which characterise the relationships. In the main, people felt that the relationship has deteriorated over the years and those who commented on this (without exception) attributed the deterioration to events arising from the Troubles and more specifically IRA activity and the Twelfth Parades.

"The older generation are still on the level with us, but I wouldn't trust the younger element."

Politics is rarely discussed in any real sense. It is, in the main, a 'no-go' area with the exception of banter. This lack of dialogue at a personal level was reflected in responses to a question on whether or not people felt their neighbours understand their politics. Some participants felt that not only is their politics not understood, but that the Catholic perception of them is that they are 'an obstruction' on the way to a united Ireland.

In summary, while the initial response to the question on relationships with Catholic neighbours was positive and affirmative, when the issue was unpacked within the workshops; in particular, when the question emerged in the context of responses to other issues and discussions, the situation was not so positive. Not withstanding the fact that while some of the participants may have genuine friendships with Catholics (which tended to be in a work rather than a neighbourly context), underlying many responses were feelings of distrust, resentment, anger and hopelessness.

Single Identity Work

'Confidence needs to be built within the Protestant community before they would feel in a position to participate on a par with their Catholic counterparts.'

Some participants asserted that there is a different level of awareness of history and tradition between Protestants and Catholics. They identified a need for single identity work within the Protestant community to develop confidence and self-esteem and to increase knowledge of ideology, history and culture. Following this work, there would be increased confidence to engage in discussions of this nature within a cross community context. In addition to the need to create the space for discussions on these issues to take place there is also a need to create a 'safe' environment - where people will not have concerns about their safety.

In one area where there is a single identity group, people stated there is a lack of understanding in the broader community (including within the Protestant community) of the need for this work. There is suspicion around the motivation and rationale for it. This in turn can lead to problems for single identity workers. It was felt that both single identity organisations and workers within those organisations need to develop confidence around asserting the importance of and necessity for this type of work. Until that confidence is developed, there is a tendency to be apologetic for it. One single identity worker said that she had had initial reservations about her job. Her concerns were about whether the management committee were *'going to be extreme'* and expect her to *'push a certain line.'* While those concerns have been alleviated, she would remain conscious of the nature of the organisation she works for in describing her work to other people and would tend to *'over explain'* in her description of her organisation and what it does.

To take the step from single identity to cross community work, even of a very limited nature (for example, opening activities up to Catholics) is one filled with apprehension. There is a strong fear of being overwhelmed (in numerical terms), being infiltrated and of losing the space that has been created through single identity work.

"People are afraid to give ground. The village has technically been Protestant for years. There's a fear of losing identity, people are not strong enough in their own beliefs. There's a fear of the slippery slope."

Peace and Reconciliation Funding

'If you're the bog standard Protestant and you see the word 'reconciliation' in the paper, it's off-putting; that's mixing and we don't want to do it.'

The most striking and consistent response to the question on levels of knowledge of Peace and Reconciliation funding was one which indicated an almost total lack of awareness of the Programme. There are a number of factors which contributed to this lack of awareness including;

- Lack of involvement in community development activity and subsequent lack of formal linkages to information sources about the Programme.
- Lack of involvement in community initiatives leading to failure to see any relevance in the Programme.
- Confusion between this funding and other sources of funding which had in the past been rejected by some members of the Protestant community, and in the case of funding from the Community Fund (previously called the National Lottery Charities Board) still is.

In addition to lack of awareness about the Programme, there are other factors which prevented Protestants from applying for funding, namely;

- Features of the Protestant ethos which militates against applying for 'support'
- Assumptions about the need to have a 'cross community' project and rejection of this either because they felt it was inappropriate or in one case, because of the lack of a Catholic population in the immediate area
- Rejection of anything linked to 'reconciliation' or 'cross community'
- Lack of leadership within the community. As a result nobody took the initiative to develop projects

"In the border area, it's equally as twisted as here. The further south you go, the better it gets, people don't even think like that. In places like Dundalk though, they'd be looking at you and checking out your car registration."

- An assumption that the money was *'not for Protestants'.* (It is unclear as to why that assumption was made, it could on one hand be a reflection of the fact that it is primarily Catholics who are involved in community development activity or it could be an assumption that because funding was targeted at 'disadvantaged communities,' that this must have been for Catholics).

There were a number of assumptions made about the Programme:

- There is a widely held belief that *'Catholics got it all'* with reflections on this varying from a grudging sense of admiration, to resentment and more commonly, a sense of *'it's what you'd expect'.* There was a widespread perception that in receiving the bulk of the funding Catholics did so using fair means and foul. The other side of this coin is another common perception, that is, that the money was *'not for Protestants'.* For some, there was an expectation that Protestants, as a community, should have been informed about the Programme.

- There is a common perception that Catholics must have lied in order to benefit from the Programme and many added that this was something they were not prepared to do.

There is also a widespread assumption about the next phase of the Programme which reflects a level of knowledge of the funding application system. In particular, it highlights a lack of awareness of the process of applying for funding and the need to meet criteria. There is a view that, because *'Catholics got it'* last time round, there is now an automatic entitlement for Protestants; it is their 'turn'.

