Midlands Traveller Conflict & Mediation Initiative
Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath

Contents

Overview

The Midland Travellers Conflict and Mediation Initiative has grown out of the work of the Offaly Traveller Inter-Agency Group, with the research and development of the strategy being undertaken by Sean McGearty, Ian White and Hannagh McGinley.

A Management Committee has been established to oversee the implementation of the strategy with membership drawn from the Offaly, Laois, Westmeath and Longford Inter-Agency Groups and the Traveller Community. The strategy is based on a co-ordinated approach to tackling the underlying drivers of conflict and recognises that currently neither Travellers themselves or those working with them have the capacity/skills to manage and resolve the underlying conflict. It also recognises that the level of conflict within the Traveller community has worsened in recent years and that the nature of the conflicts has become more serious

Rather than taking a reductionist view of Traveller conflict and viewing it as a 'Garda Problem' the strategy notes the wide range of stakeholders who have a potential role in contributing to the resolution of the underlying causes of conflict. The strategy is premised on a view (1) that an effective response to conflict requires a joined up approach that brings a mediation/conflict resolution approach to bear in tandem with a clear policing and enforcement strategy and (2) addresses a range of issues which contribute to and exacerbate conflict between Travellers and between Travellers and the Settled Community. Such an approach is more likely to secure value for money but it also challenges a range of Stakeholders to take a proactive role in integrating Travellers into their activities/services.

The Management Committee has agreed terms of reference and secured the funds/resources necessary to establish a Pilot ADR programme with the credibility and legitimacy to effectively intervene in conflicts involving the Traveller community and which has the capacity and resources to make a positive contribution to resolving these conflicts.

A programme of training and dialogue which includes stakeholders will be initiated and run in tandem with the establishment of the ADR Service. This programme will build the capacity of local actors to deliver conflict management interventions and will create receptivity to taking a holistic approach to dealing with conflict

This initiative will compliment the work of the existing Traveller Inter-Agency Groups in the Midlands and each Inter-agency Group will be asked support and feed into the work.

1 Background

The Offaly Traveller Inter-Agency Group identified a need for research on the issue of conflict in the Traveller Community <u>and</u> between the Traveller and Settled Community as critical to the development of effective strategies to reduce the incidence of conflict involving the Traveller Community.

Prior to commissioning this research discussions were entered into with other Inter-Agency Groups in the Midlands i.e. Longford, Laois and Westmeath, and with Pobal/The Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform as to the benefits of taking a regional approach. Having secured the agreement of these stakeholders to taking such an approach, the Offaly Traveller Inter-Agency Group established a Project Management Group and sought tenders. It subsequently commissioned Sean McGearty, Ian White and Hannagh McGinley to carry out the research.

2   Research Objectives

- To conduct a literature review concerning conflict resolution on an all island basis including those initiatives involving or targeting Travellers.
- To consult with Travellers and agencies (statutory, voluntary, community) working with Travellers in the prescribed counties on the issues that relate to conflict incidents.
- To identify the needs of Traveller families in relation to conflict.
- To make recommendations concerning how Travellers and agencies can support developments towards reducing the conflict within the Traveller community and between the Traveller and settled community.
- To consult with all agencies (through Interagency groups) including Traveller organisations in developing the recommendations towards supportive action.
- To work with a small team of Travellers who will inform and guide the work.

3   Research Methodology

The research methodology involved extensive consultations across the midlands, and nationally, with a particular focus on engaging Traveller men and particularly those who had been involved in conflict. The researchers noted the '*critical role played by the Traveller community in the Midlands who actively assisted in this work despite the challenges and risks this presented.*'

In July 2008 the consultants produced their draft report - ***A Strategy to reduce the incidence of conflict involving the Traveller community in the Midlands*** and this forms the basis for the ***Midland Travellers Conflict and Mediation Initiative***

4   Research findings

- Only a minority of Travellers engage in violent conflict and feuding and there is a clear evidence that Travellers want to find a way out and break the cycle. It is also clear that Local Authorities and An Garda Siochana are willing to try new approaches to manage and transform the conflict. Therefore this process and the strategy itself provides an opportunity and creates the potential for the midlands to lead the way on this issue and to create a new dynamic in the midlands which would also have a wider national impact.

