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Relationship Building Through Funded Civil Society Organizations in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland: Some Critical Reflections

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Introduction

The article explores civil society actors' experiences and perception of external economic aid in funding local peacebuilding organizations to facilitate inclusive social relationships. Peacebuilding processes are dependent on context. In the case of the Northern Ireland (NI) peace process, significant economic and social changes prepared momentum for the success of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Before the GFA, during the Troubles, the period from 1968 to 1998, high levels of social polarization in NI enabled devastating violence. Tens of thousands of people were injured, and the region of 1.9 million inhabitants suffered 3,720 conflict-related deaths (Holland, 2022). Undoubtedly, for peace to emerge, a different context must be prepared.

In NI, international economic aid targeted grassroots organizations who helped amplify the voices of previously strategically undervalued and excluded people (Byrne et al., 2009a). The grassroots focus of international economic assistance was an important factor in securing the trust and public support necessary for sustainable and ever deeper forms of peace to emerge. Indeed, the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups within society reduces hostilities between competing groups and builds communities' self-confidence and cross-community ties to avoid the recurrence of conflict (Lederach, 1997). Beyond economics, structural inequalities also deny

opportunities for political participation and provide new energy to human rights to exclude social groups as the exacerbation of these inequalities creates ideal conditions for conflict (Cederman et al., 2013; Wucherpfennig et al., 2012).

Despite general recognition by policymakers of the importance of international economic assistance for peacebuilding, keeping economic aid only at macro levels of institutional design and state-building, without reaching local social economic development and grassroots peace programs, may unintentionally reinforce cleavages and divisions between the conflicting groups (Byrne et al., 2009a). Moreover, it could also be the case that following international donors' interests and conditions, international economic assistance as an instrument of the liberal peace may fail to back up local peace and development efforts in part because of the disconnection between local communities and donors in terms of local cultural approaches to development and reconciliation (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2007). Thus, understanding the mechanisms underpinning grassroots-oriented financial investment in NI to reduce structural economic inequalities between local Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) communities through international economic aid sheds light on its impact. This paper explores the nuances of these mechanisms in NI in terms of inclusion and relationship building.

This article examines the civil society sector of the NI peace process, involving Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who were recipients of European Union (EU) PEACE III or/and International Fund for Ireland (IFI) funding to nurture cross community peacebuilding. It argues that economic and political concerns have superseded social issues, community building, and the needs of everyday citizens. The consequences of this are an overly professionalized, technocratic peace process that has left many in NI disenfranchised and uncertain about the future. The NI

peace process includes a substantial peacebuilding investment, as well as the social consequences of ignoring strategically undervalued communities like ex-combatants, disability and LGBTQ communities that risk squandering this investment as well as the lessons learned that could be considered with regards to other ethnic conflicts (Mizzi et al., 2023). The political infrastructure is showing the cracks that have been apparent at the local level as Stormont was deadlocked between 2022-2024 in political issues steeped in division between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein (SF). Other divisive political issues included the political referendum on the 2016 United Kingdom's (UK) membership in the EU and its impact on the GFA, devolved government, and powersharing.

The paper analyzes interviews which were conducted during the summer of 2010 by the third author with 120 civil servants, development officers, and recipients of EU PEACE III or/and IFI funding in NI and the Border Counties (BCs) of the Republic of Ireland (RoI). This paper points out how deep reconciliation has been supplanted by an apparatus of liberal economics and capitalism. It begins by outlining critical emancipatory peacebuilding and the concerns of on-the-ground operatives, those working within civil society to build peace. It follows by describing in brief the modern context within NI, focusing on the flying of the flag's controversy, the collapse of the Stormont parliament in 2017 and again in 2022, and Brexit. It describes critical emancipatory peacebuilding as a pushback against the (neo)liberal undercurrents within international peacebuilding, and the use of IFI and EU PEACE funding for local grassroots organizations' reconciliation purposes. It then proceeds to analyze the relational and social concerns along the lines of ongoing social issues, positives and successes, and what can be done in the future. Next is a discussion that emphasizes current dynamics in NI and international peacebuilding, and what can be learned from these interviews with CSO leaders in

NI. Finally, this paper concludes by summarizing the main points raised throughout the article and re-asserting the idea that as a peace-oriented endeavour, peacebuilding should remain committed to local people, respect their voices and learn from their knowledge and experiences of peacebuilding.

Northern Ireland Context

Civil society is composed of voluntary organizations that exist in a semi-permeable space, in between and within the realms of the state, politics, economics, and private sectors, operating separately from these spheres, but often in close connection with them (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2010). In Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), the 'local' or 'cultural' turn in peace theory have emphasized the use of civil society to localize peacebuilding, such as with the use of CSO networks in NI, as well as 'everyday' actors who work outside these more formal networks (McGinty, 2021; Paffenholz, 2015). Since 1998, the GFA ushered in an era of financial support directed towards civil society projects with the goal of facilitating more peaceful relations within NI. However, tensions remain high, and over the last fifteen years instances and representations of the ongoing divide and crevasse between both communities shows that the conflict persists underneath the surface.

The controversial ruling in the Belfast City Council in 2012 regarding the flying of the Union flag prompted protests from Loyalist communities (Goldie & Murphy, 2015). Although typically peaceful, these protests escalated into violence and created new battlegrounds online which reignited Loyalist and Republican divisions (Bryan, 2015). The collapse and devolution of the powersharing government following the DUP's mismanagement of the renewable energy incentive scandal that became known publicly in 2016, signified the inability of major political parties to function, and resulted in the suspension of government creating tensions throughout NI

(Heenan & Birrell, 2021). The newest issues following the election of SF to the Stormont parliament as the largest political party in 2022 caused another breakdown that neither side was willing to address until the issues involving the Brexit border disputes are resolved (Black, 2022; Tonge, 2022). Further, the Brexit negotiations created unease and threatened the economic stability created by the GFA and economic policies like a single-island economy and freedom of mobility for goods and people (Doyle & Connolly, 2019).

