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Civic Forum Review Team,  
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Lesley House,  
25 Wellington Place,  
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August 28, 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

Co-operation Ireland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the review of the Civic Forum. We do not take a view on the most appropriate mechanism for Government to engage with civil society in Northern Ireland, and, instead, restrict our submission to the general principles which we believe should underlie this process and the need to extend this engagement on an all-island basis through the early establishment of the proposed North South Consultative Forum.

Civil society has come to be increasingly recognised as a valuable partner in the process of governance. Its tacit knowledge, practical experience and grassroots base are seen as resources to be utilised by government in addressing the complex challenges of contemporary society, helping to inform debate and design and deliver effective policy solutions.

The benefits of engaging civil society have been clearly demonstrated in Northern Ireland by the distinctive contribution non-government actors have made in the implementation of European funding programmes and in partnership arrangements at local level to further, for example, urban regeneration and rural development. In the Republic of Ireland, civil society, including business and trade unions, has played a significant role in socio-economic development through the social partnership process.

Civil society evidently has a valuable contribution to make to the building of a prosperous and cohesive society in Northern Ireland and can be an effective partner in the delivery of Executive priorities as set out in the Programme for Government. We therefore strongly endorse the development of arrangements for dialogue and collaboration between government and the sector.

While we do not take a view on the most appropriate mechanism for this Interaction we recommend that any procedure adopted be flexible, capable of adopting a best-fit approach for the issue at hand, and output-focused, with a recognised role in the policy making process to ensure efficacy. In determining membership of any new structure a balance should be negotiated between representativeness and coherence, with scope for ongoing co-option to ensure relevance. Whatever process emerges for civil society engagement should fully respect the democratic legitimacy and primacy of the elected institutions, being complementary and additional to representative politics.

The arguments for engaging civil society in the process of governance within Northern Ireland are equally valid in the area of North/South co-operation. Co-operation Ireland and other leading organisations involved in all-island collaboration, together forming the North South Ad Hoc Group, are working to further the establishment of the North South



Consultative Forum, first proposed in the Belfast Agreement and reiterated at St Andrews. We believe civil society across the island has a key role to play in the developing North/South policy arena, assisting both governments to address shared goals and concerns, and promoting all-island dialogue and reconciliation. In addition, civil society involvement has the potential to enhance transparency in this area, given the current limited arrangements for democratic accountability and oversight of the activities of the North/South implementation bodies.

We attach for your consideration a proposal paper prepared by the members of the North South Ad Hoc Group to inform the development of the Consultative Forum. Regardless of progress in agreeing a format for civil society consultation within Northern Ireland, we strongly advocate the early establishment of the Consultative Forum along the lines outlined. We trust the views presented above will be of assistance in your consultation.

Yours sincerely

Tony Kennedy

Chief Executive  
Co-operation Ireland

## PROPOSAL FOR A NORTH/SOUTH CONSULTATIVE FORUM

### Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the North South Ad Hoc Group (see Annex 1) to support and assist the efforts of the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to establish an independent North/South consultative forum, as first proposed in the 1998 Belfast Agreement and reaffirmed in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006.

In the absence of progress in establishing the Forum, the North South Ad Hoc Group was formed in 2001 by a number of leading cross-border and all-island civil society organisations, coordinated by Co-operation Ireland, to network, share information, and enhance their individual inputs into addressing barriers to greater North/South co-operation.

We recommend the following proposals to both Governments to inform the development of the forum and look forward to its timely establishment.

### Rationale

There are three ways in which a north/south forum can add value to the current intergovernmental arrangements via the North/South Ministerial Council:—

1) **Problem-solving:** There are common concerns and shared goals north and south to which the forum could contribute by drawing upon the tacit knowledge and experience of organisations outside government working in these areas. As demonstrated by the successful social partnership process in the Republic of Ireland, the involvement of business, trade unions and wider civil society in addressing economic and social issues makes a tangible difference to the development and implementation of effective policy solutions.

