

Networking with Rural Women's Groups: Linkages with the Peace and Reconciliation Programme

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The EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (SSPPR) introduced to Northern Ireland and the southern border counties in 1995 brought with it new hopes, increased expectations, a plethora of new (some innovative) funding delivery mechanisms, lots of money and much food for thought.

The first phase of the EU funded Programme was operated through seven sub programmes, including one for 'Social Inclusion' and one for District Partnerships, the latter being applicable to the NI dimension of the Programme only. The focus of the SSPPR is on 'embedding the peace process and promoting reconciliation', with social inclusion being recognised as an important tool in achieving the Programme aim. Of the total package of 300 million ECU (St£252 million approx. at the time of allocation, but this was subject to fluctuations in exchange rates), approximately 30% was allocated to the Social Inclusion Programme, while the District Partnerships were allocated St£51 m. This paper will highlight the impact of the SSPPR on the development of rural women's groups and question of sustainability of this development. It will also explore the work of District Partnerships from the perspective of women's development.

Despite initial and indeed continuing confusion regarding delivery mechanisms (7 sub programmes and 24 measures), the Programme, with its incentive of relatively accessible funding created an unprecedented dynamic in the development of new projects within the community/voluntary sector. In particular, the 'Social Inclusion' aspect of the programme which placed considerable emphasis on the provision of developmental and training support for women presented women's groups with opportunities to organise programmes of activities in the knowledge that they would be well resourced. In Fermanagh alone, where the timing of funding being made available was particularly opportune as it coincided with the employment of a Women's Development Officer for the county, the number of active women's groups rose from 4 to 12 in a twelve month period. Particularly in rural areas where, heretofore, the development of women's groups was ad hoc and to a great extent, dependent on the commitment of local rural development workers, the rapid growth in this area was long overdue.

However, any rapid development brings with it the haunting question of sustainability. The following section will examine these groups, their stage of development and will raise the question of their long term sustainability. In Fermanagh, the newly formed women's groups largely developed around the need to create a social focus for women in their areas, which has in the main, been achieved through the organisation of education and training courses. The average grant secured by groups to adopt a modest but realistic programme of work in the first year was approximately £2,000 - peanuts in P&R terms. These grants have been a major factor in enabling women's groups to get started and subsequently to present women in their areas with social and educational opportunities. This in turn has expanded thinking around the facilities and services which can be provided in rural communities and has increased awareness of what has been lost through the centralisation of education provision.

We are now in post Phase I of the Programme. It is yet to be known if Phase II will be a reality and what types of initiatives the Programme is likely to fund. A major concern for women's networks in awaiting this information is the ability of the Programme to sustain the development initiatives of Phase I. It is, therefore, disconcerting to hear that initial reports regarding the focus of Phase II indicate emphasis on employment and labour market related initiatives. Should this be the case, it will virtually exclude the majority of women's groups in rural areas from accessing funding and ultimately from surviving. Phase II of the P&R Programme must be realistic, build on the achievements of Phase I and take cognisance not only of the slow pace of development but also of the varying levels of development within the women's sector. While the women's movement has been active and indeed political in Belfast and Derry for over 20 years, the reality is, in rural areas it is only beginning to take off in an integrated coordinated way. Funding programmes with an employment related dimension are aptly timed for the more advanced groups within the women's sector but will leave many networks of women's groups in rural areas stranded, penniless and isolated ...yet again.

While this issue, which is a major concern for all rural women's networks, is in the short term directed at the P&R Programme, it does of course necessitate serious longer term consideration. The sustainability of rural women's groups (and indeed community projects in general) initiated when the place was awash with funding is an issue which must be addressed at policy level as a matter of urgency.

The change in the Rural Development Council policy in 1995 which shifted the focus of the Council's work from community to economic development thereby rendering all its work with women's groups (among others) redundant, followed by the failure to include the funding of women's networks as part of the Rural Regeneration Networking Support Grants Programme under the SSPPR highlights the lack of importance attached to women's development within the rural development agenda.

