Building Solidarity Conference Report

The Community Foundation
Northern Ireland

Inside the Report

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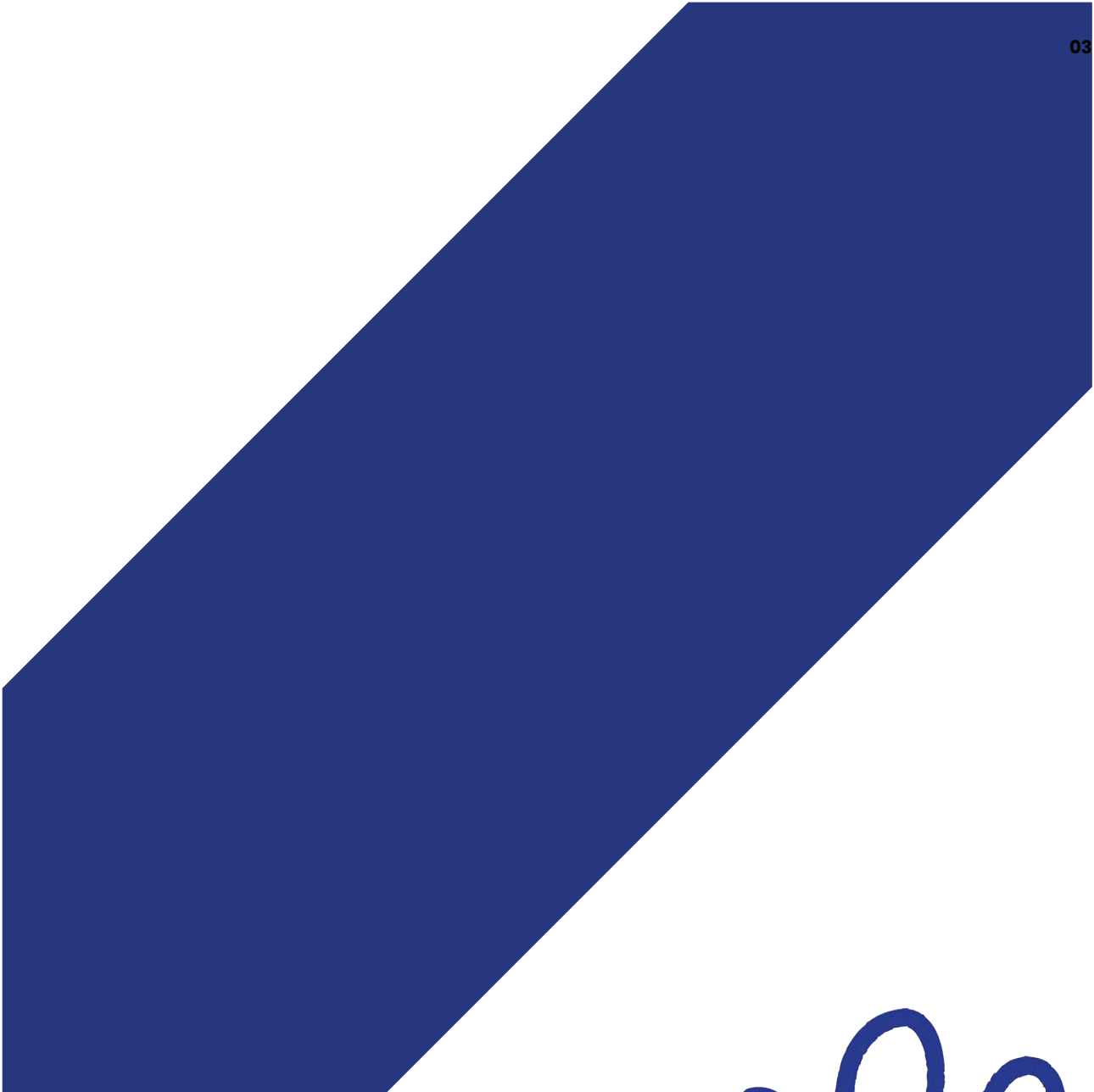
The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

Introduction to the Conference Report

The following report captures the key discussions and insights from the Building Solidarity Conference held in January 2025, which brought together community leaders, policymakers, and experts to address the rising tide of racist and Islamophobic violence and discrimination in Northern Ireland.

This event was held at a critical moment, following a series of violent attacks in the summer of 2024 that left deep scars on local communities.

The conference provided a platform for examining the root causes of such violence—specifically xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia—and for building a collective response to these challenges.

Organised by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), Social Change Initiative (SCI) and Africa House, the event gathered a diverse group of individuals united in their commitment to fostering social change, strengthening community relations, and combating hatred in all its forms.

Over the course of the conference, we explored four critical themes:

- **The Current Policy Context:** Discussions centred around the policies that shape community relations, with a focus on their impact on minority communities across the UK and Ireland.

- **The Impact of Racism:** Participants shared experiences and examined the real-world consequences of racism and the violence it perpetuates.

- **Understanding the Violence:** The conference delved into the socio-political factors contributing to the recent violence, seeking to better understand its origins and manifestations.

- **Learning from What Works:** A final session highlighted successful strategies and initiatives that have effectively combated racism and Islamophobia and promoted stronger community relations.

Throughout the conference, expert speakers led thought-provoking sessions, followed by interactive panel discussions.

Attendees were encouraged to engage fully, share their experiences, and contribute to the vital conversations.

Feedback was collected to inform the creation of this report, ensuring that the collective insights and recommendations from the conference would serve as a foundation for ongoing action.

The event underscored the importance of collective action in tackling these deeply rooted issues.

While one conference alone cannot solve the complex challenges of xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia, it marked a critical step toward building a united response.

The conversations that began here will continue in the work ahead, with all participants playing a role in fostering positive change within our communities and beyond.

This report will outline the key takeaways from the conference, highlight the proposed actions, and serve as a guide for the next steps in our shared journey to address these pressing issues.

Conference Agenda

Thursday 30th January 2025	
9.00am	Welcome and Registration
9.30am	Opening address by Deputy Lord Mayor
9.35am	Introduction to session by Chair: Lori Gatsi-Barnett
9.50am	UK/ Northern Ireland Policy Context	Daniel Holder, CAJ; Takura Makoni, ACSONI; Livingstone Thompson PHD & Dr Nazia Latif, Right Practice
11.20am	Comfort break
11.40am	Introduction to Session by Chair: Lekan Ojo-Okiji Abasi
11.45pm	The Voice of lived experience / The Impact of Racism	Naomi Green; Takura Makoni, ACSONI; Angel Arutura; Dean Lee; Limia Dyein
12.45pm	Arts and Culture Presentation
1.00pm	Lunch
2.00pm	Introduction to session by Chair: Avila Kilmurray
2.05pm	Understanding the violence – How did we get here?	Denis Long – Forward South Partnership; Dessie Donnelly, Rabble Collective; Salwa Alsharabi, ANAKA; Henri Mohammed
3.45pm	Event close and reflections
4.00pm	Event ends

Friday 31st January 2025	
9.00am	Welcome and Registration
9.30am	Conference Opening and Introduction of Session
9.35am	Examples of Best Practice – Learning from What Works	Anki Deo, Hope not Hate; Edel McGinley, Hope and Courage Collective; Dr Lucy Michael; Tura Arutura, Africa House
11.30am	Comfort Break
11.20am	Comfort break
11.45am	Workshops
1.00pm	Conference close and lunch

Session 1: The UK and Northern Ireland Policy Context

Introduction

This chapter reports on the **'UK and Northern Ireland Policy Context'** session of the conference which looked at the landscape of policies impacting community relations and the lived experiences of minority communities in the UK and Northern Ireland.

This session brought together leading experts to critically examine how national and regional policies influence racial equality and social cohesion. Panellists included Daniel Holder from the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), Takura Makoni from the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI), Dr. Nazia Latif from Rights Practice, and Dr. Livingstone Thompson, who collectively provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by minority communities, the ongoing impact of both historical and current policy frameworks and the work of their organisations in responded to these issues.

Panel Chair

The panel Chair was Lori Gatsi-Barnett, an entrepreneur, motivational speaker and founder of the JoinHer Network.

Born in Harare, Zimbabwe Lori was a youth Ambassador with World Vision and American Red Cross.

Lori reflected that Northern Ireland's history of conflict has shaped current issues, with growing concern over racist violence in addition to sectarian divisions.

In her opening remarks Lori emphasised the importance of human connection and connecting with one another through shared humanity and solidarity.

She encouraged attendees to recognise the diverse community around them, reflecting everyone's identity.

Lori encouraged critical thinking, openness, and active participation in the conversation on building a better future.

Below is an outline of the key points raised by each of the panellists.

Daniel Holder – Committee on the Administration of Justice

Daniel Holder has been the Director of the Belfast-based human rights NGO the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) since April 2023, having previously been the organisations Deputy Director since 2011. He is also the Co-Convener of the Equality Coalition – a network of equality NGOs and trade unions jointly convened by CAJ and UNISON.

Prior to this he worked in the NI Human Rights Commission in Belfast, ran a migrant worker equality project in county Tyrone and worked as a linguist in Havana, Cuba.

He has a primary degree in Spanish and Sociology and an LLM in Human Rights Law, both from Queen's University Belfast.

- **Racist and Sectarian Intimidation in Housing:** Daniel referred to recent racist posters and graffiti threatening Muslims, migrants, and landlords in communities and noted these as a significant form of intimidation. Some housing developments have seen these materials remain up for long periods due to fear of paramilitary backlash.

- **Paramilitary Involvement in Racism:** Daniel stated that some paramilitary groups have been involved in racist attacks, but official responses often downplayed or ignored this. He noted housing segregation as a major issue in Northern Ireland, but noted responses often focus on vague community relations, ignoring the role of paramilitary intimidation. CAJ presented evidence to the UN's Antiracism Committee in August highlighting paramilitary involvement in racist violence and intimidation. In a subsequent report the UN called out the denial of paramilitary involvement and the downplaying of this issue by local authorities.

- **Police Service of Northern Ireland:** Daniel noted that initially, the PSNI's policy allowed racist materials to stay up if removing them would cause public disorder. However, after legal pressure, they began changing this policy.

