

# Activism Across Division: Peacebuilding Strategies & Insights from Northern Ireland

Seán Feenan, Monina O'Prey & Avila Kilmurray



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[socialchangeinitiative.com](http://socialchangeinitiative.com)

## Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the memory of **Maurice Healy**. Maurice worked in support of many of the programmes and initiatives described in this study. He was centrally involved with the creation and workings of the Reference Group (see page 27), attending the first meeting and offering a sounding board as the Group developed. Maurice contributed not only to events and meetings but also provided support behind the scenes. Maurice sadly passed away in December 2019 after a short illness. He is sadly missed by all, having worked on the Peace Impact Programme (International Fund for Ireland), the earlier Communities in Transition Programme and as co-convenor of the Reference Group. He is particularly missed as a colleague, a confidante, a safe pair of hands and a trusted and genuine friend. His passing is truly our collective loss.

# Foreword

SCI is delighted to be publishing this collection of short articles - **Activism across division: peacebuilding strategies & insights from Northern Ireland**. While every conflict is different we believe this report provides useful insights and practical advice for practitioners and donors working in deeply divided societies around the world.

The publication results from work by two SCI Fellows, Monina O'Prey and Sean Feenan. It has been supplemented by additional input from SCI's Avila Kilmurray. Seán, Monina and Avila are all seasoned peacebuilders. Between them they have over a hundred years of practical direct experience of working inside and across deeply divided communities in Northern Ireland. They have also been involved in work in other conflict situations and in funding peacebuilding work. Each has led innovative and effective practice which has played a significant part in moving Northern Ireland forward, away from violence and towards peace. Each has taken significant risks. Each has been in the thick of the conflict and in the efforts to resolve it. The authors know what they are talking about because they have walked the talk.

SCI fellowships give seasoned and emerging activists from around the world the opportunity to take time out to deepen their skills or to reflect on what they already know and share it with others. The fellowships are bespoke and focus on SCI's priority themes of peacebuilding, migration and equality and human rights. An important part of the fellowship opportunity is that participants join an international community of activists which meets together and provides practical solidarity and support.

More details on the fellows and their work can be found at <https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/fellowships>

**Martin O'Brien**  
Executive Director  
Social Change Initiative

## **Monina O’Prey**

Monina, is a peace building activist from Northern Ireland, with over 40 years’ expertise in developing and delivering grass-roots peace building, community development and social justice programmes and campaigns.

Her work has included anti-poverty campaigns, work with lone parents, and extensive engagement with excluded loyalist and republican communities.

She has combined work at the grassroots with roles as a policy advocate and as a funder. Monina was Co-ordinator of the European Network of One-Parent families and, for 18 years, acted as Secretariat for the international Foundations for Peace Network – a peer network of activist foundations working in conflict-affected areas across the globe. She is currently the Managing Agent for the International Fund for Ireland Peace Walls Programme and supports the St. Stephen’s Green Trust (Ireland) with its peacebuilding work in the North of Ireland.

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## **Seán Feenan**

Seán has worked for over 30 years as a grass roots peace builder in the most politically marginalised communities in Northern Ireland.

He has particular experience of facilitating dialogue and mediation between and amongst groups and communities. Seán has also worked as a funder, with a focus on governance, leadership, strategy development and planning. He has worked internationally in a number of regions emerging from conflict and was a member of the Foundation for Peace Network for a number of years.

Seán’s SCI Fellowship is primarily focused on learning and applying lessons from the successes and challenges faced by local communities in grass-roots peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and in other contested societies. Seán previously worked on the Peace Impact Programme, funded by the International Fund for Ireland.

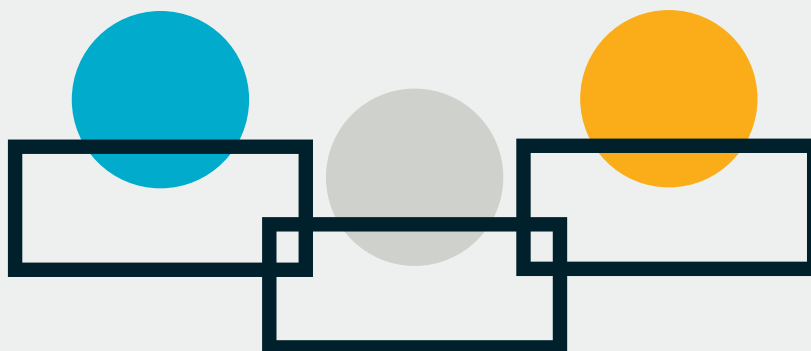
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## **Avila Kilmurray**

Avila has worked within communities in Northern Ireland since 1975. She was Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland for twenty years, supporting its work on community development, social justice and peacebuilding. Prior to that Avila was Women’s Officer (Ireland) with the Amalgamated Transport & General Workers’ Union (now UNITE).

Avila was a founder member of the Foundations for Peace Network. She was also a founder member of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (1996-2006) and a member of its negotiating team for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998).

Avila is currently supporting work in the Social Change Initiative on peacebuilding and migration. She is a Board member of the International Fund for Ireland and the St. Stephen’s Green Trust. She is author of ‘Community Action in a Contested Society: The Story of Northern Ireland’ (Lang, 2017).



## Introduction

This report gathers reflections from two Social Change Initiative (SCI) Fellows supplemented by reflective work undertaken by SCI. All are activists with long experience of working within, and between, communities in Northern Ireland – the North of Ireland – a contested society that even disagrees on the name. The key to this booklet is that the approaches and strategies described have been designed to work in a society often marked by violence and an uneasy peace process.

SCI – Social Change Initiative – is an international NGO, based in Belfast. Its mission is to collaborate with activists, policy makers and funders to deliver lasting social change. Established in 2015, it has supported activism by supporting skills, information sharing and networking locally, nationally and internationally. As an essential part of this process, SCI offered a number of Fellowships to encourage reflection. It has long recognised that activists rarely have the dedicated time and space to draw learning from their work. Both Monina O’Prey and Sean Feenan are SCI Fellows.

Northern Ireland has been a unique seed-bed for ideas and approaches on how to adopt and adapt a community development approach in a contested society. This publication reflects aspects of work undertaken over the period 1995-2020, which tracked the uncertainties of diverse periods of peacebuilding. The work ranged from building community development participation in fractured communities to supporting the growth of self-help political ex-prisoner initiatives. It includes work that encourages the inclusion of people that are critical of the on-going peace process as well as the design of funding programmes to enhance community impact on policy making. Much of the work described in this study was – and in certain cases, is - of a sensitive and exploratory nature.

