

Acknowledgement

Proposal: Develop an agreed process that allows for groups/organisations to make statements of acknowledgement relating to their role in the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. This process will have an element of genuine engagement with the potential audience, demonstrate sincerity of intent and a commitment to a peaceful future.

Guiding principles & values

- Acknowledgement requires the truthful naming of wrong(s) that were deliberately or negligently committed and the recognition of those harmed by such wrongs.
- Truth recovery, prosecutions, commemorations, apologies, actions which are designed to facilitate reconciliation – these and other processes may all form part of individual and collective acknowledgement of past abuses.
- Apologies may have a particularly important role to play in acknowledgement. Apologies should also name hurt(s) deliberately or negligently inflicted; admit individual, organisational or collective responsibility for such hurt(s); include statements of remorse or regret related to the wrongful act(s) or omission; promise non-repetition; be delivered with due respect, dignity and sensitivity to the victimised.
- The heaviest burden of acknowledgement rests on those, either paramilitary or state actors, who were directly involved in violence and/or human rights abuses. However, acknowledgement is also a broader collective process which may also involve not only those who were directly involved in the perpetration of past abuses but also those who were complicit in such abuses, either through their action, words or silence, or those who denied that such abuses had in fact occurred.
- Effective acknowledgement statements involve a process which engages both the organisations or constituencies involved and the intended audience in the drafting of statements. They are part of a wider effort to demonstrate a sincerity of intent and the avoidance of hurt.
- Statements of acknowledgement and/or apology can have value and promote greater understanding, and a more broadly shared view of the past, and may assist those who have been most directly affected by the conflict. Public acknowledgement of the various roles played in the conflict allows for a greater engagement with the wider debates on the value of dealing with the legacy of the past.

Benefits & Challenges

Benefits

- The process should be open to all who either through their, actions, inactions or statements may have contributed to the instigation, escalation or maintenance of the conflict.
- Can provide fuller knowledge about the past.
- Can facilitate the taking of responsibility for actions/inactions in the past.
- Can have positive impact on victims/survivors.
- Can enable processes of truth recovery.
- Can provide those involved in the conflict with the opportunity to make or renew a commitment to healing and reconciliation.

Challenges

- Forms of acknowledgement could have a negative impact, as competing views on the past are likely to be contested.
- Identification of the different audiences who might benefit from the production of a statement of acknowledgement.
- Sequencing - when is acknowledgement best delivered - before or after truth recovery?
- Statements of acknowledgement or apology will never meet the needs of all of those affected by the conflict.
- Risk of contributing to an on-going “blame game”.
- A tendency on part of some to link acknowledgement with expectation of forgiveness.

Rationale

Acknowledgment of responsibility and roles in the conflict is often sought by those affected by the conflict or as an aid to re-establishing trust and building new relationships. Statements of acknowledgement should be recognisable as sincere, should name the hurt caused and those damaged as a result, should engage with those previously hurt or wronged, should be delivered with appropriate dignity and should demonstrate a commitment to a future without violence.

What is needed?

- Recognition of the sensitive and challenging nature of this proposal.
- An acceptance that while those (both paramilitary and state actors) involved in violence and human rights abuses bear the heaviest responsibility for their actions, other institutional actors in political, social and civic life also played a role in the events of the past and should acknowledge their role and its consequences.
- A programme of outreach to interested groups and individuals.
- Support for internal group/organisational processes in the formulation of statements.
- Consideration as to how groups/organisations could engage with potential audience in the process of developing statements of acknowledgement and apology.
- Sufficient time and resources are paramount to facilitate adequate internal processes that lead to a statement of acknowledgment and/or apology.
- Safe audience engagement process must be assured.
- A process whereby statements of acknowledgement and apology from different actors are properly co-ordinated, in order to ensure maximum benefit to those affected by the violence and abuses of the past.

This is one of a set of HTR proposals on dealing with the past relating to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. HTR believes these proposals would be best implemented as a comprehensive response to ensure that a range of complex but interrelated needs are met.





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