There are a couple of points worth noting in the perception that projects needed to be 'cross community.' Firstly, in some areas, cross community activity was quite simply not where the group 'was at', and in some cases, not where it wanted to be; the Programme was therefore rejected. For some, this was because of a fear that *'to go down the cross community road'* may lead to loss of identity. For others, they simply did not want that level of interaction with their Catholic neighbours. Secondly, there was resistance to getting involved in cross community activity because of concern over the possible reaction within their own communities.

Where applications were submitted by for example, the Orange Lodges or Royal Black Institution and subsequently rejected, it appeared that insufficient explanation was provided as to the basis for the refusal and the criteria the application or the organisation failed to meet. This resulted in the refusal being interpreted as a rejection on the basis of the group being Protestant. Some participants did not see on what other basis the application could be rejected only that the group was 'Protestant'.

Peace II

'Protestants don't like asking for money as a general rule- but they would come here (to an Orange Hall). Funders could be more pro-active - people could come to an environment where people would feel at ease...they may be more open to looking for grants.'

The discussions around what would need to change in Peace II to result in more applications being submitted by Protestant communities yielded a set of responses not dissimilar to those which would be identified by any community. They can be placed into the following broad categories; development support, information dissemination and the need for more user friendly processes. In particular, participants highlighted the importance of personal contact as means of promoting the Programme.

It was clear from the responses that people were unaware of the development support available to them. In each area, groups would have had access to at least one independent development support worker, in some cases, up to three. They were also unaware of the development support offered by funding agencies themselves, but were clear that they would welcome this type of support during Peace II.

The issue of development support is clearly a crucial one. Despite the large volume of development support workers funded under the P & R Programme, the typically rural solution to the provision of developmental support (i.e. a community development worker

"Protestants don't like asking for money as a general rule - but they would come here. Funders could be more pro-active - people could come to an environment where people would feel at ease...they may be more open to looking for grants."

on a geographical basis, where both communities are divided but are also interspersed) clearly had not worked for these communities - that is, in communities where there is a considerable difference in proportion between Protestants and Catholics and where there has been a history of conflict. There appears to be two reasons why it has not worked; one is because of the perceived religion and politics of the development support worker and the other is the area in which the development office is located.

Although the participants in one of the workshops had recently become involved in community development activity, they are still at an early developmental stage. All of the groups therefore were in a similar position in terms of not knowing what funding information to look for, not being able to recognise it when they see it and not being on the right mailing lists in case they don't! People referred to the need to be 'clued in.'

In summary, the following potential channels or means of distributing information were identified as being the most likely to reach members of the Protestant Community; individual/group mailing lists, local councillors, M.P.'s & M.L.A.'s. the Orange Order, announcements in churches, press releases in 'Protestant' papers, advertisements in shops, leaflets distributed through the schools, the Presbyterian Women's Association (PWA), Mothers Union (MU), Methodist Women's Association (MWA) and the Women's Institute (WI) and public information sessions.

Changing Roles

In all areas, the discussions on information dissemination and the need for development support led to the suggestions outlined in the previous section. In the main, these are generic to all communities regardless of religious affiliation. However, the identification of both the Orange Order and the Churches provoked debate on the overall potential of their roles within Protestant communities. This was considered not simply in the terms in which each was introduced (information dissemination), but more specifically on the leadership role each could (or should) assume within Protestant communities.

The Orange Order

'Anything happening is happening at ground level. When you go up, it would depress you. A nineteenth century organisation has missed the twentieth century. Lines of communication need improvement.'

While the role of the Orange Order initially arose in response to the question on effective methods of information dissemination within Protestant communities, it transpired that some people had considered other ways in which its role could be developed. There was a variety of opinions between groups as to the potential effectiveness of the Orange Order as a channel for information to the Protestant community. This varied from area to area and also between men and women.

In one area, the group was very optimistic about the potential role of the Order. Participants felt it could take the lead in organising a funding information session which would be attended by all the Lodges in the area. This group which appears to have a particularly young membership, suggested that other Lodges were watching their development with interest and, dependent on the level of their success believed it was possible that others would follow their lead.

"Because Orangeism has such bad press and the perception in the Catholic mind is that we are a bigoted, biased organisation...we need a community built on something which is not specifically Orange...you need a community organisation based on something which is outside the term 'political."

Others did not share this belief (including members of the Order itself). In particular women felt they were unlikely to receive information as the meetings are exclusively attended by men and discussions which take place at the meetings are not relayed in the home. Others felt that it would not only be exclusive to women but to members of the Protestant community who do not belong to the Order. Some participants believed that the negative image of the Order is not the image that Protestantism should be moving forward with. In one workshop where people felt that the Order was an inappropriate channel of information, one woman commented; *'but if you won them (the Order) over, you're away.'* This suggests perhaps, that the Order is an organisation with potential, as it crosses the Church divide within Protestantism, but is limited because of its attitudes and beliefs. Participants in this group added that with *'natural wastage',* younger members are now assuming a more prominent role but are fearful of *'rocking the boat.'*

The Churches

'One of the big problems as I see it is that the young ones have very little interest in the church.'