- Violent conflict is hurting Travellers, destroying Traveller society and is negatively impacting on virtually all aspects of life, on all section of the Traveller community and is damaging the work of other development programmes. Perception of and fears regarding violent conflict among Travellers are also contributing to the ongoing exclusion of Travellers and to the continuing high levels of discrimination experienced by Travellers.

- Traveller families embroiled in violent conflict in the midlands region have expressed a strong desire to bring the violence to an end. This involves breaking a cycle in which they are trapped. The model below explains the cycle.

Discrimination & exclusion

Polarisation and division

Conflict

Prejudice

Mistrust and fear
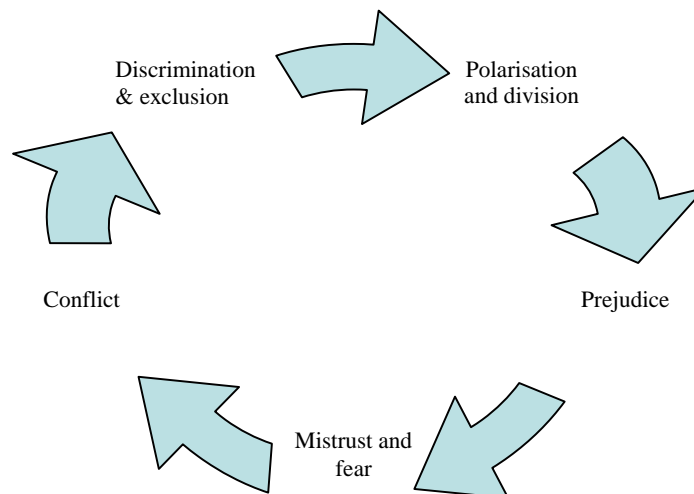
- Conflict resolution strategies must take cognisance of the fact that there are different power dynamics at play. In the case of Travellers there are power imbalances and even abuses within the Traveller community. This is set in a context where Travellers generally experience a power deficit in relation to the majority settled community. There is a perception among Travellers that the use and abuse of power and violence pays off for some so there are some vested interests. There are risks for stakeholders but particularly for Travellers themselves who take a stand against violence and promote alternative approaches.

- Relevant international comparisons can be made with the indigenous and nomadic people of North America and Australia. The common experience points to marginalisation and exclusion providing a context where conflict is internalised within that community.

- There are parallels with other protracted social conflict situations

    - Levels of hatred and hostility
    - Distrust, fear and a sense of insecurity
    - Unresolved pain, bitterness and physical loss
    - Miscommunication and misunderstanding
    - Prejudice
    - Different perspectives on the issues in dispute
    - An absence of structures and mechanisms for managing interaction

- Travellers have a strong sense of family and the family name\pride must be protected. There is some evidence of family member reluctance to participate in violent activity being met with pressure from other family members.

- There is often a genuine denial among stakeholders to a conflict as to their role in the conflict. However we have found evidence that in their day to day work with Travellers many stakeholders are by omission or commission contributing to the conflict dynamic. There is evidence that within the institutions that most commonly interface with Travellers that there are varying levels of prejudice relating to Travellers.

- Perceptions are as important as reality in conflict situations and there are a whole host of conflicting perceptions at play which are driving and exacerbating conflicts both with the Traveller community and between Traveller and agencies.

- There are widespread perceptions among Travellers regarding bias by some Gardai with sections of families involved in conflict and a belief that a "divide and conquer approach" is being used. There is also a perception that Garda are unwilling or unable to enforce law and order in some cases with the result that Travellers are "left to sort it out themselves". The difficulties faced by Gardai when attempting to process some offences especially with regard to retrieving evidence from members of the Traveller community has lead to some situations where the law cannot take its course. This has led to perceptions of impunity. These problems can be exacerbated by delays in court proceedings.

- Issues relating to accommodation are central to many conflicts. There are perceptions which perpetuate division that local authorities are in effect colluding with stronger groups/families leading to the exclusion of some weaker Travellers from accommodation.