There are a range of common all-island priorities set out in key government documents such as the Northern Ireland Programme for Government and the southern National Development Plan which the forum could assist in addressing. For example:

- Social inclusion
- Enterprise development
- Addressing the needs of the Border Region
- Sustainable development and addressing climate change
- Cultural diversity and the integration of immigrant communities

2) **Legitimacy:** Civil-society involvement enhances the popular legitimacy and transparency of intergovernmental co-operation by bringing to the table organisations enjoying credibility among communities on the ground.

3) **Reconciliation:** A north/south forum can foster people-to-people relationships and so contribute to the reconciliation effort across the island. Because their agenda is a civic one, organisations like business associations, the trade unions and the voluntary sector are not perceived as carrying any ideological baggage.

## **Roles**

Building on the above rationale, the following roles suggest themselves:

- 1) Drawing on civil society experience and insights, to offer advice to the North/South Ministerial Council and the two administrations, as appropriate.
- 2) To engage in recurrent dialogue with the north/south implementation bodies, and other organisations or agencies working in this field, advising them on their work and drawing lessons from their experience.
- 3) To give specific consideration to the problems of border areas, especially in the area of social exclusion, service provision and the practical issues faced by those working and/or living in a cross-border context.
- 4) To identify obstacles to reconciliation both north and south, and how these may be addressed, and to reflect on the emergence of multi-cultural societies across the island, and on how intercultural dialogue can best be advanced.

## **Modus operandi**

In order to promote its effective operation, we recommend that the forum organise its work around the preparation of 'opinions' on prioritised themes. This would:

- a. attach a definite output to the forum's work;
- b. give focus to the associated investigations and consultations;
- c. allow outside expertise to be utilised by commissioning papers; and
- d. provide a basis for eliciting responses from the NSMC and other bodies.

The forum would thus work, not in a routine sequence of plenaries, but in a flexible fashion, establishing and dissolving working groups around the production of particular opinions.

Plenary meetings, which should be quarterly to sustain momentum and rotated around the island, could focus on establishing and reviewing the programme of work and ratifying/amending draft opinions.

## Composition and Structure

We recommend that the composition and structure of the forum be informed by the following guidelines:

- The forum should be drawn from civil society, including a significant role for organisations engaged in cross-border and all-island working. While the aim should be inclusiveness, the forum should not be so large as effectively to reduce the bulk of its members to a passive role. Nor should it be so fragmented as to reduce its potential to achieve a whole greater than the sum of its parts.
- Membership of the forum should be balanced between north and south but with a certain 'weighting' towards the border areas. It would be co-chaired by a northern and southern representative, appointed by the NSMC, and gender balance would as far as practicable be pursued. There should be scope for co-option, particularly to working groups, of those who can contribute in an expert fashion.
- The work of the forum should be co-ordinated and planned by a small steering group, drawn representatively from forum members and co-chaired by the joint chairpersons. This group could commission external experts to monitor and evaluate the progress of the forum and make recommendations as to its evolution over time.
- A small but effective secretariat would be required to support the forum and steering committee by, for example, generating and commissioning papers for the committee's consideration.
- A dedicated budget would be necessary, supplied on the usual 70/30 basis by the two jurisdictions, with a three-year planning cycle.

## Conclusion

This proposal for a north/south consultative forum is driven by principles all can support and would, we believe, enhance the effectiveness of all-island co-operation, giving it real traction in wider society and making a tangible contribution to the shared challenges we face in our economic and social development.

## Annex 1

### North South Ad Hoc Group

In the absence of progress in establishing the North South Consultative Forum proposed in the 1998 Belfast Agreement a number of leading cross-border and all-island civil society organisations came together in 2001 to create the North South Ad Hoc Group. The group meets regularly to network, share information and enhance individual members' inputs into the development of a coherent policy framework for North/South co-operation, drawing on their shared experience to highlight constraints in current practices and make recommendations as to how these can be overcome.

The group is coordinated by Co-operation Ireland and its current members include:

- Centre for Cross Border Studies
- Community Relations Council
- Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation
- IBEC/CBI Joint Business Council
- ICTU
- Institute of British Irish Studies
- Irish Peace Institute
- Institute of Public Health in Ireland
- North South Roundtable Group
- North South Rural Voice
- Robin Wilson