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Macaulay Associates Network Ltd
CREATING POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Consultation with Older People on Dealing with the Past

Executive Summary

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INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND

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1 Introduction

This is the executive summary of a report on a Consultation with Older People on Dealing with the Past. The consultation was commissioned by The Link Family & Community Centre and was carried out, with 68 older people in Ards and North Down, between September 2010 and February 2011, by independent researchers, Macaulay Associates Network.

The purpose of the consultation was to explore the role of older people in the peace process and their role as the archive of a history of the Troubles for young people.

The objectives of the consultation were:

- a) To gather the views of a sample of older people from across Ards and North Down.
- b) To discuss possible ways forward, including the establishment of a cross community intergenerational project on Dealing with the Past.

A Steering Group made up of key stakeholders was established to direct, advise and inform the consultation process. The consultation included desk research, interviews and focus groups.

2 Background

The Link Family and Community Centre is an independent Christian-based community development organisation working alongside disadvantaged groups and communities in Newtownards.

The Link is now consolidating and developing its community relations and community conflict work in partnership with other groups across Ards and North Down. As a part of this work, the group has been interested in developing a project with older people, dealing with the past and exploring their role in addressing sectarianism and reconciliation. This consultation was the first step in exploring the possibilities of developing such a project.

Dealing with the past is about finding positive ways of addressing what occurred during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Initiatives on dealing with the past are based on the idea that if a society can find positive ways of dealing with the conflict of the past, then it is less likely to return to violence and more likely to break down the divisions that are the legacy of conflict. There has been very little research and consultation on the subject of older people and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland.

3 Main Findings

The consultation found a range of diverse views and experiences of the conflict by older people in Ards and North Down. The main findings were:

- Many older people are reluctant to talk about the conflict of the past.
- Many of the older people consulted talked about the Troubles in terms of something that was happening some distance away. Many of their direct experiences of the conflict happened in Belfast, or other parts of Northern Ireland, rather than where they lived.
- Many of the participants shared direct experiences of the conflict. Some of the participants described these as 'difficult memories'. Many of these experiences occurred in Belfast, when they had lived or worked there, or if they had been caught up in an incident, while visiting a hospital or shopping in the city
- The experiences of the Troubles shared by participants included bombings/bomb scares/evacuations, being in the security forces and under threat, shootings, vehicle hijackings, work experiences, local paramilitary activities, the Ulster Workers Strike, riots, fear, suspicion and hatred.
- Some participants felt there had been very little trouble where they lived.
- Some participants referred to a change in their local community as a result of the conflict.
- Some participants said they were not affected by the conflict and some participants stated they tried not to be affected.
- The main impact on the community identified was the movement of people from Belfast during the Troubles. People relocated for different reasons; members of the security forces moving to live in a safer area, families intimidated from their homes in Belfast, families wanting to get away from violence, tension and paramilitary activities and families wanting a better future for their children, which they felt could not be obtained in Belfast.
- Some participants felt the relocation of people from Belfast into their community had a negative impact in certain areas.
- The vast majority of people consulted said that they were aware of very few older people involved in peace and reconciliation.
- Most of the older people consulted believe that peace and reconciliation is very important.
- The majority of participants indicated that older people could and should have a role in peace and reconciliation.
- Some participants thought it was important to deal with the past, but were concerned about passing on the bitterness of the past.
- The consultation found uncertainty over whether to deal with the past, how to deal with the past, whether older people and young people can work together and uncertainty over how they might do so in practical terms.
- Many older people do not want to be involved in dealing with the past.

4 Developing an Intergenerational Programme

The main conclusions of the consultation were as follows:

- In considering the development of a new initiative on dealing with the past, the ideas, experiences and resources that have already been developed in the community and voluntary sector, can be drawn upon.
- An intergenerational project exploring the role of older people in the Troubles and in peacebuilding and reconciliation in the future, could draw on the experience of existing storytelling projects on dealing with the past, and build on the success of existing intergenerational projects, particularly in the Ards area, to create an innovative new project.
- A significant minority of the older people consulted were interested in the idea of an intergenerational programme on dealing with the past.
- Most of the older people who were interested in the idea of an intergenerational programme on dealing with the past, were uncertain about what exactly would be involved in such a programme.
- There is potential to develop an intergenerational programme that connects small groups of older people telling their stories about the 1970s, with young people, recording or presenting these stories in a creative way.
- Any potential programme needs to involve both older people and young people in planning and development.
- Any potential programme could draw on the success and learning from other local intergenerational projects.
- Any potential programme would need careful planning, built in mental health support and sensitivity in delivery, to address the concerns, fears and risks that many older people have about dealing with the past.

5 Recommendations

As a result of this consultation the following recommendations are suggested for taking this initiative forward:

- 1) The Link should launch this report to key stakeholders.
- 2) The Link should convene a steering group of stakeholders interested in developing a pilot, or a set of pilot intergenerational projects on the themes of dealing with the past and peacebuilding.
- 3) The Link, in partnership with Linking Generations, should carry out a consultation with young people in similar areas of Ards and North Down, to gather their views and ideas and to assess their level of interest in participating in an intergenerational project on dealing with the past.
- 4) The steering group should work together on the development and implementation of the pilot(s).
- 5) The pilot(s) should explore the ideas of archiving older people's stories and of using the arts and digital media.