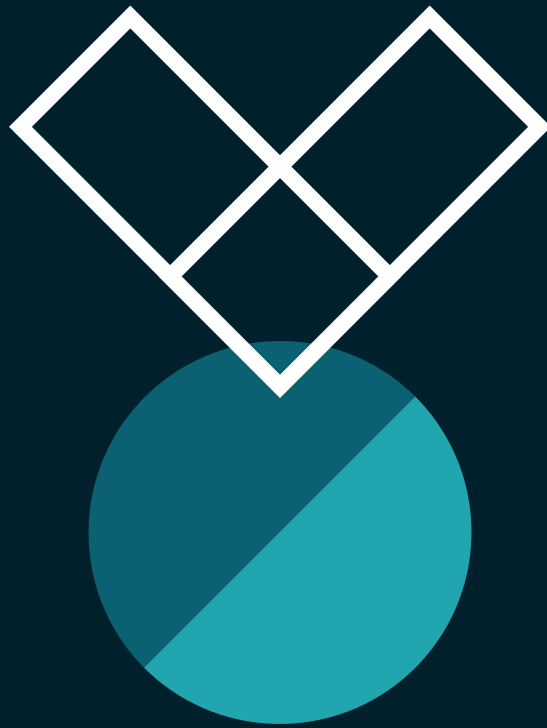
The audience for this booklet is mainly community-based activists and independent funders. We hope that it will be particularly relevant for people working in contested societies, while recognizing that the nature of these divisions will vary from society to society. There are sections included that seek to summarize points of learning for both activists and potential funders. We also hope that policy-makers will find the insights and recommendations useful when planning future programmes.

Finally, our sincere thanks to all those community-based activists who engaged with and gave so much voluntary commitment to the approaches and initiatives described. It is they that took the risks to show leadership at local level and to invest in what were often very difficult and fragile situations, challenging conversations and engagements in the interests of peacebuilding.

Monina O’Prey

Seán Feenan

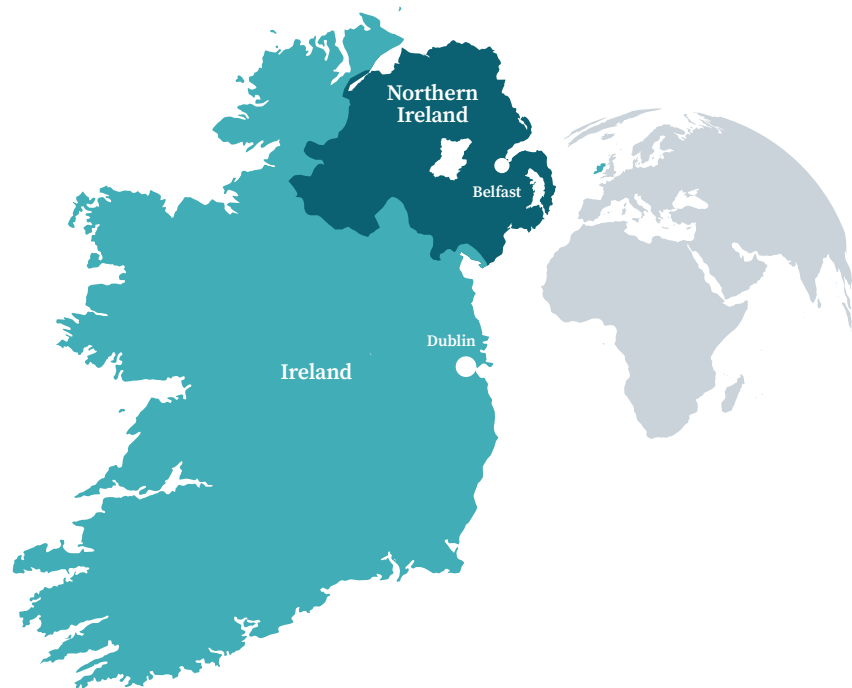
Avila Kilmurray



# **Northern Ireland: The Context**

*Avila Kilmurray*

Northern Ireland is almost 100 years old, established as a result of the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921. That year was marked by the greater part of the island (26 counties) becoming independent from British rule in an entity that was to become the Republic of Ireland, while the North-East (6 counties) remained part of the United Kingdom, with a devolved parliament in Stormont, Belfast. The history of Northern Ireland can be considered in three periods: majoritarian Ulster Unionist Party government (1922-1972); Direct Rule by the British Government – with one short period of power-sharing devolution (1972-1998) and the post Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) period which delivered a complex political settlement, marked by power-sharing devolved government, albeit implemented in a sporadic fashion given continuing political tensions.



The status and legitimacy of Northern Ireland has long been contested, with the region shared largely between two main communal groups: (i) Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist, mainly British identity (currently 48.4% population - 2020) and (ii) Catholic/Nationalist/Republican, mainly Irish identity (currently 45.1% - 2020). Identity has generally been closely correlated with party political allegiance. Contested identity is also reflected in the term Northern Ireland being itself divisive, as Nationalists more often refer to the North of Ireland or the Six Counties (there are 26 counties south of the Border). The Border between North and South runs over 310 miles, touching on five of the six northern counties.

Elections over the past two decades have returned results that have been described as ‘the balkanisation’ of Northern Ireland. There is stronger Nationalist/Republican representation to the west and south of the region, and a consolidation of Unionism in the north-east. Within Unionism there has been a dramatic shift in support from the establishment Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to the radical conservatism of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP); similarly change has been seen within Nationalism/Republicanism where the more moderate Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP) has increasingly lost ground to the more radical republican Sinn Féin. The inter-community Alliance Party, which struggled to win representation over many years, has seen recent upturn in its electoral support, as has the Green Party.

The legacy of 'the Troubles' is still seen as a major influence within the politics of Northern Ireland. Over the period 1968-1998 there were more than 3,800 conflict-related deaths; 47,571 recorded serious injuries; some 200,000 bereaved families and an estimated 25,000-30,000 politically motivated prisoners (with no official records maintained). This, together with the extensive damage to property and local infrastructure, had a major impact on a small population of 1.8 million. The post Belfast/Good Friday Agreement period, since 1998, saw a considerable reduction in the number of killings, but the region remains unsettled by difficulties in winning consensus about how to deal with the legacy of the past; the continued armed operations of some Republican political groups that reject the peace process; the controlling impact of Loyalist paramilitarism at community level; and a power-sharing government composed of politicians with very different political aspirations.

### **Current political framing:**

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was negotiated in a context created by both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. The main Republican armed movement, the IRA (Irish Republican Army) declared a cessation in August 1994, followed two months later by the Loyalist UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and Red Hand Commandos. A second armed Republican organisation, the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) declared a ceasefire in 1998. The Agreement, which was ratified in referenda held in Northern Ireland and the Republic, was accepted by 71% in the North – on a high 81% voter turn-out – and 94% in the Republic. The framing it offered provided for :

- Recognition of the validity of both Unionist/Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican identities and aspirations, with the provision for parity of esteem between British and Irish identities.
- Acceptance that the constitutional future of the North would be decided by its people, with provision for parallel referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic should the British Secretary of State identify indications of a broad desire for a united island.
- An a la carte approach to national identity – with people in Northern Ireland having the right to be British or Irish or both.
- Recognition of the importance of Equality and Human Rights, with provision for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, complemented by a Charter of Rights for the island.
- Provision for a power-sharing Executive to govern Northern Ireland, supported by an Assembly elected under proportional representation.
- A Civic Forum was agreed as a consultative body to offer a degree of participative democracy.
- North-South and East-West inter-parliamentary arrangements, that included a North-South Ministerial Council, a British-Irish Council and a British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference.
- Finally, there was a range of commitments made for the review of policing; arrangements for decommissioning of armaments, support for the increased representation of women, for community development and victims/survivors of violence, as well as the accelerated release of politically motivated prisoners from jail.

