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Grassroots Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: Elements of An Effective Model

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Abstract

Following the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement many community-based organizations became involved in localized peace-building activities in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. Drawing financial support from the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the International Fund for Ireland, these organizations adopted various strategic mechanisms to implement their projects –synchronizing bottom-up development initiatives with top-level government policies. Their effectiveness has already been felt in Northern Ireland as reduced political violence and improved socioeconomic conditions. However, the long-term sustainability of this work is questionable, affected as it is by continued intercommunity segregation, low macro-level political support, and global economic instability. This article explores the perceptions of 120 civil society leaders regarding the peace-building practices employed by community-based organizations in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. Key elements of an effective peace-building model are suggested that may contribute to the improvement of peace-building and reconciliation efforts in other contexts affected by ethno-political conflict.

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Elements of an Effective Model

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We know that peace needs to be fought with more voracity than the war was fought...Peacemakers need resources to build peace so we can never take our eyes off that ball.

Community group leader from Derry

Abstract

Following the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement many community-based organizations became involved in localized peace-building activities in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. Drawing financial support from the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the International Fund for Ireland, these organizations adopted various strategic mechanisms to implement their projects –synchronizing bottom-up development initiatives with top-level government policies. Their effectiveness has already been felt in Northern Ireland as reduced political violence and improved socioeconomic conditions. However, the long-term sustainability of this work is questionable, affected as it is by continued intercommunity segregation, low macro-level political support, and global economic instability. This article explores the perceptions of 120 civil society leaders regarding the peace-building practices employed by community-based organizations in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. Key elements of an effective peace-building model are suggested that may contribute to the improvement of peace-building and reconciliation efforts in other contexts affected by ethno-political conflict.

Introduction

Lederach (1997) envisions peace-building as “a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relations” (p. 20). Peace-building is a long-term, dynamic process, which seeks to address relational, structural, and social issues through a vast array of mechanisms that co-create an infrastructure for peace (Lederach, 1997, p. 22). Ramcharan (2009) for example, emphasizes three general principles

of this process including the rule of law, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (p. 323). Further, local participation, capacity-building, relationship-building, and cross-community dialogue are also required to address the underlying causes of conflict (Jeong, 2005; Lederach, 1997; Zelizer, 2013).

Thus, while peace-building is a somewhat ambiguous term (Chetail, 2009), it is clear that it requires “long-term commitment to establishing an infrastructure across the levels of a society...that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximizes the contribution[s] from [abroad]” (Lederach, 1997, p. xvi). However, when intervening in societies transitioning out of protracted conflict and political violence, transnational and international actors often apply a standardized assembly line form of peace-building “whereby the vision of peace is made off-site, shipped to a foreign location, and reconstructed according to a pre-arranged plan” (Mac Ginty, 2011, p. 39). Referred to as the liberal democratic peace model, this approach often results in dysfunctional and fragile peace processes that disempower local populations (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2008).

Consequently, the conflict in Northern Ireland is rooted in divided political ideologies, ethno-religious identities, and systemic poverty – issues which have fostered deep antagonism between the Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist communities (Cairns & Darby, 1998). The apex of this conflict was a bitter period of violence known as the “Troubles” – an era spanning from the late 1960s to 1998 that resulted in significant social and economic damage that continues to affect marginalized communities (Coakley, 2008, p. 101). The Troubles began largely due to Catholic Nationalist oppression and British historic colonization and, hence, the peace-building process in Northern Ireland is aimed at addressing both the trauma and devastation caused by overt violence and the deeper historical divisions that form the conflict’s core (Buchanan, 2008). To attend to these underlying dynamics, the concept of reconciliation has been integrated into Northern Ireland’s peace-building process (Byrne, Arnold, Fissuh, Standish, & Tennent, 2009a).

Reconciliation situates the relationship between former antagonists at the centre of a conflict’s long-term solution and restores and rebuilds intra- and inter-community connections through creative storytelling discourse processes that foster the mutual acknowledgement of experiences and the integration of the principles of truth, justice, mercy, and peace (Lederach, 1997, pp. 26–29). Dialogue and transcultural story-sharing are accessible, low-tech practices that involve explorations of knowledge, emotions, morality, identity, socialization, time and memory, and geography in a flexible, open, and safe milieu

wherein all participants co-create, negotiate, and share meaning from their lived daily experiences (Senehi, 2009a, 2009b). Through these processes individuals are empowered – their increasing levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, knowledge, and skill provide them with the capacity to contribute to society (Schwerin, 1995).

