

Bill of Rights Forum
Interpoint Centre
20 – 24 York Street
Belfast BT15 1AQ

13 December 2007

Bill of Rights Forum: Working Group on Criminal Justice and Victims Rights

Dear Group Members,

Coiste na nIarchimí (Coiste) is the national umbrella organization for republican ex-prisoner groups. Since Coiste was founded in 1998 it has built up relations with a wide range of groups including those involved in the victims sector. More recently Coiste became more active in this area and initiated a consultation to evaluate the possibilities and challenges to developing relations between republican ex-prisoner groups and victim/survivor groups (see enclosed). Coiste regards such work as integral to the ongoing contribution that former republican prisoners can make to peacebuilding and the construction of a new, just, peaceful, and shared society on this island.

Following from the Good Friday Agreement the terminology of “victims groups” and “ex-prisoner group” was replicated in funding structures. Unfortunately this suggests an artificial dichotomy between the two groupings. Following on previous work which contested the marginalization in the victims sector of republicans and the broader nationalist community, Coiste contends that a holistic approach to victims and victimization is required.

A full understanding of the causes, costs, and consequences of victims and victimization, and their implications for justice, truth, and reconciliation requires a holistic approach encompassing several issues:

- A dimensional definition of victims which extends to the concept of victimization, defined as oppression, a lack of human rights and dehumanization.
- The recognition that different types of violence – political, economic and social – coexist and overlap on five different levels – individual, interpersonal, communal, institutional, and structural. By extension poverty, inequalities and exclusion erode levels of physical, human, communal, and social capital.
- The historical, social, cultural, and economic antecedents to conflict must be taken into account as the context within which victims and victimization occurs.
- A broad conceptualization of victimization, human rights, and human security takes into account the macro and micro levels, the public and private, the material and the psycho-emotional, and shifts responsibility beyond being solely that of individual and collective entities, to recognize the responsibility of the State.

- Recognition of the critical importance of identity – individuals are often perceived simply as ‘victims of the conflict’, resulting in an overemphasis on welfare rather than capacity building. Coiste supports funding schemes which shift from a focus on short-term aid to support which prioritizes the longer-term development of individuals and their communities. Such a commitment is deemed essential to create an environment where social relations, networks, and intergenerational support structures can be rebuilt in families and communities.

Sincerely,

Mick Beyers
PNB Outreach Development Officer