

## How to Support and Encourage Racial Equality in Northern Ireland Discussion Papers

This paper is one in a series of six pursuing the aim of racial equality in Northern Ireland. In their five-year race equality strategy, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister envision what they are working towards as:

*A society in which racial diversity is supported, understood, valued and respected, where racism in any of its forms is not tolerated and where we live together as a society and enjoy equality of opportunity and equal protection.<sup>1</sup>*

This vision is further specified by six strategic aims, the **fourth** of which is the topic of this paper:

### SIX SHARED AIMS

- **Elimination of Racial Inequality:** To eliminate racism, racial inequality and unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity in all aspects of life, including public life, for people of different ethnic backgrounds in Northern Ireland.
- **Equal Protection:** To combat racism and provide effective protection and redress against racism and racist crime.
- **Equality of Service Provision:** To ensure equality of opportunity for minority ethnic people in accessing and benefiting from all public services.
- **Participation: To increase participation and a sense of “belonging” of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in public, political, economic, social and cultural life.**
- **Dialogue:** To promote dialogue between, and mutual understanding of, different faiths and cultural backgrounds, both long standing within Northern Ireland and recent arrivals to these shores, guided by overarching human rights norms.
- **Capacity Building:** To build capacity within minority ethnic communities to develop a vibrant and sustainable minority ethnic sector at both local and regional level and to help minority ethnic people to fulfil the Government’s aim of a shared future for Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion papers in this series are all authored by Omar Khan and Rob Berkeley of the Runnymede Trust.

The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded as a Charitable Educational Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in close collaboration with eminent thinkers and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. We believe that the way ahead lies in building effective partnerships, and we are continually developing these with the voluntary sector, the government, local authorities and companies in the UK and Europe. We stimulate debate and suggest forward-looking strategies in areas of public policy such as education, the criminal justice system, employment and citizenship.

Since 1968, the date of Runnymede’s foundation, we have worked to establish and maintain a positive image of what it means to live affirmatively within a society that is both multi-ethnic and culturally diverse. Runnymede continues to speak with a thoughtful and independent public voice on these issues today.

<sup>1</sup> OFMDFM (2005b: 7).

<sup>2</sup> OFMDFM (2005b: 8).

## **Aim 4: Participation**

*To increase participation and a sense of “belonging” of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in public, political, economic, social and cultural life.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Democratic societies require the participation of all citizens both in public and private life. In many polities, members of certain groups are less likely to participate fully in public institutions and civil society, and this paper focuses on the opportunities and constraints facing people from minority ethnic backgrounds in Northern Ireland. The paper emphasises the value of participation but also considers the sorts of measures that can and have been used to increase it in Northern Ireland.

The distinction between public and private participation can be drawn too sharply, especially because it is difficult to imagine how inequalities and discrimination that hinder some individuals from participating might yield a public sphere in which all participate as equals. Nevertheless, there is some difference between the value of public and private participation, and perhaps more importantly, between the effectiveness of government measures to increase participation in the two different spheres. While participation in the public sphere is something that the government both has an obligation and a relatively effective capacity to ensure, participation in civil society is often best achieved by community organisations and individuals best placed to respond to the interests and needs of different individuals.

### **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

In this section we first explain the value and signal importance of public participation before moving to its practice in Northern Ireland and the challenges that remain for a more inclusive public sphere.

Particularly for minority ethnic communities, it is clear that public institutions are not affording residents of Northern Ireland the opportunity to participate as equals. Some of these themes have been explored at greater length in **paper 3** on equality of service provision.

#### The Value of Participation in the Public Sphere

A foundational idea for democracies is that all citizens should be treated by equal concern and respect. Participation in the public sphere contributes to this central aim because it helps to ensure that important political institutions represent the interests of all members of the polity. It is therefore crucial for democratic legitimacy that members of all groups have the capacity and indeed the interest in participating in important public institutions. It is not only unjust if members of certain groups are comprehensively denied the opportunity to participate in public institutions, but also undermines the democratic claims of government.

