

HEALING THROUGH REMEMBERING



PRINCIPLES ON DEALING WITH THE PAST

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CORE PRINCIPLES TO AN APPROACH TO DEALING WITH THE PAST

In the course of our considerations on this very important issue we reflected on what we had learned as an organisation over the past eight years. It was clear that the key lesson is that dealing with the past is a process which must be informed by core principles. We therefore offer the following principles, distilled from our experience and learning. They guided and informed HTR in maintaining an inclusive process, getting consensus between groups, and at times, addressing very difficult issues. They continue to do so. Our experience shows that only through a sound framework grounded both in process and in principles, can practical solutions be sought.

We have identified the following core principles and offer them to the Consultative Group on the Past as the foundational structures on which we deal with our conflictual past. These are not merely a list of values to adhere to – but rather embody a framework for what needs to be put in place in order to deal with the past.

Commitment to a better future

This principle is based on the need to learn from the past so that conflict is not repeated. To build a future that is peaceful, politically stable, and benefits generations to come we must deal with the past. We need to acknowledge what happened and to learn from it (although different people might take different lessons). In order to address individual and collective needs, to build relationships that rehumanise people and heal the divisions, an honest analysis of the past is necessary. We need to understand what brought us to the point of conflict, what exacerbated and perpetuated the conflict and what facilitated the building of peace. Additional benefits would be the capacity to share our learning and experience with other contexts where conflict – or the potential for conflict – is present.

Not forgetting

This principle is based on the fact that we cannot ignore the past; it is not possible, neither is it desirable to forget. It is understandable that people want to avoid remembering painful events that may damage our current stability but our experience is that with support and a structured way forward it is not only possible to address difficult issues but also to use remembering in a positive and constructive manner. We live in a society where the threat of re-emergence of conflict is still present. We need to ensure that this process prevents recurrence and protects future generations. The challenge is not to attempt to forget, but rather to find an appropriate way to remember. International experience has shown that forgetting allows the conflict to re-emerge in later generations.

Healing and hurt

This principle builds on the essential requirement to do no harm. It includes the need to take care not to inflict unintentional harm while recognising that some will be hurt whatever approach is taken (e.g. by the revealing of uncomfortable truths). It is important that this principle is considered at all times – the value of actions must be considered in terms of the potential harm, while also realising that individual and societal healing can only take place once the pain of the past is acknowledged. An honest indication of the potential for individual harm must be made clear, and properly resourced and financed care and support must be established.

Inclusive, diverse and participative

This principle emphasises that it is vital that an inclusive approach to dealing with the past is adopted. This is an issue for all of society and across these islands. The approach must be participatory to enable everyone to have ownership so that the lessons learned can be



understood and shared amongst the widest possible cross-section of society. All groups, organisations and individuals (including but not limited to, churches, media, education, business community, judiciary, academia and statutory services) must understand their part in the approach. This conflict affected and involved all sections of society (see list above), and the two governments, and that must also be true of all attempts to tackle this issue. A full range of voices and opinions must be heard if understanding is to be generated and mature relationships are to be built. All opinions held honestly and put forward should be regarded as valid even if others disagree and find them challenging. The approach should empower people and create a shared sense of purpose while being realistic about the difficulties that inclusive processes involve.

Language and terminology

This principle outlines how the use of language must enable engagement, not hamper or divert debate and dialogue. Terminology may change and develop over time due to changing context and the working out of suitable processes. HTR has learned much in this regard. For example, there was, when the project was set up, an ongoing debate about how to refer to the conflict that took place. There were those that favoured terms like 'war' and others used 'Troubles'. The result was a long (nearly two-month) discussion in order to reach a compromise and a term – 'conflict in and about Northern Ireland' – which is now used in HTR communication. In a similar vein, the term victim is contested, and we have opted for the OFMDFM definition presented in the Victim Strategy Document (2002) that allows an individual to self-define as a victim. Thus we have learned that resolving these issues is not easy. No one can prescribe language. Like so much else it needs to be negotiated and can also evolve.

Right to truth

This principle acknowledges that society has a right to the truth about the past. While we recognise there is no agreed legal framework for a 'right to truth' as a society, we need to acknowledge that it is a fundamental right of everyone. Foundational principles to truth recovery are honesty, transparency and a willingness to engage. That said, it is also of course problematic and there can be multiple truths. There are different versions of what the truth involves. Yet truth recovery, to a limited degree for some, is still possible and should be a principle we hold dear. Truth plays an important part in healing divisions in society. While truth is an important issue it is also challenging. This is because while some people advocate that truth is achievable through a truth commission, others propose truth recovery can be an ensemble of various processes, and still others feel that there is already too much emphasis on truth recovery. In the current context, truth recovery is happening (e.g. the Historical Enquiries Team, public enquiries, court cases, etc.). We do not want to pass judgement on particular methods as these may work for some individuals, but the piecemeal uncoordinated approach impedes a collective understanding. Truth recovery needs a structured and comprehensive approach. If done selectively it can be damaging, especially if the timing is not right and barriers can hamper progress.

