

We need to explore new partnerships in the strengthening of interculturalism in our society, explains Anastasia Crickley

Ireland has a long history of cultural and ethnic diversity, not often acknowledged but to which generations of Travellers, Black Irish people, members of the Jewish Community and others can testify. Recently we have become more visibly multi-cultural.

Now at the dawn of the 21st century we have both the challenge and the opportunity to develop an intercultural society, which respects and appreciates diversity. The reality that Ireland is a multi-cultural society has only begun to be acknowledged. Many steps remain to be taken before an intercultural society takes root.

We have begun to recognise the status of ethnic, cultural and national identities as well as the majority ethnic group in Ireland. We need new strategies to address their concerns, especially the racism they experience. We need further strategies to promote interculturalism.

To date much of the work of NCCRI and others has been concerned with responding to racism and with policy and practice initiatives. Responding to racism can help create the conditions for an intercultural society. Legislation, policy proposals, training programmes, public awareness programmes, national action plans and a host of community and partnership initiatives are all playing their part in this regard.

Racism remains a cancer and a challenge, but a multi-level agenda against it – which is not the same as removing it – is being led out. We have articulated what we are against but often remain questioned about what we are for. In fact many of the responses to racism begin to frame this future of what we are for.

Non-governmental organisations have undertaken a range of creative, far-reaching initiatives in the area of cultural identity and cultural diversity and continue to do so. The proposal to set up a Forum for Interculturalism is put forward in this context – in order to create a space dedicated to the exploration of ideas about how difference can be respected and appreciated towards the development of a truly intercultural society.

The Forum for an Intercultural Ireland will provide a focus then for exploring what an intercultural society in Ireland might mean for all residents here, and it will aim to contribute to putting policy and practice proposals towards its unfolding.

The approach will be grounded in the NCCRI statement 1999 regarding an intercultural approach that *'the development of an intercultural approach implies the development of policy that promotes interaction, understanding and integration among and between different cultures and ethnic groups without glossing over issues such as racism'*.

The Forum's process will be open and inclusive of all sections – State, trade unions, employers, community, urban and rural interests and minority ethnic groups. It will operate at a variety of levels – regional, national and local.

The first concrete steps towards the Forum, which will be initiated early in 2003, involve research and dialogue with those involved in similar initiatives elsewhere in order to learn both from their successes and mistakes. A number of roundtable discussions to develop the Forum's process and a small number of initiatives to support its objectives will also be held. It is envisaged that the Forum will complete its

work within a two-year period and produce among other outcomes a report to account for its activities and actions.

The need to shape our future in ways that cherish the past without ignoring its flaws, and in ways that build on the present through inclusion of all groups who are part of Ireland now, is increasingly recognised by many sectors in our society. Managing cultural change is already acknowledged as a complex issue requiring a strategic and integrated approach in the current Programme for Government. There is no doubt that introverted monocultural notions of what it means to be Irish have no place in an intercultural society. The majority ethnic group are majorally challenged to change to create a better future for all, including themselves.

NCCRI look forward to working in partnership through the Forum with all concerned to develop an intercultural Ireland. No doubt there are diverse views about what this might mean and how it might be brought about. The Forum, will we hope, be an opportunity to hear these views and to start finding creative ways to integrate the views.

It is presented as a stepping stone, not an end in itself. We know only too well that intercultural sensitivity is not the automatic outcome of meeting with difference. It is also clear that such sensitivity does not always emanate from pointing out examples of ethnocentrism and racism. Interculturalism is however, we believe, a major development goal towards which we can painstakingly and proactively work. We invite your ideas for, critique of and participation in the process.

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Anastasia Crickley is Chairperson of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

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