Most readers will recognise the link between equal participation and public institutions. Another way to make it clearer is by focusing on the value of impartiality or evenhandedness in public institutions, particularly the judiciary and frontline public services such as housing, education and health. In order for such institutions to be fair, they need to take everyone's claims seriously, meaning that members of all groups must be viewed with a certain minimal level of respect or dignity by the practices of public institutions and by public officials. The observation that public officials sometimes pursue their own interests rather than universal or unrealised interests is neither a recent one nor unique to Northern Ireland, though residents there may be more aware of this danger.<sup>3</sup> If divisions in society are so deep-seated as to prevent mutual respect, it is likely that public servants will have to be drawn from all

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<sup>3</sup> Rueschemeyer (2004) makes this observation and notes how it has a long history including in Marx and Weber.

relevant communities in the society, but this should be couched in terms of meeting the objective interests of all citizens rather than as advancing the sectarian concerns of one segment of society.

For this reason the practices of public institutions have to meet a higher standard of fairness than private interactions among citizens. So while the state may not always intervene to condemn those who perpetrate private acts of prejudice unless they are obviously harmful or otherwise illegal, strict nondiscrimination is absolutely required to ensure the fairness of its own institutions. Institutions can hardly be fair or just when the staff members hold discriminatory beliefs or where practices are not amended to take into consideration their potentially disparate and discriminatory treatment. But if all citizens are given minimally equal opportunity to participate in public institutions and indeed in public debate this concern can be at least partially circumvented. Having explained how the value of participation is an intrinsic part of democratic theory, it is worth turning to how it is practiced in Northern Ireland today.<sup>4</sup>

#### Public Participation in Northern Ireland: politicization but segmented engagement

Citizens in Northern Ireland are usually perceived to be quite politicised, particularly in comparison to the rest of the United Kingdom. This is partly because of the continuing division of the society into two groups with a strong sense of their particular history. Perhaps more than elsewhere, people in Northern Ireland often have deep-seated beliefs about the best way for society and politics to be ordered, and to have a settled political worldview. Indeed, some have argued that people in the region place too much emphasis on distant historical events that seem to speak to modern day residents as though they are part and parcel of contemporary politics.<sup>5</sup>

This immediately suggests two of three important caveats that must be made in discussing the level of public participation in Northern Ireland. While it is of course important that citizens vote and otherwise participate in public institutions, in Northern Ireland this is often understood in a sectarian manner. So, for example, instead of participating in region-wide institutions or voting for region-wide political parties, individuals are more likely to participate in specifically Protestant or Catholic organisations, a tendency that undermines the capacity of institutions to be truly 'public'.<sup>6</sup> Such institutions are not public in the full sense of the word because they fail to represent all citizens equally and fairly. Of course there are reasons why the public sphere is so weakened in Northern Ireland, related to the fact that mutual participation has not often been possible throughout the history of the region.

The second caveat regarding participation in Northern Ireland is linked to the previous comments. Here the point is that the situation in Northern Ireland is in many ways overpoliticised. Too many minor disputes are read as part of a larger struggle and too often this leads to the use of violence as a valid way of participating politically. Now it may be true that violence is inevitable during times of foreign or indeed civil wars, but the normalisation of violence is simply one aspect of the tendency to politicise everyday interactions between citizens and to turn them into proxy battles for wider concerns. If people in Northern Ireland are occasionally too quick to link their struggle to far-distant forebears, they are also too quick to turn every disagreement into part of a broader political struggle.

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the ideas in the previous paragraphs were first explored in Khan (2006) forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> While most accounts of Northern Ireland summarize history at least dating to the plantation and Battle of the Boyne in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and many point to Ireland's role in the question of the religion of English or British monarchs from the time of Henry the eighth, there is increasing recognition that *how* these events are viewed is in many ways a political process that changes over generations and cannot be assumed to have had the same resonance nor to be immutable for the future.