- **Department for Infrastructure:** Daniel reported that no formal policy exists for removing racist material from public spaces. The Departments informal policy often defers to paramilitary groups, suggesting removal is only possible with their consent.

- **Department of Justice:** Daniel reported that despite recommendations from the Hate Crimes Review for a new legal framework to remove racist and sectarian material, the government has not acted, citing a lack of political consensus.

- **Department for Communities:** Daniel noted that there is a scheme to provide support for those threatened with paramilitary violence, but it has flaws, such as not tracking the source of threats and lacking data on racist intimidation. Recently, the Minister for Communities has proposed eliminating the scheme.

- **Good Relations Duty:** Daniel noted that while there is a statutory duty to promote good relations and tackle racism, it has been misused as a political tool, not as a mechanism for positive action against racism, sectarianism, and prejudice.

Takura Makoni – AKSONI

Born in Leeds, Yorkshire to his Zimbabwean migrant student parents, Takura Donald Makoni had a travelled childhood.

Bouncing between the UK, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Botswana enriched his life with a diverse palate shaping his curious mind.

Takura is recognised by The African & Caribbean Support Organisation of Northern Ireland for contributions to the community through volunteering, the arts and activism.

Working with Belfast City Council, Beyond Skin, Arts Ekta, Glen Bank Community Centre, Terra Nova Productions, National Museums Northern Ireland over the 20+ years living here cements the feeling of 'home' that inspired him to settle in Belfast when he repatriated to the UK as an adult to seek and secure a better life for his family than was available in his economically deteriorating ancestral home of Zimbabwe.

Takura is a single father of 5 boys and one girl.

- **Connection of Global Struggles:** Takura drew parallels between racism and other global struggles, particularly the struggles of marginalised communities and those affected by conflict. He stressed that issues like food insecurity, health, and education transcend geographic borders, and racism must be seen as part of this broader fight.

- **Racism as a Systemic Issue:** Takura made the distinction between individual prejudice and systemic racism, explaining that while personal discrimination exists, the real power of racism lies in its systemic nature. This affects policies, social structures, and global economics.

- **The Global Impact of Racism:** Takura emphasised the global nature of racism. It is not confined to one place but affects everyone, as it has been ingrained in societal structures worldwide. He suggested that racism is denied because it is uncomfortable to confront and because it is often embedded in cultural, political, and economic systems.

- **Empathy and Solidarity:** Takura stated that true solidarity requires seeing the struggles of others as your own. He challenged the audience to engage with empathy and recognise their common humanity, questioning why some people struggle to see others as equal.

- **Call to Action:** Takura called for active participation in the fight against racism, urging individuals, communities, and institutions to acknowledge and address the systemic nature of racism. This is not just a political issue but a moral one.

Dr Nazia Latif

Nazia currently runs Right Practice and specialises in providing practical assistance to organisations in the public, private and voluntary sector to initiate and manage change in order to improve the lives of all communities.

She has worked with a range of organisations including the Immigrant Council of Ireland, Rights and Security International and the Asia Pacific Forum.

Her focus is on helping organisations meet their human rights and equality obligations. A highly experienced trainer and researcher, Nazia believes in empowering communities through genuine engagement and collaboration.

Nazia is also an Equality Commissioner for NI, an Authority member on the RQIA, a member of the NI Committee of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and an Independent Assessor for Diversity Mark.

She worked for the NI Human Rights Commission for 13 years where she led on policy and investigations and was speaking at the conference in her capacity as Founder of Right Practice.

- **Need for Legislative and Policy Reform:** Nazia highlighted the need for improved hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland, better recognition of intersectional identities, and disaggregated data from public authorities and employers.

- **Structural and Systemic Racism:** Nazia noted that racism, including Islamophobia, is deeply rooted and systemic across various sectors—schools, universities, private sector, public sector, trade unions, and even in tech, social media, and AI. She emphasised that laws alone will not resolve these issues, as personal experiences of racism persist despite legal frameworks.

- **Crisis of the Rule of Law:** Nazia critiqued the decline in confidence in the rule of law and the erosion of its effectiveness, particularly for racialised minorities. She argued that corporate values and business models often take precedence over human rights and the law.

- **Personal Experience of Racism:** Nazia shared personal stories of how her Muslim teenage son is routinely discriminated against, highlighting the real-world impact of racism despite legal protections. She described the emotional toll of living in a world where racialised communities are constantly demonised.

- **Practical and Strategic Solidarity:** Nazia advocated for solidarity that goes beyond emotional support and is practical and strategic in addressing racism. She called for stronger accountability from corporations, tech companies, and media outlets in their role in perpetuating racial inequality and spreading misinformation.

- **Empowerment and Representation:** Nazia stressed that having people of colour in positions of power is not enough; true support and empowerment of marginalised voices are necessary. She noted the challenges faced by people of colour, especially women of colour, in positions of influence, and the need for continued support.

- **Institutional Change and Collaboration:** Nazia noted the need to recognise that institutions are often part of the problem and can only go so far in changing. However, working with allies and pushing boundaries from within these institutions is crucial. She emphasised the importance of collaboration with allies and maintaining support for those working to challenge systemic racism.

Dr Livingstone Thompson

Livingstone Thompson, PhD, is a theologian and specialist in world religions. As Founder of Living Cultural Solutions Ltd, he provides training and consultancy in DEI, cultural competence, racism awareness and unconscious bias.

Previously a lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, Dublin City University and the London Academy of Diplomacy, he is author of several books and has peer reviewed a number of journal articles. Livingstone supervises graduate research at Glasgow Caledonia University (GCU) London.

He is a trustee for Christian Aid Ireland and the Moravian Church, British Province. He founded the Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research, SIETAR Ireland and chaired the board of SIETAR Europe.

Livingstone is former chair of African and Caribbean Support Organisation, NI (ACSONI) and the Northern Ireland Executive's Racial Equality Subgroup.

- **Lack of Action on Hate Crime Law**: Livingstone noted that the government has not followed through on recommendations from Judge Marinan's report, specifically the creation of a standalone hate crime law. He noted this as concerning, as Northern Ireland lacks an official definition of hate crime and does not have proper legislation to address it, which he views as an abdication of duty.

- **Insufficient Role for People with Lived Experience in Policy:** Livingstone reported that there is a gap in how policies are developed, as the voices of those with lived experience of racism are not sufficiently included. The review of the Northern Ireland Racial Equality Strategy highlighted the need for clearer roles for individuals with lived experience in shaping policies. He stated that without this, policies risk being disconnected from the reality of those affected by racism.

- **Education's Role in Perpetuating Racism:** Livingstone presented that the education system has not been sufficiently challenged or supported in terms of its role in fostering or not adequately combating racism. He argued that there is a lack of attention given to how education can help create an anti-racist society, citing a recent example at a Belfast school that indicate this issue needs more focus.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion covered a wide range of critical issues affecting minority communities in the UK and Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on systemic racism, discriminatory policies, and the role of leadership in shaping inclusive environments.

These points collectively underscored the urgent need for systemic change, greater public awareness, and proactive policies that genuinely promote equality and social justice.

- **Facial Recognition and AI Discrimination:** Panellists highlighted concerns about facial recognition technology and AI systems that perpetuate racial discrimination. These technologies often fail to properly recognise people of colour, leading to wrongful arrests and disadvantaging marginalised communities, particularly in areas like insurance and criminal justice. The panel emphasised the need for greater awareness and expertise to address inherent biases in AI systems.

- **Hostile Environment and Immigration:** Panellists discussed the UK's "hostile environment" policy, which criminalised people in irregular migration status, including for everyday activities like driving without a license. They pointed out the lasting impact of this policy, which contributed to the Windrush scandal, and how the legislation is still in place. They also discussed efforts to roll back such policies, particularly in relation to driving licenses for irregular migrants i.e. individuals who enter or remain in a country lacking visas, permits, or documentation to stay.

- **Education and Anti-Racism:** Panellists stressed the importance of education in addressing racism. They criticised the lack of anti-racism education in schools, especially regarding colonialism and empire, and noted how cultural awareness initiatives sometimes reinforce stereotypes. They emphasised that many teachers lack the competence to be anti-racist, highlighting the need for better teacher training to address gaps in racial understanding.

- **Media's Role in Perpetuating Racism:** The panel highlighted the significant role of the media in shaping public perceptions of racism. They criticised media institutions for sensationalising issues and promoting divisive narratives around racism and Islamophobia. They discussed how media portrayals of racialised communities contribute to harmful stereotypes.

- **The Importance of Language in Tackling Racism:** The panel stressed the need to challenge the language that perpetuates discrimination. Terms like "foreigner" contribute to alienation and reinforce harmful stereotypes. It was emphasised that individuals have the power to influence change through their words and actions, advocating for a shift in the language used to describe people from marginalised communities.

- **Accountability and Strategic Action:** The lack of accountability in addressing racism was a key theme, with panellists pointing out that while some departments have "champions" for racial equality, these roles often lack the power and clarity to bring about real change. There was a call for future strategies to include clear indicators and consequences for failure to implement anti-racism policies effectively.

- **Hate Crime and Leadership:** The panel discussed the need for a Hate Crime Commissioner, a role that would address hate crimes and domestic violence. Despite being recommended by the independent review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland, this position has not been implemented, further highlighting the lack of strategic action to combat hate crimes and discrimination.

- **Solidarity and Collective Action:** The panel emphasised the importance of building solidarity across communities to combat racism. They highlighted that tackling these issues requires collective action, with everyone playing a role in changing societal attitudes, confronting discrimination, and holding leadership accountable for their actions.

Session 2: The Voice of Lived Experience

Introduction

This chapter reports on the **'Impact of Racism'** session of the conference. Participants shared experiences and examined the real-world consequences of racism and Islamophobia and the violence it perpetuates.

This session brought together experts by experience who discussed their and their communities' experiences of life in Northern Ireland and their experiences of racism and Islamophobia. The panel was chaired by Lekan Ojo-Okiji Abasi.

Chair: Lekan Ojo-Okiji Abasi

With over 20 years of experience as a Community Development Worker in Greater Belfast, Lekan is a Bilingual Professional Counsellor and the founding member and Clinical Co-ordinator of Counselling All Nations Services (CANS).

