

FOCUS ON CHILDREN - A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE
ON THE CIVIC FORUM SUBMITTED TO THE FIRST AND
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

The way a society treats children reflects not only its qualities of compassion and protective caring but also its sense of justice, its commitment to the future and its urge to enhance the human condition for coming generations.

Javier Perez de Cuellar, UN Secretary-General,
September 1987.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Focus on Children is an organisation formed by voluntary organisations across Ireland, North and South, to influence and support policy-makers in developing a strategic direction for children into the next century.

- 1.2 Focus on Children was founded in 1992 by 24 voluntary organisations - 12 each from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - and has a respected role in advancing and promoting children's issues in Ireland and within the European Union.

- 1.3 Focus on Children sees the Belfast Agreement as a major step forward, hopefully heralding a move from 30 years of conflict, from which children have suffered enormously, to an era of reconciliation and reconstruction. With its significant backing by the people of Ireland voting in Referendums on May 22nd, 1998, the stage is set for all players and actors in society to work together to build for a better future into the Millennium.

- 1.4 Focus on Children especially welcomes the recognition contained within the Agreement that representatives of wider society have a role in complementing the democratic process by taking part in the proposed Civic Forum.
- 1.5 The purpose of this paper is to outline further how Focus on Children would contribute to the development of the Civic Forum, in accordance with its objectives to advance the rights and interests of children and young people.

2.0 THE POTENTIAL OF THE CIVIC FORUM

A consultative Civic Forum will be established. It will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will by agreement, provide administrative support for the Civic Forum and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives to the Civic Forum.

Paragraph 34, Strand One, Belfast Agreement, April 1998.

- 2.1 The Civic Forum is an exciting and innovative proposal. Although there are models of engagement of social partners, voluntary groups, churches and others in other jurisdictions, it is believed that none has the legislative authority of the proposed Northern Ireland Civic Forum and structured relationship between the elected authority- the Assembly- and external parties.

- 2.2 Its remit is broad: "Social, economic and cultural issues" are both important and far-reaching. With appropriate consultation on priorities and appropriate focus on deliverables, the Forum could play a most useful role in providing external advice and guidance to the elected authority.
- 2.3. It will reinforce democracy; since the Civic Forum is in no way a "second chamber" but clearly a helpful and supportive consultative mechanism, it emphasises and reinforces that the Assembly members are *elected*, whilst the Civic Forum is *appointed*. It therefore does not threaten, but rather it supports the democratic and political process. Recognition of the contribution which might be played by business, trade union and voluntary sector interests is much appreciated and reflects the critical role played by the voluntary and community sector - and others outside the formal political process - during the Troubles on both parts of the island in recent decades.
- 2.4 It can be holistic; since the Civic Forum is not constrained to mirror or to provide a watchdog role on individual government departments, it can approach its task in a holistic and integrated fashion. It can examine cross-cutting themes and study interlocking issues; it can make connections between issues and it can propose integrated and holistic solutions - new answers for old problems.
- 2.5 It can be dynamic; with the mix of business, trade union and voluntary sector interests, which have been exemplified in recent years in Irish civil society, North and South, a new dynamic can be created whereby *external* forces can become *internal* influences. The partnership model, developed in the Republic of Ireland during the 80's and so rapidly increased in scope, partly through European programmes across the island in the 90's, is now enshrined in the constitution of the Civic Forum.

3.0 ACHIEVING REPRESENTIVITY

- 3.1 It is never easy to find adequate representation of any group or grouping; in this case, it will be especially important to handle the selection and appointment process with sensitivity, to achieve maximum consensus and a broad spread of interests from the business, trade union and voluntary sectors.
- 3.2 Whilst Focus on Children would support calls for appropriate geographical, gender and community spread, in addition to representation of particular interest groups such as minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, people with disabilities, unemployed people and so forth, Focus on Children would argue that it is critically important to ensure the significant representation of younger people.
- 3.3 The importance of children alone is strikingly registered in their numbers. Northern Ireland has the youngest population of all the regions within the United Kingdom, with over a quarter (27%) of the population in 1993 recorded as being under the age of 18 years. The 491,000 people in the age group 0-18 recorded in Northern Ireland in 1995 must find a voice, or they risk being further marginalised and neglected since they are by law un-enfranchised and dependant upon others. And yet, it is their energies and skills, their aspirations and hopes, their attitudes and new approaches that will help reconstruct and build a new Northern Ireland.
- 3.4 The Belfast Agreement rightly provides safeguards to ensure that all sections of the community are protected; however, the sole legislative reference is to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), in

Strand One; equal reference, we submit, could be given to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which the UK and Irish Governments have both ratified. It would inform and alter the terms of the current debate.

