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Civil Society Organizations and Relational Infrastructure: Challenges, Obstacles, and Measuring the Success of Peacebuilding Work in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Everyday intergroup contact is a common occurrence in divided societies like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, India, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, and others. Everyday peacebuilding consists of daily social practices to manage ethnic tensions, and these often invisible and underappreciated methods are used by local community members in deeply divided societies (Mac Ginty, 2014; Ring, 2006). Local communities relearn how to coexist or fail to reconcile due to multiple factors that prevent them from living together (Yavuz, 2025). Everyday peace encompasses the critical conditions that encourage fostering mutual respect and cooperation among community members to maintain peace (Ring, 2006).

While peace in Northern Ireland may appear stabilized on paper, especially following the 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA), the society remains socially and politically precarious (Yavuz & Byrne, 2023). Despite the GFA's formal framework, everyday life continues to be shaped by ethnopolitical divisions, contested identities, culture wars, and deep-seated mistrust between both communities (Byrne, 2023). Overcoming the mistrust and social exclusion experienced by those with different or intersectional backgrounds requires the active participation of social actors committed to rebuilding trust and fostering a shared sense of belonging through ordinary, sustained interactions (Simone, 2004). Critical engagement is

essential for cultivating mutual recognition and cooperation that empowers people to function in a post-peace accord milieu. That said, mobilizing communities around critical social issues relies on a diverse civil society that incorporates initiatives grounded in community knowledge that enhances social stability (Mizzi et al., 2023).

This article explores how grassroots Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Northern Ireland navigate this evolving ecology of peacebuilding amid the persistent threat of dissident violence and shifting local, national, and global political and financial terrains. By exploring these dynamics, we gain some insight into the precarious balance CSOs must maintain to support local agency, democratic accountability, and social justice in deeply divided societies. The crucial role CSO leaders play in fostering peace and nurturing a shared future in post-peace accord Northern Ireland are explored through the lens of community leaders' stories and experiences. The article discusses participants' narratives around (1) bureaucratic and financial challenges to CSO sustainability, (2) obstacles to mainstreaming and sustaining everyday peace for strategically disadvantaged groups striving for social justice, and (3) the complacency and difficulty in measuring the success of the plethora of funded peacebuilding projects in working to empower local communities.

Civil Society Organizations and Relational Infrastructure

The importance of people's local agency in peacebuilding informs critical and emancipatory approaches to peacebuilding and has emerged from the critiques of the liberal democratic peace model (Thiessen, 2011). The integration of neoliberal economic policy and liberal political systems in the construction of market democracy in post-peace accord societies labels contemporary peacebuilding efforts as "neoliberal" (Thiessen, 2011). Peace and Conflict

Studies (PACS) scholars and practitioners who employ emancipatory peacebuilding practices and research methods emphasize the importance of listening to and including local and Indigenous grassroots understandings, wisdom, and experiences, and their ideas about the preconditions necessary for achieving sustainable peace (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015).

Locals lived experiences can contribute to a more in-depth understanding of why and how communities are in conflict, and what they need to do to coexist peacefully (Zapata-Barreto et al., 2017). Additionally, questions from locals about everyday peacemaking, and the role of politics, the state, and external actors create space for supporting bottom-up local community peacebuilding (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The role of researchers and peacebuilders in extending their scope to the grassroots is critical for uncovering the "treasure trove of stories" of successful bottom-up peacebuilding practices (Autesserre, 2021).

These bottom-up, grassroots social systems utilize local people's knowledge to enhance and create space for peaceful engagement throughout society and can be understood by applying the concept of physical infrastructure to the social sphere. Infrastructure is commonly known in physical terms "as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables" (Simone, 2004, p. 407). However, this narrow definition of infrastructure is challenged by Simone (2004) who proposes a critical concept of "people as infrastructure," which highlights how everyday social interactions, relationships, and social networks operate as a kind of living infrastructure that supports the functioning of a city, using Johannesburg as an example (pp. 407-408).

Despite visible signs of decay in Johannesburg, a complex, flexible, and dynamic social system exists where locals collaborate and create economic and social opportunities through their interactions with one another (Simone, 2004). These interactions enable residents to become the

social foundation of the city. Building on this foundation of grassroots resilience and collaboration, the emergence of a functioning, diverse civil society becomes essential for fostering inclusive dialogue and institutional dialogue (Simone, 2004).

A functioning and diverse civil society help to encourage dialogue and the reintegration of people into a unified polity that can provide a vital base for transitioning to justice while holding state institutions and its agents accountable on critical issues like elections, legislation, and police training, etc. (Belloni, 2001). In the context of divided societies like Northern Ireland, drawing on Simone (2004), we argue that CSOs operate as relational infrastructures because they deeply connect with local people providing the glue to hold them together that help to create opportunities for coexistence across groups. These organizations provide needed services and stimulate social interactions, mediating everyday tensions by creating opportunities, and keeping the locals busy, which offers meaningful, goal-oriented superordinate activities to keep them focused.