The reconciliation of polarized communities is an important step within any peace-building process (Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). In Northern Ireland, cross-community dialogue and contact have been fostered at the local level by the efforts of voluntary community organizations (McCall & O’Dowd, 2008). Parallel to political and institutional cooperation, grassroots initiatives have led to increased contact between members of both communities, promoting relationship-building, goodwill, and trust (Byrne, Skarlato, Fissuh, & Irvin, 2009b). However, the sustainability of these efforts is questionable; indeed, many years after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, there remains persistent social segregation (particularly in education and housing) and low political support for parties promoting a “shared regional identity” (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 218).

This article focuses on grassroots voluntary action that is supported by a wider peace process and underpinned by substantial financial aid. Drawing upon a qualitative study that explored the views and experiences of 120 grassroots actors in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties, this article sheds light on the role played by community initiatives in the region’s peace-building process. This article contributes to existing knowledge and policies by identifying the core elements of grassroots peace-building practice and highlighting the importance of the interplay between citizens’ on both sides of the ethno-religious conflict in these peace-building and reconciliation efforts. Thus, this article offers in-depth analysis of the scope and content of the local actors’ participation and might be useful to those working in other locations undergoing similar processes. Key elements of an effective peace-building model are suggested and specific examples of local action are identified that may contribute to the improvement of peace-building and reconciliation efforts in other contexts affected by ethno-political conflict.

External Assistance and Grassroots Peace-Building in Northern Ireland

Targeted external economic assistance may be an important tool in post-accord peace-building and reconciliation (Adam, Collier, & Davies, 2008; Byrne, et al., 2009a; Byrne & Irvin, 2001). In Northern Ireland both the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Peace I, II, and III) and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) were established to provide communities with financial assistance so as to support local peace-building and development

efforts (Buchanan, 2008). The EU Peace Programme has employed a phased approach, fostering social inclusion, economic growth, and the transformation of civic culture through Peace I (1995 – 1999); facilitating economic development through Peace II (2000 – 2006); and promoting peace-building, reconciliation, and the consolidation of progress through Peace III (2007 – 2013) (Byrne et al., 2009b, p. 341; Mitchell, 2010, p. 381). The IFI was established in 1986 in the wake of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and has directed its efforts toward tackling the root causes of sectarianism as well as promoting reconciliation (International Fund for Ireland [IFI], n.d., p. 1). The focus of IFI initiatives has evolved from the promotion of economic regeneration toward challenging sectarianism, nurturing reconciliation, and creating a “shared future” for all citizens (IFI, n.d., p. 4–5).

While meant to support localized efforts, the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the IFI can also be understood as manifestations of a broader historical trend that Mitchell (2010) identifies as the post-Cold War “European liberal(ising) peace project” (p. 371). It should be noted, however, that this liberal peace agenda might not ultimately empower those in the grassroots who have to live with its consequences (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2011, 2008). This is evident in Northern Ireland. For example, the complexity of the funding application processes and externally imposed reporting requirements place considerable strain on understaffed voluntary organizations to the detriment of overall program delivery (Buchanan, 2008; Byrne et al., 2009b; O’Dowd & McCall, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, the transferability of the peace-building model implemented in Northern Ireland is the subject of debate. O’Neill (2007) suggests that the peace process can serve as a model for transforming antagonistic ethno-political conflicts in other regions, highlighting that the identity-based challenges faced within this setting are shared by other contexts. Hence, the current politics of cultural pluralism evolving in Northern Ireland may be “a model of political engagement that is likely to be of significant relevance to other nationally divided societies” (O’Neill, 2007, p. 429). Other scholars reiterate this. For example, Murithi (2009) examines the macro-level aspects of the peace-building process, arguing that the political and constitutional foundations created by the 1998 GFA, which centered on mutual consent and political inclusion, provide a “useful example of the practical implementation of conflict resolution and the initiation of peace-building in the context of a sub-national conflict” (p. 174–175). Further, Racioppi and O’Sullivan See (2007) conclude that the decentralized and multi-level peace-building approaches of the EU-funded projects are “innovative and may serve as a model for other conflicts” (p. 383).

In contrast, Hughes (2009) argues that the peace-building process in Northern Ireland has been judged as important mainly by virtue of the considerable financial resources devoted toward it (p. 288). Hughes suggests that a more accurate measure of relevance would be based upon an assessment of what is actually achieved as a result of the subsequent peace-building action. Moreover, Wilson (2010) contends that it is important to highlight the peace-building experiences of “relatively peaceful and tolerant regions” committed to the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (p. 5). Given the continued challenges posed to peace in Northern Ireland, he suggests that this country “has more to learn from the wider world than it has to teach” (Wilson, 2010, p. 5). Finally, there is much critique of the liberal peace-building approach, which suggests that externally imported models of action are neither sustainable nor effective (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2011, 2008; Richmond, 2011). Rather, hybrid models of peace-building are required whereby local people envision and own their own peace (Mac Ginty, 2011). Indeed, the polarization of Northern Ireland’s society since the 1998 signing of the GFA “should in itself be sufficient cause of concern to give anyone viewing the Irish peace process as a model for other intractable conflicts pause for thought” (Guelke, 2003, p. 76).

