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Inquiry into Building a United Community

Input to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

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Thank you for inviting me to address the Committee today on the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* published on 23 May 2013.

I can only assume you have invited me here in my capacity as a practitioner and researcher who has been working on peacebuilding and reconciliation related issues for the last two decades in a range of societies—as well as the Director of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) at Ulster University.

With this in mind, and given the limited time, I will restrict my opening comments to the issue of how the Strategy might be seen within the global field of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

The *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* (hereafter The Strategy) outlines a vision of "a united community, based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation - one which is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance".

I commend the Executive for this bold vision and the steps it has started to take to realise it. It is also right that, as the Strategy outlines, this is understood as a "journey towards a more united and shared society". The idea of a journey is consistent with the notion of "process"—most of the international literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation will talk about such concepts as essentially processes rather than continually develop and change over time.

The Strategy recognises the damaging nature of societal division and seeks to "address the deep-rooted issues that have perpetuated segregation and resulted in some people living separate lives". It goes on to say that "division, intolerance, hate and separation" unless addressed can damage individuals and communities in various ways, including in terms of economic prospects. In other words, the Strategy itself highlights social segregation and separation as socially and economically problematic.

The core question, therefore, when reading the Strategy, is whether the actions outlined align with its stated vision and are in fact adequate to make the type of changes needed to transform "division, intolerance, hate and separation".

I would contend that the headline actions outlined in the Strategy are steps in the right direction, but they are not sufficient to address the full weight of the problems outlined in the Strategy itself.

For example, according to the Department of Education, there are 308,095 pupils enrolled in primary and post-primary schools. Although one cannot calculate with complete accuracy, and for illustrative purposes, using these figures it would suggest that:

- 100 summer school/camps engaging 100 pupils each at post-primary level (there are 142,547 pupils in post-primary) as the Strategy recommends would only reach 7% of pupils, even if 1,000 pupils attended each camp we would only reach 70% of the pupils for a once off and no doubt unwieldy series of events; and
- 10 Shared Campuses would equally, extrapolating broadly, across the school going population and assuming every child in each participating school is involved, 1-2% of the total pupils in society. If we restricted the proposals on Shared Education to post-primary pupils only, 3-4% of the total pupils in society are reached over 5 years.[1]

Figures are more favourable, however, if you restrict the focus to specific groups. The Strategy recommendation for 10,000 one-year placements in a new "United Youth" programme—if restricted to the 46,000 unemployed people under 24 years of age mentioned in the Strategy this would affect a more sizeable proportion (22% of unemployed youth). But this narrowing is then based on an assumption that such individuals have a disproportionate responsibility for negative attitudes across communities—something we do not know as a fact and also risks stigmatising such individuals.

This does not mean such activities are useless. On the contrary, it has been well-established in international social psychological research for decades, that *under certain conditions[2]* contact between groups can promote positive views of the other (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Any increased contact between those representing different perspectives is to be welcomed.

But as a recent research on shared education notes, an environment that seemingly reinforces a mono-cultural order can limit the potential of such programmes (Hughes, 2013). It is added "it is hardly surprising that pupils, who meet with peers from the 'other' community for short periods (albeit sustained over time) and in a highly structured setting, struggle to develop friendships that can be maintained outside of the school setting" (Hughes, 2013, p.206).

In other words, contact programmes taking place within an the overall segregated context the Strategy itself talks about are—despite positive potential—essentially a sticking plaster on a system that is largely not conducive to creating positive attitudes between groups.

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[1] This figure is reached by assuming that each school has 261 pupils (the number of pupils divided by the 1,180 in of schools in Northern Ireland) and 20 schools are involved, in other words 5,220 pupils involved of the 142,547 pupils. Granted Shared Education is discussed as "a model" in the Strategy, but the full practical, economic, and community relations case for scaling this up to the entire education system *relative to* investing in transforming and gradually integrating existing schools has not been made.

[2] A discussion of the optimal conditions for contact to make a difference in attitudes has been extensively researched. Miles Hewstone notes that "members of the two groups should be brought together under conditions of equal status, in situations where stereotypes are likely to be disconfirmed, where there is intergroup cooperation, where participants can get to know each other properly, and where wider social norms support equality" (Hewstone, 2003, p.352).