Building on Simone's notion of people as infrastructure, CSOs in Northern Ireland function as a platform for connection, resilience, and sustainable peacebuilding. Although the primary focus of many CSO projects is to achieve greater local community engagement, inclusivity, and reconciliation, this intended outcome is often limited in achievement (Oloke & Byrne, 2022). For example, CSO projects can experience bureaucratic and competitive funding, social retaliation, historical trauma, and feelings of abandonment in minority communities (Byrne et al., 2023)

The role of CSOs is especially important for strategically undervalued communities like working-class youth, ex-combatants, and the disability and LGBTQIA+ communities that

continue to suffer with little hope for the future in terms of employment opportunities (Yavuz, 2025; Yavuz & Byrne, 2023). For example, ex-combatants in Northern Ireland continue to face barriers like ageism, and because of their criminal records have had to create livelihood niches like driving black taxis and working in the peacebuilding industry (Shirlow, 2013). Similarly, working-class youth have low educational attainment levels, precarious employment opportunities, and high unemployment rates compared to their peers in the United Kingdom (UK) (Holland, 2022). In other places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, queer people experience similar multiple structural challenges, including everyday homophobia, unemployment, and disownment from their families (Yavuz, 2025).

Young people bear the greatest burden in post-accord societies as they grapple with ongoing conflict and experience intergenerational trauma and unemployment (Townsend et al., 2020; Yavuz & Byrne, 2023; Yavuz, 2025). Berents (2018) noted the importance of exploring how young people make sense of "notions of peace both abstractly and as a functional concept in their everyday lives" (2018, p. 150). Building on Mac Ginty's discussion of everyday peace, Berents (2018) argued that the notion of "everyday" cannot be perceived as static as it is a consistent and "mutable and negotiated embodied process" (p. 150). Thus, it is vital for strategically undervalued communities to envision a shared future without any restrictions if active and genuine CSO efforts are to play a transformative role in the communities.

The Northern Ireland Conflict

Eurosceptics and populists manipulated Brexit and the controversial Northern Ireland Protocol and flying the flags conflict alienated Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) youth who became embroiled in a culture war with the Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) community

(Mizzi et al., 2023). New Irish Republican Army (NIRA) dissidents and rogue loyalist paramilitaries have also intensified tensions in Northern Ireland. The collapse of the Northern Ireland executive (2017-2020) over the energy scheme with the resignation of former first minister, Arlene Foster of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the suspension of the executive over Brexit (2022-2024) further underlines the political instability (Byrne et al., 2023).

Several significant issues like the parades conflicts, Brexit, the 2020 Withdrawal Agreement from the European Union (EU), and the 2017 and 2022 collapse of the Northern Ireland executive escalated the culture war and disagreement between the PUL and CNR communities that have different ideologies, beliefs, and opinions as Protestant youth and Loyalist paramilitary groups protested on the streets against threats to their British identity (Byrne et al., 2022). The GFA's 23rd anniversary in Belfast resulted in "dozens of police officers" being injured by rioters from the "British Loyalist community" with Loyalist paramilitary groups egging on alienated youth to commit violence (Smith, 2021). The flag protests led to youth violence that caused unforeseen risks to the already deeply entrenched conflict.

Added to the culture war was the language conflicts. The Scots Gaelic and Irish Gaelic Language Acts are major cultural issues impacting the cultural well-being of both communities (Ó Conchubhair, 2022). Language is connected to each group's cultural identity, and the GFA offered parity of esteem to both cultures. Sinn Féin supports legislation to promote Irish language usage, while the DUP sees this as undermining the PUL community's sense of British identity (Gorvett, 2020; O'Reilly, 1999).

External economic assistance was provided to facilitate cross community reconciliation and build the peace dividend in Northern Ireland and the border area. The 1985 Anglo Irish

Agreement initiated the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) in 1986 to address community development and reconciliation while the EU PEACE Fund was created after reciprocal ceasefires in 1994 by rival paramilitary groups to address reconciliation, community development, and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the border region (Byrne et al., 2023). These funds were pivotal in providing important aid to foster coexistence, reconciliation, and community peacebuilding in a society characterized by segregated neighbourhoods and schools (McCall, 2021). The peacebuilding grants were provided to local CSOs through EU PEACE I (1995-1999) €667 million; EU PEACE II (2000-2006) €995 million; EU PEACE III (2007—2013) €333 million; EU PEACE IV (2014-2020) €270 million; the IFI (1986-2010) $971 million; the EU, Northern Ireland Executive, and British and Irish government's PEACE PLUS program (2021-2028) £1 billion; and the Irish government's Shared Island initiative and fund (2021-2025) €500 million (Byrne, 2023, p. 17).

Methods

After approval from the University of Manitoba's research ethics board, the second author generated the data during the summer of 2010 over a ten week period interviewing 102 CSO worker's, five civil servants administering the IFI and the EU PEACE III Fund, and three IFI and five EU PEACE III community development officers that were the linchpin connector between both funding agencies and local grassroots peacebuilders. The research was funded by a SSHRC research grant. The CSO peacebuilding projects included in the field research were funded by the IFI and/or the EU PEACE III Fund. The 60–90-minute tape-recorded semi-structured interviews included ten questions related to cross-community peacebuilding,

reconciliation, and community development. The data was anonymized, and all names and other identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were used to report the findings.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' places of employment in Derry and the counties of Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone. Local leaders with years of experience provided valuable insight into the hopes and needs of local communities, as well as their concerns and fears about their future and the future of Northern Ireland's peace process. Their local wisdom and values have not changed significantly, and the issues they raised remain significant and prominent today.

