



Achieving global alliance against racism

Published in 2 *Metro Éireann* p. i (Special Supplement on the World Conference Against Racism, No. 6, October 2001), at pp. i, iii.

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The recently-concluded World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance constituted what was probably the greatest gathering of idealists and activists in recent times. It was, however, the realists there present who, through their steadying influence on the tiller of diplomacy, guided the deliberations through very choppy seas.

It is difficult to imagine a more solid basis for consensus than the struggle against racism, yet on many occasions during the Conference, the whole exercise seemed in imminent danger of being scuppered by much-publicised disagreements (the Middle East, slavery, colonialism, etc.), the threatened withdrawal of the United States delegation and the actual withdrawal of the Israeli delegation.

The term "racism" is highly-charged and it has a whole gamut of sinister and threatening meanings for different people. There lies the rub. Attempts at the Conference to define racism as broadly and as meticulously as possible stymied attempts to achieve consensus. Is it right to introduce the water of pragmatism into the wine of idealism – even to make the contents of the cup more palatable to the greatest possible number? The question is perplexing.

International human rights declarations – such as the one forged at the Durban Conference – generally attract more than their fair share of cynicism. Their tenor is, almost by definition, aspirational and the consistent refusal of certain major world powers (round up the usual suspects here!) to ratify and/or implement them detracts from their credibility. The habitual absence of any kind of enforcement mechanisms further deprives them of their desired vigour. Altruism is therefore expected to carry the day.

This altruism must be matched by a veritable root-and-branch approach to the struggle against racism. Thus, the success of the Conference should not be measured purely in terms of the robustness of the language employed in its Final Declaration and Programme of Action. Nor is the number of signatory states to that Declaration alone a suitable barometer for determining its success. These considerations are, of course, important, but the intense glare of publicity surrounding divisive issues at the Conference should not black out all of its very laudable achievements.

The common, unifying goal of participants in the Conference was to devise strategies for rejecting the heritage of hatred bequeathed to the world of today by the centuries of the past. A truly global platform was provided. Upwards of 17,000 people attended the Conference, according to its organisers. Opinions were articulated; experiences recounted; strategies debated and best practices shared. Tireless networking and lobbying took place. Questioning and listening modes prevailed. The whole experience

was highly instructive. Those in attendance will return to their home countries enriched and invigorated and will doubtless redouble their efforts to combat racism in all of its odious manifestations. Thus, the real impact of the Conference ought to be gauged by its ability to transcend the rhetoric of its concluding documents (designed for Governments), and the ability of its lessons to prove their practical relevance to the everyday lives of those they purport to protect.

The World Conference afforded the UN a timely opportunity to re-examine its vision and recalibrate its strategies vis-à-vis racism. The highly symbolic decision to host the Conference in post-apartheid South Africa – a country resolutely struggling to vanquish its sordid, racist past - was a masterstroke. The words of Nobel Laureate and UN Goodwill Ambassador, Seamus Heaney, could easily be applied to the optimism and sense of historical importance underpinning the Conference: "...once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme." The Conference has taken its course and the next challenge will be the long and arduous follow-up process. It is to be hoped that any lingering differences and difficulties can be surmounted, allowing all parties to rally to the cry of "surf's up"!