The placement of the land and sea customs border created complex cultural, social, economic and political issues (Doyle & Connolly, 2019). The customs border also threatened EU funding and other EU human rights programming and infrastructure that were important contributions to the peace process (Doyle & Connolly, 2019). In particular, the unemployment and relative poverty of contingencies of young Protestant men have stoked tensions (Guelke 2014). The ongoing border issue that British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is dealing with, signifies the complexity and difficulty of managing the NI conflict. A July 2024 news article published in the *Belfast Telegraph* by Claire Williamson, illustrated that Starmer wanted "to reaffirm the principles of the GFA" and "get a better deal with the EU than the 'botched' deal agreed by Boris Johnson." Brexit reinvigorated nationalisms and divisions within NI, providing an arena for Eurosceptics and British nationalists largely aligned with PUL communities to pose challenges to cross-community reconciliation, partnership, and coexistence. As a result, CNR community disillusionment with the political system was amplified yet again (McCann & Hainsworth, 2017; Van Abswoude & de Vries, 2020).

EU PEACE and IFI funding were two major financial investments into the NI peace process as part of (neo)liberal peacebuilding. The EU PEACE program has had four iterations and is currently implementing PEACE PLUS (essentially PEACE V) which covers 2021 to 2027

and the Irish government's Shared Island initiative and fund (2021-2025) of €500 million (Kolodziejski, 2022). The EU PEACE Fund was created in 1995 after the ceasefires between paramilitary groups, with a focus on grassroots organizers (Byrne et al, 2009c; Hyde & Byrne 2015; Karari et al., 2013). The IFI, which focuses its funding along the BCs of the RoI is based on an agreement between the UK, NI, and the government of the RoI from 1986 to support the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, with $895 million USD (Buchanan, 2014; Fissuh et al., 2012; Skarlato et al., 2016). Financial investment plays an important role in peacebuilding to address the economic concerns and sociocultural dimensions by investing in human capital (Byrne et al., 2009b, 2010; Creary & Byrne, 2014a). The early funding structures of EU PEACE I, II, and III were informed by a specific formula of post-war reconstruction predicted in liberal economics and democracy as well as engaging with CSOs, and civil and political rights (Creary & Byrne 2014b). The more recent strategy document for the *International Fund for Ireland 2021 – 2024: Connecting Communities* emphasizes the promotion of reconciliation, engagement with communities and individuals with a focus on youth, and support for the development of leaders (IFI, 2020). It articulates the IFI's goal as building "a peaceful and shared society of empowered and connected communities" (IFI, 2020). To highlight issues within community-building, this strategy document emphasizes that 93 percent of children attend segregated schools, those identifying as neither Unionist nor Nationalist is at its lowest in 15 years (IFI, 2020). Despite successes and deep forms of reconciliation, the community-building aspects of the peace process have clearly faced and continue to face barriers to successful implementation. The renewed emphasis on connecting communities is a welcome advance, however as recent struggles and the 2022 shutdown of Stormont illustrate, this ongoing work is difficult and complex.

The fact sheet on EU PEACE programing states "this programme is now seen as an example of peacebuilding policy to be shared throughout Europe and other regions" (Kolodziejski, 2022). Brexit and the UK's withdrawal from the EU caused concern amongst EU funding recipients (Doyle & Connolly, 2019). The PEACE PLUS and the Shared Ireland Fund have helped ameliorate some of these concerns, while the peace dividend is threatened with underlying cultural and socioeconomic issues at the forefront of the conflict that civil society continue to address in NI (Byrne, 2023). The very poor, disability, and LGBTQ+ communities shows the government's lack of engagement with social justice, and there are further concerns with the inclusion of these groups and a lack of success connecting strategically undervalued communities in these community-building endeavours (Byrne et al., 2018, 2022; Holland, 2022; Tomlinson, 2016). The inclusion of strategically undervalued communities has always been a part of the NI peace process. The Equality Scheme stemming from the NI Act and negotiated peace in 1998, requires government departments to consider and give due regard for promoting equality related to differing religious and political beliefs, racial groups, gender, marital status, age, disability, dependent persons, and sexual orientation (Department of Communities, 2019). Yet, community engagement has largely focused on religious and political divisions and not, for example, on social issues and the very poor, disability and the LGBTQ communities (Byrne et al., 2018; Mizzi et al., 2023). Therefore, not only is the community-building capacity of this funding in question, but also its ability to include strategically undervalued communities within the construction of post-war communities.

Funding, Civil Society Organizations, and Critical Emancipatory Peacebuilding

Under the leadership of the British and Irish governments, the United States (US) and the EU, economic interventions were implemented to help prepare the ground for peacebuilding

negotiations in NI. Did this economic assistance help to overcome structural inequalities and segregation? What role did CSOs play in grassroots economic development and peacebuilding in NI? This section describes how economic investments in CSO's projects working to promote social inclusion, trust and hope for the future, and public support and political transformation have not overcome some of the structural inequalities impacting NI's people.

Critical emancipatory peacebuilding (CEP) comprises of critical social theory to understand power dynamics and emancipatory frameworks of considering and resolving conflict (Thiessen, 2011). These approaches deconstruct power within conflict, and promote social justice, local ownership, building upon local capacities, knowledge, and methods of peacebuilding to resolve conflict in more sustainable, long-term approaches (Thiessen, 2011). Building off critiques of the local turn by Thania Paffenholz (2015), CEP emphasizes seeing conflict as relational, oriented toward the local, all the while conceiving of power as a central concept (Lederach, 1997; Sellick, 2019; Thiessen, 2011). As such, it centralizes social relations between conflicting groups as being the bedrock upon which peace can be built, while deconstructing power within conflicting societies.

Liberal peacebuilding is "insensitive on the grounds of gender and class divisions and is blind to ethnic and national identity" (Knox & Quirk, 2016, p. 2). Critiques of the liberal peace thesis and (neo)liberal peacebuilding led to CEP emerging as an alterity to the status quo, implying the importance of local actors, which are by in large engaged through civil society (Chandler, 2010, 2017). The traditional state-building of (neo)liberal peacebuilding, through (neo)liberal economic and political reform, are the central goals of the liberal peace project (Paris, 2004). This neo-colonial and neo-imperial method of reifying Western authority over global politics and economics has been critiqued as pushing national foreign interests, over local

needs (Jabri, 2010; Pugh, 2004, 2005). These are antithetical to the establishment of peace, due to privileging Western interests over prioritizing resistance and well-being of everyday citizens (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Thiessen & Collins, 2020). In certain capacities, this has led to civil society being coopted to administer programs while allowing (neo)liberal concerns to remain unaccountable for issues and shifting blame for any devolution into conflict back onto the local population, despite not addressing root causes of violent conflict (Chandler, 2010). CEP points out the key of including local knowledge, wisdom, and peace consciousness embedded in relationships.