Lekan is deeply committed to promoting Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion, working to ensure that the needs of BAME and Migrant communities, including Refugees and Asylum Seekers, are addressed within organisational strategies and activities.

Lekan also participates in local mental health groups and works closely with statutory bodies to advocate for the needs of BAME communities, ensuring their access to essential services.

Lekan introduced himself as a founding member and current clinical coordinator of a small charity supporting minority communities.

He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to engage in the conversation.

The session focused on the lived experiences of individuals, particularly regarding discrimination, racism, and inequality, and how these challenges shape their lives.

Lekan spoke about his own background as a black man, reflecting on the shared humanity in the room despite differences like height, gender, or language.

He also referenced the concept of multi-disciplinary teams and the different tiers of support for discrimination, emphasising the importance of solidarity while addressing practical steps to combat prejudice.
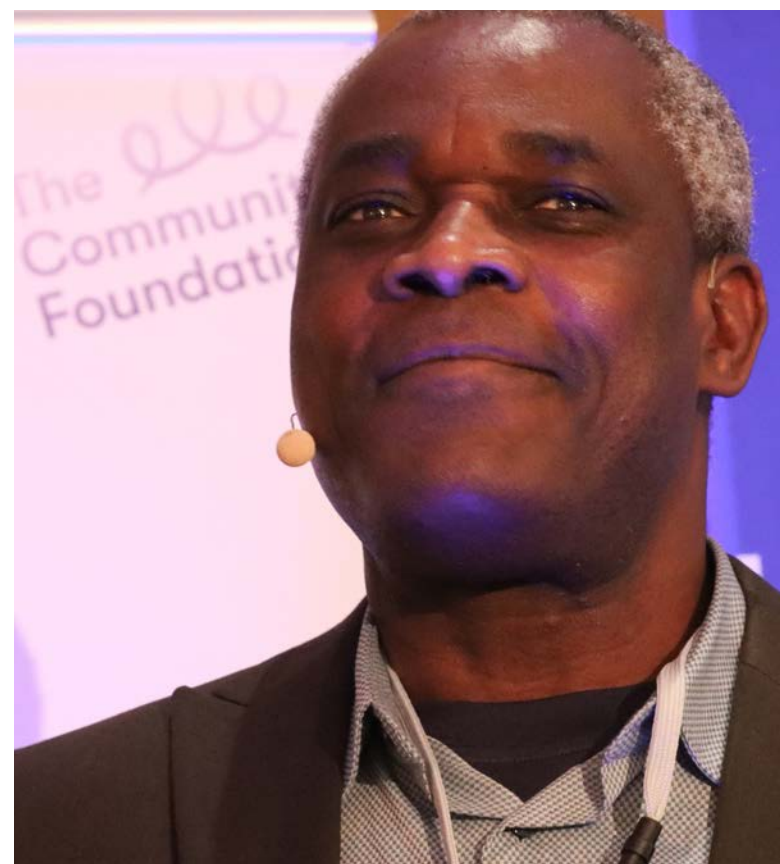
Panellists

Dean Lee

Born in Northern Ireland in 1974 to first generation Hong Kong Chinese parents, Dean began his work life in the Chinese Welfare Association NI, becoming Race Relations and Training Officer.

From there Dean moved into the public sector helping to establish the first Public Health Interpreting Service in the UK, the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Service.

Before moving into mental health and social care work, Dean also enjoyed a period as Good Relations Officer for the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

Since 2022 Dean has been focusing on their role for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust as a Foster Carer specialising in providing placements for young refugees.

In response to the racist violence and subsequent public demonstrations in Northern Ireland in the summer of 2024, Dean has just begun a Comic Relief short term funded project with the Migrant Centre NI to REduce MIgrant Tensions in NI (REMIT) through facilitation of community dialogue and action.

Previous to this, Dean worked with The Rainbow Project NI, a leading LGBTQIA + charity in Northern Ireland from Dec 2010 to Sep 2024, delivering Counselling and latterly managing the service.

During this time Dean also established the first ever support group in Northern Ireland for LGBTQIA+ people from minority ethnic backgrounds including LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees.

Dean shared a personal reflection on their lived experience with racism and discrimination, drawing from their 20+ years of work in the voluntary sector, including both the Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) sector and the LGBT sector.

Dean emphasised the difficulty of recalling traumatic experiences and how sharing such experiences publicly can sometimes be re-triggering. Instead of directly recounting painful moments, Dean chose to share a poem expressing their experience with racism.

The poem below explores various racist slurs and experiences from childhood to adulthood, highlighting the subtle and overt forms of discrimination.

Dean also mentioned more recent personal experiences, including caring for a young Sudanese asylum seeker and witnessing the impact of events like the George Floyd protests.

Stationary, Stationery
A poem about the disabling impact
of childhood exposure to Racism in
Northern Ireland by Dean Lee

Words unheard awhile lurk stationary
staring at her under
blinking street lamp in the alleyway
adjacent to haphazardous home
of memory.
She can barely make them out.

So she scribbles on branded
post-it pad,
taps micro hard letters on laptop
until they make the final cut
from dull to matte to gloss.

Where did he first black nurse
the rhyme,
"Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees
look at these"?
Who first chanted
"Ching chong china man"?

When did they graffiti the wall
in a colour other than yellow
"CHINKS OUT" ?
And did he really hear the same
slur bellowed
as windows pinged with stones?
Why did playing 'ping pong'
in Primary school sound so wrong?
Grammar school was underlined
with whispering feints and
marginal red pen corrections.

As A - student, mid-class
'Good' History teacher expected
him to know if his parents
"came here in a boat?"

After School shopping for an A3 diary
"Guk" whispered by older 'adult'
in his left ear left him stationary.
When schoolmate explained the insult
knowledgeable laughter ensued.

It's easier to know that 'Chinky'
is derogatory when accompanied by
'Fenian' and 'Bastard' and a couple of
jabs to the face
whilst standing stationary at the school
bus
Stop!

Not even the heavy load of living room
wallpapered books including the Bible
and Tricolore could protect him.

After 11pm at weekends working at the
family 'Chinkies',
they took orders from drunk white
customers
on white numbered duplicate pads,
one for the kitchen and one to reconcile
the takings later

1 x "You speak English very well"
2 x "What meat is in here?"
3 x "Don't want any of that foreign
muck"
4 x "Sweet and sour fried lice"

"Will your mum give me a 69"?
(Knowledgeable laughter ensued)
Just banter,
"You wouldn't understand
It's OUR CULTURE."

We later catered down south.
"That'll be 25 punts please"
"Thieving gypsies"
Noted of similar value are all
minorities.

And if they have anything of value,
target and take it away too with
baseball bats
on missions for easy money
or use guns like the forefathers who
colonised, enslaved or evangelized,
invading hearts, souls and minds.
Unsubtle assertions of white
superiority.
And still they have the audacity
to keep themselves to themselves.

Flash forward
years later,
this second generationer,
upgraded by age, work, grammar
education,
sits at fine dining table
facing the back of a waitress,
unconsciously biased
she waits predominantly on
their white partner.

Maybe should've just gone to the
'Chinkies'

But 'Chinkies'
or even a 'chink of light'
rarely lightens the faces of
words unheard awhile lurk stationary
staring at her under
blinking street lamp in the alleyway
adjacent to haphazardous home of
memory.

Dr Naomi Green

Dr Naomi Green is the Policy and Public Affairs Officer at British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA).

She has a background in medical genetics and now also holds a PhD in social sciences, focusing on the integration and belonging of Muslims in Northern Ireland.

As an independent researcher and lecturer, she specialises in Islamophobia, the Muslim community, and social integration.

She was the foundational researcher for the NWMF Black Heritage in Northern Ireland: The Hidden History Project.

Naomi is actively involved in various community initiatives with an emphasis on community relations and advocacy, she sits on the executive board of the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum and is a member of the Clonard Monastery Peace and Reconciliation Commission.

Naomi shared her perspective on racism, highlighting that while race is a social construct with no biological basis, it deeply impacts societal structures.

She discussed how Muslims, though not a race, are increasingly racialised and treated as a monolithic group.

She reflected on her personal experience as a Muslim with mixed heritage, feeling both accepted and rejected depending on her appearance (e.g., wearing a scarf).

She described facing islamophobia in Northern Ireland, including discrimination and the denial of its existence.

Naomi also expressed the unique challenge of navigating a space between her white Irish background and her Muslim identity, noting her privileges within her community compared to others.

Regarding the riots, she recounted the terrifying experience of seeing Muslim businesses and places of worship targeted, while political leaders justified the violence by framing it as a legitimate concern.

This experience of being collectively blamed for actions of a few was deeply painful for Naomi, reinforcing the ongoing struggle with discrimination and islamophobia.

Limia Dyein

Limia Dyein is the Assistant Coordinator at Anaka Women's Collective, where she supports the organisation of community-driven initiatives and empowers individuals through skill development programs.

She holds a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Sciences from Omdurman Alhlia University and a Postgraduate Diploma in Diplomatic Studies from Khartoum University.

In her role at Anaka Women's Collective, Limia coordinates impactful projects aimed at empowering women and fostering personal growth, while also handling administrative tasks to ensure the smooth operation of daily activities. Prior to this, she worked as the Coordinator and Secretary at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation from 2009 to 2016, successfully managing international events and facilitating communication within diverse teams.

With a strong focus on advocating for women's and children's rights and supporting marginalised communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, Limia is dedicated to creating lasting, sustainable development.

Limia, an asylum seeker and refugee, shared her personal and community experiences of arriving in the UK, initially facing discrimination and challenges due to language barriers and a lack of support.

Limia reflected on the difficulties of being treated unfairly in various sectors, such as education, healthcare, and social services. She described feeling isolated and losing

confidence during the early months but highlighted how her situation improved with support from others.

Limia also addressed the struggles asylum seekers face, including living in hotels with limited space and restrictions on working or accessing education.

She emphasised the importance of solidarity and action, urging the community to support one another and advocate for systemic change. Limia concluded by expressing gratitude for the community's resilience and collective efforts to stand up against discrimination and injustice, particularly in response to recent organised attacks against marginalised groups.

Angel Arutura

Angel Arutura is a multifaceted creative, storyteller, DJ and international speaker.

Over the years, Angel has built a platform centred on wellness, advocacy, and the power of creativity to foster connection and inspire change.