A number of people throughout the four areas suggested the churches as a means of disseminating information within Protestant communities. They highlighted the fact that information coming from individual ministers would be trusted by their congregations.

> *"Our churches should be doing something about it...the church should be showing some leadership and talking to the people."*

However, there were an equal number of reasons suggested as to why the church was inappropriate as a channel for information. People spoke of failed attempts in the past, lack of interest on the part of individual ministers, overburdened clergy, the fact that the churches are losing membership and therefore no longer have access to all the community and the potential inequity given the number of churches within the community as a whole.

In the main, mention of the church invariably resulted in a comparison with the perceived role of the priest within the Catholic community. It appears that what participants were actually looking for is a counterpart to the role of the Catholic priest as they see it. This perception is based on a belief that the priest is the link for all community activity in Catholic areas. Furthermore, there is an assumption that he assumes a leading role in initiating and supporting local development activity. The conclusion therefore is that the churches would be the natural counterpart in Protestant communities.

In one area, participants spoke of the demise of the churches in terms of young people losing interest and leaving. Given that most of the communal activity of the participants in this research was church related, in some way, there is clearly an added significance. Community organisation within Protestant communities are currently inextricably linked to the churches, their demise will have repercussions in terms of sustaining the community activity which does exist.

The Protestant Ethos - 'Nothing for Nothing'

'There's a certain amount of pride...we're Protestants, we manage ourselves. That sort of money is for Catholics, we wouldn't touch it.'

One of the inhibiting factors for Protestant communities in applying for funding support is adherence to the *'Protestant ethos.'* This emphasises self sufficiency, independence and working for what you receive.

Workshop participants also spoke about perceptions of community development as being a 'Catholic' way of working. In summary, people identified the following barriers in the Protestant mindset.

- There is a difficulty in accepting 'money for nothing'.
- Protestants don't want to ask for help or be seen to ask for help, it is somewhat distasteful.
- There is a perception that community development activity is a 'Catholic' thing to do.
- Being awarded grant aid is equated with begging and is therefore seen as undesirable.
- A strong part of the mindset is that you should *'work for what you get'.*

"There's something about not being ashamed to ask. Protestants are full of pride... we don't ask for help."

The Twelfth - 'It's what I Believe in'

The issue of the Twelfth celebrations and associated parades was of particular importance in three of the areas. It usually emerged in the discussions on a sense of belonging to the community and also in relation to the question on relationships with the Catholic community.

There is a genuine lack of understanding, hurt and bewilderment arising from the resistance to marches from Catholic neighbours. People feel that it is the only time of the year they openly assert their identity within those areas and cannot understand why this expression is not acceptable to Catholic neighbours. Opposition to parades was generally equated with a rejection of Protestant expression of identity. The issues which the Catholic community identify as being the reasons for opposing the parades were not seen as being the 'real' reasons.

There is a strong sense of loss around the Twelfth and a very real sadness that a family social occasion is lost, probably forever. The Twelfth was described as a 'good family day', when children got new outfits and there was a general sense of festivity. In one area, there appeared to be a resignation that even if all the marches were to go ahead in the future, the social atmosphere has gone forever.

"I am no different a person when I put on my orange collarette."

Participants suggested that marches in rural areas are 'different' (from Belfast or Portadown, for instance) as they don't have 'Blood and Thunder' or provocative bands. However, they felt this is not mirrored in differential treatment. Some participants expressed strong opposition to some of the more provocative bands and said that they themselves would be intimidated by them. In one area, there was particular hurt around the Parades issue as the local pipe band is seen to be a very conservative one and would *'mostly play hymns'.* Participants pointed out that the band has participated in a number of cross community events in the local town.

Responsibility for the change in attitude towards parades was attributed to three factors with varying degrees of emphasis; Drumcree, the Orange Order and Sinn Fein. With regard to the latter, it was felt that opposition to the parades was politically orchestrated and that many of those who protested against the parades live outside the areas in question. In two communities, people commented that those who protested against the parades were *'bussed in'* for the event. In another area, the point was made that protests by residents are somewhat of *'a nonsense'* as nobody lives on the Parade route.

Mixed Marriages

'Most of us would want the family to marry within the Protestant community, but if they fall in love, what can you do?'

There are a number of issues which suggest that the question of mixed marriages would have considerable significance for Protestant communities in border areas. Firstly, along the border, the Protestant population has declined considerably over the last couple of decades; secondly, there are fears around cross community activity and the perceived erosion of identity and thirdly there is resistance to selling property to Catholics in an attempt to hold onto *'what is Protestant.'*

The most common response to the question of the acceptability of mixed marriages was one of resignation to the fact that if it is a son or daughter's choice there is little can be done, but it would not be the first preference of the parents. For some, there was evidently a tension in not wanting to be opposed to mixed marriages per se and on the other hand being faced with the difficulty of coping with the very real challenges presented when it becomes an issue within the family.