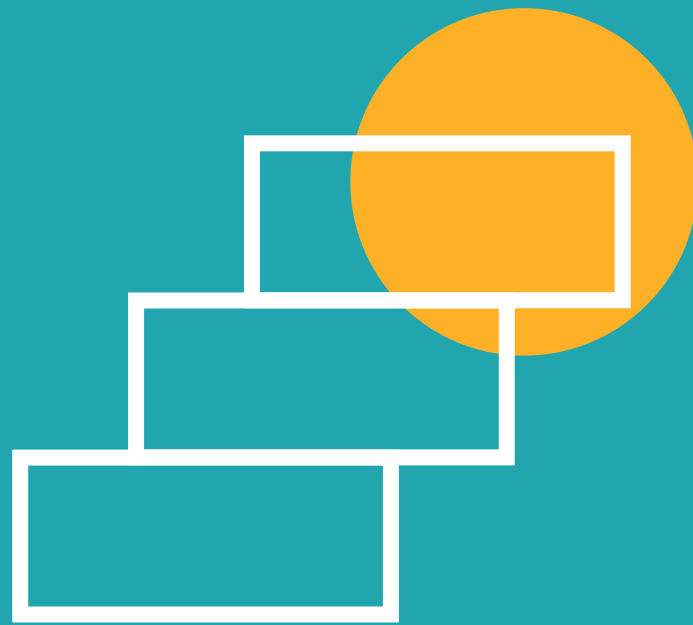


What the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement failed to do was to set a clear, timetabled implementation process. This resulted in the lack of the Bill of Rights and the early suspension of the Civic Forum. Subsequent disagreements over the terms of the Agreement resulted in further settlements – St. Andrew’s Agreement (2007), Hillsborough Castle Agreement (2010), Stormont House Agreement (2014), Fresh Start Agreement (2015) and New Decade: New Approach Agreement (2020).

A number of take-aways relevant to peacebuilding and conflict transformation can be identified over the period of both armed conflict and the peace process

- Once established as an accepted strategy the use of violence becomes increasingly normalised by both State and non-State actors, sacrificing in the process principles of human rights and transparency and creating conditions where mutually exclusive narratives define events in terms of the impact (or agency) of ‘them’ or ‘us’.
- Despite the fact that Republican paramilitarism defined British interests and the security forces as their primary target, and Loyalist paramilitaries targeted Republicans, there was much intra-community violence by means of paramilitary feuds, fragmentation and allegations of collaboration and collusion. The legacy of this continues to impact on community memory and political alignments.
- Peacebuilding is not a linear process, but is marked by tentative developments that can, and do, experience set-backs. There is the need to bring as many people as possible along in support of the peace process but also to leave pathways of engagement open to those groups that, for whatever reason, reject the process in order to introduce non-violent alternatives.
- Emotive issues such as emblems, symbols, cultural traditions and sense of identity and ‘respect’ have much potential to undermine a peace process as do ‘substantive’ issues. Equally attention needs to be paid to how the conflict is recorded and portrayed in order to encourage inclusive buy-in.
- Broader civil society inclusion in participative democracy can be threatened by violence and is in danger of being marginalised by elected politicians (representative democracy) where there is a need to negotiate an end to violent conflict and where politics is seen as focusing primarily on constitutional issues.

Within this overall context, however, space was found for community-based activism that addressed social, economic, equality and human rights issues, as well as locating them within a peacebuilding frame.



**Framing Peacebuilding Work:  
Why Investment in Community  
Development and Peacebuilding  
Work is Important**

**Monina O'Prey**

The inclusion of Goal 16 in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (adopted by all UN member states in 2015)

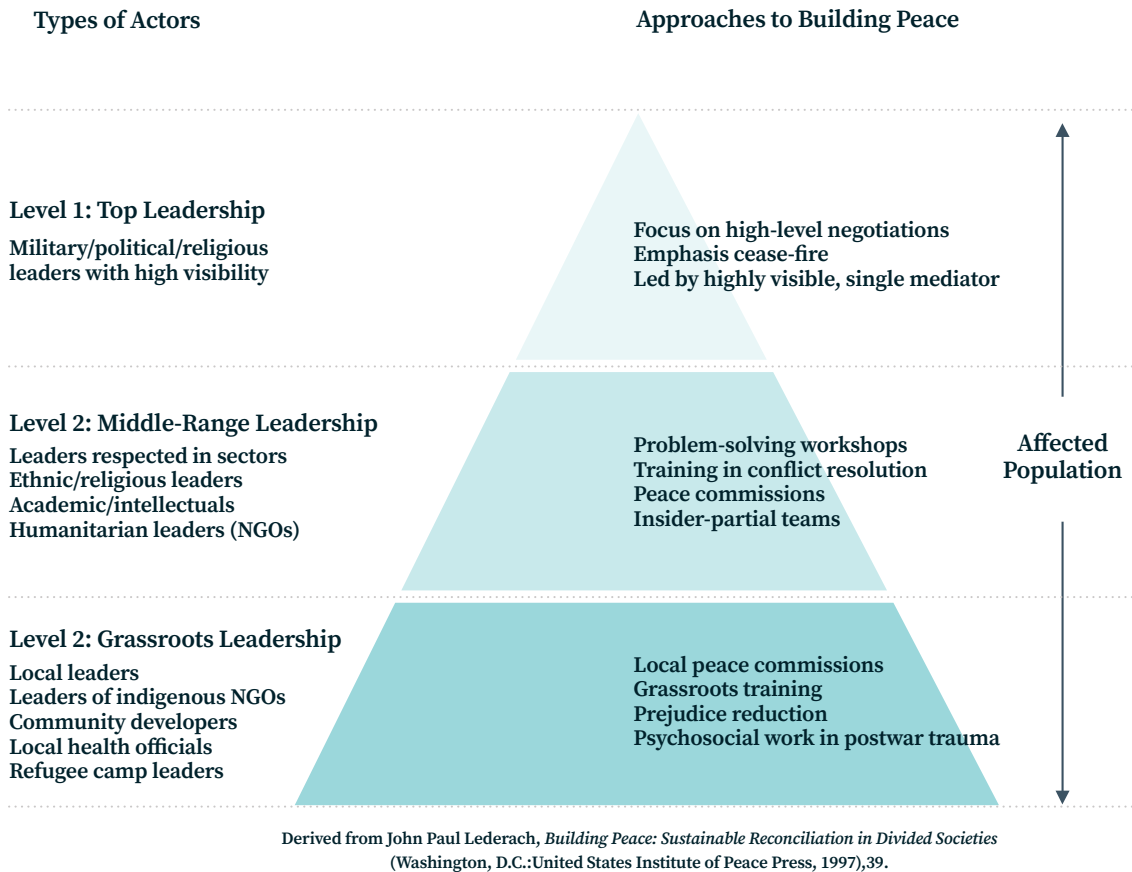
*‘To promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’*

highlights the need to tackle exclusion, communal conflict, and social injustices in an effort to promote peace.

