Promoting participation and building active communities:

the Northern Ireland experience

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As the world entered the 21st century the United Nations designated 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers (IYV). The broad definition of the term, 'volunteer' given by the United Nations mirrors the following definition used by the Volunteer Development Agency, the regional organisation in Northern Ireland for the promotion and development of volunteering:

> The commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside one's immediate family. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain.

The premise underlying the international year was acknowledgement that volunteer service has been a vital component of almost every civilisation and society and that such service is called for, more than ever before, to tackle areas of priority concern in the social, economic, cultural, humanitarian and peace building fields.

A *Northern Ireland Agenda for Volunteering* was launched as part of IYV 2001.The first principle outlined in the document states that volunteering is a 'vibrant expression of active citizenship and community involvement'. An important aspect of citizenship is simply about belonging, belonging to the place, the community, the society of which you are a part. A response to that idea of belonging is to actively engage, to actively share in the life of that place, that community, that society. Participation is the key element within any active community. It takes many forms such as traditional service giving, mutual aid and self-help, advocacy and campaigning and community action. Yet at its heart is the individual person giving time to care about people, to improve their environment and to develop and strengthen the communities where they live.

Northern Ireland is geographically situated at the western periphery of Europe; it is part of the United Kingdom and shares a political border and a cultural and historical heritage with the Republic of Ireland. It currently has a population of some 1.68 million people. Northern Ireland has suffered from social division, instability and over thirty years of civil unrest. The recent period of conflict known as the *Troubles* began in the late 1960s. The violence that took place between 1969 and 1994 led directly to the deaths of 3,523 people and resulted in over 20,000 serious injuries. The experience of the *Troubles* has been, and continues to be, profound for all aspects of life. If we take, for example, the City of Belfast, over 94% of its citizens now live in single identity communities, either Protestant or Catholic and there is ongoing inter-communal violence associated with many interface areas. Over 26 miles of walls and fences referred to ironically as *peace lines* keep communities in the City separate from one another. This is more than the total length of the Berlin Wall at the height of the Cold War.

Cease fires, the signing of the *Belfast Agreement*, the implementation of devolution and the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly have brought positive change to political and community life. We are however within a post-conflict situation and at both the macro and micro level there remains the issue of trust.

Suspicion, hostility and mutual distrust feed the negative side of life. The continuation of the *walls* illustrate that trust between communities is fragile and in a number of cases non-existent. Yet set against the brutality of paramilitary and sectarian violence we also have a thirty-year plus history of individual investment in the well being of the community through voluntary participation. A substantive amount of the commitment and time given by such individuals to voluntary activity has kept ordinary life afloat. This has included the playgroups, working with young people, the luncheon clubs, supporting the sick, the lonely and the bereaved, coaching sporting activities, protecting the environment, teaching reading skills, keeping local history and culture alive, providing an animal rescue service, fundraising, being on call for mountain rescue, school governance and committee work. The list is endless and reflects the broad spectrum of *normal* activity carried out by volunteers to make our society function more effectively. Yet the situation in Northern Ireland has not been *normal* and has often necessitated new approaches to community participation and created unconventional volunteer opportunities:

> During the darkest days of the early 1970s Hugh found himself organiser of a group of vigilantes. Nowadays the word has connotations of an extreme group that seek to hand out their own form of justice. In the County Armagh town where Hugh lived, *vigilante* was the name given to a local community watch, whose task was to act as an early warning against car bombs and assassins. For one year Hugh was a local vigilante co-ordinator and feels that that led him and a few others to setting up a local residents' group that eventually evolved into a community association. By the mid 1970s the volunteers involved in the community association were pushing for a general clean up and improvements to their local environment. The area managed to weather the initial polarisation of Northern Ireland working class areas into Protestant and Catholic. Its mixed community survived until well into the 1990s before the remaining Protestant families were forced to flee because of their real or imagined danger.
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> (O'Hagan 2001)

Hugh is fiercely anti-sectarian and has spent a lifetime giving time both to provide practical services to his community and to extend the hand of friendship across the community divide. It is fortunate for Northern Ireland that Hugh's story is not untypical. It is such individual and collective participation and action that has kept the glow of hope alive. Hugh's story exemplifies a vision of a society where individuals choose to be active participants out of a shared sense of responsibility, because they want to help others, in order to seek change and to have a share in their community.

The theme of community is fundamental to the global interest in promoting and developing volunteering. Governments are increasingly expressing the positive links between civil society and democracy, identifying community participation as one of its vital strands. A past Secretary of State at the Home Office, David Blunkett, MP referred to volunteering as the glue that holds society together. This reflects the current United Kingdom Government's support for the *Active Community Initiative* with the policy agenda of helping to rebuild a sense of community by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement. The Northern Ireland Assembly also sees the need to increase community activity, encouraging people to take responsibility in and for their own communities to reinforce the development of a peaceful, inclusive and sustainable society.

That governments are seeking to encourage and support volunteering reflects, at some level, societal trends. These indicate that people have a strong desire to live in a society that encourages neighbourliness and a sense of community. In 2000 the Commonwealth Foundation commissioned a New Millennium project that set out to examine the role of citizens in civil society. Individuals and experts across the United Kingdom were asked a series of questions. When asked, 'what is your view of a good society?' they identified trust as a central element, as well as a sense of community and association with other people. It is interesting to note that the importance of tolerance and understanding was emphasised by the Northern Ireland group. Participation through volunteer activity provides an important network of social relationships that connect people to their communities. The action that this connection leads to can be a very positive force for change.