- There are multifaceted causes and there appears to a complex mix of both proximate causes (e.g accommodation) combined with deeper root causes such as exclusion. Causes are frequently unclear even to those directly involved and one factor may be hiding or being used to disguise the other. Drivers of conflict range along a continuum from issues relating to accommodation (need) to thuggery and criminal behaviour (greed) Protagonists in a conflict situation will inevitably try to link the conflict to more acceptable issues such as accommodations or family honour.

- There is evidence that some families are introducing young children to conflicts and passing the feud on to the next generation. There is also a concern that boxing is being used as training for future conflicts. Boxing however should not only be considered in a negative light as it provides constructive diversionary activity and a sense of discipline.

- Avoidance has been the main response both among Travellers and among agencies. This avoidance is fuelled by apathy and lack of alternatives as well as other considerations such as fear and health and safety. This avoidance for some reflects the hope that if you leave the conflict alone it will sort itself out. Avoidance is also a result of lack of coordinated and common analysis and action by those agencies and institutions who have a responsibility for interaction with the Traveller community.

5   Traveller Culture and Identity

Irish Travellers are a minority ethnic group indigenous to Ireland but with many cultural similarities to the Gypsy communities in Britain and Roma communities from Eastern Europe. Many of the contemporary patterns of behaviour of the Irish Traveller community are mirrored in the Traveller community of Holland and the Voyegeur community in France. Historical nomadism, for example, and an affinity to extended families living in close proximity are cultural features of all the aforementioned groups.

There are a number of family names which are prevalent in the Traveller community. Travellers can for the most part identify other Travellers through their use of language, surname and family connections. A Traveller can choose to hide their identity and assume a settled identity but a settled person cannot assume a Traveller identity as they would not be recognized by the Travelling community as a person that shared their long shared history, language and traditions.

As with all cultural identities it is not easy to define the Traveller culture as it is constantly changing due largely to influences from the wider environment within which it exists. Nevertheless, if greater understanding between Traveller and settled is an objective, then there is a need for Travellers and Traveller representatives to find new ways of interpreting or expressing this culture in a way that makes it easy for the settled community to understand. This however is not a one way street and the settled community needs to be open to understanding the cultural identity of Travellers and to

accommodating it within wider society. Spaces need to be created for learning and dialogue to take place.
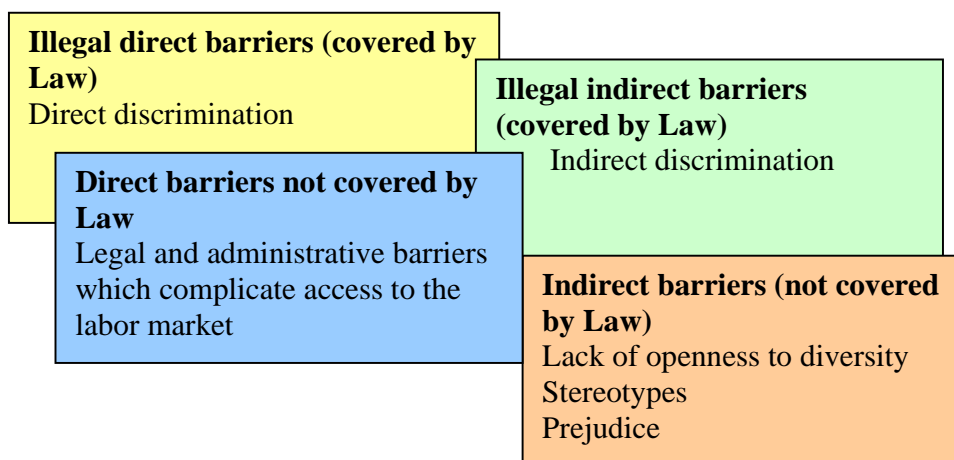

6 Social Integration of Travellers

Social integration does not mean assimilation or the suppression of cultural diversity. Social integration affords structural respect to communities of differing cultural backgrounds while assimilation attempts to create a society where smaller cultural groupings adopt the cultural identity of the stronger or majority community. The High Level Group Report (2007), which was established aegis of the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, identifies a number of barriers to integration that are relevant to the whole issue of conflict involving Travellers.