Challenges, Obstacles, and Measuring the Success of CSOs Peacebuilding Work

Peace often remains in a liminal state, neither deep nor sustainable, as structural constraints prevent a genuine transformation of a conflict milieu as it becomes paused as reconciliation becomes challenging (Byrne et al., 2018; Mac Ginty, 2008; Murphy & McDowell, 2019). As communities continue to struggle to overcome these barriers, innovative and context-sensitive peacebuilding practices used by a myriad of CSOs working with local people in Northern Ireland face many challenges and obstacles.

Bureaucratic and Financial Challenges to CSO Sustainability

Local conflict transformation practices and peacebuilding methods can be adopted in divided societies with the support of local CSOs. As a method of operationalizing local, culturally appropriate knowledge generated from the people of Northern Ireland, CSOs have a unique position to direct their efforts into building an infrastructure that meets the community's needs (Lindsay et al., 2021). Embracing these local practices can help strengthen local activists' skillsets in presenting issues, transforming communities, and, more importantly, developing the

local people's capacity to hear and engage with the voices of marginalized people who suffer and face all the obstacles brought about by past and current conflicts (Simone, 2004; Yavuz & Byrne, 2023). Yet the CSOs face a myriad of bureaucratic and financial challenges that impede their sustainability.

Darren observed a noticeable shift in the community sector's direction, particularly towards an integration of authorities and a blurring of boundaries between established community organizations and commercial enterprises. This transition has resulted in a loss of grassroots control and democratic accountability, leading some within the community to acknowledge the necessity of adapting to the changing peace-aid landscape or face extinction. Consequently, there was a departure from the sector's initial grassroots principles, with many community members now occupying influential roles in local government, raising concerns about their potential co-option by the government.

> *DARREN:* Now that clearly is the way in which there will be authorities in Northern Ireland and across the water, but particularly locally, that's the way they see the community sector going. So, the days when, of course, you can't do that and have grassroots control over it. You can't have a business plan worked out with a for-profit organization and then subject it to democratic accountability. Or you can ask people to approve of it, that's the same as any other commercial organization. But a blurring of the edges between community organizations, particularly the longer-established and better-organized community organizations, known, and commercial enterprises on the other hand (CSO leader).

Darren saw that the trajectory of development meant that some people in community organizations felt that they "would still see themselves as radical…, either do that or go out of existence, that's the choice." While grassroots initiatives have fostered greater interaction between members of both communities, they continue to experience numerous challenges (Skarlato et al., 2016). Darren observed some of these challenges for grassroots CSOs:

> DARREN: I think we have lost a bit of democracy in that, and there is no answer to what you do about that other than grow from the grassroots again or try to support any grassroots initiatives that come along. But the formerly organized sector is definitely further away now from its radical … grassroots beginnings than ever before. There's no question, and a lot of people have been completely co-opted. I mean a lot of community people are now sort of high officials in local government….

Daithi stated that there was a financial sustainability issue that needed to be addressed as many CSOs went bankrupt, while the government, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the EU didn't recognize that CSOs were financially sustainable and dependent on government support.

> *DAITHI:* And what I have noticed over the last number of years was that there has been a cull of community organizations and community groups who have been totally dependent upon public funding. And I have seen them in the transition from PEACE II to PEACE III. A lot of groups have gone, and if groups are totally dependent on other people supporting them then there [are] more groups on the go. We're not going to be like that, and what we have decided to do is we have tried to generate as much of our own income as possible, which means that we run social enterprises where it's all about generating income, and then that comes in and goes to the core.

And then we generate and develop the core, whilst still asking for public sector

intervention monies, but knowing over time it's going to reduce. So, in terms of the

PEACE program, the money is very, very important because it keeps a lot of this kind of

work alive. It also takes risks with projects that you wouldn't normally get funding for

and are not on the government's agenda. It's not on the Northern Ireland Assembly's

agenda, it's not generally on the European Union agenda, but they are specifically

targeted in the PEACE III program's criteria (CSO leader).

Daithi noted that the current situation is challenging as CSOs operate with limited staff since

their "sources [are] tied up in the machine and there is no product coming out at the end of the

machine." CSOs were aware of the need to train individuals as volunteers to be able to sustain

themselves in difficult situations.

Daithi also foresaw the importance of the CSO filtering system within communities, and

finding ways to incorporate strategically undervalued communities into CSO agendas by

decentralizing their organizational interests and empowering CSOs that do-good cross

community work in the community (see Belloni, 2001):

DAITHI: Because what it allows is those people who promote the PEACE III program

now have control over what's on the agenda and what's off the agenda. And I'm not

being sort of cynical about that. I think there is an issue around selective support. Some

organizations who in my view don't deserve the kind of quantity of support that they get

for the work that they do because the actual product that comes out again out of the

process is top heavy, and the product is very light. And I would want to be much more

critical in the way that money is invested in organizations because they are invested in

sponges you know, which is just all about money.