Therefore, additional in-depth research on specific peace-building approaches and practices in Northern Ireland is needed to discern whether it is an appropriately exportable model of conflict resolution and peace-building. The Northern Ireland experience does demonstrate that “even apparently hopeless conflict zones may, given appropriate conditions, be converted into stable, peaceful democracies” (Coakley, 2008, p. 111). However, one must be cautious when applying the Northern Ireland peace-building model elsewhere due to the unique and complex nature of all conflict situations.

Methodology

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 120 respondents regarding the effect external economic assistance from the IFI and the EU Peace III Fund has had upon local-level peace-building, development, and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and Border Counties. This study’s respondents included community group leaders and program development officers from Derry/Londonderry and the Border Counties of Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone. The interviews took place throughout the summer of 2010. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and all were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis employed a grounded theory approach wherein many themes were generated from a review of the interview transcripts (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007; Druckman, 2005). This article focuses upon themes related to the respondents' perceptions and experiences of effective grassroots peace-building and reconciliation practices. Fictitious names are used throughout to protect the participants' anonymity.

Effective Practices of Grassroots Peace-Building in Northern Ireland

Relationship-building and cross-community contact. Particular components of peace-building have been identified by many scholars as having significant implications for fostering reconciliation between divided communities. Such aspects include enhancing understanding and trust, promoting cross-community dialogue and cooperation, and developing shared spaces for mutual learning and collaboration. For example, de Vries and de Paor (2005) found that encouraging cross-community contact between political violence survivors and ex-combatants can help to bring about inter-group healing and reconciliation. The importance of relationship-building is also emphasized by Campbell, Hughes, Hewstone, and Cairns (2008) who suggest that projects which develop social capital have “the potential to mobilize communities toward collective action in tackling the problems inherent in deprived areas” (p. 32) so that communities may “better respond to opportunities for regeneration and renewal” (Campbell, 2008, p. 32).

In Northern Ireland and the Border Counties many community groups have developed and implemented projects that offer opportunities for healing, social capital development, and reconciliation. Several study respondents discussed the importance of building relationships and trust among members of both communities within the overall peace-building process. One approach to this work involves the usage of ritual, symbolism, and tradition – mechanisms that have been identified as central to the resolution and transformation of deep-rooted ethno-political conflict (Schirch, 2005). The symbols and rituals of the dominant political tradition such as flags, colours, and emblems are fixtures of “cultural violence” as the less powerful community becomes psychologically intimidated by the cultural trappings of the hegemonic group (Galtung, 1996). Consequently, within peace-building it is important to challenge and transform these manifestations of cultural violence so as to foster social inclusion. Ritual, for example, has the “capacity to make symbols speak for wider political concerns” and can be employed to challenge oppositional conceptualizations of identity (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 131). Further, within Northern Ireland and the Border Counties it is also necessary to build relationships between communities in order to ensure the continuity of traditional cultural practices. This issue is discussed by a community group leader from Derry:

SIMON: We didn't know a lot about building bridges. We probably didn't even know very many people from other communities in our city. We felt safe and secure within our own community, our own confines...But we also recognised that if we wanted to continue to have our commemorations and celebrations then we would have to win the goodwill of a number of people from the Roman Catholic community. So, although we had no expertise and no advice or guidance we set about trying to create that goodwill. We set about trying to explain...why we had celebrations, so we set about trying to explain that to anyone that wanted to listen.

Simon realized that in order to build long-term sustainable peace the Protestant Unionist community had to foster goodwill within the Catholic Unionist community in Derry. Another community group leader from Derry also emphasized promoting contact between people from both communities so as to challenge misconceptions and mistrust:

OLIVIA: By putting in programs that allowed people to come in contact with each other they broke down mistrust rather than generating trust. I think...they had a big impact on breaking down mistrust, breaking down misconceptions...to make people step over the edge, to make them to step outside the box.

Similarly, Olivia opines that NGO programs have broken down sectarian barriers and generated cross-community trust-building. However, as identified by a community group leader from the Border Area, it is important to link contact initiatives with broader strategic efforts:

LIAM: At a local grassroots level, sometimes they do things without thinking in terms of where this fits into the political context of society. People are always more interested in doing as opposed to...looking at where [their action] fits in – but are they in sync or on track [with the broader context]?