Lederach (2005) articulates the psycho-social dimensions of conflict and emphasizes the need to imagine the 'other' within our web of social relations. The 'other' in the case of NI are those on the other side of the PUL and CNR divide. Along with the need to embrace the complexity of conflict without slipping into binary constructions of 'us versus them', it is critical to recognize the potential and need for creativity and taking the risk of stepping into the unknown (Lederach, 2005). There is a need, therefore, to embrace the risk of peacebuilding, to re-imagine communities emerging from conflict as working together, as opposed to working in opposition or in competition. A fundamental peacebuilding goal must be restoring relationships between communities, and this goal must be addressed hand in hand with political and economic concerns. This overarching goal, by necessity, challenges the underlying currents of (neo)liberalism within peacebuilding. Peacebuilding that does not challenge the hegemony of (neo)liberalism does little to create sustainable change. Lederach provides a paradigm for how individual and communal-level peace-consciousness can be constructed that fundamentally challenges the impositions of (neo)liberal political ideologies.

At this juncture, Lederach helps describe the ways in which psychosocial dynamics influence and play intrinsic roles within building peace and sustaining relationship-building. What the moral imagination invites us to do is re-center relationship-building: understanding ourselves living within and across a multitude of relationships that consists of both sides of a conflict (Lederach, 2005). At a foundational level this means challenging the (neo)liberal impositions that emphasize the political and economic concerns of reconstructing post-war societies. It poses an alternative ethos to that of (neo)liberalism and liberal peacebuilding. Predicated on democratic institutions and economic reform at the level of governance and macro-economics, this focus deters the local initiatives that are less formulaic and mechanical, and less measurable and tangible (Thiessen, 2011). Lederach (2005) emphasizes that peacebuilding initiatives should embrace the risk and uncertainty involved in peace work – so called peacebuilding failures must be viewed with the complexity and circular nature of reconciliation and peace work in mind, as opposed to being viewed with a linear understanding of conflict resolution and development. This perspective on peacebuilding breaks traditional confines – and facilitates creativity in how we think about, understand, and move down the path through conflict. This research has a core objective to listen to and put local co-called everyday people who are working towards peace in their communities on the same plane as (neo)liberal political and economic concerns.

Voluntary Civil Society Organizations

A distinction can be made between the role of professionalized voluntary organizations and informal local community organizations and how they relate to the peace process and provide an outlet of alternative ideas to the status quo as well as being a source of government hegemony as these CSOs are operating within the context of neoliberal external aid rather than

they are challenging it. There is the view of what civil society's role in peacebuilding ought to be in terms of the vision of the funders and what it is in reality.

There are close to 5,000 voluntary and community sector organizations in NI that employ close to 28,000 workers that have become more dependent on government funding, grants, and partnerships (Knox & Quirk, 2016, p. 14). "Over half of civil society income derives from government purchasing of goods" (p. 15) to provide services to strategically undervalued communities which "in turn, challenges their independence and ability to call government to account" (Knox & Quirk, 2016, p. 17). Civil society and third sector voluntary and nonprofit organizations played a positive role during the conflict and in the peace process in terms of the "British or metropolitan liberal perspective" while being perceived as an adversary by Republicans and Unionists (Guelke, 2003, p. 68). Yet civil society has failed to influence the macro political level due to the GFA 's implementation and its consociationalism top-down elite structure that marginalized the voluntary sector (p. 74). As Guelke (2003) noted, "it is evident that in the Agreement as a whole too little attention has been paid to the drawbacks of consociational settlements, not least their implications for the entrenching of divisions and the reduction of the influence of cross community groups and civil society more generally on the political process" (p. 75).

The voluntary and community sector may not be real advocates for change for the strategically undervalued and disenfranchised working class as they have become dependent on the aid with the government using the sector to regulate civil society and the grassroots to generate "social stability" so it can implement its neoliberal agenda (Hughes, 2019, pp. 61-62). The government's outsourcing policy to the previously marginalized sector embraced this new collaborative partnership with government willing to transfer neoliberal values and norms to the

local level using funding to do so in the process (pp. 63-64). Government austerity measures adapted because of neoliberal policies, and the free market means that workers have not benefitted from the peace dividend (p. 65). Through New Labour and the EU, relationships between the voluntary and community sector and economic and political elites became more entangled in "network and civil society boosterism" (p. 65). After the GFA, the sector grew and prospered through EU and IFI funds, and government and private foundations as it expanded its delivery and consultation services with government in "cross sectoral creative and interdependent partnerships" becoming both an object and instrument of policy and in developing networks and community revitalization (p. 66).

The 2011 concordant between government and the sector created a professional voluntary and community sector that dialogued with government departments to deliver services and build cross community relations and, post-GFA, developed relationships with local politicians and political parties (p. 68). The local voluntary sector has token consultation with government with the "sectoral hierarchy" maintaining that illusion with NI's government pretending its consulting with local communities as it co-opts local networks as it has funded the sector as funds from the EU, IFI, Atlantic Philanthropies wind down (p. 70). Government created a contract and procurement culture to outsource its public services through the voluntary sector that has bred competition among voluntary organizations (p. 72). There is a concern in the voluntary sector that some ex-combatants in the sector are promoting distrust as government tries to co-opt them to "buy stability" in local communities as they "carve up the funds" to control their local constituency (p. 71). Top-down government has promoted the voluntary sector's dependent role and "cross sectoral relationships" as it uses it to promote "social enterprise, private sector investment" and government's neoliberal programs to embed these norms and values within

local communities to generate "social stability" so that there is no agency to have an "effective opposition" or "critical common sense" from the voluntary sector to organize and resist government neoliberal policies and the "outsourcing of its programs" (p. 73).