And it's all about where the next money comes from, and we have them all the

time because X issue is suddenly on the agenda with PEACE III. We have friends whom

we never knew we had. We have people who want to work in partnerships that we never

knew were even interested in the kind of work that we have been doing for the last

number of years. And every time there is a round of applications, they're all so sweet ….

I'd be a wee bit more cynical in that and say, "look where were you when we were trying

to forge relationships and build up bonds and working relationships with organizations."

But we'll work only with those who are genuine, and not those who just want to see it as

another moneymaking racket, or another application potential.

Centralizing funding initiatives to have a direct impact on the community is essential to the

frameworks of positive peace (Lindsay et al., 2021) and it is a necessary need described by NGO

officials. Orienting the funding of civil agencies to focus on the needs of the community, even in

opposition to funder goals, is essential for meaningful use of allocated funds (Belloni, 2001)

For example, Rebecca believed that County Councils in the Republic of Ireland were

gaining more control over community development, which brought challenges to some

organizations. Controversies around the PEACE I program arose from many peace workers

because it did not align with community development goals (Byrne et al., 2009). Rebecca also

explained how managing the EU money posed some additional difficulties:

REBECCA: But also, in the South, there's a move towards the [County] Councils having

more authority, and more power over community development funding. So, you now

have a lot of community organizations that don't have a track record over the last five

years or more with the Councils. And given that we are now in the great recession [2008-

2013] it is going to be quite hard for some of them to get back into the loop. And that the

work they do might not fit into quite the right boxes and stuff as well. So, whereas there

was a lot of pressure and controversy around the PEACE program, particularly PEACE I.

You know, there are a lot of people who attack the PEACE program because it wasn't a

community development program, and the reason they did that was because there is

PEACE I, which was sort of something for everybody (CSO leader).

Community conflicts were intricately connected to CSO staffing, funding, and control over

funding as they worked to facilitate social justice and community peacebuilding processes.

However, ordinary people who experienced various conflicts also felt included, noting that

critical services should be provided so that the grassroots can feel that justice is being delivered

to them.

Obstacles to Mainstreaming and Sustaining Everyday Peace for Strategically Disadvantaged Groups Striving for Social Justice

Cross community peacebuilding requires time, countless effort, everyday tolerance, civility, and

critical decisionmakers who focus on the wisdom and wellbeing of communities (Byrne &

Senehi, 2012; Mac Ginty, 2021). Further, integrating peacebuilding principles, practices, and

objectives into all levels of governance is crucial, so that peace is not treated as a separate

initiative but rather as a holistic approach to peacebuilding. However, when the potential of

mainstreaming peace efforts is ignored by those in power, strategically disadvantaged groups do

not fare so well (Yavuz, 2024). For example, Niall argued that peace was never mainstreamed in

Northern Ireland because "it has always been seen as a European issue."

NIALL: It has been tinkered with, and tweeted with, and played with, and toyed with. But I always argue that until PEACE was actually gone, and that we were left to have to look at this ourselves, it would be a measure of how important it really was to us. Would it become [a] course so that with any District Council and government department PEACE was at the center, it was the core hub, and everything else emanated from that, and I don't see that. I think we see that from the move from the *Shared Future* [2005 government document], and I haven't seen the cohesion in the inclusion document. But I know that several CROs are highly concerned that they live together but apart, rather than sharing this place (CSO leader).

Niall recognized that the sustainability of the peace process would become a major challenge. He didn't believe CSOs had the politicians to assist them as they supported a process of equality and inclusion and living apart, as the new paramilitaries continued to be active in both communities:

NIALL: We're not asking people to actually discover the talents and the gifts and the resources and the beauty in one another and the friendships and the potential that difference and diversity bring. We're saying all right that you're different and live together, but live together in a way that you don't hurt one another. It's a minimum approach, equal but apart. And that's my real concern, and whilst these people who said I think the Americans have given us too much attention, and the Clintons coming in and out, and whatever else, it's been good.

But it's also been bad, and people expect that. They expect to … kick-up stink, and everything will come their way. I think we have those people managing the programs and those people running the programs, and I guess we have a political journey to travel.

We've Sinn Féin and the DUP. But still, when it comes to decisions around allocations of money, it is still very tribal, and they talk about due process; there is no due process. Additionally, Dara averred that Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) posed a threat to the current peace process and the mainstreaming of peace. Dara recognized that the government was not aware of the seriousness of the situation and didn't fully grasp how this problem could lead to potential dangers ahead.

> *DARA:* We are then looking at how the [political] vacuum that will be created will bring on board the spoilers of the peace process who are on the wings who are currently operating in this city and elsewhere, but particularly in this city. And the city's Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD), and you have the Real IRA, which is allegedly the armed wing of the Thirty-Two County Sovereignty in England, heavily working to bring down the peace process (CSO leader).

Dara was also frustrated by the ongoing violence in the community. He had argued about the continuation of political violence for a long time. However, the political leaders "fail to get the message" which eventually disrupts the sustainability aspect of the work that the CSOs do. Dara articulated, "I just see dangerous things ahead. And the evidence for it is quite simply this week alone in the city, a group called RAAD has put [x] young people out of the city, last week they shot a guy in Strabane."