Liam emphasizes the necessity of linking micro-level initiatives to the macro-level activities of local politicians. Relatedly, a community group leader from Derry emphasized the role of politicians in creating cross-community alliances:

ARNOLD: The political class in Northern Ireland is still very rooted in the community...Those same politicians are involved in the groundwork at the grassroots level. It is a very easy thing for us all to say, "Sure we are getting on doing it here [while] all the politicians are squabbling away." And...the

reality is that the politicians have been doing it, they have made cross-community alliances, they have been...showing that this work can be done, it is possible.

Arnold points out the importance of recognizing the work of politicians in trying to move the peace process forward. In addition, practical concerns can also foster positive working relationships between communities. For example, a community group leader from the Border Area discussed the significance of sharing resources and space to achieve a common goal:

MATILDA: Here we have a kind of...working model of how that positive relationship...can be harnessed, the synergy of working together and using each other's resources rather than a community organisation having to set up another office and have the overheads associated with that...I think the days of everybody pulling in different directions are gone, they have to go...you'll achieve much more working together.

As Matilda notes, sharing resources in an interdependent fashion builds cross-community ties and improves the flow of communication.

Reflexive dialogue is another integral part of cross-community interaction and relationship-building. This is "a form of guided and interactive introspection [within] which disputants speak...in the presence of their adversaries...about their needs and interests viewed interactively through the prism of the conflict situation" (Rothman, 1996, p. 347).

Such a process is identified by a community group leader from Derry as critical to conflict transformation and reconciliation:

LARRY: I think the only solution [is]...dialogue, so when we are meditating on a Tuesday night and the bricks get thrown from the wall across into the Fountain and the police vehicles arrive I make certain we open the windows and...that they see us mediating...That is the only way forward. I don't think we can transform the stones when they go back into it. So, therefore, it has to be dialogue.

Larry observes that mediation and cross-community dialogue are necessary to end violence and that it is important to publicize the effectiveness of this work. Such cross-community dialogue and contact is also necessary to challenge stereotypes and ethnocentrism (Ryan, 2007, p. 70). For example, a community group leader from Derry shared the following observations:

BOBBY: Before, a Protestant mightn't have ever met a Catholic... Now they can mix and talk together better... The same Catholic mightn't have met a Protestant for all his life until he started work... But I think people accept each other more now and work with people and realise that people don't have horns growing out of their heads just because they are a different religion.

Bobby notes that when Protestants and Catholics meet and talk, they share experiences with each other that transcend stereotypes and build community. The improvement of intergroup relations at the grassroots level is also a necessary component of human rights work and is embedded within the institutional framework of the 1998 GFA. When local communities work together to promote human rights in Northern Ireland and the Border region, they can also address the issues that lie at the root of the conflict. A community group leader from Derry identified the relationship between grassroots cross-community interaction and human rights work:

BRIAN: I worked on one of the programmes about the potential for a Bill of Rights, human rights. It's a good programme because...it works on community groups...and they took it right down to the grassroots levels of what human rights means to you and those groups.

Economic development, cooperation, and leadership. Economic development initiatives can also nurture peace-building and reconciliation by reducing material deprivation, improving self- and community-esteem, and offering opportunities for learning (Jeong, 2005; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). The private sector can be a significant actor within a peace-building process, although its impact depends largely on the regulatory framework and incentives provided by “public authorities, commercial and financial intermediaries, [and] local, national and global interest groups” (Carbonnier, 2009, p. 253). Hence, it is fundamentally important that the involvement of the private sector facilitates and not hinders local ownership of the peace-building process (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2011, 2008; Pouligny, 2009).

One of the important contributions made by both the IFI and EU Peace Funds has been to infuse resources into grassroots economic development activities. Through these efforts, two crucial peace-building objectives have been achieved: the level of inequality that has negatively affected the Nationalist community for many decades has been reduced and a large section of grassroots-level actors have been empowered to undertake creative sustainable development initiatives. However, respondents in this study also noted the need

for close cooperation between local actors and the central government to ensure the effective disbursement of funds. For example, a community group leader from Derry expressed her understandings of the funding allocation process:

LYNNE: I think on the whole it has been positive; I think it produced money, introduced money that wouldn't have been forthcoming from anywhere else to engage in grassroots community work...and I have been impressed by the way the money is distributed and the attempt to involve communities in the allocation of funding through local District partnerships, in particular with Peace II.