The P&R Programme has in many ways been a catalyst for the upsurge of the rural women's sector, a sector which could ensure that this debate is raised and becomes part of a long term rural development strategy. Those responsible for securing and designing the programme must take a long hard look at what is being created and ensure that the programme does not become a four year period when women look back and remember the glory years of funding.

Rural women's development must be prioritised in the second phase of P&R funding, and must be addressed as an integral and essential part of mainstream rural development. Because of the short term nature of the SSPPR, it is limited in what it can achieve in itself. However, if it wants to leave a worthwhile legacy to rural women it must build their capacities to the extent that rural women's groups have the ability to ensure that their goals and visions for rural communities are given priority by central government when framing rural development policy.

District Partnerships

Local partnerships are not an end in themselves, their *raison d'être* lies in their capacity to transform social relations, ways of thinking and behaviour and to be an instrument of innovation and development. (Leader II, 1997)

Under Sub Programme 6 of the SSPPR, a District Partnership was established (as a funding delivery mechanism) in each of the 26 District and Borough Council areas. The purpose of the Sub Programme was to harness the energies and talents of local people in addressing social and economic needs and fostering peace and reconciliation. (NIPB, 1997) Their members comprise one third elected representatives, one third from the voluntary/community sector (nominated by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) and one third drawn from trade unions, businesses and statutory agencies. This particular partnership structure is a unique model of working in terms of its composition and also in that its remit is limited to grant allocation. It is particularly innovative in Northern Ireland terms as it is the first time that decision making about allocation of funds for local development initiatives has been devolved to such a local level. A Northern Ireland Partnership Board was also established which oversees the operation of the Sub Programme.

To take a brief look at where these Partnership Boards fit into both government and European policies and frameworks, a recently published discussion paper by Paul Sweeney and Roisin McDonough (1997) provides a useful overview of this position. It refers to the current thinking around democracy which involves a shift from representative democracy to a more consultative, participative democracy as represented by partnerships. "In policy terms conventional wisdom... will manifest itself in the recognition that if anti-poverty/regeneration efforts are to get beyond a series of piecemeal initiatives, some channel is needed to fuse this effort into a coherent strategy, i.e. partnerships with a strategic focus on the critical issues. The state will cease to be viewed as a collective problem solver and take on the role of partnership catalyst". This has been reflected in the creation of a policy environment conducive to partnerships and has resulted in some regeneration programmes being delivered through partnership initiatives or moving towards partnership arrangements. They cite among others, the examples of the Rural Development Programme initiated by the Department of Agriculture and the Making Belfast Work Programme.

Sweeney & McDonough (1997) also refer to the "Labour Party's new clause IV (which) placed the promise to work in partnership with the voluntary organisations at the heart of its constitution, making it clear that the Party views the sector as the linchpin of civil society". In relation to the new Labour government policy with regard to local government, Labour has given an undertaking to place a duty on local councils to develop three-way partnerships with the voluntary and private sectors. Furthermore, the new government is committed to producing a contract with the voluntary sector as outlined in the policy document 'Building the Future Together: Labour's policies for partnership between Government and the Voluntary Sector'.

Sweeney & McDonough (1997) highlight the 'critical influence of the European Commission in promoting the concept and practice of social partnerships, examples include community initiatives such as LEADER, URBAN and the EU SSPPR'. Indeed it was identified as one of the key principles in the EU's Third Anti Poverty Programme. The paper concludes that in this regard, 'it is highly likely that the next round of EU Structural Funds (2000- 2004) will accord a high priority to partnership arrangements'.

Indeed the potential and usefulness of partnership is reflected in feedback from the community/voluntary sector representatives involved in the first phase of the Partnerships. A NICVA report (1997) entitled 'Partnerships - a View from Within' noted that they view it 'as a method of practicing inclusion' and highlighted the 'value of the developing relationships, understanding and trust which have been built up between different sectors and individuals.' They indicate that a crucial

factor in rating its importance is 'the fact that it involves actual decision making on key issues including policy creation and allocation of finances'. Indeed the community/voluntary sector representatives are hopeful that the work and progress of the partnerships would be recognised, valued and built on.

