



## North West Community **Network**

POSITION PAPER (draft)

# *The Civic Forum*

## 1 What is Civic Society?

- 1.1 The Good Friday Agreement refers to the setting of a Civic Forum for Northern Ireland involving the business, trade union and voluntary sectors. However, the Agreement does not define what is meant by civic society and identifies only three sectoral interests which make up the civic society.
- 1.2 The structure and membership of civic society is open to debate and will be the subject of much discussion in the weeks and months ahead. It involves those who are active in society but who are outside of the political process, the Government, government agencies and institutions. Among others, it includes community and voluntary sector organisations, business and professional bodies, trade unions, agricultural and farmers unions and religious institutions.
- 1.3 Civic society is made up of the wide range of interests that have sustained the social and economic fabric of life in Northern Ireland throughout 30 years of conflict.
- 1.4 The Civic Forum is a means of harnessing the energy and talents of civic society and engaging people in a process which seeks to broaden the parameters of participative democracy. Its aim is to give a voice to those who have been excluded from decision-making in the more traditional forms of government.
- 1.5 Establishing the Civic Forum should be seen as an exciting and engaging process with the capacity for challenging policies and addressing key issues. The Forum should be open, accessible and flexible. It should be capable of addressing sectarianism and ensuring equality and equity in the political and social arenas. The Forum should avoid being seen as an institutionalised body of 'experts' and should not be confined to a single or central location.

## 2. The Forum and The Assembly

- 2.1 The Forum should be complementary to the political process - feeding ideas to Government and challenging decisions and policies seen to be contrary to the spirit of the Agreement. A range of alternative models should be explored before any decision is made as to what kind of Forum might be appropriate for Northern Ireland.

2.2 The discussion should be informed (without vested interest) and must avoid becoming an elitist, intellectual or academic charade. The Forum must be all embracing and should not be confined to dealing with difficult or awkward problems. It should not be set up as a 'giant quango' nor allow itself to become a 'top-down' decision-making or problem solving body.

### 3. Underlying Values

3.1 From a Community and Voluntary Sector point of view, the setting up of the Forum must reflect the principles and values of Community Development. The debate on how the Forum should be set up should be led rather than driven and the process should be opened up to all those who have a role to play in the building of civic society. There must be time allowed to ensure fully inclusive discussion and any unnecessary haste in finalising proposals should be resisted.

3.2 The key issues to be addressed include:

- Remit of the Forum
- Representativeness
- Accessibility
- Accountability
- Underlying Principles
- Legislative basis
- Relationship to Assembly
- Membership
- Selection
- Operation of the Forum
- Administration and day-to-day business

3.3 The success of the Forum will depend on its being seen as an independent and autonomous body which is both dynamic and challenging. It must be seen to be owned by the society it serves and must be representative of and accountable to its members across each of the sectors.

### 4. Key Roles

4.1 The Civic Forum will have many important roles but will essentially be about giving a voice to those who have been excluded and denied the opportunity to influence decision-making in the past.

4.2 Its roles might include to:

- support, assist and complement the Assembly and its Executive;
- act as a counterbalance reflecting decisions back to the Assembly;
- challenge decisions and policies adopted by the Assembly;
- promote active citizenship and participative democracy;

- co-ordinate and inform debate on key areas of interest;
- facilitate consultation on key areas of interest;
- deliver informed, inclusive and participative responses;
- respond to requests from the Assembly to address specific issues; and
- initiate its own work on economic, social, human and cultural issues.

## **5. Representation**

- 5.1 It is difficult to define which sectors should be included given the diversity across society, however the Community and Voluntary Sector as one of the largest sectors has a significant contribution to make. A key determinant will be the need to guarantee the participation of those excluded from influence and power.
- 5.2 The Civic Forum is about process as well as structure. We must find ways of involving people in open and flexible processes which enable them to contribute to society by making informed decisions. We must endeavour to find out how people want to be represented and what their vision for the Forum (and for society) is.
- 5.3 In South Africa, for example, the civic society is seen as a key mechanism for the government operating through a wide range of 'Issue Forums'. The Issue Forums comprise representatives from all walks of life relevant to the area of interest e.g. housing, land and energy issues. Their role is to inform government agencies about the issues and to advise on policy to address them. In many instances, the reports to government by the Interest Forums form the basis of Government White Papers.
- 5.4 The Issue Forums are a widely respected lobby and have been influential on government policy and on decisions impacting on specific interest groups. Such forums provide opportunities for participation from the wider society in Northern Ireland.

## **6. Structure and Size**

- 6.1 The Forum should be allowed to evolve rather than be 'set-in-stone' from day one. It should preferably have an elected membership but without the usual trappings of competitiveness.
- 6.2 Proposals to restrict the number of representatives to less than fifty members run the risk of creating an elitist and closed system.
- 6.3 The Forum should build on imaginative and creative structures and processes which have the capacity to generate the fullest possible participation of people from the wider society. The South African experience provides a model built on a wide range of 'Interest Forums' feeding into a core co-ordinating body.

## 7. Key Recommendations

7.1 The Network proposes the following recommendations as guidelines to structures and processes to be agreed:

1. The Civic Forum should build from the 'bottom up' and seek to accommodate full participation from the wider society.
2. The Forum should consist of a substructure of interest forums and regional forums feeding into a co-ordinating body with an over-arching role.
3. The Forum should be viewed as an open, flexible space accessible to all who wish to have their voices heard.
4. The selection of representatives for all sectors should reflect the interests of communities across Northern Ireland.
5. The selection processes should be equality proofed for gender and religious balance, minority interests and exclusion.
6. Within the agreed guidelines for equality, each sector should be free to determine its own method of selecting its representatives.
7. The principles of inclusion, partnership, co-operation and participation should be central to its operation.
8. The Forum should be viewed as a 'moveable feast' and should not be Belfast-based.

## 8. Conclusion

- 8.1 Establishing the Civic Forum provides a unique opportunity to transform the tired and failed decision-making mechanisms of the past and of bringing to an end sectionalism and division in Northern Ireland. The Government and Assembly must be encouraged to set aside adequate time for discussion.
- 8.2 The representatives attending the consultation seminar argued for a frank exchange of views and debate within the community and voluntary sector on the representation, structure and operation of the Forum.
- 8.3 Negotiations with the new Assembly should be based on the agreed guidelines arising from consultations across the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and reflecting the values and principles of Community Development.

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