Dara also pointed out the increase in Republican activities, narrating that "it has been horrendous." His concern was that RIRA's attacks on the police could provoke a retaliatory response from Loyalist paramilitaries, escalating violence. The cycle of violence was not addressing issues important to people, and CSOs and local communities faced further challenges

ahead. When communities remain trapped in conflict, critical issues such as access to resources, enforcement of laws, and human rights are often sidelined, while the lack of social justice perpetuates the cycle of structural inequalities (Yavuz, 2025).

Social justice work encompasses a commitment to equity, as well as adherence to moral and ethical principles that promote tolerance and equal opportunities for all, including people's access to basic human needs and providing critical resources for those in need to sustain a peace process (Hande et al., 2024). Social justice practices aim to dismantle systemic barriers that communities face, as these barriers create inequalities and hinder their ability to thrive (Fraser, 2003). Bolstering the human rights of all people and societal groups is essential to promoting the pillars of peace, encompassing the socio-cultural, economic, and political domains of everyday life (Lindsay et al., 2021). In a society with restricted visibility for strategically undervalued communities and the persistence of localized violence, the impact of CSOs has garnered much attention through peacebuilding projects that fill the public space with strategically undervalued communities' voices (Byrne & Dean 2022; Simone, 2004)

In the context of post-peace accord Northern Ireland, social justice also requires proactive efforts to mainstream initiatives addressing the disproportionate levels of youth unemployment. Youth have historically been excluded from critical economic opportunities due to societal labels, a lack of inclusion and training, as well as systemic barriers rooted in the legacy of the conflict (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009).

Lorcan proclaimed the necessity of having a community audit to identify local community needs that must be addressed to create local employment for local people to remain, so they weren't forced to migrate in search of economic opportunities. Creating livelihoods for

young people is central to social justice and to the sustainability of peace, especially in rural

areas in Northern Ireland.

LORCAN: Coming from a background where my generation emigrated to find work, I

believe the work we do now provides options for individuals to stay. Indigenous [X]

businesses are embedded in the community and endure tough times, unlike larger

international firms. These businesses provide a degree of dignity, choice, and freedom for

not only that individual but also any employees that they would provide work for over the

longer term. It gives people good standard jobs, jobs they can be proud of, a decent

standard of living, so there's freedom (CSO leader).

Creating local CSOs and businesses ensured that local people had the dignity of having jobs as

well as the freedom of choice to remain in their local communities. The spillover effect of

providing employment to local people was that it promoted cross-community ties among

workers, improving communication, trust, and reconciliation.

Aoife also revealed that youth often feel demoralized when seeking justice and equal

treatment by the instruments employed by the GFA. It was critical to provide for young people's

basic human needs (food, self-care, opportunities, self-validation) to ensure that their human

rights were respected, especially by the police.

AOIFE: A huge benefit in terms of information is helping people access their rights,

helping people know what they are entitled to. It's currently doing an awful lot with non-

nationals who would have been working and lost jobs, dealing with young people who

are out of work, dealing with issues around employment legislation, and so on. It's

dealing with social welfare queries. It's dealing with education queries, grants, and so on.

You might ask what the link is between those and peace. Well, people need to be able to

live, people need to be able to eat, people need to be cared for, and in terms of

peacebuilding, education is a key (CSO worker).

Embedding justice through institutions and policies was critical in changing people's attitudes.

Aoife pointed out how joint policing committees and peace partnerships illustrated how young

people were accountable to their community. It sent a strong message that "whether you're

white, black, Protestant, Catholic, Republican, Unionist, North or South, you are equally as

important as anybody else and you have a right to information and opportunities and so on."

CSOs needed to encourage young people to recognize that they have a role in seeking justice for

others.

That said, Ian spoke about the need for natural justice as he remembered how hurtful and

tragic the Claudy, Co. Derry car bombs were in 1972 when three explosions happened in the late

morning, two on Main Street and one on Church Street (The Irish Times, 2022). Ian, a CSO

leader, expressed concern about the victims who felt that they were left behind and not supported

after the bombing as they never received social justice. Ian didn't believe that justice was

delivered for the survivors:

IAN: The Claudy bomb was in the early 1970s, and those people are still hurting. You

can almost touch the hurt when they start talking about how they feel, and how they feel

about how they didn't get justice. They didn't get the truth of what happened to them in

their wee village. You know, at Claudy, three bombs went off in two wee streets. People

running from one bomb and straight into the next bomb, and then the next bomb, you

know, in a small village. And those people, they just certainly haven't forgotten. They are

not in a forgiving state of mind, and that is what 30-odd years ago. Ok, maybe in another generation that might be gone but what happens to those people in the meantime because they have nobody to turn to apart from, they go to their GP [General Practitioner]. They go to their doctor, and he prescribes tablets (CSO leader).

Providing meaningful education and training opportunities is critical for PUL youth who were trapped and left behind by the peace dividend. Bringing young PUL people out of the conflict could only be achieved by providing them with jobs and educational opportunities, keeping them away from new Loyalist paramilitary groups.