Participants were asked to consider whether or not their responses would vary if the question related specifically to the son or daughter who was to inherit the farm being in a mixed marriage. In one area, there were strong reservations to the extent that one woman stated that if this was to happen in her family, the son would be disowned. One woman commented *'men are stricter about this'* (the question of inheritance). However it transpired in the subsequent workshop with men, there was less resistance to the idea.

Experiences of the Troubles

'Sinn Fein put up a monument of (IRA man)...people felt very hurt that this man was honoured as he was responsible for the murder of Protestant people from the area.'

In all areas there have been very direct, in some cases, violent experiences of the Troubles. Three out of the four communities chose to talk about these in detail. People spoke of experiences ranging from ongoing fear to incidents in which family members or friends were killed or injured. The events of which people spoke, some of which happened twenty years ago, are as fresh in people's minds as if they happened within the past year. So too are the feelings around them.

In the workshops, participants were not asked about their experiences of the Troubles. This information emerged in many discussions, but primarily in those on relationships with Catholic neighbours and the 'sense of belonging' to the community. Sometimes, it emerged in discussions on how safe people felt in the town, about how comfortable they felt in going for a drink, sometimes in reference to the state of relations between both communities and sometimes in relation to north/south issues.

"I wouldn't mind them marrying a Catholic as long as they didn't turn into a Catholic or bring the children up as a Catholic. I'm not bigoted."

North/South Issues

'If peace hadn't come, I'd never have seen the Free State.'

Given that living in proximity to the border was one of the defining selection criteria for this project, it was important to get some feedback from participants on border related issues. This question was considered on two fronts. In the first instance, there was a discussion on people's level of comfort with proximity to the border and the extent to which they travelled, shopped, socialised and indeed felt comfortable with this, south of the border.

The second consideration was the political dimension to the border. The establishment of North/South bodies with executive powers and the formal identification of additional areas for cross border co-operation within the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is one which sits uncomfortably with many members of the Protestant community. Given that people who live within the areas targeted by this research deal with border issues on a daily basis, the research also sought to receive opinions on the bigger political picture.

In one workshop, travelling, shopping and socialising south of the border was clearly not an issue and indeed there was an element of surprise that it might be one. Others voiced similar opinions, although one group substantiated this by adding that a contributory factor is the fact that the Protestant community itself extends south of the border for 2-3 miles. In one area, where some participants or their families were members of the security forces, concerns were expressed about the security dimension to travelling south. However, some people in that area expressed no reservations. The price of fuel was mentioned on a number of occasions and has undoubtedly played a role in encouraging people to travel south! However, in one workshop where the participants live within three miles of a southern border town, a few of the participants said they would feel apprehensive about travelling south. A couple of people said that they would travel south for fuel only, one woman adding that she would never travel south after dark.

The question of North/South institutions and enhanced cross border co-operation as the only 'political' question in the workshops provoked opinions on a range of political issues. These included north/south co-operation, the Peace Process and the Agreement.

The primary focus was on north/south co-operation. Within these responses, there was a substantial breadth of opinion. On one end of the spectrum were people who were 'very comfortable with it' stating it would be hugely beneficial to the farming community. Some had no concerns whatsoever although inherent in many of the opinions was a sense of the inevitably of the future of cross border co-operation. At the other end of the spectrum, there was outright opposition to what was termed *'interference in internal affairs.'* A number of people expressed distrust of the agendas of both Sinn Fein and the Irish Government. Broadly speaking, there was consensus that cross border bodies are a good idea for practical reasons. Others referred to their lessened significance within an EU context.

In one workshop, there was a discussion on the practical implications of cross border co-operation. There was a concern for instance that the southern health service is not as high a quality as that in the North. There was a lengthy discussion on this and many expressed concerns which were not so much related to the political undercurrent as much as ensuring maintenance of quality services. Participants highlighted the need for further information.

Others were angry at Southern policy. Firstly, in relation to policing the border during the Troubles; *'The Guards (Garda Siochana) are busy as bees on the border (the interview took place during the Foot and Mouth crisis)...when our friends and family were being shot, they weren't to be seen* (one woman added)... *'they didn't want to catch them.'*

Others were unhappy with the Southern Government's response to the Foot and Mouth issue; *'I didn't like the mats half way across the road (referring to southern Government initiatives in response to the Foot and Mouth crisis)...it's all right to bring it in here.'*

The question on north/south issues was the catalyst in some cases for comments on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. A number of people indicated that they had voted 'yes' to the Agreement, but given the choice, they would not do so now. In particular, many participants felt strongly about the release of political prisoners and the lack of progress on decommissioning.

The Future

Given the general decline in the population of Protestant communities in border areas over the past couple of decades, the relative lack of employment opportunities and the social issues which emerged in the course of the discussions, the future of Protestant communities themselves in these areas is in question. Participants in all areas were asked to consider their opinions on the future of their areas and whether they thought their families would remain living there (of particular significance in three of the areas, given that Protestants not originally from the area are unlikely to choose to live there).

