

BUILDING UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

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Introduction

Concern Worldwide is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) that believes development is about partnership amongst equals. Development is not about 'us' and 'them' but about working together, recognising our similarities. This approach to development is based on cooperation rather than charity; identifying and sharing our respective skills and building our respective capacities.

To this end, since 2006 Concern Worldwide has been working with Echos Communications, a Belgian NGO, on an awareness-raising project called Building Unity through Diversity (BUTD). In 2008, following exhibitions in Dublin and Cork, the programme travelled to Northern Ireland. There were two elements to the 2008 programme: an internationally acclaimed outdoor photo exhibition titled '1000 Families', which comprised a series of images of families from around the world taken by photographer Uwe Ommer; and a series of events complementing the themes of the programme.

The objectives of the Building Unity through Diversity programme are to:

- Create space to explore links between diversity and development against a positive backdrop;
- Challenge perceptions of and recognise the diversity of developing countries;
- Challenge each other about what we understand by development;
- Highlight the diversity of our increasingly multicultural society.

Over the past three years, the exhibition and the events have engaged many thousands of people in reflection and discussion about diversity and multiculturalism in the workplace, in education, through the media and within development organisations. The project has been hugely successful in capturing the attention and imagination of people across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It has also resonated with our increasingly diverse and multi-cultural communities.

1000 Families

The outdoor photo exhibition consists of a selection of 70 photographs taken from Uwe Ommer's book *1000 Families: The Family Album of Planet Earth*. The photographer travelled across five continents, 130 countries and 150,000 miles to capture more than 1,250 family images over a period of four years. The photographs have been exhibited in many countries across Europe and the United States of America (USA), both within and beyond the three-year BUTD project. The *1000 Families* exhibition is a mechanism – a soft entry point – into discussion and conversation about how we relate to one another and work together in development as equals.

The photos selected for Concern's three-year programme were chosen to represent families from across the world. They were mounted in metal frames fixed into the ground. The exhibition was accompanied by information about the BUTD project, the programme of events, the journey behind the exhibition and the participating organisations and sponsors.

BUTD seeks to challenge and change the way in which development is understood and communicated by a range of actors including the development sector, the media, the private sector and the wider public. It creates space for people to think about and discuss issues of diversity and development in a positive environment. It also enables participants in the programmes to see a truthful and accurate portrayal of Africa, which recognises that there is more to the continent than poverty, famine, war and corruption.

Between 18 August and 12 September 2008, photographs selected from Uwe Ommer's collection were exhibited at and hosted by Belfast's City Hall. This proved to be an excellent city centre location and enabled a significant number of visitors every day. The accompanying programme of events were held in Belfast's Linen Hall Library directly opposite the City Hall.

The event programme

Ahead of the 2008 programme, efforts were made to engage with as many partners as possible to ensure a good representation of relevant Northern Ireland-based organisations at BUTD events. In order to shape an appropriate programme of events, planning meetings were initiated in early 2008 with: the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA) in Northern Ireland; The Equality Commission of Northern Ireland; the UNESCO Centre for Development at the University of Ulster, Coleraine; the African Support Organisation of Northern Ireland (ACSONI); and

the Good Relations Unit of Belfast City Council. As a result of these discussions, partnerships were established and these supporters of the 2008 project were acknowledged in all print material.

The event programme consisted of three main events: a Family and Cultural Day to maximise public interest in the programme; a seminar on Images of Africa in the Media; and a seminar on Diversity and Equality in the Workplace. The first event, the Family and Cultural Day, was held on Saturday, 30 August 2008 at Belfast City Hall. It aimed to celebrate the diversity of Northern Ireland, spread the message of the Building Unity through Diversity to the public, to promote the events' programme and to engage with multicultural groups in Northern Ireland.

Over 5,000 people came to enjoy the Family Day, set amongst the 1,000 Families Exhibition at City Hall. The entertainment for the event included musical acts, poetry, multicultural arts and dance performances, storytelling workshops, and arts and crafts. The event also enjoyed both radio and print media coverage. Over 100 family photographs were taken to create a 'Belfast Family Album' that would reflect the city's diversity.

The Images of Africa in the media seminar was held on 3 September 2008 at the Linen Hall Library. Its aims were to reflect and discuss representations of development and developing countries in the media, and how the recently published Code of Conduct on Images and Messages adopted by development agencies across the European Union has promoted the vision of BUTD.

The session was chaired by the journalist and broadcaster Seamus McKee and featured speakers were Julius Anakaa, Chair of ACSONI, journalist Ann Hailes, and Hans Zomer, Director of Dóchas (the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations). The discussion focused on how people from developing countries are portrayed by the media in Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on Africa, and the challenges of portraying the complexity of this continent.

Julius Anakaa, originally from Nigeria, gave examples of how the local media can ignore or misrepresent both development issues and issues relating to people from developing countries living in Northern Ireland. Hans Zomer explained the voluntary Code of Conduct on Images and Messages, which attempts to guide and improve the way in which images and language are used by development agencies as they communicate their issues. Irish Anne Hailes spoke about her experiences when reporting on Concern projects in Rwanda and Bangladesh. She outlined some of the challenges facing journalists in the developing world and some of the considerations development agencies should bear in mind in their engagements with journalists. The event, supported by CADA, was followed by a lively

discussion with an audience of approximately 60 attendees.

The third and final event of the BUTD programme in Belfast was a seminar titled 'Diversity and Equality in the Workplace'. It took place on 9 September 2008 again in the Linen Hall Library and aimed to discuss issues surrounding the integration of people coming from outside Northern Ireland into the workplace. It also addressed the issue of how organisations can effectively implement an equality policy that embraces diverse cultures.

Bob Collins of the Equality Commission of Northern Ireland served as Chair of the last event of the programme. Kasia Garbal, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions' Project Worker for Migrant Workers, outlined some of the challenges facing workers arriving to Northern Ireland, and stressed the need to think of migrant workers as more than just economic units. Khanyisela Moyo, Vice Chair of ACSONI, built on this theme, citing examples of discrimination experienced by some workers, and suggesting potential improvements in legislation and practice. Councillor Naomi Long MLA spoke about the work of Belfast City Council's Good Relations Unit, which promotes best practice of integration within its own workforce, and through community-based organisations and events. I addressed Concern's about Equality policy, which has been developed to accommodate over 3,500 staff working in 30 countries, spanning very diverse cultures. A video interview with Ms Umme Salma, Concern's Equality Champion in Bangladesh was also shown in which she spoke about the reality of implementing an equality policy at programme level. The presentations were followed by questions and comments from the audience, which included representatives of private, public and voluntary sector organisations.

Conclusion

The success of the exhibition in Belfast and in previous locations has been built upon its capacity to mobilise civil society groups, academic institutions and development organisations in programmes that reflect local and global aspects of development. The exhibition explores universal themes related to family and community that impact on societies around the world. Moreover, the photographic exhibition has been a catalyst for debate on a range of international development issues, particularly how developing countries are portrayed by the media and perceived by users of media sources. Most importantly, however, the exhibition and its associated events have helped to build understanding of the increasing diversity within our society and the positive outcomes arising from multiculturalism in Northern Ireland. It has also identified many of the challenges confronted by new communities

and how we can help to address these problems through dialogue and education.

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