Recent research into volunteering in Northern Ireland carried out during 2001 indicates that a large number of people are giving time to their community and that this is increasing. It is estimated that some 448,000 individuals over the age of sixteen give time through an organisation or group, an increase of 17% since 1995. The economic contribution of this level

of activity is considerable and an estimate based on an average wage of £9.03 per hour brings the annual contribution of these volunteers to in excess of £452 million. If, however, we accept participation through volunteering as impacting on such important issues as social cohesion then we have to look beyond the pound (£) signs to the community impact.

Within Northern Ireland there has been a substantive amount of voluntary activity to facilitate reconciliation, conflict resolution and peace building. The 2001 research indicates that 13% (58,250) of those individuals are directly involved in volunteering with a cross-community organisation. This figure has increased by 6% on the 1995 findings. The *Directory of Peace, Reconciliation and Community Relations Project* in Northern Ireland has some 144 entries. This is not the totality of organisations involved in this area of work, however, given the size of the population, it reflects the extent to which reconciliation has been a growth area of volunteer involvement. There is no doubt that we would have had no peace process momentum without individual and collective participation in voluntary activities to promote, enhance, facilitate and develop community relations in Northern Ireland. Good community relations are vital to building trust within a divided society.

Research indicates that within Northern Ireland participation through volunteering is an important social and civic dynamic. In terms of civic engagement volunteers and their family members are more likely to be active in the community than those who do not volunteer. Volunteers are also more likely than non-volunteers to be engaged in other forms of civic participation such as raising issues through public consultation or through engagement with elected representatives. Participation in this sense can act as a social catalyst for a process of social development that cumulatively and over time makes a significant impact on community well being.

At a global and local level we need to remember that the *active community* agenda is about live people and live issues. For instance, in Northern Ireland:

- There are 15,000 individuals currently volunteering their time to statutory youth service provision in Northern Ireland.
- A small band of dedicated volunteers walks up and down the Foyle Bridge in the evening seeking to offer support to those who may be contemplating suicide.

- 5000 people offered time to support the Northern Ireland Millennium Tree campaign, planting 1.5 million trees to make our environment more green and healthy.
- 800 young people will receive their Millennium Volunteers Awards for 200 hours of volunteer service because they want to express their citizenship in a practical and positive way.
- Employees from one of Northern Ireland's leading companies have, in their own time, completed a major project to build a community playground.
- Across the City of Belfast volunteers are working with young people in inter-face areas to minimise community tension and prevent street conflict.
- A group of volunteers in County Tyrone are providing economic and social regeneration in their community through developing a refurbished flax mill into a living history project and tourist amenity.

These cameo examples emphasise that every day, everywhere we see very positive evidence of the active community at work.

As Northern Ireland moves forward into the new century the participation of individuals in community life will remain of vital importance. In order to grow as a community we need to have a sense of shared ownership of the areas where we live and the issues that affect our lives. A major role for all of us is to recognise and promote a value base which reflects the belief that participation in voluntary action is of benefit to the individual, the organisations or groups with which they are involved, the communities they serve and the greater social environment. This will help to increase and broaden the base of volunteering.

We need to remember that volunteers are often the single largest human resource of an organisation or group and that this resource requires effective management to enhance the experience of the individual volunteer and the service or activity provided. Volunteer involving organisations have a key role to play in establishing a good practice environment for the recruitment, selection and ongoing support to volunteers.

It is important that all those with an interest in promoting participation and building an active community work better together. This includes policy makers, funders, volunteer involving organisations/ groups and volunteers, all of whom need to recog-

nise, promote and support the involvement of individuals in helping to make our community a better place in which to live.

Towards the end of 2001 a major conference, entitled *Tipping the Balance*, was held to celebrate volunteer involvement across the island of Ireland. This event was co-hosted by the Northern Ireland Committee for the International Year of Volunteers and the National Committee on Volunteering in the Republic of Ireland. The Volunteer Development Agency had a lead role in organising the conference and one of our major supporters for the event was the Northern Bank. Northern is a member of the National Bank of Australia Group. (A corporate link that fits well with this article.) A Conference Declaration was one of the key outcomes from the event and it endorses a value and a vision for volunteering that deserves to be shared and offers a fitting endnote to this article.

We declare that:

- volunteering lies at the heart of democracy and is a vibrant, celebratory expression of active citizenship leading to growth in the richness of local communities.
- volunteering is a dynamic force for change centred on a mutually beneficial gift relationship. Based on free will, it has a positive effect on the volunteer, individuals, organisations and communities.
- the involvement of individuals in voluntary and community action is relevant to all spheres of life and makes a positive impact on the economic, social, cultural and environmental issues of our time.
- it is everyone's right to volunteer regardless of age, gender, disability, race, background, religious belief, sexual orientation. There is a need to match the choices, skills and personality of the volunteer to the appropriate role.
- volunteers have the right to be valued and treated fairly, with respect.

We call on volunteer organisations, central and local Government, the corporate sector and the media, as appropriate, to:

- value volunteers, recognise and promote their important contribution to society, thereby ensuring a more positive image of volunteering

- promote diversity in volunteering and provide practical pathways to greater inclusion fostering a positive culture for volunteering
- address the barriers to volunteering including lack of information and access, poor management, negative images of volunteering and disincentives caused by an inflexible benefits system
- seek to build effective equal partnerships that create and sustain a framework to promote, encourage and support all individuals to effect change through volunteering
- ensure that the knowledge and expertise of local volunteers and volunteer involving organisations is utilised in policy-making
- develop policies and programmes that enable volunteering to be supported and encouraged.

The Volunteer Development Agency was established in 1993 as an independent non-profit organisation for the promotion and development of volunteering in Northern Ireland. The Agency seeks to:

- promote a positive climate for volunteering
- develop and support standards of practice for involving volunteers
- develop the capacity of the volunteering infrastructure
- influence public policy.

For further information on the Agency's work, log onto: <www.volunteering-ni.org>

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