1) Lack of education and training
2) Lack of access to professions
3) Lack of integration policies
4) Stereotypes, prejudices and negative attitudes
5) Lack of mobility and concentration in certain areas
6) Industrial change
7) Disincentives through welfare systems
8) Discrimination
9) Lack of accessible information

When these barriers are accumulated they are mutually reinforcing and lead to virtually total exclusion from the labor market and social life. This can trigger a vicious cycle of a lack of social protection, dependency on welfare benefits and negative attitudes of the majority.

Barriers, which vulnerable members of the Traveller community encounter, can be divided into four categories which are overlapping and mutually reinforce each other. They are displayed in this simple matrix.

Illegal direct barriers (covered by Law)
Direct discrimination

Illegal indirect barriers (covered by Law)
Indirect discrimination

Direct barriers not covered by Law
Legal and administrative barriers which complicate access to the labor market

Indirect barriers (not covered by Law)
Lack of openness to diversity
Stereotypes
Prejudice

The residential segregation of Travellers in low income neighborhoods with bleak economic prospecs, which is at least partly due to discrimination in the sphere of housing, contributes to the vicious cycle of social exclusion. Another barrier to integration is the way Travellers are "settled" in Ireland. They are concentrated in isolated rural areas or on the outskirts of urban areas. At the same time mobility is weak.

Other barriers to integration such as poor education and access to goods and services are often intertwined with discrimination to such an extent that it is often difficult to separate them from each other. Stereotypes are more entrenched and negative regarding Travellers than with other minority in Ireland.

7   The relevance of context.

The context in which a conflict exists, often creates an environment which is conducive to and sustains an escalation of the feud. It follows that for remedial or preventive actions and strategies to be effective they must:

- Be comprehensive and multifaceted.
- Sustainable.
- Engage all stakeholders. (Experience from other protracted conflicts including that in Northern Ireland demonstrates clearly that it is only through an inclusive approach where all stakeholders have a responsibility for generating change in relationships and context that effective management of violent conflict will be achieved.)
- Specific interventions on relationships and issues must be accompanied by changes to the context.

All too often when attempting to resolve a dispute there is an exclusive focus on the parties and issues directly involved in the conflict with little or no attention paid to the context or other influences which impact on the conflict. Such an approach which ignores external or contextual influences can produce positive outcomes but these outcomes will not be sustainable and the outcomes are likely to take the form of short term cessations or lapses in violence.

Like most other violent conflicts the phenomenon of feuding in the Traveller community is a complex mix of dynamics related to identity, power, economics and status and is influenced heavily by the context in which the conflict exists and external relationships which impact on the stakeholders. For a conflict management process to be sustainable and effective it is therefore important to change the context as well as work with the parties and issues directly involved in the dispute.

8   Power in conflicts

Strategies to deal with conflict also need to recognize the importance of power in these conflicts and how power is used both by Travellers themselves and by various agencies engaging with Travellers. Any effort to reduce violent conflict must take into account the issue of power; who has it and how it is used. The challenge is to transform this power from abusive to constructive forms.

Ben Hoffman describes power which is used abusively as "power over" while power used constructively is described as "power with". Power over is the world of winner and loser and would describe many of the conflictual relationships between Traveller families at present. In order to build a sustainable peace there is a need to transform these destructive forms of power where needs are unmet, and violence is used, into more constructive forms and expressions where power is used constructively and peoples needs are met.