Responses to this question varied considerably from one area to another. They ranged from on one hand, a sense of resignation that the social infrastructure and the population of the Protestant community could not be restored, to a strong sense of optimism. The latter was reflected in a definite belief in the future of a Protestant community in the area coupled with a strong commitment to shaping that future for their children. However, within this spectrum of opinions, there were common themes: the need for regeneration of the areas; the need to create social and economic opportunities, particularly for young people; the demise of farming with the inevitable move from the land and the issue of personal and family safety.

Many participants in three of the areas spoke of the lack of social and economic opportunities, in particular for young people. For some, this was coupled with a sense of resignation that there was no possibility of restoring the social infrastructure in any way. For many, this issue was too difficult to contemplate. People were acutely aware of what is happening within their communities in terms of decline but avoided consideration of the consequences.

However, in one of the areas, participants in both the men's and women's workshops felt there's definitely a future for the Protestant community in the area and they are committed to shaping that future for their children. They stated that people would want to live in their community *'out in the country'* where there is a Protestant population but would not want to live in the local town. Central to people's belief in the certainty of being able to retain a Protestant community in the area is the increase in numbers in the local Protestant schools and indeed the academic success of pupils in those schools. Some placed their optimism about the future alongside a determination that they would not be forced out of the area.

Where are they now?

This section reports on the development work undertaken by RCN in three of the four communities subsequent to the research. It also draws out some of the key lessons learned by RCN as a result of its development work.

Community A - At the Beginning
One of the groups we met with at the outset was drawn from the Orange Order. It had established a Community Association to develop plans to build a sports hall in the community and the male participants we met were all involved in this initiative. There were no women involved with the Management Committee of the Community Association at this stage.

An initial seeding grant was to be provided by RCN. Early discussions with members of the Community Association indicated they would like to use the funding for architects plans which had already been developed for the new Sports Hall. However, it transpired that no audit or needs analysis of the community had been carried out. The group had planned the Hall (to quite an advanced stage) on the basis of what they anticipated the needs of the community to be.

During the workshop with women in the area, they highlighted the absence of any activities for women in the community and the extent to which they would welcome the opportunity to meet in a space that was just for women (and free from children!). The Community Association therefore decided to use the funding in two ways. In the first instance, it would be used to conduct an audit of the community's needs with regard to the Sports Hall and secondly to fund evening classes or other activities for women in the area.

The Group's Activities
Following the initial meeting with RCN, the women who had participated in the research decided to form a women's group and they now meet once a week in the local Orange Hall. Their first activity was to organise a fancy dress Halloween party for the local children and over 50 participated in the event. They then organised a Christmas party which was very successful with over 70 people attending. They went on to organise a series of courses through a local outreach training establishment which included; First Aid, Computers, Christmas Floral Art, Keep-fit, Yoga and Reflexology/Aromatherapy/Indian Head Massage. Other courses are planned through to June 2003. The Women's group are planning to hold their first Annual General Meeting in March of this year.

The women of the area were keen to establish a Parent and Toddler Group but the hall was in need of repair and therefore unsuitable. Remedial work was carried out in order to facilitate this and the Parent and Toddler group now meet once a week and the numbers are increasing steadily.

The Community Association are now working with RCN's Halls Advisory Service to develop their 'new build' project. An Economical Appraisal is currently being conducted and relationships are being established with the local council and other funding bodies. The management committee of the Community Association is now more representative of the whole community.

Progress - **The Group's Story Now**
The progress report requested from the community in the preparation of this report was submitted by the women's group;

> *"Before the (Women's) Group was established there was a great big void with lots of individual women and girls in this community with no focus for their talents and energy. If women wanted to participate in any form of self improvement, be it learning a new skill or losing a few pounds or simply sharing their experiences, they had to go outside the community.*
>
> *The main impact of this programme has been to show a community of women that perhaps thought it had no voice or that it didn't matter to anyone, that this is not the case. Having the support of the community and seeing them turn out eagerly for everything that we have held so far (to the point of there being no room left on some occasions!!!) is an ongoing highlight."*
>
> *The only thing that I can think of that you could perhaps do differently in future is to try to reach girls in the mid-teens and up age group. Sometimes when women are targeted, the focus tends to be on married women who are settled in a community. This may or may not be intentional, but I think that a section of the community is being missed in important years when greater efforts need to be made to provide a reason for young women to either want to stay in a community or to return to it after education.*
>
> *The most important factors for our group's growth and development are never to be thwarted by indifference or lack of resources. If you are put off at the first hurdle you come to then nothing will ever be achieved. Our group believes in what we are trying to do and we will keep on trying. The approach and format may have to change but the vision is always constant. It is vitally important to take people with you as you grow and move on so listening is absolutely essential and change has to be gradual and at a comforting speed rather than in one manic step. Women are the glue which binds a community together. Without them a community will crumble and die"*

"Women are the glue which binds a community together. Without them a community will crumble and die."