Structured and holistic approach

This principle involves the importance of following a structured and holistic approach to dealing with the past. The piecemeal approach currently operating in society does not serve our collective needs. There are many varied needs and issues – often conflicting – and so a structured comprehensive approach covering all the areas being addressed by HTR: i.e. truth recovery, living memorial museum, day of Reflection, storytelling, and commemoration – and perhaps some others – is needed. Even within each area, such an approach is important. There must be co-ordination between all the mechanisms for dealing with the past. Structure must ensure that there can be delivery and hopefully a conclusion to processes, while being sufficiently flexible to meet changing needs and circumstances. A multifaceted approach including the overlapping issues listed above must be further developed. There is no single solution. A range of integrated options is necessary to meet the needs of society and these must unfold over time.



Process – including discussions, debate, engagement, listening, learning, acknowledgement and flexibility – is important. In a divided society the process where each aim or aspect is attended to, is as important as the final product.

Flexibility

This principle outlines that an approach that is flexible is vital in order that diverse needs can be met. Those who wish to engage with any process should be able to do so as soon as possible, e.g. those who want and need to tell their stories, learn, share or be informed, since time is passing and matters of aging and ill-health must also be taken into account. An approach must adapt to changing needs and context, growing awareness, newly unearthed questions, issues and circumstances. The legacy of the conflict and the development of the peace process mean that some people only realise the personal legacy of the past as issues are addressed. Participation should be allowed as appropriate and may change and evolve over time. The approach must stay alert to the wider international context (e.g. foreign policy issues, the resonances and implications of language such as the ‘war on terror’, for example).

Trust, transparency and engagement

This principle stresses that trust must be built at all levels and that honesty in engagement is vital to maintain trust. There is need for transparency in the formation and workings of all processes in order to build enough trust for processes to operate successfully and to ensure the best benefits for society. Listening to each other’s viewpoint while not necessarily agreeing with it is important – accepting that we have different opinions but can share them.

Independence and political commitment

This principle emphasises that processes must be officially sanctioned at a political level while maintaining independence in terms of planning and operation. All political parties must commit themselves to dealing with the past in order to build a better future for all. Those who sanction this must maintain an open, full and honest commitment to its processes. Issues of political will, efficacy, capacity and generosity must be explored. Politicians have a duty to act in the interests of their citizens and to show leadership.

Recognition and appreciation of existing work

This principle relates to existing work. There is already a wide range of remembering projects underway that look at dealing with the past in a way that will build a better society. It is important to enable these initiatives to continue in their work, and ensure they are seen as complementary to, and not in competition with, any other projects or approaches that may be proposed.

Realistic and hopeful goals

This last principle relates to goals. There needs to be a clear articulation of the *way* things can be done versus *what* can be done. While there is urgency in dealing with the past because with time the voices and experiences of a generation can be lost, there must also be recognition that there is no ‘quick fix’. While some elements may be time-bound, it is clear that other aspects of dealing with the past will need to continue for at least a generation. Our experience has shown us that the complexity of these issues means that the timeframe must be constantly under review. We now realise that this is generational work, but with the potential of real benefit for current and future generations. It is important that the Consultative Group help society to achieve a realistic view of the processes necessary and the timeframe involved. At the heart of this must be the identification and upholding of hopeful goals.

CONCLUSION

There is no single solution for the process of dealing with our past. Some processes of remembering, reflecting and educating must be sustained for another generation at least, while recognising that other aspects may need to be time-bound. All have a part to play in dealing with the memories of the past. This has been and will continue to be a painful and difficult task, however it should not paralyse us and prevent us from moving on, but encourage us to avoid further damage, seek solutions and create a better future. The recommendations presented here, and the work begun by HTR, should not replace what is already in place and what is developing in other sectors. It is our belief that the initial HTR recommendations, and the work of the Sub Groups, taken as a whole can usefully complement current initiatives that should continue to be supported and developed. The work of the Sub Groups and the principles are presented separately above – but taken as a whole they can provide a basis and a way forward for dealing with the past.

The work streams presented here stand or fall on the commitment of those who may be willing to take it forward. While the Healing Through Remembering Board and the members are committed to ongoing and long term work of the organisation, the process is much larger than they alone can offer. The Northern Ireland Assembly, British and Irish Governments, and local political leadership, must endorse the need to deal with the past and will need to provide a conducive environment for this to happen. This needs to be founded on the principles outlined in this submission. Civil society – communities, community groups, churches, individuals and organisations – needs to do the same and to engage in the debate as many are currently doing, whilst continuing to develop their own ideas and solutions. Their ongoing work should be supported.

We believe it is essential that steps are taken by our society, to develop a network of commemoration and remembering projects; a storytelling initiative; a day of reflection; a living memorial museum; and acknowledgement, especially by those actively involved in the conflict, institutions and the governments. The establishing of the truth about the past, to the degree this is possible, is an important right for all, and ways of pursuing this in a structured and consensual way should be sought. This altogether should provide the foundation for dealing with the past.

To translate the HTR recommendations and work done to date into dynamic and unique practices and methods for dealing with the past in a spirit of tolerance and respect will require a willingness to take risks. Those involved with HTR Sub Groups, Board and wider membership have taken risks and have engaged the issue in a constructive and productive manner. We offer our experience as set out above and importantly the principles we believe are necessary in building any approach or process to deal with our past. We believe it important that our society grasps the opportunity of remembering in a constructive way, to enable us to move into a new future built on a shared acknowledgement of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. We as an organisation are committed to assisting in taking this process forward.

Friday 25 January 2008