Working class communities have not experienced the peace dividend. Economic reconstruction is critical to embed peace and "an asymmetric 'peace dividend' can store up resentment and create circumstances which are unlikely to be conducive to the long-terms social change that will embed peace" (Knox & Quirk, 2016, p. 37). As Coulter (2014) notes, "while there is some evidence that a 'peace dividend' has materialized in the region, its benefits have, however, been neither universal nor evenly distributed" (p. 766). Direct investment into NI tapered off by the turn of the 21st century as "the unemployed and workless" are underpaid in low end jobs and find it difficult to look for work while the privileged class has accrued benefits from the peace dividend (p. 767). The 2008 global economic crash led to a recession in which NI's fragile economy succumbed to austerity measures, cuts in spending, and erosions of welfare benefits as powersharing efforts failed while the so-called socialist SF and the DUP agreed on economic policies like reducing corporate taxes and cutting welfare benefits that hurt the very poor (p. 772). This was due to their "willing embrace of the established dogma that private finance is an indispensable prerequisite of public enterprise" (Coulter, 2019, p. 129). "When we look more closely at the way in which NI's society is structured, it becomes readily apparent that the fundamental line of material fissure in the region is, now more than ever, that marked by social class" (Coulter, 2014, p. 773).

The application of neoliberal policies and the failure of the GFA to deliver a peace dividend to NI's poorest strategically undervalued communities has ensured that the working class derived limited economic benefits while austerity measures continue to erode the welfare

that these communities need as politics is framed in ethnocultural terms (Coulter, 2014; Knox et al., 2023). "When the sap of ethno-national feeling rises in NI, among the first casualties is the space available to socialists" (Coulter, 2019, p. 135). Poverty, inequality austerity, and lack of economic opportunities continue to harm the very poor in North and West Belfast neighbourhoods as there are few quality jobs being created in meaningful numbers "and of sufficient quality, to alter meaningfully the material conditions of these neighbourhoods that bore the brunt of the Troubles" (p. 127). Both SF and the DUP signed onto a budget in 2015 that cut welfare benefits and allowed for public sector job losses while allowing the British government to "legislate welfare reform" (p. 133) "imposing even greater misery on the poorest sections of NI's society" (p. 134). The People Before Profit Alliance elected socialists to the Stormont Assembly to represent the interests of working-class people that eventually evaporated in the wake of Brexit and the turn to identity politics (p. 135).

A few external funders have provided economic aid to the third sector to build peace like the EU PEACE Funds, IFI, and Atlantic Philanthropies (AP). Philanthropic organizations can assist the aid recipients to be creative and imaginative about social change, advocacy, and service delivery (Knox & Quirk, 2016, p. 45). For example, AP provided $604 million to 618 grantees to "shore up" the peace process through a social justice framework to support changing political structures in the areas of ageing, disadvantaged children and youth, population health, and reconciliation and human rights (p. 56) by building networks and "advocacy coalitions to effect social change through different engagement forms" (p. 63). AP became a "driver of change by supporting some of the most marginalized groups in NI" (p. 222) like ex-combatants, pensioners, children, and youth generating empirical data on intervention and prevention so that grantees could "hold the new government accountable to its prior commitments, making sure that peace

had a real and positive impact on the day-to-day lives of everyone in NI" (p. 231). CSOs evaluated their projects and used those findings to influence macro politics to effect social change.

However, AP went from advocacy for strategically undervalued groups to using its leverage to influence government policies becoming a "driver of social change" (p. 233). AP selected certain community groups to fund without any public accountability to do things at its behest to agitate on common inequality problems as community gatekeepers slowed down the change process (p. 236). Tensions arose over unrealistic expectations as some groups did not desire or have the capabilities to "navigate the policy landscape" (p. 240) and felt abandoned by AP's cozying up to government in which it had a complex friend/foe relationship. "Some officials and politicians have at times viewed APs role as reckless. Others perceived AP as having the resources to experiment with radical ideas free from the shackles of public sector accountability associated with spending taxpayers' money" (p. 236).

The EU designed the Peace and Reconciliation Program as a "bottom-up networked style of metagovernance" to facilitate cross border and local interdependence among a myriad of "actors and networks" in the third sector to address "the deep structural roots of the NI conflict" especially deprivation and unemployment (Lagana, 2021, p. 135). Jacques Delors, President of the EU Commission, created a special NI Task Force in 1994 to bring "the public and private sector together to form a consensus approach on the way forward achieving cohesion within NI and the BCs together with accelerating economic growth" (p. 138). As part of the Task Force, NI's three MEPs, Hume, Nicholson and Paisley, worked together on a superordinate goal to design the program and to connect it with local groups for the betterment of NI's people (Lagana, 2016). They knew that "there was a lot of commitment in voluntary organizations and

private actors to cross the religious divide and do things together to further community development" (p. 140). For example, John Hume consulted with European parliament committees to ensure that the PEACE program would support all NI's citizens (p. 142). This would be done through local CSOs that "had already developed and built on the existing solidarity within communities and had already encouraged cross-community cooperation" (p. 144) to work to regenerate strategically undervalued and deprived communities through the fundings grants to generate "new forms of cooperation" and initiatives across the bicommunal divide (p. 147).

The PEACE I Fund involved many key stakeholders including CSOs, both governments, Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs), local authorities, and private sector organizations with the EU Commission acting "as the metagovernor" in bottom-up peacebuilding (p. 149). Supranationalism of the region and transnationalism and local cultures superseded the nationalism of the British and Irish governments. "The PEACE package, therefore, embodied the EU commitment to multi-level structured social partnership, which included peacebuilding networks empowered by metagovernance mechanisms" (p. 150). PEACE I encountered problems that included cross border links, different currency and tax systems, lack of coordination between statutory agencies on both sides of the border, lack of an effective method to target CSOs, and its short-term support of projects (pp. 151-152). However, a "new style of multilateral dialogue and compromise" (p. 154) emerged with the cross-border focus providing "the scope for a broader framework of cooperation" to assist in overcoming zero-sum politics and "IFBs and bottom-up consultations were an ingenious metagovernance tool of devolving responsibility to the grassroots and building capacity in the region" (p. 153).

