

## **Community Sector must be equal partners in Peace III Strategic Partnerships**

The Community Workers Co-operative was invited by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to carry out a consultation with the community and voluntary sector in the Border Counties on the Draft Operational Programme for Peace III. A briefing document on this consultation was presented in the February issue of '*Community Work News*' and is available on the CWC web site ([www.cwc.ie](http://www.cwc.ie)).

Consultation workshops were held in Peace funded community resource centres in Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan, Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim, and Manorcunningham, Co. Donegal on the second week of February. In all over 110 community and voluntary sector people attended these meetings. Each workshop consisted of presentations on the *Peace III Draft Operational Programme; From Peace II to Peace III - New Additions to the Programme; and Equality Legislation & the Peace Programme*, followed by roundtable discussions.

A full report of the consultation process has been submitted to the SEUPB and will be posted on the CWC web-site. The following is a summary of the main points from the consultation.

The ongoing recognition of the impact of the conflict on the border region in the Peace Programme was welcomed, as was the acknowledgement that peace building is a long-term and multi-dimensional process. Workshop participants hoped that this acknowledgement will be reflected in the allocation of funding throughout the programme.

The draft Operational Programme proposed five crosscutting themes – Equality, Cross-Border Co-operation, Sustainable Development, Impact on Poverty and Partnership. Equality was welcomed as a crosscutting theme, particularly the recognition of the racism experienced by minority groups in the border region. However disappointment was expressed that there was no Equality Impact Assessment of the OP carried out in the border region. Cross-Border Co-operation, Sustainable Development and Impact on Poverty were also generally welcomed as crosscutting themes.

The development and introduction of the reconciliation criteria during the Peace II extension helped strengthen the programme and gave clear direction to applicants on how to do reconciliation work. It is welcome that these will continue to be used and is worked into the Peace III Operational Programme from the outset.

The funding for the Peace Programme must be additional and must not be used to replace funding under other lines in the National Development Plan or other government programmes. This concern was expressed particularly in regard to the proposed shared public spaces

However, while the principle of Partnership is strongly supported by the community sector, this crosscutting theme was the biggest concern throughout the consultation. It raised the greatest concerns for community sector participation in the programme. The experience of operating in partnership with the statutory sector in particular has left the vast majority of community sector organisations extremely wary and apprehensive about how it will operate in Peace III. The greatest concerns centred on the role of Local Authorities and Integrated Partnerships in the key area of *Building Positive Relationships at the Local Level*.

It is clear that if partnership is to be successful in the implementation of the Peace III Programme then it is going to have to be established upon very firm principles and robust agreements.

Among the key concerns are:

- Partnerships to date have not been experienced as partnerships of equals. The more powerful bodies with greater financial, institutional and political resources have been seen to dominate and to dictate the direction of the arrangement.
- The community sector is greatly under-resourced in terms of finances and personnel. The additional strains of participating in local partnerships, steering committees and the monitoring committee will have to be addressed.
- In most areas of the Border Region there is no body or structure that organises or represents the community sector.

- The right of the community sector to determine its own structures and its own representatives must be respected. There have been experiences in the past of local authorities and local development partnerships dictating structures and representatives.
- Partnership structures that are truly inclusive of the broad range of perspectives within the community and voluntary sector run the risk of being unwieldy
- There is concern that partnerships will only include the most organised and strongest groups within the community and voluntary sector. The most marginalised and weakest will be excluded, e.g. ethnic minorities, Travellers, gay/lesbian groups.
- The experience of participating in structures such as County Development Boards has been of marginalised voices finding it difficult to be heard
- There is a fear that if the Local Authorities or Integrated Partnerships control the funding they will control the partnership
- There is also a fear that partnerships will not be transparent and that deals may be done outside the official partnership structures.
- The indicative operations envisaged in the Draft Operational Programme are of areas of work which the sector has the greatest expertise; Reconciliation and Peace-Building, Anti-Racism and Diversity; Community Development and Social Inclusion. This type of work is outside the experience of Local Authorities

Partnership implies a relationship based upon equality and respect, to the mutual benefit of those involved. Partnership can only work where there is an equality of resources or an equality of esteem between the partners. If there is not equality of resources then partnership can work if the stronger partners accord parity of esteem. It is clear that the community sector does not have the resources of the other partners and is mostly dependent upon them for what resources they have.

The concept of formalised partnership agreements as has operated under the EQUAL programme, whilst a new concept to most, is considered a possibility in ensuring that partnerships are inclusive and operate in a manner where there is parity among the partners.

A range of safeguards and principles are suggested to underpin the principle of partnership:

- Partnerships must be based upon a written memorandum agreed and signed by all partners. This must detail the contribution of each partner; the authority of each partner; the responsibilities of each partner; the procedure to be employed to resolve disputes
- Disparities in resources and finances between parties must be recognised and procedures, structures and accords put in place to equalise the relationship
- The partnership must be led by the partner with the greatest expertise in the field that the partnership is addressing
- The partnership can be equalised by the partner with the least resources being involved in the financial management of the partnership project.
- The independence of the Community and Voluntary Sector in deciding who will represent them in partnership structures must be maintained
- Strong guidance will have to be given on how partnerships are formed and the principles that must guide them.
- Supports should be put in place to ensure that some, at least, of the proposed strategic partnerships can be initiated and led by community and voluntary sector organisations.

The results from consultation sessions across Northern Ireland and the Border Region were presented at a major conference hosted by the SEUPB on 21<sup>st</sup> March in the Armagh City Hotel. The consultation period closes on 4 April 2007. Following this an amended Operational Programme will be sent to the European commission for approval. This process could take up to six months but it is hoped that the new programme will be up and running by the end of this year.

The complete Operational Programme can be downloaded from [www.seupb.org/consultation](http://www.seupb.org/consultation)

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