Community B - At the Beginning

The project which hosted the workshops in this area was a single identity one which seeks to improve the quality of community facilities for Protestant people in the area. The women who attended the workshop indicated they would welcome the formation of a women's group. At the outset, the group met to consider the relationship it would have with the single identity 'host' organisation, whether or not the group would remain single identity and to agree on and plan activities (initially there was an extremely wide range of ideas put forward).

The Group's Activities

This group's main activity was to produce a work of art through a series of ceramic tiling classes. The culmination of this work was launched in September 2002 and the finished piece is now on permanent display at a local resource centre. The finished piece is made up of individual hand crafted tiles which reflect the interests and hobbies of all the women involved along with a sense of pride in their surroundings and an expression of the hurt experienced by many in their community. These workshops have been interspersed with social activities and visits to other groups and places of interest.

"The experience of taking part in the programme has been very positive. Friendships have been forged and the group has grown numerically. There is good sense of caring and support."

Progress - The Group's Story Now

"The experience of taking part in the programme has been very positive. Friendships have been forged and the group has grown numerically. There is a good sense of caring and support. The programmes based on discussion e.g. assertiveness, health etc. have been most enlightening regarding the ideas and thoughts of others, and the visits, the artistic and exercise programmes more relaxing and enjoyable. There's a balance to be considered here.

The group has a deep felt and sincere degree of concern and regret for the fragmentation and exodus of our community from the area. Members already do reach out across the community but emphatically feel less restricted in voicing their opinions in a single identity group. However, as a result of the group meetings it is felt by members who have limited opportunities for meaningful discussion cross community, that they are more confident in these situations to enter into discussion. But this is still very tentative and limited.

At the beginning, we needed to be left to bond and find our own feet. Ideas for future directions and funds to apply for are helpful and the assistance given at all times by R.C.N. is very much appreciated.

We the committee, would greatly appreciate some help from R.C.N. possibly in the form of a facilitator to lead a discussion, point out pathways and draw out the feelings of the group, say on a six monthly basis.

It is important to keep fulfilling the social need, but concerns about the family, the wider community and the environment (physical, political and social) might be channelled into some positive development or action alongside this. The group is very positive at its present level and there would be a degree of inexperience, apprehension and worries about funding and commitment in pushing towards anything very radical."

Community C - At the Beginning

This initial meeting was held in a newly refurbished Orange Hall, a few miles from the local village. While there was already a women's group in the wider community, its meetings are held in a venue which would not be attended by members of the Protestant community. Given the opportunities presented by the refurbished hall alongside the lack of existing outlets for Protestant women the group was quite keen on the idea of forming a women's group.

A session was held during which a range of project ideas was discussed and the group agreed on a course of activities which it believed would be attractive to women in the area.

The Group's Activities

The group acquired some new equipment for the Hall in order to enable women to run craft classes. Members have since organised and participated in a number of activities/courses such as First Aid, Decoupage, Indian cookery demonstrations, flower arranging and Fitness classes. The group has also organised a number of social events and trips. The group are presently planning a patchwork quilt project and other events for the coming months.

Progress - The Group's Story Now

"For over thirty years of the Troubles, the small rural Protestant community living in this area was subject to extreme intimidation. Many people felt they had no choice but to leave their homes, especially as a number of those who remained, suffered violent and murderous attacks on their families.

When the consultant first contacted us it was only possible to obtain six participants to take part in the workshop. This was because local women were reluctant to express their views and were very wary about what they might be asked and who would know what they had said.

We as a group were not aware that funding was available for single identity groups. After our discussions with the consultant and RCN staff we decided to start our group and received funding from RCN.

As time went by our numbers increased to twenty one. We have had classes in first aid, cookery demonstrations and decoupage. Our group also attended the Ardhowen Theatre in Enniskillen, which five of our members had never been to before. The highlight of our activities to date was when we hired a bus and went on a trip to one of the other border areas. We enjoyed a lovely meal and did some shopping. That evening we went to a resource centre to meet with our friends who had established a women's group and we attended the launch of their 'ceramic mural' and were delighted to find that our friends had written a poem about the evening they had spent with us in our community.

We have greatly appreciated the help and funding we have received from RCN. "We have started on a journey from what was a terrible thirty years of fear, intimidation, death and destruction. We have a long way to go to overcome the feelings of isolation within our community." However we feel that being part of a group has helped us a 'lot' and we hope that we will be able to continue to and slowly build up our confidence through the friendships we have made with one another and other similar groups".

> *"We have started on a journey from what was a terrible thirty years of fear, intimidation, death anddestruction...However we feel that being part of a group has helped us a lot."*

Lessons Learned by RCN

The following section outlines some of the key lessons learned by RCN in the course of this development work.

1.   It highlighted the importance of engaging in a 'reality check' - of going into communities, listening to people, recording their experiences, providing them with an opportunity to identify the issues which are most important to them and accepting where they 'are at' in terms of their development.