9   Trends in conflict in the Traveller community

There is considerable evidence that the level conflict within the Traveller community has worsened in recent years and that the nature of the conflicts has become more serious with an increase in the number of large scale confrontations and the increasing use of weapons including guns in these conflicts. There is also clear evidence that Travellers are deeply concerned about this and that the vast majority want an end to these conflicts. In her report "***Conflict and Conflict Resolution***"   Dr. Sinead ni Shuinear examined conflict in the Traveller community noting that

> *"Travellers are bewildered and distraught by the spiralling violence in which their community has become embroiled. Conflict of course is nothing new in this or any other human society but why this particular society should be responding in this way at this time is a subject, not only of media alarmism but more urgently of reflection among those whose families are – literally – in the firing line.*
>
> *There is consensus on a number of points; first that conflict as such is not "new" Second that there is time honoured and honourable ways of dealing with conflict; ritual combat – and simply walking away and cooling off Third that conflict is being expressed in unprecedented and deeply alarming ways specifically in its shift from one-to-one to a group activity and in the recent introduction of weaponry".*

In the close knit Traveller community a relatively minor incident can escalate rapidly and other family groupings can get drawn into the conflict. This can quickly result in a spiral of violence. The impact of these conflicts can be devastating for all concerned and are felt by all sections of Traveller society. Violent conflict is hurting Travellers, destroying Traveller society and is negatively impacting on virtually all aspects of life and on all sections of the Traveller community. Perception of and fears regarding violent conflict

among Travellers are also contributing to the ongoing exclusion of Travellers and to the continuing high levels of discrimination experienced by Travellers.

10   Conflict Analysis

The objective of the conflict analysis was to identify and analyse the different factors causing and contributing to violent conflict.. It should be noted that

- In any conflict a number of factors may be at play and these may change over time as the conflict escalates and intensifies

- The real reason may be hidden and may not be apparent – even to the parties involved.

- Not all these are equally significant and not all are present in any given conflict

Over the course of the consultation process a total of 27 different drivers of conflict were identified. Conflict drivers are defined as people, relationships, acts and\or issues which perpetuate or escalate the violent conflict. These ranged from factors which exacerbated conflict to major structural issues. While there is a considerable amount of overlap it is important to bear in mind the full range of drivers in order to seek out potential solutions to conflicts.

A ranking exercise carried out with one mixed group of Travellers (male/female and from different areas) identified the following sixteen issues as the most significant. However they also acknowledged that all these factors could be a play at different times

Naming the drivers.

1. The hard man culture
2. Family power/status/pride/honour
3. Lack of integration
4. Criminal activity /drug dealing
5. Intimidation and bullying
6. Lack of appropriate accommodation
7. Control of business /making money
8. Domestic disputes
9. Anger and frustration
10. Lack of protection from Gardai and courts
11. Travellers left to sort things out
12. Inequalities among Travellers
13. People stirring things up / gossip
14. Breakdown of marriage
15. Arranged marriage
16. Lack of respect for parents /older people

There is considerable overlap across all these and it is possible to identify 7 broad categories of conflict drivers.

Drivers of conflict

The hard man culture Family power/status/pride/honour Intimidation and bullying Inequalities among Travellers	The role of the family
Lack of appropriate accommodation Competition for accommodation The allocation of accommodation Expanding families	Accommodation issues
Control of business /making money Criminal activity /drug dealing	Business interests
People stirring things up / gossip Breakdown of marriage Arranged marriage Domestic disputes	Domestic issues
Lack of protection from Gardai and courts Travellers left to sort things out A lack of sanctions/deterrents and a culture of impunity Perceptions and allegations of bias and the use of informers by Gardai	The legal system & law enforcement
Anger and frustration Discrimination Substandard living conditions Nothing to loose mentality A lack of opportunity for young men Media portrayal of Travellers	Lack of Integration
Loss of identity /culture Sedentary lifestyle Lack of respect for parent /older people	Culture and identity

11   Stakeholder analysis

The complexity of the situation in the midlands is reflected in the number and the range of stakeholders who are either involved in conflict or have a stake in any conflict transformation strategy.

This research has not attempted to quantify the cost of violent conflict involving Travellers. However there is recognition among all stakeholders consulted that the cost of these conflicts is considerable when we take into account all relevant costs: direct costs

(damage to property, policing, etc), indirect costs (disruption to a whole range of development programmes) and the opportunity costs of tying up resources and personnel from different agencies in the region.