In a world that has seen the causes of conflict and use of weapons multiply rapidly in recent decades, the challenges of peacebuilding must be approached in a holistic way. Inter and intra-state armed conflicts have become increasingly complex, with a causal weave that features religious belief, ethnic and cultural differences, territorial aspirations and the desire for control of power. But they also feature control of natural resources, the impact of climate break-down and the unresolved legacy of colonial settlements. When differences coincide and reinforce each other the potential for violent conflict is heightened. Added to this mix is the nature of proxy wars, which factor in the interests of external states with their own respective power dynamics.

Conflict impacts disproportionately on poor people and on those local communities that are already disadvantaged and where community infrastructure is weak. At times of conflict, access to health, education and social support services reduce; alienation and tensions rise. Civic participation is diminished with decision-making removed from local people and human rights increasingly seen as expendable. Social exclusion, powerlessness and lack of hope become the lived experience of many communities. Ongoing violent conflict invariably means that any sense of trust is damaged, with fear and trauma becoming the norm. Groups of people and communities become suspicious of ‘the other’ resulting in a break-down of community resilience. The scale of conflict can rapidly escalate as positions become hardened; mutually exclusive narratives of cause and effect take root; actions replace words; and ‘the other’ are dehumanised and cast as the enemy to be destroyed/ removed. To all intents and purposes, conflict ends normal politics, and those directly affected by violence, including many marginalized groups and communities, rarely have ‘voice’.

While this downward cycle of division is hard to break, it has been found that courageous and innovative local leadership has a crucial role to play in creating the conditions for greater local participation, so that local solutions can be developed and owned, with local communities supported to take the steps needed to break down division and mistrust. Clearly this is only one element in a broader peacebuilding enterprise which has been depicted by John Paul Lederach (1997) as working at three interlinked levels –



But the reality remains that the essential Grassroots Leadership level is often overlooked in the imperative to engage directly with the main state and non-state armed combatants and the INGO scramble to secure resources and position.

It has been shown in repeated studies that despite the best efforts of well-intentioned external support organizations, the architecture surrounding humanitarian development aid in all its forms (direct emergency aid, short-term philanthropic investment or institutional initiatives) is rarely the most effective way to contribute to building sustainable peace in conflict-affected communities. Indeed, the aid system often tends to create dependencies which can undermine the autonomy of local community activism and peacebuilding work. It is this latter that is essential to achieve the necessary conflict transformation in a manner that is inclusive of those people who will have to live with the consequences of their actions and decisions.

## Supporting locally based infrastructure:

There are many considerations that point to the importance of investing in local infrastructure in areas of conflict. The Foundations for Peace Network (FFP) highlights the experiences of locally based, and directed, community philanthropy organisations working in these circumstances. One member, Kamala Chandrakiana, from the Indonesia for Humanity Fund, explained –

*“I understand conflicts to be evolving and multiple; peace to be episodic and flawed; and peacebuilding to be a continuous and intersecting process. Over time, when the root causes are not sustainably addressed, conflicts do not end up disappearing and simply evolve in form. A recurring pattern is peace-making that involves high-level political settlements which do not necessarily resonate beyond the negotiating table let alone in the grassroots. More importantly, narratives of distrust continue to flourish as identity politics dominate. Given how complex conflicts are and how flawed and episodic peace-making is, efforts in peacebuilding must necessarily be continuous over an extended period of time and intersecting across multiple aspects of life. For example, peacebuilding is not just about rebuilding trust in divided communities but also about reconstructing local economies so that they are more inclusive and sustainable. Such work can only be done when located deep within the community, engaging with shared experience and aspirations”.*

Kamala, and other members of the Foundation for Peace Network (from Serbia, Georgia, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Palestine and Northern Ireland) note some of the difficulties found in situations where there is a predominance of INGOs or externally driven initiatives:

- the short-term nature of engagement in a country or region;
- the inability to reach the most excluded/affected groups;
- distortion of the local community/voluntary sector by recruitment of staff;
- the lack of consideration for local languages, meeting locations and customs;
- top-down pre-determined approaches and notions of what represents success, and that set unrealistic outputs/outcomes; and
- the quick-fix and walk away approach that often leaves communities worse off.

Of greatest concern is the dependency culture created and lack of investment in local leadership and capacity which effectively disempowers poor and/or marginalised communities in the longer-term. Kamala went on to describe some of these concerns, arguing that international philanthropic and state donors should –

*“Ensure interventions underpin peacebuilding rather than create dependencies and unsustainable development; avoid tight timescales and unnecessary bureaucracy. Peacebuilding takes time and inclusion/participation. In Indonesia, organisations lost their autonomy and became project implementers of a plan designed elsewhere when there was an abundance of Donor Aid. Little sustained when they left”.*

It is experience such as this that underlines the need for the international community to partner with existing local organisations rather than distorting the concept of localisation by simply establishing client relationships on a country basis.

Alongside supporting mission-driven local philanthropy organisations that have a clear commitment to social justice and peacebuilding, it is important to invest in building and nurturing local community-based infrastructure and leadership that develop the longer-term resilience necessary for sustainable peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

## **The contribution of philanthropy:**

Access to independent financial support is critical to local peacebuilding activism; resources are essential. Without independent funding, the work has the potential to be controlled or stymied by those with vested interests or those working at the behest of the state that may be part of the conflict, making this source of resources either inaccessible or unpalatable to local communities. Peacebuilding activism is difficult and politically complex work, often reducing its appeal to potential sources of local philanthropy. Much of the work would not be done without independent external philanthropy. While it is clear that independent philanthropy has the power to make positive change, it should also be acknowledged that it has the power to do the opposite, and/or to have little impact, if not managed well. It can benefit significantly from partnering with mission-driven local philanthropic or peacebuilding organisations that have a clear commitment to local peacebuilding work.

In undertaking peacebuilding work, an adaptive change management approach is much more productive than imposing a rigid outputs/outcomes imposed framework. Peacebuilding is not a linear process: as it faces difficulties and challenges it needs to be able to evaluate and adapt. It needs to be able to take account of changing political environments or other local circumstances while also open to availing of unforeseen opportunities or innovation.

It is essential that there is acceptance of the possibility of slow progress from the outset and that unreasonable expectations are not allowed to strangle creativity. There is a need to trust local partners and actors to set the pace and take the risks. That is not to say that good governance should not be applied throughout, this must be part of the process, co-designed and agreed with local actors who can then be supported to ensure that it is in place.

Community development and peacebuilding principles and models of practice are core to the successful delivery and sustainability of peacebuilding activism. They are enabling, participative, inclusive approaches that build local capacity and leadership. They invest in people and communities, demonstrating respect for local knowledge, lived experience and endurance.

