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Speech for launch of Za Chlebem

I should begin by saying that it was a great pleasure to work on this research. For me it was a reminder of just how multi-ethnic and multi-cultural and multi-national Northern Ireland has become over a very short period of time. When people like Patrick Yu first started doing work on racism in Northern Ireland some twenty years ago, the estimate for the whole minority ethnic population was less than 10,000 people. And now the Polish population alone is somewhere from 30,000 to 50,000 – and the wider BME population has also grown tremendously. There are Polish sections in all the major supermarkets; Polish shops in most towns and the Belfast Festival at Queen's devoted a whole section of its programme to Polish culture this year. This is a remarkable change.

The methodology also shows that it is possible to produce good, quantitative data with this population. I think there is a specific challenge to the statutory sector to begin to follow this up. While quantitative research with small, dispersed populations is never easy, the BME population in Northern Ireland is now sufficiently large to allow such research. Which brings us to what is perhaps the defining aspect of the research – the research shows that work is the paradigm within which this Polish migration is experienced. Of course the research reveals that there are many dimensions to the experience of the Polish community but ultimately for most people the reason for movement is economic – they come because there are relatively well-paid and accessible jobs available.

Employment insecurity is also the key reason for Polish people thinking about leaving Northern Ireland. The research makes it clear that this dynamic changes significantly in the context of economic downturn. Polish people – like other migrant workers – often occupy the most vulnerable, least well paid and least unionised sectors of the economy – and they tend to be impacted first in any period of downturn. Thus economic downturn has impacted specifically and negatively on the Polish community in Northern Ireland. The research finds tellingly that Polish people are three times more likely than the average to be unemployed. Around one fifth of the Polish community is now out of work. Moreover mechanisms like the Workers Registration Scheme

(WRS) also often prevent them accessing any form of social assistance if they become unemployed.

So the research has indicated where there are problems and where targeted intervention might be made. This kind of data is very important in terms of addressing race equality issues more generally. The population estimates for the Polish community alone range markedly and it is difficult to respond satisfactorily to the needs of a population the size of which remains so uncertain. At the same time the research also reminded me of the grounded knowledge which exists in the communities and representative organisations – despite the value of the quantitative analysis in this research, key qualitative information in terms of the community and its needs still rests within the community. And we sometimes undervalue the importance and usefulness of this knowledge. It is perhaps not too obvious to remind ourselves that anyone who wants to know how to support the Polish community has to begin by asking the representative organisations of the community.

Whatever the ambiguity around the exact size of the Polish population, it is now clearly the largest section of the BME population in Northern Ireland. I think that we can suggest that the Polish community in the north has reached a 'critical mass'. In this context it is particularly important to understand the report recommendation which supports specific research and resourcing of the Polish community in the north. This means, for example, that it is increasingly inappropriate to collapse the Polish experience with wider categories of A8 nationals or migrant workers. While these are sometimes useful contexts and there are, of course, many similarities in terms of experiences and needs, there is also a strong case for 'Polish-specific' research and Polish-specific intervention. This notion of critical mass also should inform issues like language provision in schools and interpretation and translation – organisations may well be able to support the Polish community with interventions beyond the current broad BME approach to these issues.

The research also raised interesting issues in terms of the question of how Polish people choose to situate themselves in Northern Ireland. They may not immediately locate their experiences in terms of existing BME approaches – regarding ethnicity in terms of 'whiteness' and not necessarily making sense of experiences in terms of race and racism. This relationship has to be worked on

and negotiated. Clearly there needs to be specific attention to how Polish people want to conceptualise their experience and how they want to challenge racism. Here there are useful comparisons with the Irish experience in Britain – a predominantly white and European migrant worker population that nevertheless had to situation itself in terms of ethnicity and race inequality.

The other side of this experience of ethnicity and racism that emerges from the research is the shocking level of harassment experienced by the community. This puts paid once and for all to the notion that the 'whiteness' of the Polish community somehow protects it from racism and sectarianism. The research suggested that there were new developments in this dynamic following the violence at the Poland/Northern Ireland soccer game earlier this year. Certainly the level of racism and sectarianism experienced by the Polish community is worrying and the level of racist and sectarian violence is particularly troubling. There is a particular onus on the criminal justice system to draw on existing NICEM work in this area and respond to the specific needs of the Polish community in this regard.

We can draw a couple of conclusions from the research to place alongside the important quantitative data on demography and employment. First, I think it is fair to suggest that it is hard to do anti-racism in a recession – the economic downturn makes NICEM's work more difficult but it also makes it even more relevant. Here NICEM's grounded rights-based approach is particularly important. In terms of the right to work, employment restrictions on EU citizens are unhelpful; more specifically the operation of the WRS forces people into the informal economy and prevents them accessing benefits to which they should be entitled. More generally it bears emphasis that Polish people in Northern Ireland have rights as EU citizens and these are best delivered by according them the same rights and entitlements as UK nationals.

Second, it is important to remind ourselves that it is possible to respond to economic crisis with either racism or anti-racism. As economic nationalism is presented as a response to recession, ideas like 'British Jobs for British workers' and 'Ulster jobs for Ulster workers' have begun to gain some currency. Particularly in the case of Polish people in Northern Ireland, it needs to be emphasised that they are doing what the EU wants us all to do – the Lisbon Agenda and European Employment Strategy makes it

clear that European citizens are not mobile enough and that the movement of workers needs to increase. It is also the case that many Polish people were directly or indirectly recruited to Northern Ireland to fill vacancies that couldn't be filled. Since coming they have transformed Northern Ireland in a whole range of positive ways. In this context, there is no 'them' and 'us', only an economic downturn that has to be survived collectively – or to use a term intimately associated with Poland – with solidarity!