<sup>6</sup> According to the most recent (2005) Life and Times Survey, while 38% of self-identified Protestant respondents supported the UUP and 32% supported the DUP, 0% of Catholics did so. Among Catholic respondents, 50% supported the SDLP and 22% Sinn Féin, while only 2% of Protestants supported the former party and none supported Sinn Féin. The Alliance Party drew 8% support overall, but only 5% among Catholics and 7% of Protestants; its support was much higher among those who identified as being of 'no religion', who supported the largest non-sectarian party at 18%, although 26% of such respondents preferred to respond 'none'.

### Public Participation: decreased trust and participation

A final concern for participation in Northern Ireland is part of a disquiet found throughout the Western world, namely decreased trust in political leaders and political institutions. Citizens are increasingly likely to view political decisions as being taken without their consent and to view voting as a burden that is unlikely to change their life or indeed their country. Like elsewhere, voter turnout is down and membership in political parties has decreased.

Some evidence for these claims can be found in the 2005 Life and Times Survey, conducted since 1998 when it was set up by Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. According to the 2005 poll, while 32% of people think that people are more likely to vote today than they were a few years ago, 46% think that they are less likely.<sup>7</sup> Roughly three-quarters of people in Northern Ireland sympathise with the propositions:

- If they were going to make a difference to me in my everyday life then maybe I would consider voting
- There's no point in voting for a suspended Assembly
- I would have voted if there was a strong non-sectarian party
- I trust politicians 'not very much' or 'not at all'<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps more worrying are findings that young people are even less interested in politics, with only 16% reporting a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest, while 38% reported no interest at all and 26% report 'not very much'. Those who did *not* identify as Catholic or Protestant were among the least interested, with 72% having no or 'not very much' interest in politics. One explanation is that they also are far more likely to feel that no politicians or parties represented their views, in keeping with the dominance of sectarian parties in the region.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, there is some evidence that people in Northern Ireland continue to have some confidence in politics as a way of participating. Many more people think that when people get involved in politics they can really change things than disagree, and only 30% agree that politics is a waste of time. There is also far less sympathy for the idea that there are more important things to do than voting or for not caring or indeed for the thought that 'even if you think your candidate is useless you can't vote for the other side'.<sup>10</sup> And in the youth survey, half of respondents agreed that schools should be required to provide lessons on politics and more than half wanted to have a say in how Northern Ireland was run. Only 17% thought politics was a waste of time, less than people in the region as a whole, and a mere 12% thought that it wasn't worth voting.<sup>11</sup>

### Public Participation for Minority Ethnic

For members of minority ethnic communities, the above concerns are often compounded. In a deeply divided society, the sort of fairness expected of public institutions is often lacking. As an example of the impact on minority ethnic individuals, consider the case of those who move into new housing where neighbours have already managed to scrawl racist graffiti on their property.<sup>12</sup> Here it is obvious that someone within the housing association or indeed within government has informed local racists that an 'undesirable' individual or family is moving into the vicinity. This is a clear violation of the spirit of impartial public institutions and its impact on minority ethnic individuals is more difficult precisely

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic\\_Participation/NIVOTOFT.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic_Participation/NIVOTOFT.html)

<sup>8</sup> All data from this paragraph from: [http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic\\_Participation/index.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic_Participation/index.html)

<sup>9</sup> Young Life and Times 2004, 'Young People's Attitudes to Politics and Elections', compiled by Dirk Schubotz: [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic\\_Participation/index.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2005/Democratic_Participation/index.html)

<sup>11</sup> YLT 2004

<sup>12</sup> Such examples have been related to us by a number of residents in Northern Ireland. For a recent example, see the report of 11 September 2006 'Racist attack mother urged to come home' in which a DUP councillor condemned the attackers: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/ViewArticle2.aspx?SectionID=3425&ArticleID=1759672>

because they are too few in number and weak in influence to avail themselves of the sort of networks that Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland have developed over the years. Where public institutions fail the test of fairness, the weakest and worst off often suffer the most.