Alongside understanding, and accepting, the key contribution of principled community development brings to peacebuilding, funders must also adopt an honest broker position. This recognises the importance of philanthropic investment maintaining a non-partisan position in situations where there are contested issues, territories and rights: it must maintain clear efforts to be non-partisan. That said, programme deliverers should also know when to challenge gatekeeping and other local blocks or vetoes to progress, as well as knowing when to have the patience to be the facilitator that understands the need for time/space/understanding.

Experience of local peacebuilding activism work in Northern Ireland indicates that access to independent philanthropic support was and is critical to enabling much needed sensitive and long-term peacebuilding work. This relates to local place-based community activism, work with women, and work with disaffected/marginalised groups, as well as work with groups significantly impacted by the conflict including political prisoners and ex-combatants, victims of conflict, legacy and human rights work. Independent philanthropy has huge power to effect change. It can take 'calculated' risks to build peace; it can offer significant added value support and, when necessary, it can use its reputational capital to withstand negative comment by those who oppose community-based peacebuilding and local activism to safeguard their own vested interests.

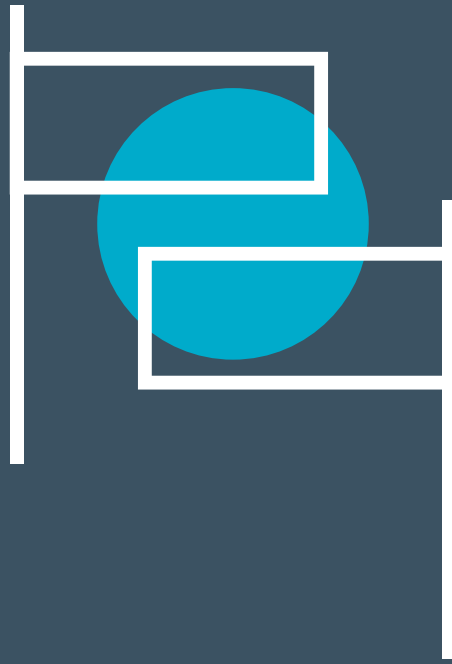
### **What local peacebuilding work needs from funders:**

- A long-term commitment with flexibility around budgets and work programmes and an assurance that the funding won't be pulled when the going gets tough;
- ongoing moral support in difficult times as people need to know their funder has their back and won't bow to political and other pressures/criticism;
- trust, respect and understanding for the work to be undertaken;
- ongoing engagement for the purposes of reflection on progress, learning, and adaptability when change is needed;
- providing cover for organisations to undertake sensitive and complex work;
- enabling international connections with like conflict areas that can give guidance and support and potentially be a vehicle for opening up conversations that are too difficult for local actors;
- enabling safe space for convenings which provide opportunities for external expertise to share experiences, challenge and push boundaries; people can be overwhelmed by their own situation and hearing how obstacles have been overcome/tackled in other situations can be inspirational and help to move things forward.

In conclusion, independent philanthropic support has enabled reach into issues/areas that were either unpalatable or outside the comfort zone of local funders, be that because the work was either seen as too political or beyond the constraints of governance controls. The funder/local implementer relationship was central to the delivery of peacebuilding approaches. Where this worked well opportunities could be grasped in a timely manner and challenges addressed. While the successes often went unrecorded, the differences made were evident in many of the eventual peace processes. Given the long-term and precarious nature of peacebuilding work, impact and progress is never linear so commitment and belief are essential.

*“Peacebuilding is like housework; if done regularly no-one notices, if neglected, everyone notices.”*

The wise words of Marina Tabukashvili, Executive Director of the Taso Foundation, a sister indigenous Peacebuilding Foundation in Georgia – and a member of the Foundations for Peace Network.



**Grass-Roots Peacebuilding  
Work in Northern Ireland/  
the North of Ireland**

Monina O'Prey



Community development and self-help has a long history across Northern Ireland, taking on an edge of activism in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the on-going violence. During these two decades, the work primarily took place within rather than between communities, and with people who were bearing the brunt of the daily toll of conflict. People were being intimidated out of homes located in the 'others' territory; they lived in fear and distrust of the heavy police and army presence as well as the persistent danger of shootings and bombings, arrests and imprisonment/internment. Personal safety was a key issue for many community workers and activists and, like the communities within which they lived and worked, survival was key.

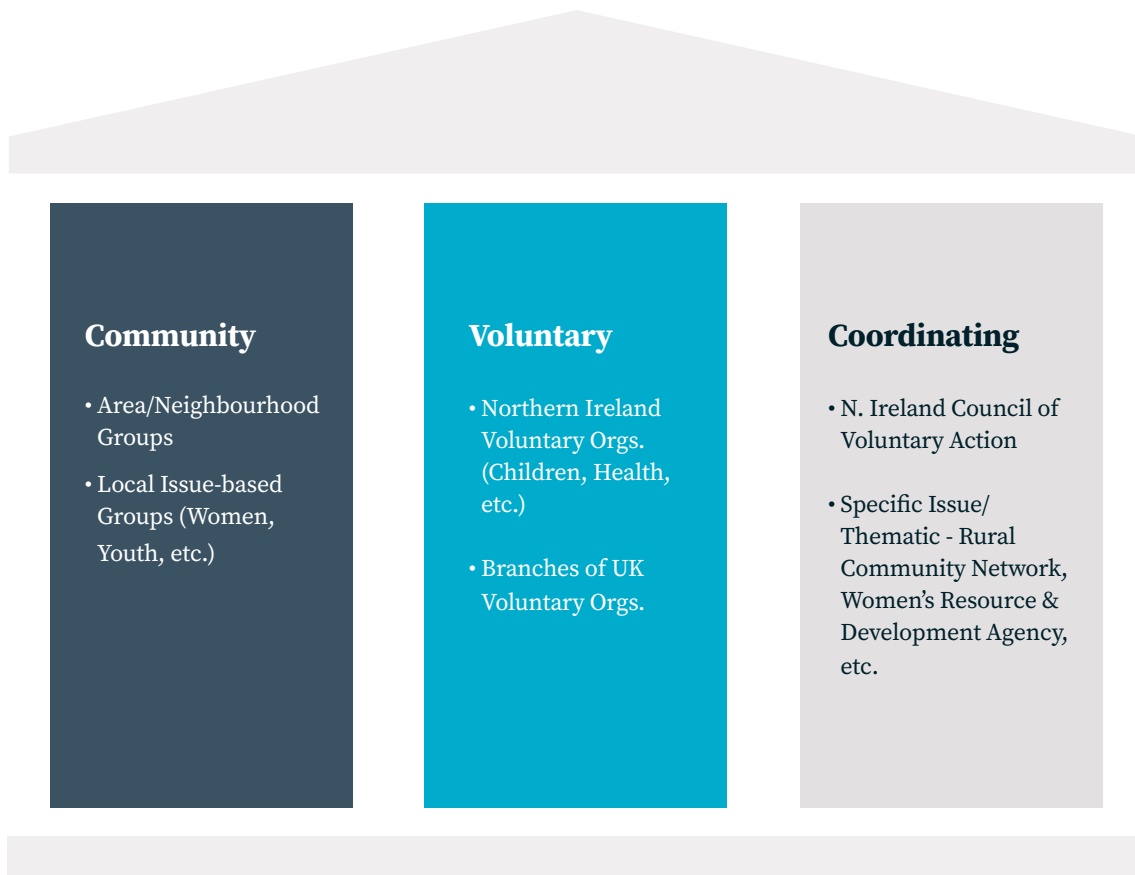
Core to this was building internal community solidarity and resilience in what were increasingly 'single identity' communities – composed of either Catholic/Nationalist/Republicans (CNR) or Protestant/Unionist/Loyalists (PUL). Often in the absence of, and disruption to, much-needed services, local people came together to organise their own provision to meet community needs. Volunteerism was strong, particularly among women, with a focus on supporting families to survive and keeping young people safe and engaged within their own areas .