As a sought-after international speaker and creator, she has shared her voice on stages worldwide and collaborated with leading brands such as BBC Sounds, META, and The Body Shop to amplify messages of self-expression, mindfulness, creativity, and community.

Her influence has been recognised with accolades such as being named one of the Irish Times' "50 Young People to Watch in 2021" and being featured on the GUAP Blacklist 30 under 30.

Angel talked about her experience growing up in Belfast as the only Black person in her school where she faced covert racism and unconscious bias, which significantly impacted her self-esteem and the belief that there were limitations on what she could achieve.

Despite this, her creative upbringing, especially through her father's influence, helped her find her voice and self-expression, using social media as a platform for empowerment.

Angel emphasised the importance of encouraging creativity and creating safe spaces for young people, particularly within ethnic minority communities, to explore their potential.

She advocated for tackling the deeply ingrained systemic racism in Northern Ireland, noting that it is not just about verbal or visual racism but also about limiting opportunities for ethnic minorities.

She stressed the need to nurture young people's talents and build more inclusive, supportive environments, drawing attention to the lack of a creative scene in Belfast compared to other places like London.

Takura Makoni

Born in Leeds, Yorkshire to his Zimbabwean migrant student parents, Takura Donald Makoni had a travelled childhood.

Bouncing between the UK, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Botswana enriched his life with a diverse palate shaping his curious mind.

Takura is recognised by The African & Caribbean Support Organisation of Northern Ireland for contributions to the community through volunteering, the arts and activism.

Working with Belfast City Council, Beyond Skin, Arts Ekta, Glen Bank Community Centre, Terra Nova Productions, National Museums Northern Ireland over the 20+ years living here cements the feeling of 'home' that inspired him to settle in Belfast when he repatriated to the UK as an adult to seek and secure a better life for his family than was available in his economically deteriorating ancestral home of Zimbabwe.

Takura is a single father of 5 boys and one girl.

Takura reflected on his migrant journey, beginning with his father, a former student activist in Zimbabwe who fled to the UK as a refugee.

Takura was born in the UK, and his family moved across several African countries due to his father's activism.

Takura shared early experiences of prejudice and racism, including a significant moment where a friend made him fight for the chance to play at his house, which sparked his awareness of racial injustice.

As a father of four sons in Northern Ireland, Takura discussed the challenges of raising Black children in a hostile environment, expressing concern about whether his children will return safely from the playground or face systemic racism.

He shared his own struggles with anger and the emotional toll of navigating a racist society, particularly as a Black man in Northern Ireland.

Takura expressed a deep internal conflict about bringing his younger children to join him in Northern Ireland, fearing the challenges they would face.

Despite being born in the UK and speaking the language, he emphasised that racism affects him just as it does others who look like him but may not sound like him.

Panel Discussion

Panellists shared personal stories highlighting the emotional, social, and institutional effects of racism and islamophobia, shedding light on the daily struggles faced by individuals, especially in schools and workplaces.

The conversation delved into systemic issues, such as discriminatory policies and the failure to address prejudice, while also emphasising the importance of leadership, community solidarity, and inclusive practices in creating meaningful change.

- **Racism in Schools:** The panel discussed how racist remarks made by other children in schools are often dismissed by teachers as "kids being kids." The panel emphasised the need for proper action and accountability from schools. The difficulty that many refugees, especially women, face in speaking out against racial issues or defending their children in schools was discussed. Some feel "blind and deaf," unable to voice their concerns.

- **Role of the Community:** The panel stressed the importance of local support and community actions. One example shared was a colleague holding a flag to support refugees, showing the impact of small acts of kindness in the face of adversity. The panel discussed the need for empathy, understanding, and continuous effort to address systemic racism, as well as the recognition that these issues cannot be solved overnight but require sustained collective action.

- **Call for Structural Change:** The panel discussed the need for systemic changes in language, education, and policies to address racism. Naomi pointed out the issue of lack of disaggregated data, which makes it hard to address specific needs of minority groups.

- **Need for Inclusive Policies:** Panellists urged for changes in curriculums, official policies, and language used in the community. They suggested a shift towards treating all residents as part of the community, instead of labelling them as "newcomers" or "others."

- **Racism's Emotional Toll:** The panel also addressed the psychological and emotional toll that racism takes on individuals, particularly the pressure on children to prove themselves in school due to assumptions based on their ethnic background.

Session 3: Understanding the Violence – How did we get here?

Introduction

This sectioin examines the discussion on **'Understanding the Violence – How did we get here?'**.

This session looked at the contributing factors including the media, social media, political leadership, the rise of the far-right and misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

This session brought together leading experts to critically examine the sociopolitical factors contributing to racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and violence.

Panellists included Salwa Alsharabi from the ANAKA Collective, Henri Mohammed, Dessie Donnelly from the Rabble Collective, and Denis Long from Forward South Partnership, who collectively provided valuable insights the background and current context in which this violence occurred.

Panel Chair – Avila Kilmurray

Avila Kilmurray has worked in the community and women's sector in Northern Ireland since 1975.

She was Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland from 1994-2014.

Over that period Avila was a founder member of the Northern Ireland

Women's Coalition and part of its negotiation team for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998).

Avila is currently a Programme Executive with SCI (Social Change Initiative) focusing on activism for peacebuilding and racial justice.

She is a Hon. Professor with the Mitchell Institute (QUB) and has written extensively on women, community and peacebuilding issues, including 'Community Action in a Contested Society: The Story of Northern Ireland', (Lang, 2017).

Avila highlighted that incidents of hate based on race have surpassed those based on sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with many incidents going unreported.

She noted the dual influences of far-right groups, both from Britain and the Republic of Ireland, which have exacerbated racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in the region and that this was visible during the violence in August, which saw symbols of both the Irish and British flags.

Avila discussed the impact of racism and xenophobia at the community level, particularly in areas facing social issues linked to a lack of resources and housing.

She emphasised the importance of targeting decision-makers, not marginalised communities, in discussions about resource allocation.

She noted that Northern Ireland is still a post-conflict society, where a mentality of "winners and losers" persists, leading to a blame game

that often targets outsiders or ethnic minorities.

Despite the challenges, Avila pointed out that recent surveys show a growing acceptance and tolerance in Northern Ireland, although media coverage often highlights the extremes.

Finally, Avila touched on how misinformation spreads quickly, especially in a post-conflict society, fuelling violent reactions and division.

Panellists

Salwa Alsharabi – ANAKA Collective

Salwa Alsharabi is a Yemeni activist & cultural visual artist.

Salwa confronted notable difficulties in her career as a photographer and she uses art photography to show the transformation effected by religious extremism on Arab female identity and culture as well as the ongoing struggles of women around the world.

Salwa is also an advocate for migrant and refugee communities living in Ireland and her art focuses on the identities and experiences of immigrants and ethnic minorities confronting an oppressive immigration system.

Salwa Alsharabi shared her personal journey as an activist and cultural visual artist.

She began by highlighting her work in Yemen, where she used photography to raise awareness about issues like child marriage and the impact of cultural and

extremist traditions on women's rights.

Her work led to difficulties with extremist groups and forced her to leave Yemen.

After arriving in Belfast as an immigrant, she faced challenges integrating into the community but sought to use her experiences to make a positive impact.

Salwa was introduced to the "Dare to Lead" project, a partnership between Bryson Intercultural and TIDES, which aimed to build stronger relationships between locals and newcomers.

This led to the creation of the Anaka Women's Collective, a group designed to empower migrant women through workshops, art, and advocacy.

She participated in exhibitions and campaigns such as "Homes Not Hotels," to highlight the poor living conditions of asylum seekers in hotels. Through her art, she also expressed her rejection of stigma.

Salwa also participated in research with Dr. Lucy Michael on integration, diversity, and equality, interviewing Arabic speakers in Belfast to understand their experiences of discrimination and inequality.

She shared her own struggles with racism and the challenges her son faced in the education system, including discrimination from teachers and classmates.

Her son's experience with racism affected his self-esteem, leading him to try whitening products in an effort to fit in.

Through her work, Salwa continues to advocate for migrant and refugee rights, emphasising the importance of human rights and equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their background.

Henri Mohammed

Henri Mohammed is a community development worker with nearly 40 years' experience of good relations work.

He has worked for a number of organisations across the city including Farset Community Enterprises, Dee Street Busters, Glencairn Community Association as well as the Education and Library Board.

A native of Belfast Henri studied community development work at University of Ulster.

Henri Mohammed talked about his 40 years of experience in community work and reflected on the evolution of community work in Northern Ireland, moving beyond the traditional "cross-community" focus to include broader social issues.

While acknowledging the challenges, he noted progress and greater awareness of societal needs for change.

Henri criticised the current political climate, particularly in the West, where politics has become more about confrontation rather than collaboration, driven by media manipulation for ratings or votes.

He highlighted how this confrontational approach has contributed to division and tension, particularly in socially deprived communities where people feel unheard.

Using Martin Luther King's quote about riots being the language of the unheard, Henri suggested that while violent actions are inappropriate, they may stem from a feeling of being ignored.

He stressed the importance of engaging with communities that feel marginalised, noting that it is not enough to have events like this—efforts must be made to reach those who don't attend.

Finally, Henri emphasised the need for greater representation of people of colour and their supporters in all sectors of society, including healthcare, local government, and organisations. He called for lobbying and active efforts to ensure that minority communities are included and that change is actively pursued.

Dessie Donnelly – Rabble Collective

Dessie Donnelly is a labour movement and social justice organiser by trade.

Prior to founding the technology cooperative Rabble Cooperative in 2021, Dessie worked with SEIU (USA), UNISON and Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR).

Deeply uncomfortable by social movements' dependence on Big Tech, accelerated during the Covid lockdowns, Dessie led the transformation of PPR into a human rights organisation that embraced free software and promoted digital rights.

In 2020, he took a sabbatical from organising to learn more about how technology can be integrated into strategies for social change.

Dessie discussed a research project commissioned by the Equality Commission, which examined the role of social media in the aftermath of race riots in August and in other incidents up to early 2024.

The research specifically focused on the far-right coordination on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, looking at locations, content, and the influence of different groups on these platforms.

He noted that a lot of these conversations were occurring in private online groups, chats and through private messaging.