When young people are provided with opportunities in education and job training, their close social circle, including friends, family, and parents, should be involved in their future goals. Ian emphasized that education and job training alone were not sufficient to keep young people out of trouble and were a challenge to the sustainability of the peace process:

IAN: There has to be something there. There has to be employment, whether it's self-help in their own place, creating their own employment opportunities, which would be better. And if that's not happening, then resources have to be put in there from the government. And if that's going to be taken away, you know, you're facing a situation where we could be back to where we started in the '70's now.

The direction of current peace efforts was a concern for CSO workers. Governments often believed that peacebuilding efforts were only needed within a certain period; however, peacebuilding is an ongoing effort (Mac Ginty, 2021; Yavuz, 2024). When employment, education, or other critical resources are not provided for communities, their lack of access to basic human needs often escalates conflict (Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

Similarly, Eoghan disclosed that the funding addressed the root causes of the conflict, and neglected people living along the Northern Irish Border corridor, especially in the PUL community. He noted that PEACE II created employment for hundreds of community development workers in villages and small towns, and the resources flowing into the region were crucial in bringing the peace dividend to the grassroots level and sustaining peace efforts.

> *EOGHAN:* On human needs, the Border region, particularly parts of Northern Ireland, lacked many facilities and services. These programs kick-started stuff like childcare. In terms of equity, equality, and justice, they have made a big contribution there. I think that people's attitudes towards "the other" have shifted, and the wider community recognizes the importance of equality and justice in the conflict.
>
> The challenge remains to ensure that mainly the Unionist community begins to see quality and justice as issues for them, not as a threat to them. At the working-class level, it's seen as a loss, and at the Unionist leadership level, they seem not to have fully bought in (CSO leader).

Sinn Féin activists initially began to articulate the significance of equality and justice needs within the CNR community. Today, equality and justice issues are imploding in some of the Loyalist heartlands while the terms are perceived as cloaked in Republican rhetoric. Yet addressing equality and social justice within the working class PUL community is an integral part of any long-term legislation initiatives and peacebuilding projects within Northern Ireland and the Border Counties to build a sustainable peace.

Darren disclosed that the Northern Ireland peace process altered the balance of power, with the PUL working class losing out to the CNR middle class. The absence of direct violence

everyday mainstreamed negative peace and aided community relations because people were not living in a constant state of fear. The CSOs improved conditions on the ground; yet the PUL working class perceived that the CNR community had accrued all the benefits of the funding, and people continued to live in a state of negative liminality, with structural violence still harming the PUL working class.

> *DARREN:* All of the attention placed on Northern Ireland can be seen as pressure to end discrimination against Catholics and has been a factor in the passage of civil rights legislation in the Good Friday Agreement. But without fundamental change, it means altering the balance between Protestant and Catholic working-class people.
>
> Many Protestant working-class people see themselves as the great losers from the Troubles, and they are. If you wish to know which section of the Northern Ireland population has lost most, it's the Protestant working-class; if you wish to know which section of the Northern Ireland population has gained most, it is the Catholic middle class.
>
> This creates great resentment on the Protestant side, as they feel they have lost something they ought never to have had. A Protestant from East Belfast remembers that their father and their grandfathers had a more or less right to a job, and now they can't get a job at all (CSO leader).

Darren noted that "Protestants in X city say everywhere they look, they can see Catholics advancing." He perceived that this analysis was problematic and not representative of the majority who saw the aid mainstreaming and sustaining a negative peace as the absence of everyday violence improved over time:

DARREN: You don't wake up in the morning and hear that last night another person

was killed, and then you are wondering who that person was? Where was it? What side

did that person come from? What side did the killer come from? Is it an internal feud? Is

it a sectarian killing? All that was a sort of anxious experience was daily life. The fact

that that is gone makes all sorts of things easier. So, I wouldn't be too cynical or too

negative about the way things have changed.

While everyday direct violence may have ended, the structural roots of the conflict remain, and if

unaddressed, will continue to foster resentment within the PUL working class. Given the right

conditions, such as the escalation of conflict post-Brexit, this resentment could morph into a new

round of political violence.

Hannah also revealed that social justice was about everyday people caring about and

listening to each other and having the space to speak about what is on their minds. Sharing one's

story with individuals from the other community opens the possibility of seeing a different

perspective as they hear and understand the teller's experience, which is an action that fosters

positive encounters and interactions, thereby forging everyday peace and mainstreaming

peacebuilding at the local level.

HANNAH: People [must] be able to share what has happened to them, what their life

experience has been. So, many people have never had that space to share but also have

the opportunity to talk to those who would be the perceived enemy. Maybe not the actual

person who pulled the trigger or planted the bomb or whatever. But to talk to those

groupings to say, "this is what was done to me," and just allowing that for people to

actually tell their story, how this left them, how this left their family.

Now I think that is a human need for people to express themselves to tell their story to say, "this is how it was for me"… So, people need opportunities to be able to express themselves, and to be listened to very, very respectfully. But also giving them an opportunity to hear where the other grouping is coming from, so that they might better understand the circumstances, you know, to come to terms with it and make sense of what went on.