The emerging community structures included Residents/Tenants' Associations, Community Councils, Women's Groups and Centres, Youth Centres, Community Partnerships, Special Needs Groups, Independent Advice Centres and Resource Centres as well as issue-specific campaigning groups and networks. It was noted at the time that this 'community infrastructure' was more extensive in CNR areas than in PUL communities, partially attributed to the former having lower expectations of state interest or assistance so more willing to organise for themselves. This, however, was to become a political issue when resources were made available to community initiatives, with the perception of greater allocation being absorbed by CNR areas. This sometimes resulted in a political cheque-book balancing of resources, with resources and facilities introduced into many communities that neither asked for them nor used them. This contributed to the need for many agencies to employ community workers to animate work. This approach persisted for many years with evidence of it continuing to this day.

The conflict impacted across the North in different ways, but disproportionately impacted on poor working-class urban and rural areas where poverty, neglect and unemployment/under-employment were already facts of life. The direct impact of the violence experienced through bereavement, injury and imprisonment added to the toll of issues to be addressed. In the light of an official British Government narrative that the ongoing situation was 'an aggravated crime wave' rather than a politically inspired struggle, there were few statutory services designed to meet the needs of those impacted by conflict. Over time, a number of government programmes were put in place to focus on socio-economic issues at both regional and community level but few acknowledged the conflict or its impact, and many were programmes routinely rolled-out across the UK to tackle disadvantage.

Notwithstanding the many challenges, community workers managed to develop and maintain a certain level of inter-community connection over the course of the conflict, mainly through individual relationships, working on common issues of concern or on efforts to tackle interface violence. By the early 1980's this was augmented by fledgling inter-community contact work that was mainly led by local women who recognised the need to build bridges and broker relations with their neighbours from the 'other side'. In the period up to the ceasefires of 1994, this was augmented by the engagement of many community activists and community leaders with a focus very much on conflict reduction.

**Figure 1 – Typology of Community & Voluntary Organisations**



As can be seen from Figure 1 above, community-based activism was one pillar within the NGO eco-sphere in Northern Ireland. A noticeable trend in the 1980's – and to an even greater extent in the post-ceasefire years – was the strengthening of voluntary sector services, controlled by Government funders, often to the detriment of the work of local community organisations who saw control of their locally organised services and initiatives gradually undermined or taken over. The requirements of funders (statutory and independent) also served to professionalise NGO provision, minimising the lived-knowledge of local activists. In addition, there was the conflict-related imperative reflected in Government funding policies that privileged resourcing agencies, organisations and institutions that were seen as 'safe hands' in political terms.

There were some exceptions to this trend most noticeably a small number of independent Foundations or funders that were prepared to support locally-developed and controlled community development and peacebuilding work that focused on human rights and social justice. Funders such as the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Baring Trust, the Nuffield Foundation and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland were examples. The Atlantic Philanthropies supported initiatives from 1991, and in the post-ceasefire period (post 1994) independent funding from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) offered a sharper focus on community-based peacebuilding. This support for local activism and peacebuilding (alongside major financial support from the range of EU PEACE Programmes) was often a game-changer, creating space for movement, a much better understanding and articulation of the longer-term impact of the conflict and new approaches to community development and peacebuilding work.

## De-constructing community development:

With the 1994 ceasefires opening up greater space for inter-community activism there was time for greater analysis of the essential building blocks for such engagement: the existence of confidence, capacity and structures to enable people to participate and engage collectively in both approaches to address local issues and to build inter-community relationships. This became known as ‘community infrastructure’ which flourished in situations where there was a combination of (i) physical capital (meeting space/resources/equipment/finance); (ii) social capital (activists/groups/networks/collective processes); and (iii) human capital (local leadership/relationships/knowledge/confidence). Analysis showed that in many areas community infrastructure was weak or non-existent. There was a high correlation between areas of weak community infrastructure and those Local Authorities that had limited interest in community development and/or in areas where there were competing paramilitary organisations. Research into this issue established that areas of weak community infrastructure were disproportionately (although far from exclusively) found in Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities.

**Table 1 – Factors and Indicators of Weak Community Infrastructure**

Conflict-Related Factors	Geography: Infrastructural Support	Other Factors
Political or paramilitary gate-keeping and control of areas	Physical isolation: areas falling outside the (funded) support organisation's priority areas	Cultural barriers: reluctance to take or accept State or external (tainted) money
Intra and/or Inter community tensions; Interface tensions	Lack of community meeting space or venue; no history of self-help	Religious or ideological barriers (Lottery money, etc.) or preference for voluntary services provided by churches
Areas deemed ‘difficult or dangerous to work with’ by agencies and so avoided	Development shadow – agencies claiming all available resources to work in areas and then neglecting them	Alienation from perceptions of the community/voluntary sector (seen as radical or unnecessary)
Fear of failure – due to previous CD experience or take over by paramilitaries	Small areas of deprivation living in the shadow of wealthier areas so not qualifying for funding	Community development seen as ideologically or politically aligned.
Lack of human capital – leadership – due to political context; Fear to put head above the parapet, risk to self/family	Available funder criteria does not relate to identified local needs	Fear that inter-community work would compromise allegiances/loyalties/relationship with the state.

Two custom-specific community development initiatives were designed to address some of these factors – (i) The Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure Programme (1995-2000) and (ii) Communities in Transition Programme (2000-2012). Both were implemented under the auspices of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, with funding provided by Atlantic Philanthropies, the International Fund for Ireland and the EU Structural Funds (1995-1999). The contribution of independent funders was vital to allow for the investment to be delivered over a longer time scale and in a flexible adaptive manner.

The Communities in Transition programme built on the learning of the earlier pilot Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure programme and committed to work proactively in areas of weak infrastructure, which were also significantly impacted by conflict, and that were continuing to experience community tension and division in the post Belfast/Good Friday Agreement period. This brought community development and peacebuilding work together in a combined action-research approach.

Key to this de-constructed approach is the belief that peacebuilding in divided communities needs to be community-led and community-owned. A belief that confidence and capacity must be built from the ground up in order to be sustainable. It is essential that difficult and potentially divisive issues are not avoided but dealt with in a way that does not further endanger people or exacerbate tensions. Sensitivity and reassurance is needed at all stages of the engagement process while maintaining the momentum to build inclusivity. Inclusivity requires reaching out to people who are apprehensive of involvement as well as to the local 'gatekeepers' (whether party political, paramilitaries or simply strong local personalities who wielded power) and is built on developing honest relationships.

