

Social Economy Unit  
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A chara,

Please find attached written comment from the above organisation in response to the Social Economy consultation documents.

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Coordinator

**WEST BELFAST ECONOMIC FORUM**  
**COMMENTS ON**  
**‘DEVELOPING A SOCIAL ECONOMY’**

**April 2004**



West Belfast Economic Forum welcomes the opportunity to make comment on the consultation document 'Developing a Successful Social Economy- NI Governments Three Year Strategic Plan 2004-2007'

We feel it is opportune to comment on this documents given the history of social economy projects that have been developed in the area and the experiences of people seeking to develop such projects over the last thirty years. Social Economy projects developed in the West Belfast area as a response to British government discrimination and neglect in the area. People developed their own enterprises to service and meet the needs of local people i.e. West Belfast Taxi Association, Conway Mill Enterprises etc. We welcome in particular the formal departmental commitment to the social economy and look forward with optimism to the departments active support and co-operation with people and organising seeking to develop new social economy projects in the area and to expand existing ones.

The WBEF sees the social economy sector as being fundamental to the social and economic regeneration of disadvantaged areas and areas that have suffered most as result of the conflict. The report of the West Belfast Task Forces focussed on the social economy in Chapter 4. The report states:

*' There are many community based or driven organisations which have provided critical transitional employment for unemployed people, which have delivered a valuable local employment, social or economic services and which are not commercial for profit companies. They have operated in an ill-defined grey zone usually dependent for a crucial part of their income on Government or EU funding. They have included co-operative enterprises, urban regeneration groups, local enterprise agencies.*

*Because they did not fit neatly into established concepts of community or commercial companies they were no ones baby in public policy terms or responsibility.*

*Now because of recent developments in thinking and recognition for their contribution, there are opportunities to avail of the social economy model and Intermediary labour markets to provide more structured transitional employment to the unemployed in West Belfast.'*

The Task Force went on to recommend that:

**'The social economy model be pro-actively and flexibly applied to West Belfast. It could be applied to many areas of social need, for example, childcare provision. It could facilitate the growth of potential business by groups of unemployed persons e.g. cultural or craft business formed by political ex prisoners.'**

WBEF fully endorses this recommendation.

We would like to make some comments:

- ❑ WBEF would urge that department recognise the experience, expertise and existing support mechanism that already exist within the social economy and community sectors and that these should be utilised for the implementation and development of the strategy wherever possible.
- ❑ The social economy mechanism should not be seen as the alternative source of funding and resourcing the community sector/infrastructure. Many community organisations and projects are not suitable for development as social economy projects and therefore should have access to other means of funding and support.
- ❑ A certain amount of flexibility is required for the support and development of community based social economy projects. More so that for the established private sector. Risk taking is a fundamental requirement given that some of these projects are new ideas being carried out by people at grass roots level. This means that new ways of thinking and operating will have to adopted within the Department and other public bodies to facilitate this development successfully.
- ❑ We welcome the recognition of the diversity of the sector and the departmental approach to this diversity must be real and imaginative as well as flexible in order to respond to different needs.
- ❑ Traditional barriers placed in the way of groups and individuals seeking to develop such projects must be removed i.e. political vetting of organisations and individuals, barriers placed in the way of political ex prisoners being able to access grants and development funds.
- ❑ Recognition of the vital role such enterprises play in historically disadvantaged communities must be actively supported by the department and the history of obstruction and discrimination eliminated.
- ❑ Social economy projects have historically developed in areas that mainstream inward investment and enterprise agencies neglected and avoided. They operate in areas of market failure and this needs to be built in as part of the development of the social economy.
- ❑ The development of a social economy strategy must be led by the community sector and the existing social economy sector practitioners and experts to ensure that the strategic approach is the one that will deliver the success sought.
- ❑ The development of the strategy must have a strong emphasis on equality and the needs of Section 75 constituents must be actively responded to in terms of the

delivery of support and assistance and responding to training and information needs. The development of the strategy must also be linked to very clear TSN outputs and outcomes negotiated with the voluntary and community sector and the social economy network. This will also mean that the department will have a responsibility to work with DFP in particular and all other departments and public bodies to ensure a culture change in their approach to the procurement of goods, facilities and services to allow social economy enterprises to avail of tender opportunities and to do so in away that does not discriminate against the sector.

- We welcome the establishment of the Social Economy Network and believe that it is filling a strategic, information and developmental gap that has been there for far too long.
- We also welcome the establishment of the Interdepartmental Working group as an example of joined up government that has been long overdue. As part of our response we would like to see this developed into a single government strategy as opposed to the development of separate departmental strategies.
- An all Ireland approach to the development of the strategy and the Social Economy Sector must be developed learning from good practice and expertise, sharing information and the development of a common funding and support base.
- WBEF broadly supports the three strategic objectives. We think it is imperative that there is an active outreach and information strategy into the voluntary and community sector to encourage groups and projects, WHERE IT IS APPROPRIATE to consider the development of the a social economy project but only based on accurate and relevant information and with the provision of support and positive encouragement. Signposting and possibly one stop shop information and support for the Social economy is essential.