Lynne appreciates how the external aid has contributed to grassroots community work in a distribution process that is fair and just. Another community leader from Derry emphasized the significance of economic regeneration and the need for changes in economic structure and practice:

ROGER: It's about how you approach the whole issue of sustainable development and transformation, and I think it has to be done on a citywide basis...We are trying to devise a regeneration process that changes how we do things fundamentally at the core because we recognise that if you continue to do the things that you have always done you will always get the same result.

Roger emphasized the need for a regeneration process to develop core and local capacities so as to create a critical mass of human and social capital that can continue the developmental process after the external funding evaporates in 2013. He also noted that nurturing socio-economic development in post-accord situations is a long-term and incremental process. For example, Making Belfast Work (MBW) (an initiative of the Northern Ireland Department of the Environment) involves "a twin-track approach" that incorporates both the European Union and "indigenous policy evolution" (Hodgett & Johnson, 2001, p. 326) – a combination that has made this a very successful development initiative (Hodgett & Johnson, 2001). While elaborating on this theme, a community group leader from Derry identified the cumulative nature of peace-building work:

MICHAEL: I think peace is built by one, by one, by one, by one...It has to do with...eventually creating a critical mass, and you reach a tipping point, and things change. But that isn't always easily identifiable either in advance or even retrospectively. It takes some sort of long-term perspective before you see all this...I think the same is happening here...there are many, many things

happening here, which may not have that great single sun-burst impact but are much more gradual.

Thus, Michael suggests that peace-building radiates out from micro-level interactions that gradually culminate in broader systemic change. Moreover, another community group leader from Derry cited an example of effective partnerships in facilitating effective development:

PATRICIA: We...have had what was called the Local Strategy Partnerships....it may not have been perfect, but it was workable. It builds capacity, it showed inclusion. It allowed grassroots voices to be heard.

Patricia avers that strategic partnerships build local capacities and facilitate the inclusion of grassroots perspectives.

In contrast, other respondents identified the need to clarify the preferred definition of development, highlighting that it must include considerations of both economic growth and the empowerment of all societal actors. For example, the concept of Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) encompasses both notions of development and suggests that it is necessary for marginalized populations to participate in and access information for capacity-building (Unwin, 2009). In Northern Ireland, ICT4D played an important role in this process, as identified by a community group leader from the Border Area:

ROBERT: It's very difficult for people in the Border region to access third level education...and we, through the funding that we have received, have been able to facilitate outreach programmes [that provide]...satellite broadcasting...so that people can participate and that the cost is minimum in terms of time and the financial output. [Also]...because many of the courses were cross-Border, networks – unofficial and official – were developed over time. I think that has had a very positive impact in bringing people together.

Robert highlights that distance education programs empower people, especially those residing in rural areas, to further their education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, many respondents noted that the maintenance of a sustainable peace-building process in Northern Ireland requires a synergy of developmental efforts between macro-level politics and micro-level actors. However, many respondents argued that coordination between these levels has fallen short of their expectations. For example, a community leader from the Border Area explained the role of local politicians in fostering important connections:

NIALL: We definitely need the political will, and if it's going to be sustainable...we need to have the government, we need to have all of that body on board...But the local politicians have got more involved in the peace process and the programmes and engaging with communities, and you definitely see that now in the work when you're out on the ground and even the groups would tell you that they are a bit more connected.

Niall recognizes the key role of local political leaders in moving the peace process forward to the benefit of all citizens. In addition, a community group leader from Derry explained how styles and perceptions of leadership have changed:

ALLYSON: At last in Northern Ireland a certain amount of common sense has come to the fore. Both communities' people have realised these leaders in the past have led us down a dead end and we have hit the buffers on both sides. There are three thousand four hundred murders and twenty thousand injuries...[and] we are still living together. If this was to start again the whole thing would start all over again and where would that get us all? What is important is peace and prosperity. War brings want but only peace can bring prosperity.

Allyson notes that local citizens want to elect leaders who will shore up the peace process so that they can prosper economically. Thus, social economic development NGOs like Rath Mor Business and Community Enterprise Centre in Derry were created by Creggan Enterprises as a community economic development venture to address the social and economic needs of the people in the Creggan and the Bogside through the local ownership of business initiatives where all profits are reinvested in the community.