2.   People affected by the conflict, both directly and indirectly, need to 'tell their story.' While this procedure can be slow and difficult it is an important part of the healing process. It can also be an essential pre-requisite to people's engagement in local community activity. The extent to which people are willing or able to engage with existing development groups in their communities will be affected by the fact that these stories are very much a part of their lives and for them - that is the context of any engagement with the rest of the community.

3.   RCN Development Staff at all times worked where communities 'were at' in terms of their attitudes, values and the criteria they themselves laid down for involvement in community development activity. These did not always sit easily with the ethos and practice of RCN as an organisation and indeed forced RCN into a position of having to decide between key principles as an organisation and allowing the group to determine its boundaries. It opted for the latter and it worked!

      This approach allowed groups to identify the importance of certain issues for themselves. For instance, in one area, some members of a group were clearly concerned about working with Catholic workers. There were also issues with the inclusion of women in the process. RCN took a strategic decision not to insist on the inclusion of women. As the group progressed and developed, group members themselves began to realise the need to include women in their activities.

4.   The provision of high quality developmental support was crucial in gaining the trust of the groups. Given there were pre-conceived views both about the value of including women and the motive of Catholics - the ability of Development Staff to de-construct stereotypes by providing competent, effective and unconditional developmental support was critical in the groups' development.

5.   There was a key lesson in realising the importance of 'little steps' - of gradually encouraging, nurturing and avoiding being judgemental, or setting the pace while at the same time being 'quietly' challenging.

6.   It transpires that the area, which, apparently had the greatest capacity for development at the outset (as it had already formed a committed development association) was in fact able to make the least progress. It is worth noting that this group was already in receipt of development support from other agencies (arguably with differing agendas) and subsequently the group was in receipt of advice that was not always consistent. The group was also 'goal' rather than 'process/activity' oriented. By contrast, all other three areas started afresh - worked with one development agency and received consistent support.

7.   A team within RCN was involved in the initiative. While one Development worker has assumed a lead role in the project, a number of other workers have been involved in providing development support, depending on the particular needs of the groups. All other participating workers are kept informed and all problems and issues are discussed and resolved by the team rather than by individual workers.

8.   In animating community activity in areas where there has been no history of community development, the importance of allowing communities to 'feel comfortable' in themselves cannot be underestimated. Communities will reach out and engage when they are ready to do so.

9.   Not being reactive to inappropriate comments proved to be important. Sexist and sectarian remarks were not reacted against, rather were used as a basis for discussion. Space and time was given to discussing issues.

10.   Making the space and the case for single identity work in an organisation committed to cross community development proved to be important. In particular, when sectarian sentiments were expressed by some of the community group members as the reason for wanting to engage in single identity work, it was sometimes challenging to justify supporting this work within the Rural Community Network. However, it also provided a valuable opportunity for this work to be placed on the agenda and debated.

From a RCN perspective, this particular piece of work has been highly successful and significantly with a minimum allocation of resources. It has had a considerable affect on the communities involved and indeed on the individual lives of the people concerned.

RCN has also learned and benefited from involvement in this initiative. It is hoped that the good practice developed in this project will assist and inform the work of others engaged in similar weak community infrastructure activity.

Recommendations

One of the primary reasons for undertaking this research was to identify recommendations which RCN could implement when future funding opportunities arise. Therefore, despite the breadth of issues discussed in the course of the workshops, the recommendations focus solely on those issues which can be taken on board in the context of delivering a funding programme or engaging in developmental work.

1) There is clearly a need for single identity work within Protestant communities to develop confidence and self-esteem, with the ultimate purpose of enabling people to feel confident enough to engage in cross-community activity. This is particularly important in areas where the community is in a minority. It is clear from the responses of the research participants that people are, in the main, unwilling to engage in cross community activity. While fears around safety are an explanatory factor, so too are fears on giving ground and loss of identity, the 'slippery slope' participants referred to. While people perceive cross community activity to be a threat to their own identity, they are unlikely to willingly engage in it.

2) To facilitate the work referred to above, funders must be open to supporting activities which take place in both Orange Order and church halls. In some areas, these are the only halls available for community activity.

3) Funders, when organising roadshows and other information events should consider how advertisements and press releases read to people who are not involved in community activity. Frequently the language used and the information provided only makes sense if the reader is already conversant with the language of funding and community development. Information aimed at the public should highlight the opportunities funding presents, rather than the fact that it is available. It should cite the type and range of projects which are eligible for funding.

4) In promoting funding opportunities, consideration should also be given to innovative ways in which previously funded projects can be highlighted and brought to the attention of those not already involved in community development. Case studies and similar publications tend to be made available to and read by those already involved in community activity, thereby failing to inspire activity in people who are unfamiliar with and uninvolved in, community organisations. (For example, local weekly newspapers could be encouraged to publish features on models of good practice.)

5) When calling for applications to funding programmes, where applicable, advertisements should also point out that applications are acceptable from communities which comprise of one religion only. ('Single identity' is not a term used in everyday conversation.)