Consider also the question of political participation: which parties in Northern Ireland might a Chinese, Arab, Indian or indeed Portuguese resident join? Because the main political parties are so prominently linked to a particular 'tradition' in Northern Ireland, and because that tradition is self-consciously attached to specific cultural and historical symbols, it is difficult for those who are not Catholics or Protestants – as those terms are understood in Northern Ireland – to participate. While some parties are making attempts to encourage minority ethnic participation, their capacity to do so may be undermined by their strong identification with specific ethnic, cultural, linguistic and political identities that have little resonance with minority ethnic populations. But given the relative weakness of non-sectarian parties, they are also unlikely to influence decisions by joining or forming other political organisations.

### Government Measures

The government can clearly have some impact on some forms of political participation. For example, they can ensure that the hiring of public workers, whether civil servants or cleaning contractors or indeed the police services, meet strict standards of equal opportunity policy. In the case of the police, there is currently a policy of preferential treatment for Catholics that is justified both by their underrepresentation and by the increased effectiveness in having police officers who understand local concerns. Again, because of the singular importance of public institutions it is important that they represent, as far as possible, the relevant interests and needs of all citizens in Northern Ireland. This can be facilitated by positive action and other policies.

Furthermore, the government can study whether its practices and policies are in fact fair to all service providers. If members of certain communities have difficulty gaining public housing, or others face worse health or educational outcomes, the government is obliged to take measures to raise the standing of the disadvantaged groups. This is not because the communities are intrinsically worthy, but because citizens should not be unjustly disadvantaged in virtue of the groups to which they belong.

In their first annual implementation report of their five year (2005-2010) racial equality strategy, the OFMDFM have listed the various actions that seven government departments, the OFMDFM itself and the Police Service of Northern Ireland have taken to advance participation (pp. 94-112). These range from the Department and Agriculture and Rural Development's consideration of ways to improve minority ethnic access to the Forest Service to the invitation of a nomination from the Northern Ireland Council of Ethnic Minorities to sit on the Women's Stakeholder Forum under the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment's 'Investing in Women Initiative'.

There is of course a limit both to what government can do and the effectiveness of the policies described above. For example, the government cannot create political parties nor can it assume that all differences are based on prejudice. Furthermore, the achievement of equality and fairness in the public sphere is severely compromised where the private sphere contains systematic disadvantage but the government's remit runs much less in the latter area. Nonetheless, it is vital to consider how the equal participation of all requires certain institutions and forms of relationship in society more broadly.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY**

The value of participation is not limited to political engagement. If the notion of 'belonging' has occasionally been imprecisely specified, the idea is relatively conventional: those with greater social ties to others, including the various communities to which they belong, are not only likely to be more confident personally, but also to participate and contribute to everyone's well-being through various

institutions in civil society. Individuals without significant ties to various communities are more likely to feel adrift and less likely to view other citizens as participants in a shared project and so placing legitimate claims or obligations on each other.

In the UK there have been a number of studies on the virtues of community belonging, with many focusing on particular activities that range from meeting a neighbour to canvassing for a political party. While these are all 'participatory' in a sense, their impact on 'belonging' is arguably less unified. More precisely, visiting a neighbour or cousin is probably less likely to contribute to a feeling of belonging than more overtly political or cross-community interactions, whether in Northern Ireland, Britain or Ireland.

Another point that has been made in this context is that high levels of social capital, or indeed being part of a community-based organisation, is not necessarily the same as participation in the wider society. An influential version of this argument can be found in the Cattle report.<sup>13</sup> The writer who has done most to emphasise the concept of social capital, Robert Putnam<sup>14</sup>, has drawn a similar distinction between 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital, where the former focuses efforts on institutions, organisation and interaction across different sorts of communities, while the latter is more concerned about the ties within a particular community.<sup>15</sup> Some local projects and organisations are relatively inward-looking and focused on strengthening such ties; it is sometimes hard to see how this can contribute to participation in the wider public, and many have pointed out that some strong communities lack basic tolerance of outsiders.