In contrast, the EU PEACE II Fund provided "new cultural places across the Irish border" on cross cultural activities like arts, storytelling, and multi-media initiatives, and recreational programs to promote "mutual understanding and reconciliation" to "explore commonality and diversity outside the theatre of the conflict" (Lagana & White, 2021, p. 157) because they were less contentious politically and encouraged participants to think differently about local needs. The EU used these cross-border initiatives to "Europeanise the conflict by undermining historical communal tensions" (p. 160).

Consequently, local political actor's short-term interests were to look after their own ethnic communities while the EU bureaucrats and technocrats short-terms interests were to make sure that member states resources were spent appropriately (Knox et al., 2023, p. 291). "The precise and overly rigid means of implementation, where the absence of direction leads to ineffective implementation" in terms of policy implementation remains with the member states (p. 261). Knox et al.'s (2023) EU PEACE IV's findings indicated that respondents did not believe that relations would improve between both communities while results were mixed for those wishing to live in a mixed neighbourhood or remain in segregated neighborhoods with 16-year-olds having a pessimistic view of future relations (pp. 298-303). Local politicians were interested in getting resources for their communities and not in implementing EU policy that made the program "difficult to deliver in practice" (p. 305). Measuring "financial accountability" might be overcoming transformative change leading to "administrative ambiguity" so that "bums on seats and crude sectarian head counting alone is a poor measure of success" as it sustains sectarian relationships and structures (p. 306). "At the same time as the local administrators adhere to the strict rules of the policy, these policies are at odds with the local political interests and priorities, leading to an implementation deficit" (p. 306).

External funding has supported a burgeoning peace industry in NI, yet the socioeconomic conditions of strategically undervalued communities has not much improved. Yet there are many authentic and genuine cross community projects facilitated by local CSOs. The goal of this research is to explore how these CSO peace workers have experienced peacebuilding and facilitating cross community relationships.

Methods

The article empirically assesses interviewees' experiences and perceptions of peacebuilding funding and the progress in transforming the culture surrounding the conflict and promoting a shared future. During the summer of 2010, the third author interviewed 120 individuals including CSO leaders in NI and the BCs of Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone receiving funding from the EU PEACE III Fund and/or the IFI in support of peacebuilding. The sample also included senior civil servants responsible for administering the funding, and development officers working for both funding agencies that liaised between the CSOs and funders. These civil servants and officers were able to comment on the bureaucratic nature of these funding programs such as converting currency, and the rules and regulations. Development officers and other middle-tier workers are the key intervention level between CSOs and civil servants as they simplify the policies and support CSOs to apply for funding. Eighty men and forty women were interviewed in the BCs and Derry and consented to participate in the research.

Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted in respondents' offices after signing the informed consent forms, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. The interviews were grounded in their experiences and the respondents were asked ten open-ended questions about the connections between economic assistance in building local peacebuilding and reconciliation

capacities. All transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed, and pseudonyms were assigned to each person to protect their anonymity. We inductively elicited themes from the interviews. The data in this paper focuses on the interviews with development officers and recipients of EU PEACE III funding and not the civil servants administering both funds.

Developing Social Relationships

The impact of the NI conflict continues to influence social relationships. A CSO leader communicated that there is a denial about the conflict along the Border Area even though it permeates everyday conversations, and that stories and experiences not considered acceptable or respectable are more stigmatized and marginalized than others.

> *ANNMARIE:* I mean there are commonalities no matter which perspective, whether it's a Catholic background whether it's a Republican background or a Loyalist background. And the stigma attached to their particular story whether it's the wives of men that served time or whether it's someone who's a member of their family was caught up quite innocently in an explosion.
>
> There's almost a sense that okay while there's sympathy from society in general there is a sense that we need to collectively move on. The community needs to collectively move on. So, and at the same time particularly here in the Border Area there's also the sense that people almost have a denial of the conflict, and yet in the conversations it permeates conversations.

Annmarie noted that some people use stereotypes to frame ex-combatants' experiences and stories as they are not the stories and experiences of respectable members of the local community. There is no real incentive for them to engage with ex-combatants or other people who got caught up in the conflict. Thus, ongoing issues remain, and stories of the conflict

operate in tightly wound political and social spaces that people must navigate when trying to

promote reconciliation (Senehi, 2009, 2022).

Alternatively, relationships across different communities need to be facilitated by

organizations. This is not always the case, as one CSO leader articulated. Divisions remain even

in the infrastructure of buildings. On the other hand, simply getting both sides inside a building is

facilitation enough in some cases.

> *NIALL:* The first night I went into the area I knew the IFI had funded a lot of the facility,
> and I walked into the building. And I walked in through one door and as I walked in
> through that door, I noticed [another entrance]……Catholic and Protestant could not be
> seen going out through the same door.
>
> So, that's held up as a leading light in Europe as an example of how to build
> peace. Whereas I was saying put a door on the side of it, which says we all come in as
> one, we come from our perspective. But it's the moment we come through there our
> attitude is as one. We're not about me versus you, we're about the "we."

There have been successes in relationship building, but not without issues. A CSO leader

disclosed that several peace projects and partnerships have lasted beyond the PEACE funding,

creating partnerships and meaningful ongoing relationships that serve the local community.

Roisin reported that there was a saturation of projects in the area, and that in rural areas it was

challenging and difficult to get Protestants involved in peacebuilding projects.

> *ROISIN:* …In terms of bringing communities together, I think it's also to recognize that
> [here] you have different traditions as well so actually within communities based solely
> [here]. You would sort of have you know one of the success stories of this scheme as well
> of the PEACE scheme anyway has been that kind of got communities talking to one and

other [and] at least discussing the issues whether necessarily they agree on the issues or not.

At least they provided a forum for that, an opportunity for that I think that's really important. When the Catholic community uses resource centers and community centers more especially in the more rural area, the Protestants just tend to keep to themselves, and don't want to be involved in those types of projects. So, I don't know how we as a local authority can change that, maybe that's more for the community centers themselves. The PEACE funding has encouraged members of both communities to begin dialoguing with each other. At the same time, however, some members of the PUL community are afraid to get involved and be seen raising their heads above the parapet. Isolation during the Troubles has solidified an isolationist mindset for many people. Current issues like Brexit, as well as the election of SF as the largest political party in Stormont for the first time have not eased tensions, and young Protestants are caught up in protests and disenfranchisement (Guelke, 2014).