6) Information on the availability of developmental support should be provided alongside advertisements on funding opportunities. For people who may be interested in initiating development activity, knowing that there is development support available and being aware of how to access it could be the essential catalyst.

7) Development support organisations must consider the ways in which they publicise their work and activities. The research highlighted the extent to which many people are unaware of development organisations (in areas of extensive community development activity) and in particular the support they offer to groups.

8)   Discussions with and between church leaders in Protestant communities would be useful for the purpose of examining the potential expansion of their role in community activity. There are clear possibilities for a 'gate-keeping' role here, where information and opportunities could be made available to Protestant communities via church leaders.

9)   While funders will be sensitive to the differences (in terms of proportion) between funding awarded to Catholic and Protestant groups under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme, it is extremely important that this does not manifest in funding being awarded to groups just because they are Protestant under Peace II. Many of the respondents believed that Catholic communities were the primary beneficiaries of Peace funding simply because it followed a pattern; *'that's them ones getting it again';* or they interpreted it as another concession to the Catholic Nationalist community or simply that the Catholic community lied in order to get funding.

          It is important that Peace II does not reinforce these interpretations. Funders need to be consistent in showing that there is a system which applies to all and that this system is based on a process of application and assessment according to clearly outlined criteria. If long term community development activity within Protestant communities is to be encouraged, the development of familiarity with and trust in the funding application system is crucial.

10)   The typically rural solution to the provision of developmental support, i.e. a community development worker employed on a geographical basis, where both communities are divided but are also interspersed and living alongside each other, clearly does not work. The community development worker will be perceived as being 'one side or the other' and as is evident from this research, the 'other' community is unlikely to avail of support (in areas where there are deep divisions).

          Therefore, sub-regional development/support organisations must pay particular attention to areas where there is a low level of community activity and where a minority community might be present. Pro-active work must take place within these communities initiated by these sub-regional organisations (even though there may be a local community development worker).

11)   Innovative methods of information dissemination need to be used by organisations attempting to target Protestant communities. These include for example, using the schools, the Orange Order, the Presbyterian Women's Association (PWA), Mothers Union (MU), Methodist Women's Association (MWA) and the Women's Institutes (WI) as channels of information. To progress this, discussions need to take place with these organisations at a regional level to gain support and to avert what some people described as a 'filtering' process (in terms of which information would be passed on).

12)   Particularly (though not exclusively) in areas where members of one community are a small minority, funders should be wary of insistence on cross community membership. While one cannot fault the ideal, the reality is that it can result in tokenistic membership. This, as the research demonstrates has the potential to create further rifts and enhance the sense of powerlessness felt by minority communities.

13)   Both development organisations and funders should be aware of the need to provide a space for people to talk about their experiences of the Troubles. This space needs to be independent of any other agenda - such as a first step to cross community activity. It should be provided for the sole purpose of enabling people to come to terms with their experiences by sharing them with other people, preferably in a safe, facilitated environment.

Comment

At the outset of this piece of research, there was a clear commitment on the part of RCN to assume a pro-active role with Protestant communities in the border area. There was a recognition that this is a community in decline, to the extent that many people would assume that no Protestants live in three of the selected research areas. In these areas, the Catholic community is strong, confident and politically articulate whereas the Protestant community has largely been invisible and silent. This has been the case for a complex set of reasons.

As the breadth of issues raised in the course of these discussions highlights, RCN's intervention will be just one of many such interventions required if a cross community presence is to be retained in these areas.

A large part of the solution may well lie within the communities themselves. There is clearly a challenge, issued indirectly by the workshop participants, to those who are in a position to give leadership within those communities to do just that - provide leadership. Here, people specifically referred to churches, the Orange Order and politicians.

However, prospective leadership from within these communities does not lie exclusively within existing structures. There is potential leadership from other sources within Protestant communities. If it is to develop and be maximised, there needs to be openness to leaders emerging from non traditional areas and to providing support for them to do so. Therefore, while it is fair to say that in order to be successful, developmental work within Protestant communities must take existing structures into account, it must not allow itself to be limited to these structures.

The type of leadership required is that based on empowerment, confidence building and communal self help. It must be leadership which asserts itself in its own right and avoids setting itself up in competition with its Catholic neighbours.

Whether or not these communities exist in the border area for generations to come may well be dependent on the extent to which these leaders rise to the challenge.

RCN

"I'm under the impression that Roman Catholics have the headstart. They have one church to start with. Priests are more community minded. Here, Ministers are for religious pastoral care and nothing else."

"It doesn't give me a problem whatsoever.. outside Ireland. If my children were in a mixed marriage anywhere else in the world outside Northern Ireland, it wouldn't give me a terrible problem, if it happened here it would."

"Community development, it's not to do with us, it's to do with them. Setting up a community organisation is a Catholic thing to do."

VISION
Our Vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society.

MISSION
Our Mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

STRATEGIC AIMS
To articulate the voice of rural communities.

To promote community development and networking in rural communities.

To work towards social inclusion and peace building in rural communities.

To support the building of sustainable rural communities.