He identified that the riots were promoted primarily by local loyalist groups, but the messaging was amplified, especially on the day and following the events, by external far-right groups from Britain and Ireland.

The study showed that these external groups capitalised on local tensions, promoting narratives that were often xenophobic and anti-immigrant.

One striking finding was how the political responses from unionist parties downplayed the overtly racist nature of the events and reframed them as grievances over social deprivation and urban decay.

Dessie outlined that the next stage of the research will focus on tracking hate crimes and racist incidents over a longer period and understanding the political and social ramifications of these incidents.

Dessie emphasised that most of the far-right activity is locally driven, even though there is external influence.

Dessie also stated that he felt in the South there was a greater sophistication in terms of approach and mobilisation of the far-right, and that this was not yet the case in Northern Ireland and there was a chance to get ahead of the curve.

Finally, he reflected on strategies to challenge this issue, focusing on the need for community-based efforts rather than just relying on social media platforms or regulatory measures.

He highlighted the importance of community integration, using examples of initiatives that engage marginalised groups and build solidarity, rather than simply relying on cultural awareness programs.

The second phase of the research is set to be released in March.

Denis Long – Forward South Partnership

Denis Long works for Forward South Partnership, one of the 5 Belfast Area partnerships – as a community development practitioner where she leads on the capacity building work in the Holylands.

She facilitated the community conversations after the recent racist violence in South Belfast and together with Fiona Molloy is the author of the community Conversations report.

Denis is a Diversity and Inclusion consultant with over 25 years' experience in community

development, facilitation, and training.

She is a certified teacher, with further qualifications in Health and Social Care and Community Development.

As a community development practitioner, she has extensive experience supporting the inclusion of marginalised groups, including working with looked after children in residential care and the local migrant and minority ethnic communities.

Denis presented on their work with Forward South Partnership, which works with at-risk communities in South Belfast.

She advised these communities face significant underinvestment, limited infrastructure, and challenges engaging with decision-makers and that without support, this creates a dangerous vacuum filled by harmful narratives that further marginalise vulnerable groups.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation supported local communities by providing food, safety, and access to critical services.

They learned about the deep issues of poverty, limited-service access, and a lack of connection to wider networks.

Post-pandemic, they advocated for better community support and addressed concerns about continued exclusion and neglect.

Denis shared how their community support group, made up of 23 organisations, emphasised priorities like capacity building, affordable housing, and better community relations.

They also addressed the impact of racial violence and responded with events like the Botanic Community-led Festival to promote inclusivity and unity.

Their work shifted focus from housing to healing conversations following recent unrest, helping communities understand each other's lived experiences.

Key takeaways from these conversations include the complex socio-economic and political

factors behind violence, the failure of institutions to support marginalised communities, and the role of historical trauma in shaping current tensions.

Denis emphasised that violence and racism are never justified, but they arise from deeper issues such as neglect, frustration, and societal changes.

They noted that racism exists at all levels of society but must be seen as a response to vulnerabilities rather than inherent violence.

Denis concluded with a reminder that the true crisis lies in policy failure, not the communities themselves, and urgent action is needed to address systemic neglect.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion covered issues like systemic underinvestment, media representation, and the need for leadership at all levels. Emphasis was placed on the importance of education, fostering open conversations, and empowering communities to combat prejudice and create a more inclusive society.

- **Racism, Islamophobia and Lack of Leadership:** The panel highlighted the pervasive nature of racism and Islamophobia, particularly in Northern Ireland, and the impact on everyday lives, where minorities often face discrimination that is ignored or downplayed. The need for both political and community leadership to address these issues was emphasised. Frustration was expressed over the absence of leadership in some communities, which allowed racism to thrive. Empowering communities to take responsibility and challenge stereotypes was seen as a key to creating change, with grassroots movements seen as vital tools in the fight against racial injustice.

- **Racism in Schools:** Racism, especially towards Muslim students, is prevalent in schools. One specific incident was shared involving Muslim girls being pressured to remove their hijabs. The need for better teacher training and a more inclusive curriculum was suggested. The discussion highlighted how racism is often learned through societal conditioning, with a call to challenge these ingrained prejudices, particularly in schools, to foster

diversity and understanding from a young age.

- **Misrepresentation and Media Misinformation:** The media's role in misrepresenting Muslim communities and spreading false narratives and the importance of challenging these portrayals, presenting a more accurate image of minority communities was raised. The discrepancy in media coverage of racial violence was noted, questioning why some incidents only gain attention when they escalate, and how these issues often do not receive consistent focus.

- **Systemic Issues and Underinvestment:** Broader systemic issues, such as chronic underinvestment in services like housing and healthcare, were discussed. It was noted that minorities, especially immigrants, are often blamed for these issues.

- **Shifting the Narrative:** There was a call for leadership to shift the narrative around racism, acknowledging its historical and systemic roots, including Britain's colonial past and its present-day impact on societal structures. The impact of racism on often-overlooked groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, transgender people, and the Roma, was also noted.

- **Empowerment and Solidarity:** The need for solidarity and meaningful action beyond protests was raised. Empowering individuals to take sustained, concrete actions against racism was key.

Session 4: Examples of Best Practice – Learning from What Works

Introduction

This chapter reports on the **'Examples of Best Practice – Learning from What Works'** session.

This session looked at lessons that could be learned from the experiences of organisations and researchers working across the UK and Ireland.

The session brought together leading experts with experience of research and interventions aimed at tackling hate and racism and panellists including Edel McGinley from the Hope and Courage Collective, Dr Lucy Michaels, and Anki Deo from Hope Not Hate.

Panel Chair – Tura Arutura

Tura Arutura was born in Zimbabwe and raised in Chitungwiza during the civil war.

After migrating to Northern Ireland, Tura learned Irish to connect with the region's cultural and linguistic identity, driven by his grandmother's belief in the power of language.

Over the past year, he has worked closely with Oireachtas to promote Irish language and culture.

As Executive Director of Africa House since 2020, Tura has supported African organisations and families, while engaging in initiatives like CAIRDE Teo

and the Black Lives Matter campaign.

Tura holds director roles in several Belfast-based community enterprises and continues to use culture and the arts as tools for healing, connection, and fostering inclusivity.

Tura Arutura opened the session by welcoming everyone to the second day of the conference and thanking both returning and new attendees.

He reflected on the powerful personal stories shared the previous day, which have left a lasting impact.

He encouraged the conference to take a moment to shake off any tension, likening it to how dogs or ducks shake off stress, as a way to release trauma.

Tura highlighted the importance of healing, especially for a society emerging from conflict.

He introduced the day's focus, which was to learn from examples of best practice for building an inclusive and just society.

Tura emphasised the need to confront racism, bigotry, and other forms of prejudice while fostering solidarity.

Panellists

Edel McGinley

Edel McGinley is an experienced community worker, campaigner, civil society leader, advocate and strategist. She is Executive Director of Hope and Courage Collective – an organisation supporting communities and civil society to counter the rise of the far right, hate and disinformation.

Edel has over 20 years experience leading and advocating for positive change in Ireland and was the Director of Migrant Rights Centre Ireland from 2014 – 2024.

She is passionate about worker and migrant rights, countering hate and disinformation, and empowering communities.

She has an MA in Globalisation, a BA in Applied Social Studies, a Professional Diploma in Youth and Community Work and a postgrad in Digital Media Technology.

Edel shared an in-depth overview of Hope and Courage Collectives efforts in combating far-right hate and disinformation.

Hope and Courage is dedicated to creating environments where all individuals, regardless of identity, can live peacefully, joyfully, and prosperously.

This guiding principle is deeply rooted in their belief in an inclusive society where diversity is celebrated and where hate and division are actively countered.

Edel outlined the organisation's work focused on several key areas:

- **Resilient Ecosystems:** Building communities that are interconnected and capable of reacting swiftly to emerging challenges posed by extremist groups. This approach aims to create a nimble, adaptive structure that can effectively resist far-right efforts to stir division and hate on a local level.

- **Trusted Research and Intelligence:** Providing communities with accurate, timely information to counter the spread of hate and disinformation. This helps people discern fact from fiction and resist the allure of harmful, divisive narratives.

- **Narratives and Messaging:** Understanding that the way messages are framed can shape public opinion, the organisation works to develop positive, inclusive narratives that challenge the fear-driven, divisive rhetoric of far-right groups. They emphasise the importance of crafting a collective narrative that resonates with communities, fostering unity and support.

- **Protecting Democracy:** The organisation works to ensure that democratic institutions remain strong, including protecting elections from interference and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process. This is vital in maintaining trust in democratic systems and preventing the far-right from undermining public confidence.

- **Tech Regulation:** The organisation recognises the role of big tech in amplifying hate online and advocates for the regulation of social media platforms to limit the spread of harmful content. Given the speed at which disinformation spreads through algorithms, they stress the need for online platforms to be more accountable for the content they promote.

The Far-Right's Playbook

Edel outlined how the far-right operates, describing their strategies to exploit social and political divisions.

Far-right groups often create enemies by sowing anger, envy, and resentment, usually by focusing on sensitive issues such as immigration and housing.

They use hate speech and othering language to divide communities, offering no real solutions but promoting fear, chaos, and distrust.

Online platforms are often their primary venue for spreading disinformation, and these messages are amplified by social media algorithms, which help them reach larger audiences.

The far-right thrives on emotional reactions and seeks to portray themselves as the majority, even though they may represent a minority.

A crucial tactic is to get politicians and the media to react to these divisive messages, which in turn shifts political discourse to the right, fostering fear and division in society.

Hope and Courage aims to counter this by using interventions that challenge this cycle and promote more inclusive, progressive narratives.

The Cycle of Hate and Virtuous Cycle

Edel outlined a key challenge as breaking the cycle of hate that perpetuates disinformation, polarisation, and distrust. The cycle begins with online hate and misinformation, which targets marginalised groups and drives communities further apart.

This leads to a breakdown in trust in institutions, an increase in oppressive behaviour, and a decline in democratic engagement.

The media amplifies these narratives, which in turn affects public opinion and pushes politics to the right.

Hope and Courage's goal is to disrupt this cycle by promoting a virtuous cycle—one that amplifies progressive values, promotes inclusion, and strengthens community solidarity, ultimately leading to more inclusive policies and stronger democratic institutions.