A CSO leader articulated that it is difficult to quantify the projects' successes because their duration is over a short period of time. Groups doing the same activities often work near each other engaging in similar peacebuilding efforts without knowing that they exist. The task is to facilitate their capacity building and networking by providing small grants. He believed a real sustainable peace was not being built on the ground.

NIALL: …And some of the early Protestant communities have done very well…but has it built peace, has it made people feel from the opposite community any better going in there? I'd say probably not…and you look at all the investment there, and the whole development….Is that making the other community feel safer and more able to engage? I'd say no.

> I think…when cross-Border becomes a peacebuilding by proxy that concerns me. When you try and bring a Catholic group together with a Protestant group from the Republic, I've issues with that. For one it's not sustainable, and they're not building relationships with their neighbor….

Niall went on to note that the funders do not understand the challenges faced by many young people and the pressing sectarian issues of the day, unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, and the associated alienation, frustration, isolation, and disconnection from politics and the peace process. Supported by recent literature on these feelings of social relegation and the way these feelings inspire the re-emerging protests, the ability for CSOs to reach youth is an important concern for maintaining the momentum the peace has created and continuing the work of building cross-community relations (Halliday & Ferguson, 2016).

> People do not know each other's stories and young people born after 1994 are very vulnerable. Consequently, it is important to engage youth in conversations with the older generations so that they learn from the past and not become easy cannon fodder for dissident Loyalist and Republican groups. This is what a CSO leader had to say on the issue.

> *ANNMARIE:* And we can see here in the town slogans starting to go up again, Republican slogans so we know that…. Just last week or the week before you had a massive bomb scare outside X town as well, and you had one in Y town. So, you know the threat is actually rising…. Look at how that permeated their lives and some of them have a big story to tell.

> Like one woman who talks about the biggest tragedy in her life, and how her brother was killed, and the community actually while they were sympathetic… were

encouraging her to move on.... And no one came to her aside from that first day…. She

has been carrying this around for 30 years, and how the priest waited to take her to the

hospital but after that nothing, after that nothing.

There are multiple traumatic stories about the Troubles that need to be heard by

the younger generation because they affirm the survivors' experiences, and they educate

the youth who have limited knowledge and experience about the conflict. They are

empowered to visit different areas and speak to different generations to increase their

knowledge and awareness.

As can be seen, relationships remain tenuous and peacebuilding, despite successes in NI and the

BCs, faces challenges to the deep reconciliation needed to overcome the confrontations and

disruptions to peace that occur.

Positive Peacebuilding Experiences

Positive experiences of peacebuilding to date can be built upon moving forward. The

brain-drain of young people moving out of the Border Area due to the lack of economic and

employment opportunities necessitated intervention by the statutory agencies to facilitate

networking, build relationships, and community development between local CNR and PUL

communities. A CSO leader highlighted that external funding created opportunities for cross-

communal contact that had not occurred in the past.

BRONAGH: Protestants did not get involved in community development much less

peacebuilding because … once they would see peace being involved, they didn't want

anything to do with it. They probably saw it as a bit of a threat to their culture, which as I

said they were strongly trying to protect….

…So, I have witnessed a lot of things that happened that would never have happened. People sitting down together that we would have never thought would have sat down, a safe space where opinions can be aired….We found that the more difficult work and where the relationship building was really made [is] at a local level.

…Like Protestant people would have thought "well, how much did my Catholic neighbor know about that" or vice versa what was carried out by the other side…. Because that's what's needed you know….There has been a lot of politeness and hopefully now in PEACE III that maybe we'll get to the point where people are ready to get beyond the politeness.

The funding created a safe space for members from both communities to get involved in local community development, and to discuss difficult issues and be heard so that they can move forward together.

In contrast, a CSO leader noted that the five major ex-prisoner paramilitary groups played a key role with former Secretary of State for NI, Mo Molam, in supporting the peace negotiations. They were the key lynchpin between the negotiators and the communities with the EU PEACE Fund, providing the resources for the ex-combatant structure so that it could continue to function.

EOGHAN: But up until now you've had different ex-prisoner groups coming together in different partnerships. A project… [that] brings the five together. The Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), and the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) that's the five of them. So, they are now working together.

And I think they had a vital role in terms of sustaining the peace and getting it out into the wider community particularly say the Loyalist paramilitaries where there is a big

sell to be done still to convince people.…And then working with their local community to convince them. And they are both the ex-combatants and ex-prisoners but the wider Loyalist community that this peace process is worth working on and sticking with.

They had the credibility at the local level in their own constituencies. They had the links, and then they were able to act as that channel of communication during the peace process as negotiations unfolded. And I think now they are playing a key role in working at the local level say along interfaces where they are in direct contact with each other to soothe things down during the tension, and when young guys are out fighting and rioting during the [Loyalist] marching season…

When dissident Republicans started to shoot officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and launch some bomb attacks, the Loyalist groups involved in the five major paramilitary negotiation structure went back to their community to say that they were talking to the PIRA, OIRA, and INLA and they were holding the line. They were able to report to their communities that it was just a small number of dissidents that were resorting to violence. Some ex-combatants and ex-prisoners have built relationships and are gatekeepers switching from military control to some sort of community leadership control of their communities so that they still retain some sort of power while others continue racketeering and illicit businesses hiding behind the label of paramilitarism. They were best operating in community development during the early 2000s, and they certainly had a role to play there in terms of reducing tension along the interfaces.

A CSO leader also averred that a social inclusive approach includes the most strategically undervalued groups in society like the very poor and ex-combatants. Peacebuilding work does not lend itself to convenient statistical analysis because intangibles cannot be easily measured. It

is important to advocate for the rights of ex-prisoners to be treated as legitimate visible members of society.

> *RUAIRI:* We have found that we have been able over those years to create certain bridges. We have been able to meet with people that ten, twelve, fifteen years ago we certainly couldn't have met with, and talked with. That there is a certain fluidity and flexibility and engagement now across different sections of society that wouldn't have taken place in the past.…There was no need for [ex-prisoners] to hide, no need for them to disguise that here they were, that a conflict had come to an end and that we were moving to go to resolution.