Participation in civil society is a common feature of Northern Ireland, though sectarian divisions continue to cause difficulties. According to the Youth Survey, 56% of young people in Northern Ireland helped with fundraising or collected money for charity while 42% took part in a sponsored event. This compares to a figure of 51% for England and Wales<sup>16</sup> and so in comparative terms suggests that young people in Northern Ireland are no less (and no more) involved in volunteering than their counterparts in England and Wales.

Turning to the question of inter-group relationships in Northern Ireland, it is worth discussing recent research by Hewstone et. al.<sup>17</sup> Their findings suggest that it is important for individuals of different communities to interact, but that it is vital that such contact is meaningful. While there has been a lively debate between the idea that 'contact' improves relationships and the 'threat theory' that increased numbers can increase the perception of a threat, Hewstone et. al. emphasise the importance of meaningful contact. So it is not good enough for Catholics and Protestants to have contact, but vital that they develop extended interactions.

### Minority Ethnic Groups

Given the small size of minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, it is perhaps even more important that they participate in civil society to increase their opportunities and interaction with white residents. At the same time, there are good reasons why minority ethnic communities have developed their own networks, and not mainly because they have been affected by the group-based approach in Northern Ireland. Because of their small numbers and because of their continued unmet needs, it is not at surprising or objectionable that strong minority ethnic associations are created and supported. This is because such organisations and networks contribute to the important goal of the participation of all, an

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<sup>13</sup> Cattle report.

<sup>14</sup> Bowling Alone, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Varshney influence.

<sup>16</sup> DCLG (2006) *2005 Citizenship Survey. Topic report: active communities*. London: DCLG, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Hewstone et. al. from OU project, confirming a thesis originally proposed by Gordon Allport more than 60 years ago.

aim which requires confidence and respect. As such, they can be vital instruments in combating discrimination.

One reason that minority ethnic populations in Northern Ireland and indeed elsewhere create their own institutions and networks in civil society is because they feel that other institutions have failed to respond to their legitimate needs. This has certainly been the case in Northern Ireland, where sectarianism continues to have an influence in the distribution of benefits and burdens and further complicates sharing in civil society as well as public space. If minority ethnic residents must participate in societal institutions in civil society, they need to feel they can belong as equals and part of doing so is participating in wider civil society institutions. Where certain individuals do not participate, it can be as likely because of the sentiments of wider society and the lack of integrated (i.e. non-sectarian) spaces in civil society as because any perceived 'separatism' among minority ethnic communities. For this reason, minority ethnic participation in civil society requires appropriate attitudes among longer-term residents in Northern Ireland.

## **CONCLUSION**

The value of participation is one that all members of a democratic polity must and usually do appreciate. If this paper has focused on the difficulties faced by minority ethnic residents in Northern Ireland in being able to participate as equals in the public sphere, it has also pointed out that sectarianism prevents all members from sharing and participating in important democratic institutions as equals. There has been some undoubted progress on this front, but more remains to be done, as recognized by the first annual report on achieving the OFMDFM's five-year race equality strategy. Continued monitoring and developing new policies in this direction can only help achieve this aim.

Participation is often conceived as an explicitly public or political phenomenon but recent reports in England and Wales as well as in Northern Ireland have focused on the importance of volunteering, whether formal or informal. Such an emphasis is reasonable both because disadvantage in various communities is bad and because such disadvantage often has a negative effect on individuals' ability to participate as equals in public institutions and public debate. But since we have produced separate papers on dialogue (**paper 5**) and capacity building (**paper 6**) this paper has focused mainly on more explicitly public matters, partially because government policy in these areas is likely to be more effective. However, as the evidence in Northern Ireland makes obvious, more civil relationships among citizens are absolutely crucial if all members in society are able to participate as equals in both public institutions and in public debate, an aim that is the responsibility of all democratic government.