Local grassroots endeavours contribute to structural changes. Violent ethno-political conflict is often rooted in a social structure that privileges certain identity categories over others (Jeong, 2005). This “structural violence” is built into social institutions and the very fabric of society in a manner that sustains inequality, prevents some people from satisfying their basic human needs, and encourages the use of overt violence by sectarian political actors seeking to maintain the status quo (Galtung, 1996; Galtung & Höivik, 1971; Galtung, 1978 cited in Montiel, 2001). In the past, structural violence has negatively affected the working class Nationalist and Unionist communities and, consequently, peace-building in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties must involve restructuring society so as to ensure the equitable distribution of resources (Byrne et al., 2009a). Numerous respondents in this

study identified that the first step of this transformation is to educate people about the systemic nature of social inequality. A community group leader from Derry highlighted that externally-funded local peace-building and conflict resolution training initiatives have done much to achieve this objective:

AOIFE: How do we empower and enable people to carry out work at the grassroots level?...[O]ur ethos is based on the premise of “What is it that the people need to heal? What are the unresolved issues that they need to address before we challenge them to open themselves up to other possibilities?” If we are holding onto hurt, and it feeds into our prejudice and discrimination, we have to deal with that first.

Aoife recognizes that people need the space to be educated about the conflict and to heal from past atrocities. For example, the Corrymeela Community was established 48 years ago in Ballycastle, Co. Down with the vision of creating authentic interface experiences between both communities, especially through its youth and primary/secondary school projects. Further, youth in Northern Ireland and the Border Areas have been identified as a specific population requiring intensive long-term economic, political, social, and psychological support within the peace-building process (Senehi & Byrne, 2006). In an effort to meet these needs, many projects have been initiated, including the IFI-funded project described here by a community group leader from Derry:

NIAMH: One of the programmes that we [were] involved in...[took] young people from across the community out of Northern Ireland... We ran two [cross-community youth camps] in New Zealand, and we ran two to Boston.

Niamh notes that taking Protestant and Catholic youth abroad can build important ties among the projects participants. For example, Peace Players International brings Protestant and Catholic children together on mixed basketball, rugby, soccer, Gaelic football, and hurling teams to forge new friendships and to work with international facilitators that help participants develop leadership skills and create a common ground of understanding. Another NGO community group leader from Derry highlighted how youth perceive the peace process and how certain practices can expose them to a healthy and vibrant political system. She emphasized the importance of collaborative processes whereby various actors work together so that young people are prevented from reliving the trauma of the Troubles:

KATIE: I remember one of them telling me the reason he gave up his struggle and joined the peace process and became...part of an ex-combatant

organisation to help bring about the peace, was that he looked at his teenage son and saw the potential for him to go down the road that he went down, and he said “I didn’t want my son being in jail for 10 years or 15 years.” So he got involved in the peace process... We are all in it together, working with ex-combatants, working with community leaders, working with educators, colleges..., the youth service. Together we hope that there is a greater understanding that we cannot go back.

Katie’s NGO works with former Loyalist and Republican combatants. These participants desire a future for their children that is both peaceful and progressive.

Women have also been identified as a group with particular needs and assets that must be considered within peace-building processes. United Nations’ reports have identified that women and children are the most vulnerable populations within ethno-political conflict (McKay, 2007). Furthermore, the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (adopted in 2000) unequivocally reaffirmed the role of women in peace-building and conflict resolution. It identifies:

[t]he important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and [stresses] the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. (United Nations, 2000)

As a consequence, many NGOs emphasize the need to ensure the equal participation of women at the governmental policy, programming, and planning levels (McKay, 2007). In Northern Ireland and the Border Counties the external funding has created opportunities at the local level for women to participate in educational, economic, and peace-building activities in numerous ways as explained by many respondents in this study. For example, an NGO leader from the Border Area highlighted such efforts in the following way:

JESSICA: There are groups that I could take you to in Derry where there is tremendous trust, women who would have been divided, and their partners would have killed one another and [they] are now the best of friends, and they are leading lights and champions. So I can bring you to places of real hope and desire.

Jessica’s NGO works with Protestant and Catholic women in the Border Area who have developed important relationships across the bi-communal divide over the years. Another

community group leader from the Border Area mentioned how the funding created opportunities for women to develop skills and learn new information:

ROBERT: One of the most important outcomes of European money to this Border Region was money that was given over to the setting up of [a programme aimed at creating learning opportunities for women]...During the years in which it was operating, women came out of their homes because it was a free programme, they came out of their homes for the first time to do this...the thousands and thousands of women who...left school maybe thirty years before or forty years before and came out to do this programme in personal development, skills assessment, skills transfer and mental health, physical health, and assertiveness and responsibilities.

Robert articulates that his NGO has fostered the empowerment of women in the Border Area by providing them with important capacity-building opportunities.