3.5 Every citizen deserves a government sensitive to his or her needs; inadequate co-ordination of policies across the government is a potential problem for all citizens, not just children and young people. Focus on Children's concern here is to make the case for a distinct and high priority for children and young people, without diminishing the need for appropriate government responses to ensure sensitivity to other defined population groups - disabled people, unemployed people, women, older citizens and so forth.

4.0 WHY DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE JUSTIFY SUCH SPECIAL ATTENTION?

4.1 Firstly, because their healthy development and active participation are so uniquely crucial to the healthy future of a society such as Northern Ireland; in addition:

- Despite their immaturity, children have equal status to adults as members of the human race. They are individuals - not the possessions of parents, not products of the state, not people-in-the-making.
- Children are initially totally dependent, and grow towards independence only with the help of adults. Their dependence and developmental state make them particularly vulnerable so that they are more affected than adults are by the conditions under which they and their families live. Therefore they are disproportionately affected by poverty, poor housing, environmental pollution and so forth.

the Irish Presidency, when he declared on September 17th 1996 that children would henceforth be regarded as full citizens of the European Union

- 4.3 To achieve this representivity, it is submitted by Focus on Children that special attention should be given to the mechanisms by which the First and Deputy First Minister invite outside bodies to make nominations for membership of the Civic Forum. It is proposed that additional weighting be given to those organisations nominating young people under the age of 26 and also to those nominating people able to speak with authority on issues affecting and involving children.

5.0 IMPLEMENTATION OF CIVIC FORUM'S RESPONSIBILITIES

- 5.1 Whilst government is departmentalised, with lead responsibility for children resting with the Department of Health and Social Services (NI) and other responsibilities spread across the Department of Education (education, sports and the arts etc), Department of the Environment (for road safety, education and concessionary fares), the NIO's Criminal Justice Services Division (for Juvenile Justice Issues including administration of the Training Schools), the Office of Law Reform (co-sponsoring the Children (NI) Order 1995 with DHSS and working on legislation dealing with domestic violence and occupation of the family home), Department of Economic Development (youth training, New Deal, discrimination issues) and Agriculture (Rural Development, farm

and family incomes etc) the Civic Forum however shall be able to take a unified and integrated look at issues as they affect the end user - the citizen of Northern Ireland.

- 5.2 Focus on Children has numerous examples, not least of which was the successful European Conference co-sponsored in Belfast on 28th - 29th May 1998 *Active Citizens - Children's Choices* of organising to engage and empower children, young people and their representatives.
- 5.3 Similarly, many youth organisations on both parts of the island have experience of articulating the needs and aspirations of young people in a powerful, fresh and vibrant manner.
- 5.4 With appropriate support, training, resourcing and backup nominated young people could play an important role in the work of the Civic Forum; it is proposed that special resources be made available to support the young people nominated to the Civic Forum so that they be briefed and helped to make their positive contribution.

6.0 THE NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Consideration to be given to the establishment of an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues.

Paragraph 19; Strand Two, Belfast Agreement, May 1998.

- 6.1 Focus on Children notes the reference in the Agreement to the possibility of a consultative forum working alongside the North/South Ministerial Council and welcomes the proposal.
- 6.2 Since Focus on Children is itself an all-Ireland body with six years experience of building alliances, coalitions and partnerships on children's and young people's issues across the island, it feels well placed to advise and support the appropriate "consideration" required by the Agreement.
- 6.3 Focus on Children proposes that a consultative process be initiated at the first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) on how a representative Consultative Forum might be developed, learning from the experience from the Consultative Forum developed under the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties (1994 - 1999), the only pre-existing model of which we are aware.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 Focus on Children welcomes the Belfast Agreement and the challenge of assisting in implementing its provisions on both parts of the island - and across these islands - to help work towards reconciliation and reconstruction.
- 7.2 Focus on Children has made the case for special attention to be given to the rights and interests of children (0-18), representing nearly 1/3 of Northern Ireland's and Ireland's - citizens.
- 7.3 Focus on Children has made proposals for weighting to be given to children's interests and young people's representatives.

- 7.4 Focus on Children has proposed that special arrangements be made to ensure that young people thus chosen are adequately supported to achieve their and the Civic Forum's full potential.

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