I think with regards to justice, I think with telling your story sometimes is the only justice people are going to get. They're not going to have their day in court. They're never going to express in the public realm what has happened to them. But in very safe spaces, speaking … their story may be the only form of justice.

I think even at the very minimum, as human beings, we reach out to somebody and say that we care, we kind of touch the emotions, we touch the heart, and it is something about love. It is sharing, it's about humanity, and at the very basic level, we are saying, "listen, it is important that your voice is heard, it's important that you are allowed to tell your story." And we really do feel … humbled that people are willing to share. So, I think that goes to the heart of maybe somebody walking away and thinking, "that's the first time that I have been able to tell what it was like for me."

When one hears another person's story in a profound and authentic way, it rehumanizes that person, and it becomes difficult to demonize or otherize them (Senehi, 2020). Survivors were able to understand and make meaning out of what happened to them through the process of telling their stories. There was a level of healing that took place where they found a form of natural justice, they could not attain through the criminal justice system.

Yet Northern Ireland remains a deeply polarized, segregated, and sectarian society where people have few opportunities to dialogue and hear the other person's political positions to account for and broaden their own (Holland, 2022). Hearing only one point of view from within one's community reinforces that one-dimensional view, and it generates a sense of self-righteousness when addressing equity and justice across communities.

Measuring Success - Complacency, Isolation, and Accessing Resources

Eoin recognized that the conflict had festered over the years since partition, and CNR people had internalized the anger and frustration that eventually exploded in the late 1960s when the civil rights movement took to the streets of Northern Ireland to advocate for the CNR community's human rights, culture, and identity as the conflict escalated into the Troubles. Eoin noted that while IFI and EU PEACE funding has provided a platform to ensure equity and inclusion to work toward social justice and to improve cross-community relations in a slow-moving peacebuilding process, people remain complacent about what has happened:

> *EOIN:* I certainly think that they [IFI and EU funders] have contributed to the whole area of the equality of opportunity for people and communities, where, I suppose, the impact of conflict had fast-forwarded a spiral of decline at a local level. And I think that society, as well as government, had a responsibility because people did not create it; it's a bigger question.
>
> All the Troubles were there for a decade, virtually until the eruptions in the '60s post-civil rights movement. And really, in the end of it all, it was a problem that people hoped would go away, and it never went away because it wasn't addressed, and it wasn't acknowledged. And the respect for the identity and culture certainly, in terms of the

Catholic community living in the North, wasn't there. But I think that we need to acknowledge that the respect in terms of the identity of the Protestant culture and their perspective on life, and the world around them, wasn't necessarily embraced in the South.

So, I think that the funding has at least provided the platform where equity and justice can actually happen. I would think that they have provided the platform for that to be at least delivered. Do I think we're there yet? No. Do I think there's a level of complacency about what has been done and what has happened? Yes. I think that the institutions of the state, like the government, ministers, set the context, whether we like it or not, the way society goes. And they need to constantly be reminding us of what our priorities are as a society (PEACE III development officer).

External funding provided the platform where equity and social justice happened so that PUL and CNR citizens could express their hurt, anger, and frustration, and not bottle it all up inside, so that they couldn't move forward.

People's most fundamental need was to feel safe. Vulnerable people were afraid to engage because of Republican dissident activities, while some CNR young people entrenched within sectarian attitudes aspired to join the RIRA, while DUP and Sinn Féin politicians remained estranged from each other in the public forum not appearing to give too much ground while working together behind closed doors.

At the same time, Cormac also believed that CSOs were promoting contact and behind-the-scenes peacemaking that addressed local people's human rights. The funder's fixation on measuring success meant that CSOs had to focus their activities on quantity rather than on the quality of delivery.

CORMAC: One of the difficulties with it sometimes, the funders are more interested in quantity rather than quality, the number of people you have. And we felt with experience, it might be better to fit 20 people and take them on a few exchanges to really build up a relationship, rather than 20 different people every time. And other groups have said that you were only starting to feel relaxed with people, especially when there's huge mistrust, and that just comes down to that qualitative and quantitative. Well, certainly it broke down barriers and has contributed to an awful lot of the peace that is there at the moment (CSO leader).

CSO-funded projects have made a difference in bringing people together to break down barriers and create tolerant and respectful communities. This contact has led to a deeper understanding of the issues impacting people in these communities.

Conan also revealed that understanding different cultures provided local people with a broader global view that enriched the cultural and economic well-being of the local community, enhancing people's quality of life and broadening peaceful encounters. Conan noted that isolated people found it difficult to access resources.

CONAN: Basic human needs, I suppose, when it goes back to the statute on human rights, it is about that opportunity to access health and education. And education for me is a much broader term than simply the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Education is about understanding and having a greater view of the world, and a greater understanding of different cultures and what their perspective is.

If you have a grounding in a broader global view of things, if your mind kind of has access to understanding broader cultures, I think you have a better platform to start

out from. But I also think a lot of people, as well, find it very difficult to access the

resources that are open to them or the channels that are open to them, if they're isolated at

a time, within one, you know, if it's an insular kind of community view. You know, it

kind of just stays in one community now (CSO leader).