There can be no doubt that partnerships are potentially an important vehicle for change and will play a considerable role in shaping the future of rural communities in Northern Ireland. So, where do rural women's groups fit into the picture? Devolved decision making structures are in theory the most likely avenue for women involved with groups at a local level to get involved in positions which exercise control over what happens in their areas. So, to what extent are women likely to play an active role within them and how accessible are they?

Equality proofing of the Peace and Reconciliation Programme in the North is safeguarded by the PAFT guidelines (Note1), which stipulate that all aspects of the Programme- strategy, delivery mechanisms, and projects to be funded, should be equality proofed. Furthermore, EU Commissioner Wulf-Mathies, in outlining criteria for the Programme insisted that the District Partnerships must have a gender balance. However, is gender proofing/balancing enough? Gender proofing, we can assume is required for a few reasons. In the first instance, women constitute over 50% of the population and it is, therefore, logical that we should be proportionately represented on decision making

structures. Secondly, women and men have different work approaches and therefore a gender balance ensures a mix of dynamics in any working forum. Thirdly, women should be there to bring a gender analysis to the work of the partnerships. It is with regard to this aspect that I would question whether gender balancing is adequate in itself. In targeting other sectoral interests in the Partnerships, for example, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, etc., the representatives chosen from within those sectors are those who offer a critical analysis of their disadvantaged position in society; have experience of developmental work, either in a paid or voluntary capacity with that particular sector and; are, therefore, familiar with the issues, problems, and challenges facing the sector. Likewise, if the interests, issues and difficulties faced by women are to be raised and addressed at partnership level, gender proofing should ensure that women representatives bring a gender analysis to bear on the work of the partnership. It is unrealistic to assume that every woman has had an opportunity to critically regard women's position as 'women' in their communities.

Furthermore, some of the partnerships established sub groups to address themes such as agriculture, urban regeneration, etc. It is essential that gender balancing should be applied to all sub groups of the partnerships ranging from agriculture to tourism, rural/urban regeneration to social exclusion. Women's perspective on all of these issues is necessary and not just on the 'social exclusion' sub groups which may specifically address 'women's issues' and the social or perceived 'softer' approach to development.

Finally, gender balancing should be insisted upon across all three sectors (elected representatives, voluntary/community sector and trade unions, businesses and statutory agencies) and not just the Partnership as a whole. This would lead to better opportunities for women representative of statutory agencies and elected representatives to increase their involvement in decision making structures. Gender balancing does at least ensure representation of women, so are the partnership structures conducive to women's involvement? To again cite the NICVA report, it highlights the time and commitment required of members of District Partnerships. It indicated that this placed great strain on members who found themselves having to take time out of personal or family time or from their businesses to get involved. While it is generally acknowledged that the inordinate amount of time required of members was related to the timescales as laid down by the EU Commission, it is undoubtedly a factor in determining the type of person who can or will get involved. Many of the partnerships held full day meetings on a regular basis while some began meetings at 8.30 a.m. and others held residential. It hardly needs to be stated that this method of working, whatever the reason, excludes a large volume of women from being in a position to take a place on the Board. The reality is that childcare responsibilities for the most part lie with women. Therefore, even if creche facilities were to be provided, these working hours exclude women with children of school going age. Gender balancing is not about ensuring that there are a minimum number of women sitting around a table; it is about ensuring that the conditions are conducive to the full involvement of women who may wish to become active members of partnerships. This involves adapting timing of meetings to suit school times, terms, etc. This requires imagination, commitment, flexibility and possibly financial resources on the part of the partnership but not to plan for the involvement of carers is to render gender balancing and inclusive policies little more than paper exercises.