The programme design required pro-active identification of local communities where the challenges for the work included:

- Little evidence of community development, activism or engagement;
- Clear evidence of ongoing community tensions and divisions, both within the areas themselves and on an inter-community basis;
- Strong evidence of community control through ongoing paramilitary activity or other gatekeeping resulting in lack of broader community participation; and
- Clear evidence of social need coupled with statutory neglect, resulting in lack of services, physical infrastructure, engagement and investment.

Programme staff had to have the ability to engage in a non-judgemental manner as well as being politically aware of local perceptions, nuances and dynamics. They required the confidence to build and sustain relationships (both within and between communities) and to be committed to inclusive peacebuilding and social justice. Equally, local people had to be convinced that the programme was long-term in nature and that support would be accessible and dependable irrespective of the inevitable periodic set-backs.

## **The programme roll-out:**

The model adopted had three main steps to the initiation of the work in each programme area:



The approach focused on building relationships with people either living in, and/or who knew or worked in the area; identifying needs and opportunities with local people and developing an action plan that would be implemented at a pace that local people felt comfortable with. No pre-set agenda was set, apart from a commitment to the values of community development and peacebuilding. There were no specific inputs/outputs to achieve and no rigid funding requirements such as year-end spending deadlines. All project areas were allocated a notional 5-year programme budget – with all being eventually supported for more than 7 years within this budget – and all drawing in additional funding and resources to meet newly identified needs

The initial area assessment established not only the infrastructure and nature of assets/deficits in each area, but also assessed the political profile and nuances – the ‘who was who’ in terms of influence, controls and power gatekeeping and the barriers/challenges faced to date. This assessment was made through participant observation, as well as by talking with both external and internal agencies and individuals, that included key actors within paramilitary and political groups.

A transparent process to engage with people and encourage participation was then initiated. This essentially meant talking directly to people to build a relationship of trust. Alongside the social and economic needs that were identified in these conversations, peacebuilding issues also emerged, with people speaking about the reasons why things either happened, or didn’t happen, within the neighbourhood. Once trust was slowly established, Programme staff were able to probe and understand some of the more sensitive issues relating to the conflict that were holding back engagement and progress.

The development process could then be put in place:



The animation and development phase involved assessment and documentation of local needs and priorities (as well as assets), public meetings as well as one-to-one resident contact, engaging with agencies, offering training opportunities and access to courses, identifying projects and activities that could deliver ‘quick wins’ to build credibility and confidence, and the development of flexible Action Plans and targets for the work. Development was often slow, and the pace varied from area to area, but all established a local Action group and either sourced meeting places or opened community offices. Effective engagement was the key and was promoted through public meetings, newsletters, local family events, engaging schools, youth services, churches, community nurses, the local post office and other small businesses where people met. There were attempts, from time to time, by statutory agency workers or local politicians to block the engagement process, whether for vested interests or resentment at external intervention, and this had to be worked through by keeping local people informed and supported to address these attempted blockages.

Local programme visibility and accessibility were important as was organising non-threatening and inclusive activities like community fun-days, taster workshops or local history projects. Opportunities for ideas generation could be informal in nature and include different age groups. It was important to be conscious of any section of the community that was not participating (such as young people, minority ethnic groups, etc.) and design proactive activities to reach out to them.

By the nature of the communities targeted for the programme, some of the work was within single identity areas, dealing with intra-community tensions. These could take the form of factionalism and feuding between different paramilitary groups. Other areas might have people from different community identities living side by side. In these situations, there were often overt sectarian community tensions and divisions. The skills required for both circumstances were the same – building trust and relationships, breaking down negative perceptions of ‘the other’ and creating opportunities to enable difficult conversations which eventually led to a greater understanding of ‘the other’ and the development of inclusive processes.

As the capacity of the Action Groups developed it was important that they continued to actively participate in decision-making about their areas and taking the responsibility of engaging with decision-makers while lobbying for the changes needed. They needed to encourage further local participation by keeping people informed of developments, opportunities and challenges. While paramilitary structures remained in place in many areas, the power/control dynamics changed when the local Action groups included people with paramilitary connections as well as those who didn't. Both worked together as residents and activists on an equal basis, making positive contributions for area improvement, but also discussing negative incidents as they arose, and holding people to account in ways that enabled relationships to be sustained. This is often a sensitive process of trial and error, which benefits from external facilitation by the Programme worker. There were ups and downs, starts and stops, but learning came from all activity and review/adaption was built in.

### **Addressing inter-community issues:**

The challenge of building inter-community relationships needed the hook of safe space to meet and a staged approach to naming and addressing sensitive issues. Attention had to be paid to the confidence that local activists had in articulating their fears and aspirations as bringing groups together that have very different levels of confidence and capacity can be an alienating experience for those with less confidence. There were also issues about how individual participants were seen by people from 'the other' community, given that local groups often include political ex-prisoners and/or ex-combatants. The work across Northern Ireland involved sounding out the willingness for activists to meet on a cross-community basis which was facilitated by highlighting shared community-level interests and concerns. Convenings could then be organised, involving several groups supported through the Programme, which focused on training workshops, activities, information sessions with external speakers and residentials that offered team-building exercises in safe space. As confidence grew, site visits were organised so that activists were exposed to the conditions in other areas. In short, there was a strong emphasis on breaking down stereotypes and challenging perceptions. Much of this was achieved by giving people the time, and relaxed space, to mix and network.

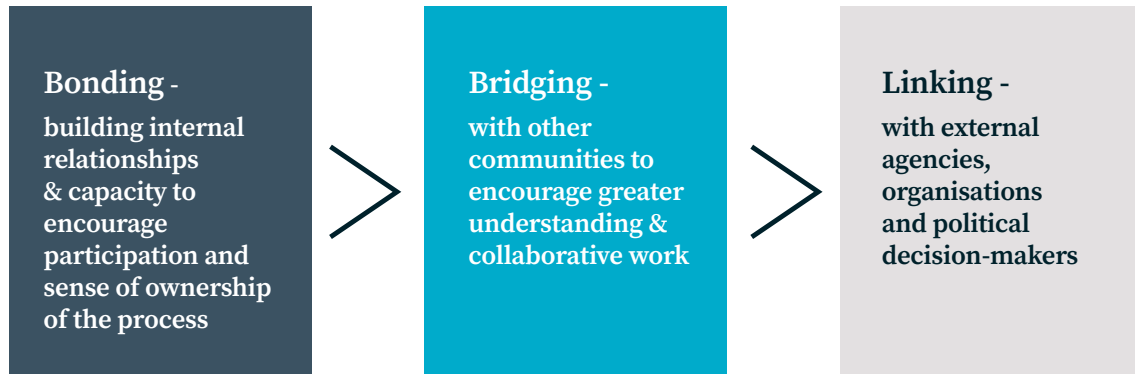
Encouraging people to work in small groups, with membership drawn from different local areas, allowed them to work through a range of 'local scenarios' that raised a range of sensitive issues and entailed negotiation between the group members as to what the solution(s) might be. These sessions were generally facilitated by external people who could keep an eye on appropriate levels of challenge and discomfort. In practice, it was found that this approach delivered positive relationship building and collaborative follow-on work that was undertaken on an inter-community basis. Undertaking this work within the framing of the overall shared programme helped provide confidence in the process.

