

Executive Director Report November 2014

The past year was a turbulent year in Northern Ireland. Not only did we witness the aftermath of the failure of the Haas Talks, but saw as a consequence the upsurge of racist attacks in East Belfast and now in North Belfast. A backdrop to this were the comments of Pastor McConnell who made Islamophobic remarks that were echoed by our First Minister who famously said that he wouldn't trust Muslims...but would "trust them to go down the shops for me and give me the right change".

These remarks infuriated the Muslim community who are the backbone of our NHS trust as well as other professions in Northern Ireland society. We witnessed the Muslim community as well as other BME communities, for first time in history, take to the streets for the March Against Racism which was organised by NICEM, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Amnesty International. The March called for coherent political leadership from the Northern Ireland Executive and for the promised Racial Equality Strategy to be published. The March attracted over 8,000 people from all walks of life to support the campaign against racism, and was followed by the Limelight, a famous pub with renowned gigs, fundraising for NICEM in support of our work.

Two weeks after the March our Committee Member, Michael, was welcomed by a group of protestors waiting below his new flat with a big banner stating "Local homes for local people". And the First Minister, still showing no remorse for his Islamophobic remarks, extended support to the local people as he considered it as a housing issue and therefore not racist. These remarks further alienated the BME communities in Northern Ireland who contribute to our economy, create local jobs and contribute to the cultural and linguistic diversity in our society.

The Racial Equality Strategy was, at last, coming out for consultation in late June. The consultation document is so weak with the key parts missing. These include the failure to use evidence based data and research reports on the wide-ranging racial inequalities experienced by BME communities, no timetable for updating the Race Relations law (which is quite out-dated based in the context of the 1970s situation) and no Action Plan or Departmental Champion on Racial Equality. As a result, NICEM organised a number of consultation meetings for our sector as well as working with NICVA to inform the wider voluntary and community sector and making presentations at both the Equality Coalition and the Human Rights Consortium regular meetings. We also attended all public consultations organised by the OFMDFM as well as supporting our sector to make submissions.

NICEM have prepared our response to the Racial Equality Strategy by launching the Human Rights Benchmarking Report in mid-June with Junior Minister McCann and the launch today of “Voices for Change: Mapping the views of BME people on integration and their sense of belonging in Northern Ireland.” These are our contributions towards the strengthening the future Racial Equality Strategy.

We have been playing a vital role in informing our sector, as well as other sectors, through our briefing paper that we developed in July and our submission in August. Most of our partners across different sectors used it as the framework and drew on the content making their submission. This united voice of both BME communities and wider civil society is crucial in order to fight against racism and redress racial inequality in Northern Ireland.

NICEM is currently a key member in respect to the Community Relations Council’s “Common Platform” initiative and our key partners, both the Equality Coalition and the Human Rights Consortium mobilise their members to make submissions, too.

This year is also a turbulent year for NICEM in terms of workload and funding which never match with each other. In September 2014 we wound up the “Strategic Advocacy” project which had been funded by Atlantic Philanthropies

since January 2009. The second phase of the AP project started in April 2012 and had focused on sustainability by setting up the Regional Offices in North West, Mid-Ulster and Down and Belfast and North East.

We had achieved all the required tasks as listed in the application, but more importantly our Regional Offices - which were funded for the first two years - can now be sustained in Year 3 and beyond. Now the Regional Offices play a vital role in the local support and provision of services to all the local ethnic minority communities and/or groups. Since our presence in the regions we have been developed more new groups and strengthened local BME communities and networks.

The regional offices used the model in Belfast by providing advocacy and advice on one hand, with the capacity building of BME leaders, groups and communities on the other. In particular we brought local groups to work together on local issues through evidence based action research. As result we launched a few reports including 'Believe in Childcare?: an investigation into the childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland' in Mid-Ulster and Down and 'The Impact of the Economic Downturn on the BME people in the North West'.

For the Belfast Office, which focussed on setting up a new BME Women's Network which has held five meetings to assist the preparation process. They also made a submission to the Racial Equality Strategy from the gender perspective as well as another submission on Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategy. A Steering Group has been established which aims to approve the constitution and boost membership recruitment. The new Network also got a grant to appoint a part-time Women Development Officer.

The end of the Big Lottery Funding in July 2014 for Belfast Migrant Centre saw the end of generalised advice services in July 2014. We achieved all the targets with more demands from the communities facing the extended economic recession. The Migrant Centre handled 404 cases and had achieved a benefit maximisation of £279,582.86. Many of the

issues in this area stem from delayed benefits and tax credit appeals.

The loss of these services highlights the future gap of advice services following the Migrant Centre closure of the general advice service provision. Individuals are finding difficulty accessing alternative services since the mainstreaming advice sector does not provide interpreters for enquiries.

At the same time the support of victims of the racist attacks are continuing within the Migrant Centre. The upsurge of the racist attacks put our two part-time bi-lingual advocate in stress situation to cope with the massive demand for services. We dealt with 142 cases. Starting this financial year the PSNI also has provided funding to NICEM to have a part-time Community Development Worker to tackle racist attacks by using cross-community approach to support victims with the local community groups and leaders in East and South Belfast. The delivery is through the Migrant Centre.

CONNECT-NICEM has closed the interpretation services for the criminal justice agency after the contract finished on 18 September 2014. We had provided the services for the last ten years and established the professional standards in conjunction with the Article 6(3)(f) requirement of the European Convention for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom. CONNECT also worked closely with Queen's University Belfast in the establishment of a Masters qualification in interpreting.

All these changes mean that large staff cuts occurred in NICEM and the Migrant Centre. Although some of the changes were well planned, some are not - in particular the contract for CONNECT which had provided a cushion for NICEM's overhead costs and key staff who had no funding over the last 10 years. Our income from the OFMDFM on core costs remain stationary at £45,000 since 2000.

As an organisation we will seek alternative sources of funding and the positive note is that our Regional Offices are still running. The loss of income from CONNECT has serious implications for NICEM however we will identify alternative sources of income over the next few months. One source of

income is from an EU Transnational project which draws on our professional standards and reputation to deliver these complex and highly regulated EU projects.

Currently we have two projects in this period. One is the Good Relations Project for which we brought in as the Consultant to advise the Finnish and the Swedish Government to use the Good Relations concept to tackle racism and promote diversity. The project finished by the end of October. The other project is Integration on the Ground (INTEGRO) project with NGO partners from Germany, Czech Republic, Austria and Cyprus. The launch of the Integration Mapping Report today is part of that Project. Currently the project in NI will deliver a six month Pilot Project for which we have set up a Stakeholder Advisory Group to advise and to monitor the implementation of the project. We also received good news of another new project which will be start in December that aligns the Ministry of the Interior of Finland, the PSNI, the Migrant Centre, the UK Race European Network and NICEM as the Lead Partner. The new project is called “Good Practice Plus” and is a two year project.

As the scaling down process is now complete we will now focus on our future role and continue our work alongside a planning process to develop our next Strategic Plan for 2015-2020 in the context of the revised Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

Last but not the least is to say thank you to our Executive Board and the Advisory Board who have provided enormous support over the last 9 month period to cope with all these changes as well as our staff team, interns and volunteers - without them we could not achieve anything. We also extend a big thank you to all our funders who have provided us resources to implement our work plan, and of course to all our partners who worked with us over the period, in particular UNISON, Equality Coalition and Human Rights Consortium.

Thank you.