

BRIEFING NOTE C

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION POSITION ON RELEVANT COMMUNITY ISSUES

1. *Inclusion of Local Communities*

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition believes in the importance of a process to enable local communities and previously excluded groups, to become involved in a movement that will seek to enable the Peace Process.
- 1.2 To this end the emphasis of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation on aspects of social inclusion has been particularly helpful, as has been its ability to prioritise funding for those groups and areas that have suffered most severely from the impact of the conflict in the North.
- 1.3 The Coalition feels that the Peace Process must be developed where possible as an open and accessible system that rests on a broad base of participation and responsibility rather than relying exclusively on the 'owners' of the negotiating table. We see the Peace Process as an interdependent model between local communities, middle-range decision-makers and the political leadership.
- 1.4 It is important to actively encourage the availability of social space to facilitate discussion of aspects of the Peace Process and of potential changes at local community level.

2. *Addressing the Politically Marginalised*

- 2.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition recognises the particularly important role played by social activist and politicians representing groups that are often portrayed as extremists in promoting and developing the Peace Process. It is crucial that every effort is made to continue to facilitate the involvement of such groups and to recognise the pressures that they are often under within their own communities.
- 2.2 Self-help work with politically motivated ex-prisoner groups and victims of the violence have played an important role in addressing trauma and achieving inclusion. This area of work however requires support.
- 2.3 Recent initiatives in the area of community and restorative justice are to be welcomed in both Loyalist and Republican communities. This is particularly important where such models are based on a respect for human rights and a commitment to a non-violent approach and operate as an effectual alternative to punishment beatings.

2.4 The increasing use of international examples from other divided societies that have experienced conflict is also to be welcomed given the positive frame it has provided for consideration of divisions within Northern Ireland.

2.5 While the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition recognises the sensitivities attached to the issue, it accepts that the early release of politically motivated prisoners remains high on the agenda of many local communities throughout Northern Ireland. The experience of other jurisdictions is that this is a critical element in any developing Peace Process.

3 *Promoting Peacebuilding and Reconciliation*

3.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition accepts the importance of developing a peacebuilding process within which reconciliation can be firmly located. However, the Coalition does not see 'peace and reconciliation' as short-term outputs, but instead understands that if a society has invested year's of energy, time and money in maintaining divisions, it is likely to take the same time period, as well as energy and money, to rebuild relationships.

3.2 The Women's Coalition believe that it is important that imaginative approaches are adopted to enable communities to remember past hurts and injustices as well as to seek the changes that the future demands.

3.3 It is important that approaches to community relations in Northern Ireland are not viewed as quick fixes to community alienation, but instead are informed by a structural commitment to equality, human rights and genuine community inclusion.

3.4 The Women's Coalition firmly believes that it is critical that Government accepts and acknowledges its role in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Ireland not only as a facilitator but also as an active party in the conflict and the hurts inflicted and received.

4 *Supporting the Community Infrastructure*

4.1 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has welcomed the increased recognition of the contribution of the community and voluntary sector to the partnership approach in Northern Ireland. It has felt that this has been particularly well expressed through the E.U. District Partnerships with their emphasis on a balanced community and gender representation. This form of participatory democracy should be used as a model for the Civic Chamber proposed by the Women's Coalition under Strand 1 and the North/South Advisory Body which is suggested to complement the more formal Forum for social and Economic co-operation under Strand 2.

- 4.2 If the community and social organisations are to continue to play an important role in social inclusion and peacebuilding then it is essential that they are adequately resourced and supported on a long-term basis. The Women's Coalition believes that this is particularly important with regard to community based women's groups.
- 4.3 It is important that the Government recognises that the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland have learnt how to balance their responsibilities and provision with the political sensitivities in which they work. This is a valuable attribute which should not be discounted or undermined by overly simplistic categorisation of the work undertaken. The Government should value the contribution of the community and voluntary sector to the peacebuilding process.

November 1997