Community Response Model

One of the organisation's central approaches is their community response model.

This model is focused on assessing risk and identifying potential crises before they escalate.

By predicting incidents of hate and mobilisation, they can intervene early to prevent them from gaining traction.

The organisation employs a "traffic light" system to gauge the severity of the situation and escalate their response accordingly, whether that involves reaching out to local leaders, law enforcement, or media.

Crucial to this model is building relationships within communities, especially in moments of crisis. When anti-immigrant mobilisations arise, the organisation works to calm tensions and provide resources to communities.

They focus on empowering local leaders, building confidence, and helping people stand up against hate.

This includes de-escalating emotionally charged situations and ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are central to the response.

The organisation's model also emphasises ongoing support through tools like WhatsApp groups, training on how to engage with the media, and building solidarity networks to strengthen community cohesion.

Examples of Successful Interventions

Edel provided examples of their work in local communities. In Newbridge, a small town in County Kildare, tensions flared in 2022 over plans to house Ukrainian refugees.

Initially, there were protests and mobilisations that were eventually infiltrated by far-right groups.

However, there was also a group of proactive community leaders who reached out to the organisation for support.

The organisation helped keep the community calm by providing updates, engaging local leaders, and promoting positive, inclusive narratives.

Similarly, in Tipperary, a series of flashpoints in 2024 led to increased mobilisation around anti-immigrant sentiment.

The organisation supported local groups by bringing together volunteers and community members to discuss responses and build networks of solidarity.

They helped form a countywide group called "Tipperary Welcomes" that included various community organisations.

This group successfully advocated for public housing, healthcare, and welcoming practices.

Challenges and Adaptive Model

Edel acknowledged that their model is not static; it is evolving as they learn from both successes and failures.

The work is iterative, meaning that not every approach works perfectly, but they continuously refine their strategies.

Edel also emphasised the importance of well-being resources alongside financial support.

Community work of this nature is demanding, and sustaining these efforts requires the mental and emotional well-being of everyone involved.

Publications and Training

As part of their ongoing efforts, the organisation has published a guide called Greater Than Fear, which highlights the stories of communities successfully resisting far-right narratives.

This publication also provides a "how-to" guide for other communities facing similar challenges.

Additionally, the organisation organises workshops and training sessions for community leaders, helping them build skills in crisis management, narrative framing, and media engagement.

Dr. Lucy Michael

Dr Lucy Michael is a sociologist in practice and consultant on equality and integration issues.

In her work, she draws on a 16-year academic career at Ulster, Keele and Hull universities researching discrimination, violence, and public policy on integration as well as many years serving and leading in community organisations and grassroots campaigns.

For the last 5 years she has led an independent research and training firm which supports the public, private and community sectors with inclusion work, and crucially which is based on an ethos of partnership and capacity sharing with groups most affected by discrimination.

Lucy is the author (with Bryan Fanning) of Immigrants as Outsiders in the Two Irelands, and (with Samantha Schulz) of Unsettling Whiteness.

She is a Member of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and a former President of the Sociological Association of Ireland.

Dr. Lucy Michael began by reflecting on her learning journey from experts like Edel, who has been at the forefront of migrant experiences in Ireland, and how her work in academia focused on figuring out what truly works on the ground in terms of integration and anti-racism efforts.

- **Disconnect Between Academia and Groundwork:** Dr. Michael shared her experience of leaving academia five years ago after realising there was a significant gap between theoretical knowledge published in academic literature and the real, practical work done on the ground by community organisations. She discovered that much of the literature failed to mention key organisations and activists, a realisation that fuelled her interest in bridging this divide. Upon arriving in Northern Ireland, Dr. Michael sought to understand the local context and realised that key organisations and activists were missing from the academic literature. This discovery led her to question why the important work being done at the grassroots level was not being acknowledged.

- **The Hostile Environment:** Dr. Michael discussed the concept of a "hostile environment" and how it impacts those working

in anti-racism and integration. She uses the metaphor of plants needing light, water, and soil to grow, comparing it to the need for adequate resources and support in the sector. Many people in this sector feel like they are wilting under the pressure of the environment that undermines their work. Dr. Michael explained that to thrive, organisations must focus on creating an environment where people can grow and succeed. The metaphor continued as she introduces the idea of "bees" and "butterflies" in the room—bees are connectors, while butterflies are bold, brave individuals who will stand up for their beliefs. Both are necessary for creating a flourishing environment.

- **Challenges of Language:** Dr. Michaels addressed the pressures of using the "right" language in anti-racism work and how organisations can fall victim to co-option, where external parties (like the police or local authorities) influence the direction of an organisation's work. She highlighted a troubling example where the term "anti-racism" was avoided to keep potential partners comfortable.

- **Strategic Planning and Vision:** Dr. Michael shared a story about a community group she worked with that struggled with scaling their work. The group had a broad vision but lacked the capacity to fulfil it. They were overwhelmed and burnt out, leading to a loss of trust and resources. By focusing on their local knowledge, connections, and trust within the community, they began to realign their efforts take more

practical steps. From her experience with this group, Dr. Michael learned that it is important to scale back when necessary and focus on what an organisation can realistically achieve. She urged organisations to assess their resources, capacity, and strengths before committing to overly ambitious goals.

- **The Role of Radicals in the Sector:** Dr. Michael concludes by stressing the need for bold individuals—"radicals"—who are willing to challenge the status quo and carry the message forward, even in a hostile environment. She believes it is essential to have different types of people in the sector working together—those who connect, those who advocate, and those who carry the message. Dr. Michael acknowledged that she cannot provide a definitive answer on what works, but offered a valuable insight into the things that do not work. She encouraged everyone to think strategically about their work and to recognise the importance of collaborating with others to achieve the greatest impact.

Anki Deo

Anki Deo works on youth, migration and cohesion at HOPE not hate, the UK's biggest anti-fascism organisation.

HOPE not Hate focuses on the organised far right, the communities susceptible to them and the issues and policies that give rise to them.

Anki's work includes public attitudes research, sector outreach and policy development on topics such as youth

radicalisation and social cohesion.

- **Background and Insights on the Riots:** Anki reflected on the recent UK riots tied to long-standing anti-migrant sentiments, which have escalated since 2012. Hope Not Hate's efforts focus on addressing these tensions and the broader issues fuelling the far-right movement, including racism and Islamophobia. She noted that public opinion surrounding the riots was divided, with some viewing them as anti-police or anti-establishment, but a clear undercurrent of frustration with immigration policies and Muslims was evident.

- **Data Insights and Public Attitudes:** Anki reported on new data which provides a large-scale view of community sentiments, revealing a general sense of disconnection and uncertainty about the future of the UK and its relationships between different communities. Areas like Northern Ireland show more negativity, though the sample size is small. Public attitudes reflect a mix of support for local pride and cultural identity, paired with deeper concerns about multiculturalism and integration. (Fig 1)

- **Fostering Solidarity and Building Positivity:** Anki noted that to combat the growing negativity, there is a need to build solidarity across diverse sectors, fostering an inclusive view of multiculturalism. It is essential to connect people of various backgrounds, races, and religions, particularly in communities experiencing racism. She noted that the goal is to promote collective support,

challenging ideas that separate communities based on their differences. Multiculturalism, though under threat, remains crucial for community cohesion. The debate on integration is ongoing, with many people showing pride in their local communities but scepticism about national policies. Local campaigns that focus on diversity and multiculturalism tend to garner more support when they resonate with specific, community-cantered narratives.
(Fig 2)

- **Challenging Integration Narratives:** Anki noted that the integration narrative often presents itself as a one-way street, which oversimplifies the complexity of integration challenges. Political rhetoric that frames integration as a failure, particularly in the context of far-right ideologies, needs to be re-examined. The focus should shift to inclusive, two-way approaches that address resource access, community engagement, and mutual respect.
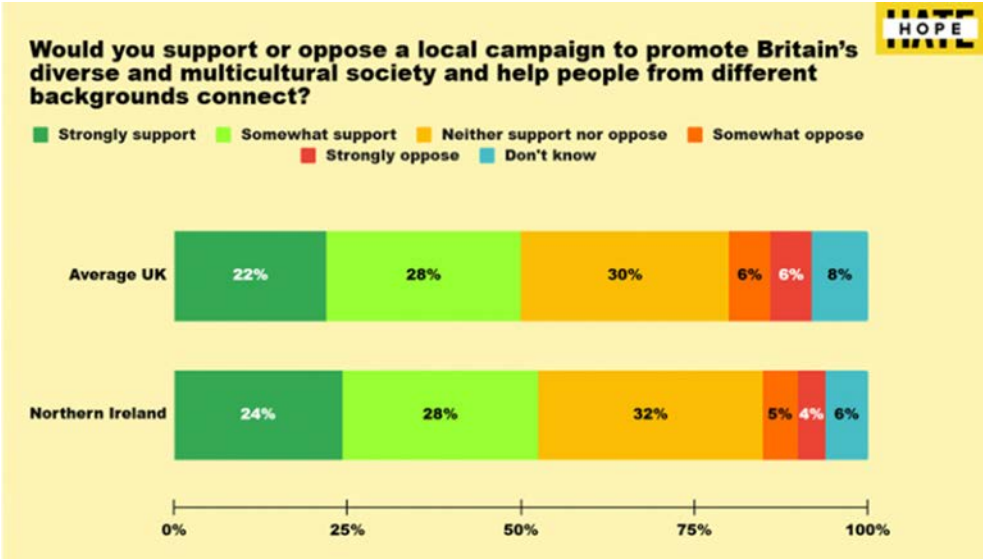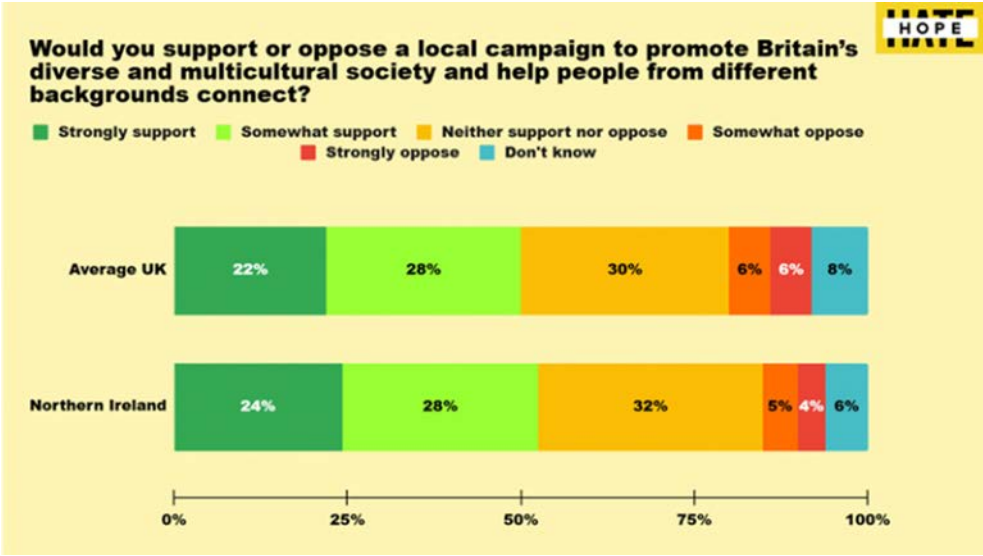
Fig 1