Furthermore, it is absolutely essential that the childcare issue receives more than lip service. Identifying childcare and children's development as a theme to be addressed by a partnership is the first step in an approach to addressing childcare as a concern for an area. Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of childcare

provision in Europe. If District Partnerships, in identifying childcare/work with children as a theme, they should also take a lead role in providing childcare facilities for representatives on the Partnership Board. Creches should be provided as a matter of procedure, not when requested. If the latter is the case, it places the onus on the parent and in most cases, the woman, to make the case for the need for childcare. Particularly in rural areas in NI where creche provision is the exception rather than the norm, there is an excellent opportunity for District Partnerships to set themselves up as role models and also to send a real gender balancing message to women. If District Partnerships genuinely want the equal participation of women, they must give strong signals to that effect.

Funding strategy regarding work with women

Unlike the Area Based Partnerships in the South, the District Partnerships have produced strategy statements, which relate to key development themes and suggested programmes which they will fund. The Partnerships do not initiate any project actions around strategic themes, they are totally dependent on existing groups to make submissions. Again, given the limited time frame within which the SSPPR is implemented, it is perhaps unrealistic to assume that they could engage directly in developmental activity within the current structure. To again look at the developmental work with women, there are at least three Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFB's) under which rural women's groups can relatively easily access funding under the SSPPR, particularly as most tend to apply for funding under the small grants scheme. In deliberating over how best the District Partnerships could address the concerns of women, this should be the starting point for their discussions. If the funding needs of groups are being met by regional agencies, there is little to be gained by the Partnership becoming a fourth or fifth funding option (and indeed a less attractive one as the application forms for phase I were convoluted and the processing time slow in relation to other IFB's, albeit for genuine reasons). The way is wide open, however, for the District partnerships to strategically address the development of women. In an area like Fermanagh where there is a long established network of women's groups, an opportune starting point could have been to work with the Women's Network to identify research or county wide developmental needs. It is likely that this would have identified issues such as the impact of rural isolation on women; the implications of the regional health development strategy; the potential impact of the onset of incorporation on community based education; or the need to develop a coordinated strategic county wide policy in relation to training and education. This approach would have a long term benefit as it could inform the

work of existing groups and networks who will exist post the SSPPR and enable them to implement recommendations with long term outcomes.

This need to adopt a strategic approach is transferable to the other target groups identified. Taking Travellers for instance, the Fermanagh District Partnership identified Travellers as one of its target groups. However, it could be argued that this was a meaningless gesture. In the first instance, Travellers are evicted from the county almost as soon as they arrive and secondly, there is no infrastructure of developmental support for the Travelling Community. So, where were the programmes of action going to come from? An effective piece of work for the Partnership would have been to commission the Northern Ireland Council for Travelling People to conduct research in consultation with Travellers as to how the District Partnership could address the issues faced by Travellers in Fermanagh. This in turn, could have informed the relevant service providers and policy makers in the county. This would actually address the future needs of Travellers rather than merely acknowledging that they are a disadvantaged group.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the SSPPR is currently having the single biggest impact on networking with women's groups in the North. While the initial reaction to the Programme may well have been delight (because for once the voluntary/community sector was to be well resourced), the Programme has created a distorted picture of the sector as new initiatives abound, many of which may not be sustainable beyond 1999. It has however acted as a catalyst for community groups and projects who may otherwise not have started and has created a momentum for development within these communities. However, it now places a huge responsibility on women's networks, amongst others, to ensure that the newly emerging groups remain intact. It has also laid the groundwork for the creation of District Partnerships, structures which in the future can play a critical role in terms of local development. However, while the fact that the process has been initiated is positive, there is no doubt that much thinking needs to be done about future methods of working. When the current funding phase is over, partnerships will no longer be in a position to use the excuse of limited time for failing to adopt a strategic and inclusive approach to ensure the participation of women in a meaningful way.

Note1

The Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment guidelines came into operation in 1994. The guidelines are intended to ensure that government policies and public services treat everyone fairly. The SSPPR is subject to equality proofing under the PAFT guidelines.

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