Finally, innovative peace-building methods such as music, storytelling, and the arts can also be used to help the survivors of violence heal from trauma. As a consequence, these creative processes can be catalysts for peace-building in divided societies (Senehi, 2009a, 2002). Some of our respondents noted that by using these methods strategically it is possible to create a common space wherein members of both communities can freely express their hopes and fears (Shank & Schirch, 2008). A community group leader from the Border Area mentioned a number of such projects as follows:

JENNIFER: One of our IFI approved projects...[involved] twelve towns and villages on a cross-Border basis and the idea was to give them a boost in development, but a certain amount of trust had to be developed between the different groups...It's kind of like shared public art pieces that are developed...you had to get communities on a North-South basis to actually share their ideas or their creativity or their whole inspiration behind a project before you could develop a piece of public art that would actually meet the needs of both groups.

Jennifer's NGO supported Protestants and Catholics in the Border area to co-create a public art piece that represented both communities. For example, Cooperation Ireland was established in 1979 to bring young Protestants and Catholics on the island together in joint projects and programs to break down sectarian walls by learning about each other's cultural traditions and by providing the leadership skills to build a vibrant, tolerant and pluralist

society. Another NGO leader from the Border Area suggested that arts and music are apolitical tools that allow people to operate without the assumption of hidden agendas:

WILLIAM: I think the reason we see the arts playing such an important role in peace- building is because it is something that isn't political or overtly political...I think what has happened is that...people view the political parties and the political individuals as very much coloured by their own education and upbringing...If you can change people's perceptions through integration at a younger age...maybe if they do go on to politics they'll take that with them.

William's NGO provides a venue for young Protestants and Catholics to come together to play music infused with their cultural traditions and to work collaboratively to develop new joint pieces of music. This fosters mutual understanding and relationship-building.

Overall, the study participants' responses indicate that a wide variety of strategies have been employed to address both the immediate effects of violent conflict and the underlying sources of social tension in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties.

Conclusions: Elements of a Peace-Building Model

While it may not be possible to construct a clear, bounded model of peace-building for export to other conflict situations, the Northern Ireland experience does allow for the identification of important lessons learned. The liberal democratic peace applied to societies transitioning out of protracted conflict and political violence offers lessons that can guide future practice – particularly in terms of the facilitation of cross-community interaction (Tannam, 2006, p. 274). For example, the lessons from these peace-building efforts could be applied in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Iraq – societies transitioning out of war and toward which the international community has directed considerable resources for rebuilding both infrastructure and tattered relationships in the wake of massive violence and trauma. At the same time it is important to recognize the complexity of each of these individual conflicts that necessitate localized-international hybrid interventions. In Northern Ireland and the Border Counties the external funding from the IFI and EU Peace Funds has nurtured the voluntary sector and created many positive cross-community ties across the bi-communal divide (Byrne et al., 2009b). By drawing upon the perceptions and experiences of grassroots actors, this study has allowed for the identification of several “key elements” of effective peace-building practice that – given their congruency with existing literature – may be conceptualized as applicable to other contexts of ethno-political conflict.

The first of these elements is the necessity of developing significant relationships between actors at multiple levels of social interaction. For example, former Loyalist paramilitaries are actively engaged in restorative justice, community leadership, and transformative work with former Republican paramilitaries (Shirlow, 2012). Further, in response to changing political and socioeconomic terrain, Unionist community development groups have organized “around cultural and historical traditions activities” that address the psycho-cultural roots of the conflict and provide a critical training arena for community development and peace-building workers (Smithey, 2011, p. 223). This is challenging work because, as identified by Smithy (2011), “changing the rules and norms with which many Protestants identify (such as accepting external funding or meeting with Republicans) or the symbolic displays that perform identity [is] a tenuous and sometimes delicate business” (p. 223). Despite this, both communities continue to experiment with and change their collective identities in constructive new ways “that are ontologically consonant but that open the group’s orientation to hear adversaries in a new constructive way or at least minimize the alienating effect of a particular cultural expression” (Smithy, 2011, p. 50). Such modifications are unfolding in the Unionist community, resulting in new understandings as both communities grapple with a shared past and reframe their stories to allow for intergroup collaboration and co-existence (Shirlow, 2012; Smithey, 2011).

Study participants identified that the formation of such relationships was necessary to ensure the effective targeting of aid and the efficient use of monetary and human resources. This approach is supported by Lederach’s (1997) integrated peace-building framework. He argues that effective peace-building is never strictly a top-down or bottom-up affair; rather, it requires the development of both vertical relationships (between top-level, mid-level, and grassroots-level actors) and horizontal relationships (across communities, among multiple sectors, and so on). In this manner a complex web of relationships is constructed that facilitates the emergence of approaches that creatively maximizes available resources and are responsive to changing conflict dynamics (Lederach, 2005). Some participants further expanded upon this notion, stating that such relationship development also requires significant investment in educational and skill development services.