Fig 2

- **Role of Local Narratives and Communication:** Anki noted that Local narratives, steeped in pride and shared history, play a vital role in fostering community connections. People feel more connected to smaller, specific initiatives that reflect their personal experiences. Initiatives cantered around local pride, like community newsletters or events, have proven effective in connecting people and shifting attitudes, even towards issues like immigration. Effective communication is critical. It is essential to frame conversations in ways that resonate with people, avoiding top-down, one-size-fits-all rhetoric. Focusing on local narratives, positive stories, and practical solutions can help build trust and a sense of collective responsibility, particularly in addressing issues like racism and community disconnection. Local initiatives, such as community newsletters, can create significant impact without needing to be large-scale campaigns. By offering positive news and practical support (such as food bank information or community events), these efforts contribute to strengthening local identities and fostering a sense of collective responsibility.

- **Community Resilience and Long-Term Work:** Hope Not Hate's work underscores the importance of resilience in communities, particularly through access to resources, empowerment, and social connectedness. Strengthening these areas helps mitigate vulnerability to far-right ideologies. While short-term solutions are essential, a long-term approach to addressing deeper, underlying issues is necessary to break the cycle of unrest.

- **The Role of Trusted Local Messengers:** Trust in local leaders and community members is key to effective engagement. People are more likely to respond positively to initiatives that come from people they know and trust. This emphasises the importance of grassroots efforts, where local people lead the charge, rather than relying on top-down approaches from distant or impersonal sources.

- **Balancing Concepts with Practical Action:** While academic concepts and high-level ideas can help frame the discussion, they need to be paired with actionable, practical steps that people can engage with. Translating these ideas into tangible, community-cantered actions helps people feel more connected to the cause and enables them to contribute meaningfully to the process of change.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussions addressed multiple pressing social issues, with a focus on youth involvement, marginalised voices, and social media challenges:

- **Youth Involvement, Radicalisation and Over-Policing:** The panel discussed the involvement of young people, particularly those aged 12-14, in recent riots. The panellists noted that many young people are more likely to be disenfranchised rather than radicalised, with older figures often influencing their actions. The potential for mobilising youth against the far-right was also explored, emphasising the need to guide them from online activism to real-world involvement, especially as many have experienced increased isolation post-pandemic. A key concern raised was the over-policing of young people, particularly from disadvantaged communities, leading to a disproportionate criminalisation of their actions during protests and riots. The critique of the police's heavy-handed response, especially following the Dublin riots, was emphasised.

- **Female Participation in Anti-Immigrant Movements:** The panel highlighted that women aged 35-55, often targeted by far-right groups online, are being drawn into anti-immigrant protests due to fears stirred by social media. This demographic's online engagement is crucial for understanding the spread of such ideologies.

- **Collaboration Across Sectors:** The panel discussed the effectiveness of collaboration across various sectors and pointed to challenges in valuing diversity of approach within movements. Despite differences in methods, panellists stressed the importance of local-level collaboration, with small-scale community actions being impactful. Quiet, subtle conversations around issues like racism were seen as vital in driving meaningful change.

- **Amplifying Marginalized Voices:** A key theme discussed by the panel was the ethical responsibility of organisations to amplify the voices of marginalised groups without putting them in unsafe or uncomfortable positions. The conversation highlighted the need for creating safe spaces for these voices to be heard and for understanding the varying contributions that individuals can make over time.

- **Social Media and Misinformation:** The panel discussed the difficulty of combating harmful narratives online due to divisive algorithms and suggested strategies like pre-bunking misinformation and using offline methods, such as leaflets, to counter false narratives. The panel also noted how far-right groups have been more successful at amplifying their voices on social media.

- **Political Participation and Votes at 16:** The conversation touched on mobilising young voters and marginalised communities, particularly in Northern Ireland, where a campaign for votes at 16 is underway. Panellists emphasised the importance of engaging young people and migrant communities in political processes and holding politicians accountable for their promises to these groups.

Workshop Overview

The workshop explored critical issues surrounding racism and Islamophobia in Northern Ireland, particularly evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and discussing necessary improvements.

The discussions emphasised the role of the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in advocating for change and ensuring marginalised communities have a voice in policy-making.

Participants also examined the root causes of racism and Islamophobia-related violence and proposed policy and community-based solutions.

The key questions asked during the workshops and a summary of the responses are outlined below.

How effective do you think current policies are in combating racism and Islamophobia in Northern Ireland, and what improvements would you suggest?

Policy Gaps, Implementation, and Accountability: There are concerns regarding the lack of policy implementation and action, with policies often disconnected from reality and requiring practical translation into effective programs

Additionally, there is an absence of clear accountability mechanisms and legal frameworks to ensure compliance with many policies focus on general racism, overlooking specific issues such as Islamophobia.

To improve, there is a need for better monitoring, particularly in relation to equality data and employment.

Furthermore, incident reporting and compliance mechanisms must be strengthened, as successful policy implementation relies on sufficient resources and support.

Communication and Awareness: Policies are not effectively communicated, with language barriers limiting engagement and participation.

There is a need for clearer and more accessible language to increase awareness and involvement.

Additionally, stakeholder engagement is hindered by a disconnect between policymakers, academia, and grassroots organisations, preventing effective collaboration.

Policy Design and Participation: There are calls for community-led policymaking through bottom-up approaches, co-design, and co-production.

Emphasis is placed on creating safe spaces, fostering collaboration, and promoting inclusive practices for marginalised groups.

Policies should be directly relevant to those affected, offering opportunities for meaningful dialogue and action.

Funding and funders: There is a clear need for adequate resources to support meaningful change, as efforts cannot be reduced to a mere tick-box exercise for grants.

Translating this work into effective programs requires deep engagement with funders to ensure alignment and impact.

It's essential to better guide and inform funders on the importance of flexibility, particularly in embedding lived experiences into their funding strategies.

Policies must be backed up by real investment and resources, ensuring that commitments translate into tangible support for marginalised communities with funders playing a crucial role in enabling this by providing the necessary backing for sustainable, inclusive change.

What key policy changes do you think are necessary to address the challenges of racism and Islamophobia in Northern Ireland specifically, and how can these be advocated for by the VCSE sector?

Intersectoral Approach and Collaboration: There is a call for greater solidarity and knowledge-sharing across sectors, particularly with government.

It was also emphasised that nurturing allies and building strong community relationships are crucial for advancing policy changes.

Engagement with Policymakers: There is a need to focus on involving policymakers directly with local communities to ensure policies reflect lived experiences.

Emphasis is also placed on racial literacy and training for policymakers to enhance their understanding of racism and Islamophobia.

Additionally, there was a call for greater accountability for policymakers, including the evaluation of the effectiveness of racial equality champions.

Inclusive and Authentic Policymaking: There is a need for greater diversity in decision-making bodies, ensuring meaningful inclusion rather than tokenism.

While the co-design model is suggested, it is criticised for lacking full inclusivity, as policies should genuinely involve communities in the process.

The priority needs to be creating safe spaces for marginalised voices and ensure community representation in the policy process.

There is also a call for more representation at leadership and board levels, embracing the principle of "nothing for us without us."

Policy Work and Implementation: Policies should be iterative, regularly reviewed, and refined based on community feedback.

There is a need to demystify policy to make it more accessible and understandable.

Additionally, the importance of adequate funding and support is highlighted for the effective implementation of policies.

Creative and Inclusive Approaches: Policies should be intentional and inclusive, considering age, language, identity, and technology.

Creative advocacy, such as using the arts, can help engage broader audiences and raise awareness.

There should also be a focus on tangible actions and investments, valuing the contributions of community organisations.

How can the VCSE sector collaborate with policymakers to ensure that the voices of marginalised communities are heard in the policy-making process?

Building Relationships and Trust: Communication and networking are crucial for fostering trust and collaboration between the VCSE sector and policymakers.

Organising networking events and creating safe spaces for marginalised voices is essential.

Building goodwill and finding allies within policymaking helps ensure marginalised concerns are prioritised.

Listening to community experiences and providing feedback to policymakers is key to informing decisions.

Challenging Power Imbalances: It is essential to address the power imbalance between marginalised communities and policymakers.

The VCSE sector should advocate for inclusive policies and hold policymakers accountable.

Additionally, efforts must be made to ensure that marginalised voices are genuinely integrated into decision-making processes.

Practical Collaboration: The VCSE sector should facilitate connections between communities and policymakers while ensuring safe spaces for dialogue.

Training and capacity-building for both sectors are necessary to better understand the challenges faced by marginalised groups.

Additionally, workshops and diverse mediums, such as stories and poetry, can make the policy process more human-centred.

Practical Policy Implementation: Collaboration with existing structures, such as housing organisations, is key to improving access to resources for marginalised groups.

Policies should be practical and actionable, focusing on delivering tangible outcomes rather than remaining in the realm of theoretical discussions.

Advocacy and Education: Advocacy should prioritise the voices of those with lived experiences to inform policy.

Education plays a crucial role in promoting cultural awareness and addressing various forms of discrimination.