Although there is work to be done, it is imperative to show how hardworking peacebuilders have facilitated and provided spaces where successes can be claimed. As is articulated in the excerpt above, this must encompass different sections of society. Social justice and bringing to light the issues from all corners of NI are imperative, conversations must be all-embracing. Moving towards this more inclusive environment is part of the way forward discussed by participants in the following section.

Moving Forward Inclusively

Identifying voices that represent strategically undervalued groups and working to change the psychosocial and cultural dynamics of a society can create a new and improved economic and political milieu and transform how ex-combatants see themselves – not as former prisoners but as constructive community activists and leaders. As some participants communicated, that starts with listening deeply to people's stories and developing shared narratives, where both sides are allowed to apportion and explore their stories in entangled, interdependent ways.

RUAIRI: …If you want to make the first step towards addressing conflict you've got to really listen to what the other people are saying. One of the problems that have been identified in NI is that there is not a shared narrative about what happened. So, we can't, each of us have our own political personal outlooks and I have mine.…And we have had on occasion's remarkable success with this where we have brought people to communities, and communities have listened to people that ordinarily they wouldn't.

And what we find is that when people are in a room there is a quality of difference between what human beings understand the other person is saying when they are sitting around the table having a cup of tea as distinct from hearing sound bites on a television interview. So, we've had on many occasions found that Loyalists and identifiable Loyalists have sat around the table with men who I know they're Sinn Fein activists.

Bringing in expert speakers with different experiences to share their own individual stories and journeys and provide their view of their constituency's outlook can bridge gaps in information transforming relationships because the process respects the host community's intelligence, competency, and life experiences. Telling these stories can be difficult at the current juncture because of the challenges posed by cultural and social sticking points. No shared story of the conflict exists, and this tempers what can be discussed and spoken about.

That said, an EU PEACE III development officer noted that the socially inclusive interdependent EU PEACE Program has witnessed the positive distance local communities have travelled in terms of building new relationships and trust.

EOIN: You need a good formal base line analysis around attitudes, around perspectives, around where people are at in terms of that. From that then you see where the issues are, from that there you design as a community a direction forward. From that there you build in the policies and procedures, and from that there you start being proactive and knocking on doors.

Because that is the only way you get people in. And from that there, the listening, the talking, the storytelling, the different perspectives, and the analysis. But you build up relationships, you build trust, you build up a vision, you build up a strategic approach. You start then having the confidence to reach out there to others doing the same, to local government.

Local community groups are brave and comfortable enough to develop their own vision, and they are also in the central place of devising their own evaluations of their projects. Building upon the analysis of these local evaluations and the perspectives and experiences of participants to peacebuilding develops starting points for engaging community and developing practice and policy.

That said, a CSO leader stated that peacebuilding is relationship-building that takes place in a safe environment where project participants from both communities on their healing journeys can talk freely about very personal and painful issues and be listened to by the other participants.

OONAGH: We have a different take on peacebuilding, and we don't see it as an event. We don't see peacebuilding as something that you do at the weekends. We very much see peacebuilding as being about a journey. And we see it about bringing people with us on a journey that enables them to discover what peace means to them, and how they live with it in the community….

…We take a long-term approach. It's all about building relationships. It's all about

building an environment that people want to come to, and feel safe and nurtured, and

[are] content to be there. And it enables them then to start a journey in that environment

reaching out and re-establishing or creating relationships that have a level of tolerance

and understanding within it.

Listening to these stories within the group is incredibly therapeutic and profound as the project

participants can say what is really hurting and frustrating them in a milieu where nobody is going

to make a judgment over what they are saying, and where they can have difficult and important

conversations. Ways forward begin by listening deeply to the people who inhabit the everyday

spaces of violent conflict and peacebuilding, those who experienced the violence, and those

working towards reconciliation and peace. It also involves creating inclusive spaces, where

marginalized stories and voices can be heard and given the space to be included in developing

shared narratives about the conflict.

Discussion

There is broad recognition of the importance of international economic assistance to

peacebuilding (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Jeong, 2005). In the end, in most cases, the aftermath

of wars includes the destruction of many economic activities and assets, so the beginning of a

peacebuilding process demands the infusion of external economic assistance to rebuild the

economy and must be a priority. Moreover, in parallel to the recovery of the economy, the need

to recover or develop new institutional settings designed for a new stable social and political

order after the end of military confrontation crucially depends also on economic and financial aid

(Boyce, 1995; Collier, 2003). However, critical views on the role of international economic

assistance for peacebuilding have been raised. In aiming to inform policies promoting peace

between PUL and CNR through IFI and the PEACE Fund, we offer, in this paper, some insights arising from the NI peacebuilding experience.

What has been presented here through analysis of interview responses are a thread of collective consciousness from CSO workers and both funder's development officers in NI that articulate the issues as they see them, on the ground. These individuals have insight into the world of peacebuilding, and their opinions and views must be recorded and valued to improve peacebuilding and refrain from similar mistakes elsewhere, as well as improving current practices in NI and the BCs. What can be learnt at this moment, as the future of the island is enmeshed in the politics of Brexit and Trumpism, and the economic and political insecurity that risk further deteriorating social relations on and between both islands? What is next for most people in NI who simply want to move past the Troubles, have economic opportunities and get on with their everyday lives? Although violence remains liminal, it is slowly creeping back into the social sphere and people's consciousness.

Mechanisms linking grassroots-oriented financial investment into NI and the BCs to reduce structural economic inequalities between CNR and PUL communities can empower local communities. To be concrete, one key peacebuilding mechanism is the economic empowerment of funded cross-community projects that promote the social inclusion of previously strategically undervalued social groups. A second mechanism is promoting trust and hope for a better future within subsequent generations. The third is providing public support for peacebuilding and inducing a political transformation that might change the opportunistic political behavior of politicians at different levels.