Conan believed that some people feel secure and safe within their community. He also

emphasized the importance of facilitating opportunities for community members to engage with

one another, which could make them feel more secure as they don't feel as lonely and isolated,

"as they feel their own cultural personalities are more accepted." Conan also pointed out that

demographic changes in Northern Ireland have impacted the sectarian nature of the conflict in a

positive way as newcomers have enriched the culture with new ideas, experiences, and cultural

practices in terms of peacebuilding:

CONAN: But here it seems to be that the demographic is very much about the Western

ex-colonial people coming into Ireland, and I don't know why that is. You know it's

interesting, there are a number of West African taxi drivers here, so it's just been a

massive increase…. Sometimes when you have people from [immigrant] communities,

they have a different viewpoint on how Ireland operates as a whole, and they can

contribute something to that than the Indigenous population can't.

You know, because it is grounded in an older kind of more very fixed kind of

prejudice, where you have the likes of Portlaoise appointed its first mayor, a guy that

came from Nigeria [Rotimi Adebari], I think. But anyway, just to see the fact that this

guy had come [and] in seven years [of] living in Ireland … was now the mayor of an Irish

town.… So, it was just a fantastic kind of thing to see that is one of the more truer

success stories of Ireland actually being welcoming to those communities and providing a

kind of shelter for people who are escaping persecution in their own countries.

More immigrants from West Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia have moved into

the north-west region, and demographic patterns have shifted dramatically (Byrne, 2023).

Including new immigrants in local peacebuilding projects was a welcoming and validating

experience, recognizing and respecting their knowledge and cultural practices. New immigrants

were working with local people on joint peacebuilding projects to understand cultural differences

and complex problems, to build cross-community relationships. Strategically undervalued

communities like the long-term unemployed, disabled people, LGBTQI+ people, and ex-

combatants should also be included in the decision-making process. They must be provided

opportunities to engage with other communities around sustainable local community economic

development and unemployment and be able to influence policymaking in the statutory bodies to

meet their needs.

Discussion and Conclusion

Young people live in fragmented communities where they have few opportunities to vent

their frustrations and to have an economic outlet that would improve their livelihoods. Extremists

in the PUL and CNR communities weren't interested in bringing communities together, and they

felt threatened by CSOs trying to do so. A sustainable reconciliation process could be achieved

through strong CSOs if they're supported, funded, and allowed to operate independently

(Skarlato et al., 2016). Consistent everyday dialogue could also bring about enduring community

peacebuilding so that CSOs must be included in critical government agendas where they

continue to play crucial roles in working with local communities working to forge a sustainable peace in Northern Ireland.

A notable shift in the direction of Northern Ireland's community sector toward political authorities and commercial enterprises seemed to pose a threat to the grassroots control of peacebuilding projects, resulting in a loss of democratic accountability. Grassroots CSOs face many obstacles and challenges as they work to achieve their peace agenda goals while they struggle to remain financially sustainabile. Consequently, the British and Irish governments and the funders must prioritize and mainstream peacebuilding and support CSO project initiatives until their work is completed. Local CSO peacebuilding activities are necessary and needed. That said, the education system must also change and be radically overhauled because segregated education continues to damage young people's perceptions of other groups, creating societal division, as well as embedding a mythology and fear of the other in young people's psyche. The churches still have a powerful hold over the segregated education system that continues to regenerate and replicate the sectarian conflict. Northern Ireland could integrate its education system and become a truly inclusive society where over time ethnoreligious identity may not be so central in everyday local interactions. This change would contribute to the transformation of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland.

Moreover, an equity and human rights agenda was embedded in the 1998 GFA, and Sinn Féin emphasized consolidating equity and social justice for all. Human rights were an anathema to the British government's belief that they were already deeply embedded in British political culture, and it did not have to concern itself with European codified rights that were part of the architecture of the GFA, and there was a sort of collusive silence around them (Arthur, 2000). It

is important for people to listen to one another to move toward respecting everybody's human rights.

The Northern Ireland government could also establish a department of community and voluntary peacebuilding that would provide ongoing resources to CSOs and facilitate the development and implementation of a local grassroots vision for the region's future. This might include creating a regional peacebuilding credit union with local community branches, where resources from external funders are housed, with local community boards meeting with CSO applicants from their communities to evaluate and fund good project ideas. The peacebuilding credit union would eliminate neoliberal bureaucratization and consultants that eat up community resources (Oloke & Byrne, 2022).

The CSOs continue to work to facilitate dialogue that contributes to better relations as groups gain a clearer understanding of where they are coming from, and they can appreciate the experiences and perspectives of others. As people have engaged with each other, prejudice, misunderstanding, and attitudes have mostly changed for participants because they are in safe spaces where they are free to discuss controversial issues openly about what happened to them and their families during the conflict.

Extremism is preventable if solid measures are put in place, and many stakeholders have a responsibility to collaborate with local communities to create sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. To do so, it is essential for the Stormont government to actively work with CSOs to continue supporting their peacebuilding efforts. In so doing, the CSOs will be able to address some of the many challenges that engulf Northern Ireland and create more inclusive, peaceful, and forward-thinking steps toward building a sustainable peace for all.

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