The role of stakeholders in supporting the strategy

Stakeholders	Strategic focus
Central Government (DJELR Environment, CRAG, Education, Social and Family Affairs	Provision of resources Monitoring work of agencies in the midlands
Inter Agency Groups	Provide joined up thinking and integrated responses Inclusion of Travellers
Politicians	Provision of inclusive leadership Engage with and educate Travellers
Local Authorities	Promote conflict sensitive planning Honour obligations, Apply equity
Gardai	Provide equitable transparent community based policing (Justice needs to be seen to be done)
Traveller Action Groups	Integrate conflict resolution into fabric of organisation Build capacity in conflict management Ensure they are inclusive
Health /HSE	Recognise consequences of violent conflict Provide counseling
Churches	Provide inclusive leadership Provide outreach to apply influence positively
Business	Support Traveller economic activity
Education sector	Engage with Traveller group Promote understanding of Traveller culture
Traveller Training Centres	Integrate conflict resolution into the curriculum
Travellers	Engage with the strategy Acknowledge own role in violent conflict and in resolution
The Community and Voluntary sector	Ensure inclusion especially of young Travellers Make conflict an issue
The Media	Work to stamp out racism and negative portrayal of Travellers Acknowledge role in sustaining conflict and potential positive role.

It is evident that all stakeholders want a resolution to these conflicts. However there are risks for stakeholders but particularly for Travellers themselves who take a stand against violence and promote alternative approaches. This strategy has been framed to respond to these challenges. It is based on the recognition that no single solution will work and that there is a need for a range of responses which can be implemented in a flexible manner.

Traveller related conflict comprises two different but inter related dimensions:
   o Conflict which is internal to the Traveller community

o Conflict between the Traveller community and the majority settled community.

It is the internal conflict that is more likely to result in violent behaviour. Therefore while this strategy will include measures to address settled\Traveller conflict the sharper focus will be on violence internal to the Traveller community.

The strategy cannot be seen in isolation and must be implemented within a broader framework and context. The strategy need to be multidimensional due to the fact that

- There are multiple parties who are or could be involved in conflict
- There are multiple causes in any single conflict with layers of factors involved in starting and sustaining the conflict
- Conflicts can escalate rapidly
- There is a need to work across all section of Traveller community (children, young men, women) as well as the settled society
- There is a need for approaches involving different sectors (education, Community development, sport)
- There is a need for change at personal, community, structural and cultural levels
- Conflict transformation is a long term process which requires; engagement and ownership, leadership, commitment, skills and confidence and resources

12   Values and principles underpinning the strategy

The strategy will be underpinned by a number of core values and principles. It is evident that deficiencies and gaps in a number of these areas are in themselves major contributors to conflict involving Travellers and therefore any strategy to deal with conflict must start from this point and ensure that they kept to the forefront at all times Based on the issues identified during this research process and the

Five key values should underpin the strategy
- Equity and a focus on just solutions
- Inclusive Participation and voluntary agreement
- Transparency
- Respect for diversity and cultural recognition
- A human rights based approach

13   The Strategy

Rather than taking a reductionist view of Traveller conflict and viewing it as a 'Garda Problem' the strategy notes the wide range of stakeholders who have a potential role in contributing to the resolution of the underlying causes of conflict. The strategy is premised on a view (1) that an effective response to conflict requires a joined up

approach that brings a mediation/conflict resolution approach to bear in tandem with a clear policing and enforcement strategy and (2) addresses a range of issues which contribute to and exacerbate conflict between Travellers and between Travellers and the Settled Community. Such an approach challenges a range of Stakeholders to take a proactive role in integrating Travellers into their activities/services and is more likely to be sustainable in the longer term.

The strategy will be implemented by the provision of a range of ADR services (negotiation, mediation, arbitration) proactively working to respond to and resolve conflicts, and would work in three ways:-

1. Working in partnership with stakeholders in the midlands and dealing with referrals from these stakeholders (Local authorities, Traveller support groups etc)
2. Proactively working to respond to and resolve conflicts
3. Dealing with referrals from the Garda Siochana and the courts

A programme of training and dialogue which includes stakeholders will be initiated and run in tandem with the establishment of the ADR Service. This programme will build the capacity of local actors to deliver conflict management interventions and will create receptivity to taking a holistic approach to dealing with conflict