It is possible to argue that shared education, for example, might incrementally change the system, and result in cross-community activities taking place at the heart of the community over time (Borooah and Knox, 2013) and it seems this is what is implicit in the Strategy—but we have little evidence that relatively small scale cross-community projects taking place within a divided society will change the *overall* context substantially.

International research suggests that contact programmes need to be complemented by more substantial social change to be effective (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). Contact interventions that leave existing forms of wide-scale division in place are at best a limited framework for promoting social change (Foster & Finchilescu, 1986 cited in Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005).

Those who study and practice conflict transformation globally, would name a peace that does not alter underlying forms of separation a "negative" peace. That is a context where political violence has decreased, but the underlying issues that fuel conflict have not been addressed.

So I would ask the Committee, despite the boldness of the vision stated in the Strategy, to seriously assess whether the actions outlined in the Strategy are adequate to achieve the objectives it lays out for itself.

Is the goal one of "thin" integration or deeper social transformation as the Preamble of the Strategy asserts? Are we going to settle for a society where the dominant communities are going to remain separate and, hopefully, equal, co-existing in "negative" peace? In short, is the Strategy in its current form capable of delivering the profound change it calls for?

It is, from a policy perspective, counter-intuitive to set up a range of new programmes to bring children and young people into meaningful contact with one another through various collaborative ventures—at great expense financially and in terms of resources—when the context itself is going to undermine any potential achievements, unless this is part of a wider strategy to fundamentally change the context.

Of course, there are many reasons as to why the context cannot be changed instantly, and we must foster contact where we can, but to lose sight of the fact that the most logical place to foster contact is in an integrated classroom and in neighbourhoods where communities use the same service and recreational facilities on a day-to-day basis is missing the most obvious long-term and sustainable solution to building a united community—that is, a large-scale policy with a timetable for breaking down separation in daily life.

This type of timetabling is evident in the Strategy, for example, within the recommendation to remove so-called peace walls by 2023, but lacking in relation to other barriers to integration such as in schooling or residential mixing.

In conclusion, I welcome the steps the Strategy outlines towards achieving greater social contact between communities—however would contend in the absence of bolder social processes to breakdown separation they may not have the full impact they are intended to have. In other words, the society will remain in "negative" rather than "positive" peace where it is constantly at risk of on-going and future conflict.

Thank you for your time and once again for inviting me to share my views.

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About the Author

Professor Brandon Hamber is Director of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), an associate site of the United Nations University based at the Ulster University. He is also an Associate of the Transitional Justice Institute at the university. He has recently finished a term as a Mellon Distinguished Visiting Scholar in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (2010-2013). He was born in South Africa and currently lives in Belfast, where he has been working since 1996. In South Africa he trained as a Clinical Psychologist at the University of the Witwatersrand and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Ulster. Prior to moving to Northern Ireland, he co-ordinated the Transition and Reconciliation Unit at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg. He co-ordinated the Centre's work focusing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was a visiting Tip O'Neill Fellow in Peace Studies at INCORE in 1997/1998. He was also the recipient of the Rockefeller Resident Fellowship (1996) and was a visiting fellow at the Centre for the Study of Violence in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He has consulted to a range of community groups, policy initiatives and government bodies in Northern Ireland and South Africa. He has undertaken consulting and research work, and participated in various peace and reconciliation initiatives in Liberia, Mozambique, Bosnia, the Basque Country and Sierra Leone, among others. He has written extensively on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the psychological implications of political violence, and the process of transition and reconciliation in South Africa, Northern Ireland and abroad. He has published some 40 book chapters and scientific journal articles. He is the author of "Transforming Societies after Political Violence: Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health" published by Springer in 2009, and published in 2011 in Spanish by Ediciones Bellaterra. His most recent books included, edited with Ingrid Palmary and Lorena Nunez, is entitled "Healing and Change in the City of Gold: Case Studies of Coping and Support in Johannesburg" and was published by Springer in October 2014, as well as "Psychosocial Issues in Peacebuilding" edited with Elizabeth Gallagher published by Springer in November 2014.

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