**Heenan-Anderson Independent Commission**

**Response by Co-operation Ireland**

**Date Submitted:** January 30th, 2015

**Foreword**

Co-operation Ireland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the work of the Heenan-Anderson Commission. While not unique to Northern Ireland, the continuing social and economic marginalisation of some of our most deprived communities represents a key challenge in addressing the legacy of the conflict and moving towards a shared society. Young people in these communities face particular challenges in accessing opportunities for employment which severely limit their life chances and risk future negative impacts on social cohesion and stability.

Our response is based on our experience and practical knowledge of working across some of the most marginalised communities in Northern Ireland, including, in particular, through our Youth Leadership Programme which supports at risk young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to build positive futures.

We wish the Commission well in its work and look forward to its recommendations.

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 Co-operation Ireland is an all-island voluntary organisation which works to advance mutual understanding and respect through practical co-operation. We consistently promote peace-building across the community divide, providing innovative programmes which create opportunities for people to meet, share experiences and collaborate for mutual benefit with those of a different religion or tradition.

1.2 Much of our work is focused on the most disadvantaged urban communities in Northern Ireland and those at greatest risk of conflict. These programmes aim to bring peace to these communities, building confidence, trust, and respect between individuals and groups through local interventions using different delivery mediums that reflect the needs of these communities. We especially deliver programmes that impact on young people, creating opportunities to meet those from a different tradition, providing training to improve their lives and helping them re-engage with others in the community.

Current programme priorities include:

* Increasing dialogue, understanding and co-operation at community level
* Supporting marginalised communities to take the lead in their own development and participate fully in a shared society
* Increasing the participation of young people in activities which develop their leadership potential and help them to build positive futures

**2. Economic Marginalisation in Northern Ireland**

2.1 The relative levels of economic marginalisation in Northern Ireland are well-established. In 2014, 10% of workers here were on the minimum wage, with 16% classified as low paid (earning less than two-thirds of the median wage) and 28% earning less than the Living Wage.[[1]](#footnote-1) While unemployment has declined in the past year, long-term unemployment (the proportion of those unemployed out of work for over 12 months) has risen sharply to 51.9%[[2]](#footnote-2) and the rate of economic inactivity is, at 27.9%, the highest in the UK.[[3]](#footnote-3) Unemployment varies considerably across the province, with some of the highest rates in areas which experienced the worse impacts of the conflict.

2.2 Twenty years on from the first paramilitary ceasefires, the benefits of peace continue to be shared unequally in Northern Ireland. While there has been considerable success in bringing new jobs and industries to the region, particularly in the business and financial services sector, few people in our most disadvantaged areas have the necessary skills and experience to compete for these opportunities. More broadly, many of our most deprived communities continue to remain on the margins of civic life and have not enjoyed, or been able to fully exploit, the opportunities for economic and social renewal which have emerged with the ending of violence. In particular, sections of the Protestant working class community view political and socio-economic changes under the peace process as unfairly benefiting nationalists and perceive their culture and identity to be under siege. Equally, in the most deprived nationalist communities, many have seen little change in their circumstances and feel excluded from the benefits and opportunities of peace. Within these communities, there is a constituency who remain disaffected with the Belfast Agreement and the political direction of Sinn Féin and who feel disenfranchised by their lack of representation. Such narratives of loss and inequality fuel sectarian antagonism and grievance, blocking progress towards a shared society and risking future instability.

**3. Economic Marginalisation and Young People**

3.1 Across Europe, young people have been among those to bear the greatest impact of the recent economic crisis. Northern Ireland was no exception with a substantial increase in the number of young people aged 18 to 24 either unemployed or not in education or training. While youth unemployment in Northern Ireland has fallen in line with a general upturn in the economy (currently standing at an estimated 19.2%3), young people from marginalised backgrounds face distinct obstacles in accessing the limited opportunities available. Low levels of educational attainment, narrow aspirations, and lack of work experience restrict their chances of finding employment. The negative impacts of being out of work for long periods in early life are well-documented and include lower wages, poorer career prospects, and negative health and well-being effects.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, young men who are not in education, employment or training between the ages of 16 and 18 are four times more likely to be unemployed later in life.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland, socio-economic exclusion brings additional risks by increasing the vulnerability of young people to the influence of extremist groups and involvement in disorder.

3.2 Over the past five years, Co-operation Ireland has, through our Youth Leadership Programme, supported young people in some of our most disadvantaged communities to overcome the barriers they face to getting on in life. Experience in designing and delivering the programme has highlighted the following learning of particular relevance to addressing socio-economic exclusion among vulnerable young people:

* One-to-one mentoring and support is central to enabling participants to progress towards further education and employment. Project mentors work with participants to explore career interests, to set goals, and to identify barriers and challenges which are holding them back. The young people are helped to map out a pathway towards achieving their career goals, including identifying options for further education and training, and, where necessary, sign-posted to support services.
* The programme provides participants who have limited educational attainment with opportunities to gain additional qualifications and learn new life and employability skills. The small group size, more participative teaching styles, and participant-input into deciding on course topics, all help to support engagement by young people who have under-achieved in formal education. The qualifications gained strengthen the young people’s CVs and can provide stepping stones to higher levels of study. These opportunities are highly valued by participants and are frequently described as the most valuable aspect of the programme.
* All participants in the Youth Leadership Programme undertake supported work placements relevant to their career interests. The placements provide the young people with valuable work experience, giving them insights into the world of work and helping them to identify potential career paths. Placements with high profile/prestigious employers are particularly effective in introducing participants to careers they may not have previously considered and raising their aspirations and motivations to achieve. For example, for the past of number of years we have ran a short summer placement scheme with Morgan Stanley in London which has been very successful in engaging young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ensuring young people at risk of socio-economic exclusion have the necessary skills and training to avail of current and emerging employment opportunities and providing them with meaningful work experience will be key elements of any response to addressing inequality and marginalisation. While a range of initiatives are currently being undertaken, by the Executive and others, there is still potential to learn from successful approaches abroad. For example, models of apprenticeship and organisational training common in Germany and Austria are frequently highlighted as examples of good practice and the potential for their adoption here could be usefully explored.

1. <http://www.nerinstitute.net/blog/2015/01/28/low-pay-in-northern-ireland-in-2014/> [Accessed Jan 29, 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NI Labour Force Survey. Available at <http://www.detini.gov.uk/labour_force_survey> [Accessed Jan 29, 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nevin Economic Research Institute, 2014. *Quarterly Economic Facts, Winter 2014*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eurofound, 2012. NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe. Dublin: Eurofound. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Van Poortvliet, Matthew et al, 2012. Impact Measurement in the NEETs Sector. London: New Philanthropy Capital. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)