Relatedly, the second element of effective peace-building practice is the need for external financial assistance to be appropriately targeted and effectively distributed – a criterion that can only be met if there is consultation with local communities and the grassroots organizations delivering peace-building programs. Participants in this study

identified that the aid monies provided through the IFI and EU Peace III Programme have benefitted local communities greatly, infusing vital resources for peace-building, reconciliation, and development efforts that otherwise would not have been available. However, many participants qualified this by emphasizing that the effectiveness of the assistance has been dependent upon the extent to which it has addressed community needs and has been disbursed in an accessible and equitable manner. Further, while participants expressed that both the IFI and the EU Peace III Fund have sought to adjust their funding delivery mechanisms in response to changing conflict dynamics and local concerns, the perception remains that the complexity of the funding application process has been a hindrance to marginalized groups. Thus, effective peace-building requires on-going collaboration between funding agencies and local communities so as to develop appropriate priorities and disbursement mechanisms (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2011, 2008).

Ensuring the sustainability of peace-building processes is the third element of effective practice. This was a central concern of many participants in this study – an unsurprising finding given that the external funding is set to expire in 2013. Numerous participants identified different mechanisms for ensuring the continuation of local peace-building efforts in the absence of outside assistance, some of which include: the development of interpersonal relationships; the challenging of inequitable social structures; the creation of a fertile pool of human and social capital at the local level; the fostering of hope and leadership amongst youth; the transformation of attitudes; and the re-conceptualization of cultural symbols and traditions. Overall, it was stressed that all peace-building activities should contribute to the realization of a long-term vision and help build a stable platform for continued change. In addition, many participants identified the development of a culture of collaboration amongst local NGOs in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties; that is, thousands of voluntary organizations are currently working together so as to share resources and attain common goals, thus creating what Boulding (1998) terms an “NGO peace-building community” (cited in Reychler & Paffenholz, 2001, p. x). This is another mechanism through which long-term sustainability may be achieved.

However, it should also be noted that external funding may also encourage a dependency culture wherein a plethora of community groups compete with each other to access limited resources (Mac Ginty, 2008; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). Indeed, several respondents in this study indicated that some community groups have developed “peace-building projects” in name only; that is, these groups engage in little cross-community

collaboration and operate primarily from a single-identity basis. Thus, it should not be assumed that external funding will, in and of itself, provide a pragmatic intervention for communities transitioning out of post-agreement societies (Mac Ginty, 2013, 2011).

The fourth element of effective peace-building practice is the need to address both the immediate effects of violent conflict and the underlying conflict dynamics that give rise to social tension. Both of these peace-building avenues must be pursued simultaneously using a plethora of multimodal strategies. The participants in this study identified a variety of issues that require consideration within Northern Ireland's peace-building process, including: trauma (and the transmission of trauma narratives to younger generations); socioeconomic inequality and unemployment; cultural narratives and symbolism; the lack of access to education and skills training; and misconceptions of the Other. Furthermore, specific groups (for example, youth) were identified as having particular needs that require tailored programming. Thus, there is no singular catchall cure for violence and conflict; rather, it is necessary to address multiple issues of concern, interpersonal and intercommunity relationships, and broader systemic factors simultaneously (Lederach, 1997, p. 56).

The need to address multiple conflict factors in a comprehensive and coordinated manner leads into the fifth element of effective peace-building practice: the usage of multiple strategies that are both linked to broader peace-building goals and directly relevant to local needs, capabilities, and visions. Participants identified a variety of specific strategies employed by their organizations that met this criterion, including: storytelling and engagement with the arts; the usage of ritual, symbolism and tradition; dialogue and contact groups; the creation of shared public spaces; training and educational initiatives; and job creation programs. Many participants noted that each initiative was designed to meet a variety of peace-building goals simultaneously. For example, cross-community economic development projects served to meet the immediate material needs of local populations while also fostering reconciliation by facilitating intergroup contact, the sharing of resources, and the pursuit of a common goal. Such efforts help to maximize the impact of external assistance while cultivating local capacities and relationships.

These five elements of effective peace-building practice – the development of significant relationships between actors at multiple levels of social interaction; the undertaking of on-going consultation with local communities so as to effectively target and distribute external aid; the development of mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of peace-building processes in the long term; addressing both immediate issues as well as underlying

conflict dynamics; and the usage of multiple strategies that meet both local needs and broader visions – can all together be considered elements of an effective model of peace-building practice that may be appropriately applied to other settings of ethno-political conflict. These five elements respond to the cumulative, organic nature of peace-building and directly address the complex and dynamic nature of conflict. Consequently, they provide a sufficiently flexible model of practice adaptable to other contextual conditions.

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