

Consultation – Extension Peace II from Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)

Introduction

The Women’s Resource and Development Agency (“WRDA”) was established in 1983 with the objective of advancing the participation, inclusion and equality of women, working for the benefit of their own communities and society in general.

The organisation continues to focus its efforts on working with and through women and community organisations located within disadvantaged and/or divided communities.

By strengthening the role and position of women in their own communities, it is anticipated that wider community change will be brought about, leading to the advancement of the broader vision for peace, reconciliation and social inclusion.

The WRDA through its membership of over 60 groups recognise the importance of the following key areas in ensuring continuous progress: training, development, education, building community capacity and working towards social and policy change.

WRDA welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation on extension of Peace II.

Women and Peace Building

Overall the women’s sector is impressive in terms of its reach and presence at community level, providing vital services and activities through the Women’s Centres and Rural Networks in particular. 90% of the Sector operating at a community level and primarily in disadvantaged communities represents both an important access point and springboard for women to play a strong role in the key areas of: peace building; policy development; service delivery; community development and good relations.

A strong interdependent relationship between and across the regional and community based women’s organisations is important to maximise this position. Research undertaken to date by RCN/FWN on CAP Gender Proofing, the WSN on the role of Women’s Centres and CFNI mapping of Sector contain compelling information on the solid and effective contribution of women to peace building in Northern Ireland.

This was further evidenced both by the Mid Term review of Peace II and Shared Future consultation.

‘Women in peace making has been highly positive at community level but was undervalued and needed to be recognised – providing community stability and a sense of normality through difficult times in the past’.

Therefore specifically our response to the three questions asked is based on this context of the unique and valuable role women have played and can continue to play in our society to advance peace and reconciliation.

What Type of Activities Should The Programme Fund

The desire for government to advance Peace & Reconciliation, tackle poverty, develop social cohesion and achieve equality and human rights dominates government policy with such Programmes targeting primarily on disadvantaged communities in so far as it is not always possible to separate sectarianism from poverty and exclusion.

So the Programme needs to support civic society and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations and leaders in particular in the **wider policy**.

Development Role

To seek to advance the progress of 'performance politics' as opposed to 'sectarian politics'. The Women's Sector as do other in the Voluntary and Community Sector care about public policies of health, education, poverty and one could argue that if a shared understanding could be achieved on the costs to the public purse of a divided society through a hard focus on bridging and linking social capital progress could be made.

The Voluntary and Community Sector needs support to operate more effectively in this environment of Section 75 and good relations as a 'David and Goliath' relationship continues to exist. The PWC Evaluation of Partners for Change flagged up the need for a stronger Voluntary and Community Sector role in terms of social capital.

'Bridging social capital presents a significant challenge to policy makers working particularly in societies undergoing transition towards diversity and pluralism in attitude and expectations.'

So the Programme should sharpen its focus on supporting activity/groups willing to take a harder look at progressing and bridging, delivery and linking social capital.

Within the Women's Sector evidence of bridging social capital across communities and among the diversity that is now NI society presents a solid base on which to build.

Who Should Benefit from the Programme

WRDA as part of the Women's Sector met recently with Bill and Hilary Clinton on the specific role of women and peace building. As outlined earlier **where** and **how** the Women's Sector operate is critical in this regard, and there is now compelling evidence to support that view.

This was further endorsed by the Clinton visit. Two powerful messages emerged that should inform the thinking of the Peace II Programme namely, 'The absence of conflict does not mean the presence of peace.' Therefore, there is still much to do to advance and build the will for change and the creation of trust.

Secondly, 'we need to define winning' from a culture of win/lose or lose/win. Both of these messages have a particular resonance to strength and increase the specific role of women in peace building at a strategic and community level in Northern

Ireland. They are normally not the main/usual actors in the political process or in the negotiations at community level. Yet global evidence demonstrates the following:

'Women's strength in reconciliation included skills of good listening; communication and the willingness and flexibility to compromise through extensive experiences in practical and pragmatic problem solving and caring for real people above abstract principles.'

Furthermore, the finds show:

'The presence of women seems to be a potent ingredient in fostering and maintaining confidence and trust among the local population – in performing their tasks with their male colleagues, women were perceived to be more compassionate, less threatening or insistent on status – less willing to opt for force or confrontation over conciliation even if is in said less ego centric to contribute to an environment of stability.

There in our view is therefore a strong rationale and a compelling imperative to fund a specific women in peace building programme which tackles and advances the strategic engagement of women in political and public life **and** continues to support the practical and pragmatic work at community level.

Both ends of the spectrum need support – with as outlined earlier the focus on bridging and linking social capital in particular.