It is important to use diverse methods to educate both policymakers and community members, ensuring that all age groups are reached effectively.

In your view, what are the root causes of the violent acts related to racism and Islamophobia in Northern Ireland, and how can they be effectively addressed in both policy and community work?

Fear, Hate, and Ignorance: Fear of change and the unknown, often driven by ignorance about diverse cultures, fuels racism and Islamophobia.

In divided societies like Northern Ireland, fear of losing power and identity heightens tensions.

Additionally, hate and prejudice, often rooted in unconscious bias, are perpetuated by misinformation, particularly on social media.

Social and Economic Factors: Poverty and social deprivation increase tensions and contribute to violence, particularly in underserved communities.

Competition for resources and the scapegoating of marginalised groups, such as migrants, fosters negative stereotypes.

Additionally, the lack of opportunities, especially for youth in employment and education, creates an environment where extremist ideas can take root.

Political, Media and Social Media Influence: The lack of political leadership in Northern Ireland exacerbates divisions and allows harmful narratives to persist.

The media contributes to negative stereotypes, particularly around migration, amplifying fear and division.

Paramilitary groups and local leaders further fuel violence by maintaining territorial divisions and inflaming tensions.

Misinformation spread through social media fuels hate, making fact-checking and myth-busting essential to counter divisive views.

Public education is needed to challenge oversimplified and polarised perspectives on migration.

Educational Gaps and Cultural Understanding: There is a lack of education on diversity, migration, and the contributions of marginalised communities.

Schools need to integrate more inclusive teaching on cultural awareness, social justice, and human rights.

Additionally, training initiatives, such as bystander and cultural awareness programs, are essential to challenge discrimination effectively.

The legacy of division in Northern Ireland, including the green/orange divide and colonial history, complicates efforts to tackle racism.

Cultural and Social Inclusion: Promoting social and cultural inclusion through activities like food, music, and cultural interactions can help bring communities together.

It is also important to engage with those instigating violence, fostering peaceful collaboration to create a more inclusive society.

Public Messaging and Engagement: Using anti-racist language and strong messaging is essential to inform policymakers and the public about inclusion and addressing racism.

Joint statements from the sector can help amplify this message and demonstrate a collective commitment to change.

Practical Solutions and Community Engagement: Community-based solutions, such as youth education, mentorship, and collaboration across sectors, are vital in combating racism.

Encouraging safe spaces and dialogue, especially through youth services, can foster understanding and build bridges between communities. Practical solutions, such as mentoring, trauma support, and safe spaces, are critical in addressing short-term needs.

Collaboration with sectors like housing, education, and violence prevention is key to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Leadership and Representation: Strong leadership is crucial, with clear action plans focused on diversity and inclusivity.

Regular audits, informed by client feedback, are necessary to ensure effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Diversifying boards and senior management help ensure that decisions are informed by a wide range of perspectives.

Steps should be taken to improve representation, even if quotas are not fully met, to ensure inclusivity and broader input in decision-making.

Continuous staff training on cultural competence, handling difficult conversations.

Collaboration and Support: Collaborative efforts among sectors can have a greater impact when funders encourage shared objectives rather than competition.

Coalition-building and capacity-building are essential for effectively supporting marginalised communities and ensuring sustainable progress.

Creating safe spaces where people can share their experiences and receive trauma-informed support is vital.

Access to mental health services, human rights support, and community resources is crucial in helping individuals feel heard, valued, and supported.

Commitment from Funders and Policymakers: Funders should prioritise supporting collaborative projects that focus on long-term social change rather than individual achievements.

Dedicated funding is essential for long-term, sustainable initiatives that address the root causes of racism and Islamophobia.

Policymakers and organisations must work together to address systemic issues related to racism and Islamophobia, creating lasting impact through collective efforts.

Organisations should speak out on human rights issues and use communication tools, such as social media, to amplify marginalised voices and raise awareness on important matters.

How can organisations within the VCSE sector ensure their programs and interventions are inclusive and genuinely support those affected by racism and Islamophobia?

Leadership & Accountability: Organisations need to show strong leadership with clear action plans, regular audits, client feedback, and ongoing staff training.

Organisations must speak out publicly on issues, counter divisive narratives, and use communication tools to amplify marginalised voices.

This will help foster trust, collaboration, and a shared objective across sectors, leaving ego at the door.

Resource Prioritisation: Funders, including government, need to ensure proper funding and resources are allocated for long-term, impactful initiatives with a focus on what works.

Board Diversity & Representation: Organisations need to ensure they are inclusive of those with lived experience ensuring diverse boards and senior management teams, recognising gaps.

Organisations must engage directly with those affected, and work in collaboration with other sectors to build capacity and share knowledge.

Organisations must also be open to feedback, use inclusive language, and prioritise community-driven design and consultation.

Education & Training: Organisations should commit to continuous cultural competence training, safe spaces, and promoting early education programs that address racism and Islamophobia.

Conclusions and Recommendations

IStrengthen Resilient Community Ecosystems: Far-right ideologies and hate groups thrive in environments of division and weakness.

Strengthening communities to respond swiftly and cohesively to hate-driven events can prevent the spread of extremism and create safer, more inclusive environments for all.

Recommendation 1: Develop community frameworks to foster resilience against hate ideologies and extremist views.

Encourage Government and organisations to create interconnected support networks and provide resources for rapid response to hate-driven events. Train community leaders in crisis management and peacebuilding. (Policymakers, political leaders, community organisations, and community leaders.)

Promote Trusted Research, Counter Disinformation, and Media Accountability: Misinformation and disinformation spread quickly, particularly online.

By fostering a more informed, critically engaged public, we can combat harmful stereotypes, reduce social division, and prevent the manipulation of vulnerable groups by extremist ideologies.

Recommendation 2: Support community capacity to critically assess information and challenge harmful narratives. Offer workshops on disinformation detection and support community-led fact-checking initiatives. Advocate for more accurate media portrayals of minority communities and push for policies that combat online hate speech and misinformation. (Academic institutions, media outlets, tech companies, local governments, and civil society organisations.)

Foster Inclusive Narratives and Celebrate Diversity: Negative stereotypes and divisive narratives often perpetuate racism and Islamophobia.

Shifting the narrative to one of inclusion, shared prosperity, and respect for diversity helps break down prejudice, fosters social cohesion, and promotes tolerance across communities.

Recommendation 3: Encourage the creation of community-centered narratives that celebrate diversity and counter divisive rhetoric.

Organise storytelling initiatives, collaborate with local media, and promote multicultural contributions to shift public opinion toward unity and inclusion. (Media organisations, community groups, cultural institutions, and local governments.)

Support Tech Regulation to Combat Online Hate: Social media platforms are powerful tools that can either amplify or counteract hate speech and harmful ideologies.

Regulation is essential to ensure they are not used to perpetuate division, extremism, or discrimination.

Recommendation 4: Collaborate with legislators and tech companies to develop regulations that address the spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies on social media.

Advocate for algorithm reforms that prioritise accurate information and reduce the visibility of harmful content. (Tech companies, legislators, regulatory bodies, and civil society organisations.)

Engage Marginalised Communities in Policymaking and Ensure Accountability: Effective policies must be informed by the experiences of those directly affected.

Marginalised communities must have a seat at the table in policymaking ensuring their needs are addressed, and any policies enacted are relevant and impactful.

Recommendation 5: Involve marginalised communities in the policymaking process through co-design and co-production.

Ensure diverse representation in leadership positions and create inclusive platforms for dialogue. Strengthen accountability mechanisms to ensure policies addressing racism and Islamophobia are effectively implemented. (Policymakers, political leaders, civil society organisations, and marginalised community leaders.)

Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment: Young people are often the most active in online activism but may lack the tools to transition these efforts into real-world impact.

Empowering them to become leaders in social justice ensures long-term change and the emergence of new voices advocating for equality and inclusion.

Recommendation 6: Mobilise young people to challenge hate ideologies through educational campaigns, mentorship programs, and workshops.

Empower youth to become leaders in anti-racism and anti-discrimination efforts, transitioning from online activism to real-world action. (Educational institutions, youth organisations, mentors, and community groups.)

Promote Long-Term Community Resilience and Social Cohesion: Resilience against extremism and hate ideologies needs to be built over time through strong, collaborative community efforts.

Tackling root causes such as inequality and misinformation ensures that we address the underlying issues driving social division.

Recommendation 7: Develop sustainable strategies to build community resilience and prevent extremism.

Support partnerships between local governments, civil society organisations, and the private sector to invest in social cohesion programs.

Focus on addressing root causes of violence such as socio-economic disparities and misinformation. (Policymakers, political leaders, civil society organisations, social service providers, and private sector partners.)

Improve Funding, Resource Allocation, and Intersectoral Collaboration: Racism and Islamophobia are complex societal issues that require coordinated action across sectors.

Sustainable funding and intersectoral collaboration ensure that efforts are consistent and impactful in the long term.

Recommendation 8: Advocate for long-term, sustainable funding models for community-led programs that address racism and Islamophobia. Encourage collaboration across sectors (government, academia, civil society) to pool resources and create unified strategies for combating hate ideologies. (Policymakers, political leaders, funders, policymakers, academic institutions, and civil society organisations.)

Shift the Integration and Public Awareness Narrative: Integration should be a shared responsibility, not just a one-way process.

By reframing integration as a collaborative effort, we can foster greater understanding and acceptance, reducing the marginalisation of minority communities and ensuring a more cohesive society.

Recommendation 9: Promote an inclusive, two-way integration narrative that emphasises mutual respect and engagement between minority communities and the wider society.

Launch inclusive public awareness campaigns that educate communitiess on diversity and challenge harmful stereotypes. (Target Audience: Policymakers, political leaders, media outlets, cultural organisations, and community groups.)

Focus on Education, Cultural Awareness, and Anti-Racism Programs: Education is one of the most powerful tools for combating racism and Islamophobia.

Providing people with the knowledge and tools to recognise and challenge prejudice from a young age fosters a more inclusive, empathetic society.

Recommendation 10: Invest in cultural competency training for staff across all sectors and integrate inclusive education on diversity, migration, and the contributions of marginalised communities in school curricula.

Implement bystander and anti-racism programs to foster empathy and understanding. (Educational institutions, policymakers, employers, and community leaders.)

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