First, while international economic assistance is including some strategically undervalued communities, other working-class communities continue to suffer from deprivation,

unemployment, and limited access to economic resources that are crucial in

supporting peacebuilding in NI and the BCs of the RoI. Working with overlooked communities

that suffered the greatest economic and social deprivation during the Troubles would generate an

atmosphere of goodwill and trust, strengthening a sense of community and providing incentives

for cross-community initiatives for people to know each other better (Byrne et al., 2010).

Further, thanks to their economic empowerment, these civil society leaders have envisioned a

more tolerant and inclusive society, profiting from the inclusion of other minority groups that

have emigrated to NI, with a greater connection with the European and world communities, an

inclusive educational system, and greater safety for freedom of movement (Byrne et al., 2010).

However, more needs to be done to include the most deprived communities and youth so that

they enjoy the fruits of the peace dividend (Coulter, 2014, 2019; Hughes, 2019; Knox & Quirk,

2016).

Second, improving excluded populations' material living conditions and providing

opportunities for new cross-community projects to develop also builds trust and brings hope and

emotional support for the future and meaning to the present (Hallman, 2017). In fact, the rise of

stronger cross-community ties may increase levels of trust that positively influence civil

society's hopes for the future betterment of the society (Byrne et al., 2010). Thanks to the

external aid, CNR and PUL communities can work on the co-construction of a grassroots-based

shared homeland for both communities as new cross-community initiatives were funded and

were able to emerge (Byrne et al., 2009b).

Projects like the reopening of roads, the elimination of neighborhood boundaries, the

reduction of communication barriers, and supporting networking economic and business

initiatives have contributed to increasing opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and building

trustworthy relationships between civil society groups from both communities (Byrne et al., 2009c).

Peacebuilding must also address the underlying causes of conflict, including structural and cultural violence, in nurturing the ground for positive peace to emerge (Galtung, 1998, 2007), while building trustworthy relationships for reconciliation between members of communities previously engaged in conflict that contributes to social justice (Lederach, 1997). Economic assistance becomes an integral component of multi-track peacebuilding by funding local grassroots projects to empower local communities and support cross-community networks (Diamond & MacDonald, 1996). More must be done to provide direct investment to provide educational and economic opportunities for working class communities in north, east, and west Belfast and the Bogside, Creggan, Shantallow, the Fountain, and the Waterside in Derry

Third, the increasing control of transformative processes by grassroots communities' builds political support and challenges rival politicians interested in maintaining social divisions in NI (Byrne et al., 2022). By empowering civil society, the grassroots have increased their political power to make politicians accountable to the electorate and the government's upper echelons even as the voluntary community sector has been coopted by government and the external funders have cozied up to government (Knox et al., 2023; Lagana, 2016).

Improving the living conditions of excluded groups, reducing economic inequalities and economic development as well as addressing other essential non-tangible needs for peace and reconciliation are essential for increasing public support and making peace sustainable in the long run (Hallman, 2017). The hope of a better future for the next generations will encourage people with genuine commitments in favor of peacebuilding, and pressure politicians to cease playing sectarian politics and instead create a new inclusive political culture.

According to NI's grassroots community leaders, a complex administrative process for accessing economic aid caused distrust among CNR and PUL communities and allowed politicians to affect the distribution of resources (Byrne, 2023). There are also many critiques of the liberal peacebuilding package that includes international aid in ignoring and circumventing the local (Mac Ginty, 2006, 2011; Thiessen, 2011).

As one interviewee stated, "we don't want to transport this around the world." This fear is a reality, NI is held up as one of, if not the most successful international peacebuilding project – such as influencing Juan Manuel Santos and his negotiations with the revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) (Geoghegan, 2016). Further, the Fact Sheet on PEACE funding boasts its applicability across Europe and to other local contexts (Kolodziejski, 2022). A further issue is that peace projects may be reduced in favour of strategies linked to counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE). Dealing with violence that is rooted in historical ethno-centered divisions and poverty only through counterterrorism and PVE strategies would risk generating further violence, extremism, and terrorism by deepening and entrenching fundamental issues and inequalities that lead to conflict in the first place.

The principles of (neo)liberalism also remain central, and the needs of everyday citizens dissipate for international and domestic political interests (Thiessen, 2019). The burden of peace remains upon individuals and community organizations, whether that is in NI or abroad. How can we challenge these shifts within international peacebuilding and responses to violence?

Tensions old and new exist and can resurface, and communities continue to deal with elements of deeply rooted segregation (Guelke, 2014). This is not to say there are not improvements, benefits, or a sizeable body of hard, quality work that has established a level of peace not seen over the 30 years of the Troubles – or indeed the years preceding the Troubles

and the historical legacy of conflicts that have occurred on the island. It is to say that if peace-oriented programs and funding and government do not take seriously the social, economic, and cultural aspects of violence and continue to simply treat them as political issues, and people as numbers and statistics, submerged tensions will continue to re-emerge (Holland, 2022). Peace, negative or positive, is a fickle thing and requires a continuous mindset of reconciliation over profit-making and political power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper described how the peace process in NI and the BCs is bedeviled by ongoing cultural identity conflict and the marginalization of working-class communities as the voluntary community sector has become coopted by government. The paper overviewed the advancement of critical emancipatory peacebuilding. It proceeded to show how, despite issues within relationship-building being ongoing within NI peace work, successes with building connections across PUL and CNR communities are evident, and ways forward have been articulated based on the narratives of interviewees. The findings herein highlight how residents must push back against the foundational issue that plagues peacebuilding: the (neo)liberal status quo that utilizes and expresses its power to continually push the concerns of everyday citizens aside for elite-level economic and political interests. Ultimately these issues limit the capability and capacity of people in NI to live peacefully, truly move beyond the Troubles, and lead everyday-lives free from the shadows of violent conflict. In NI, the Troubles are often avoided and neglected because, when discussed, they either bring up unresolved trauma or unresolved tensions that lead people down a path they no longer want to take. The strategically undervalued and deprived must be included in the economic benefits of the peace dividend. New paths must continually be forged to move the needle of peace forward, giving people new avenues to pursue

peace in their everyday lives. This does not mean dwelling on the past – but investing in people who wish to re-construct narratives of violence into stories that can be interwoven and understood together, generating compassion for the shared suffering, and building true, deep reconciliation that is sustainable.

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