Many of the sensitive issues identified and addressed had profound effect on the local communities. They included:

- Disaffection with the peace process/potential for a return to armed conflict.
- Dissatisfaction, and in cases disaffection, with policing/security which included the perceived failings of community policing.
- Uncertainties over decommissioning of weapons that impacted on both intra and inter-community tensions.
- Vulnerability of marginalised young people in areas which continued to feel the impact of the conflict compounded by both lack of opportunities/hope and vulnerability to both drugs/mental health issues and potential paramilitary/gang recruitment or intimidation.
- Concerns over issues of identity and unaddressed issues arising from the legacy of the conflict.

While discussed, rarely was there consensus of opinion either within local groups, or on an inter-community basis, about many of these issues. However, the fact that they were discussed was, in itself, sign of progress – a step forward.

The insights derived from this work allowed the design of further and more tightly tailored programmes grounded in social justice, human rights and inclusion. Whether at area or group level, the work was conceptually framed in terms of the three layers of social capital:



As noted above, peacebuilding and social justice work was never a linear process and required regular programme review and flexibility in order to take account of the external macro-political environment which was itself often changeable and uncertain.

At programmes end, enhanced infrastructure and capacity was in place with investment in local vibrant confident community leadership and a strong contribution to peacebuilding and social inclusion work. All programme areas drew down external monies to regenerate their areas, which would not have happened without the investment in the work, but which was much deserved and contributed to countering previous statutory neglect. Much needed new resources, facilities and services were in place to enable growth and development.

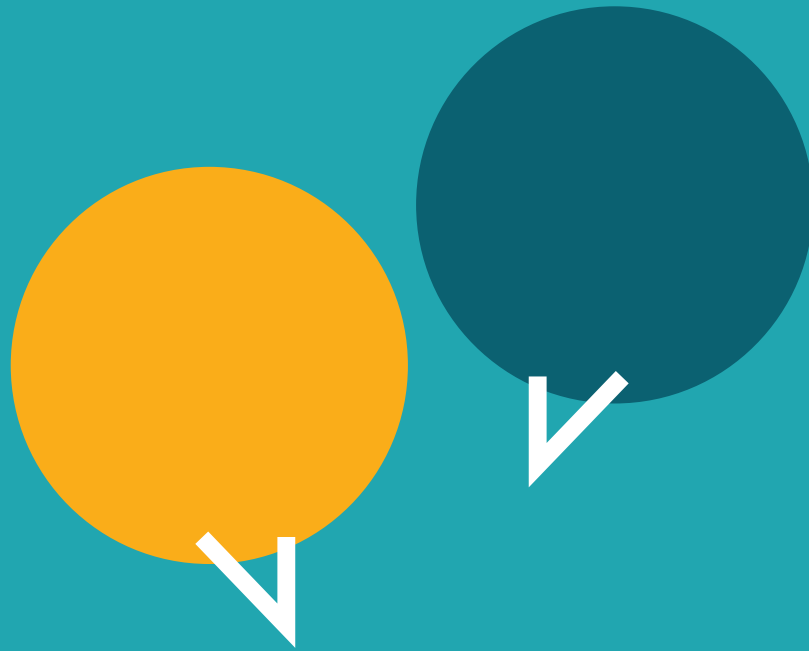
From a funder's perspective a relatively small investment that was flexible, adaptable and committed to building local leadership and capacity, that believed local people to be core to progress and sustainable peacebuilding, that was carefully managed and reviewed, ended up enabling marginalised areas to have voice, ownership of their agenda, input into decision-making and an opportunity to contribute to peacebuilding and social justice.

**In summary, the first Community in Transition Programme commenced in year 2000 and completed 2007, with the second Programme starting in 2007 and completing 2012. They enabled:**

Community Development and Peacebuilding work to be initiated and actively sustained in 20 geographical areas across NI for many years after Programme end: some remain active to this day while others evolved into new partnerships or initiatives.

Between them, the two Programmes leveraged an **additional** and much deserved £14.125million regeneration and peacebuilding funding into the 20 areas involved.





# **Peacebuilding On The Edges: Facilitating Inter-Community Dialogue Between Ex-Combatants**

Seán Feenan

The work described in this chapter focuses on the inclusion of individuals from Republican and Loyalist groups and communities that are known to express serious reservations about the ongoing peace process in the North of Ireland in an effort to explore possible pathways for moving away from conflict. Initially it was felt that this process would be helped by the introduction of conflict transformation models drawn from a range of international examples, but over time it became clear that participants prioritised local issues. A Discussion Circle, soon termed ‘The Reference Group’ came together, meeting on a regular basis, facilitated by support from an SCI (Social Change Initiative) Fellowship.

### **Initiating the process:**

It was felt to be essential that the membership of what was to become the ‘Reference Group’ should be drawn from former combatants and political activists from a range of backgrounds – both organisationally and in terms of community identity (Republican and Loyalist). It was important that the individuals selected be open to the idea of establishing a working relationship within the group based on principles of trust and support for non-violent approaches and strategies. It was also felt that some form of commonality would help engagement. Translating these principles into practice was crucial. A number of trusted individual activists were consulted about the idea prior to any project design. While they all reported being positive about the idea, and gave feedback about what they felt they could contribute and on what basis, a number of reservations were noted. There was concern over the potential dangers of ‘big personalities/egos’ dominating meetings, people promoting party lines, the over (or under) representation from any one group or faction, people being involved who were still associated with armed conflict, etc. These were all valid considerations and helped in thinking through what might be feasible in terms of establishing a working model for the Reference Group.

Each of the people initially approached were people with whom there was a good working relationship built up over a number of years. All of them were new and emerging leaders or people who had moved into a new process of leadership. All were former combatants and/or political activists.

### **Identifying Reference Group members:**

A list was drawn up of potential Reference Group members. This took account of what was known about each individual in terms of what they might have to offer the Reference Group as a whole; the groupings that they were otherwise associated or identified with; and their contribution in terms of geographic distribution and political balance. In choosing to work with former combatants it was felt that those people who had previously been engaged in conflict were well placed in this instance to engage in conflict transformation processes. A number had already been active in aspects of peacebuilding and each was working to support a constituency or community to make positive change. This change invariably involved moving away from reliance on armed actions by creating new pathways for constituencies to progress their political aspirations and engage more positively in support of their own communities.

There were a number of important considerations to take account of in the identification of the Reference Group membership –

- Many of the individuals prioritised for potential membership already knew and had a relationship with some of the other potential members. These relationships could be positive or negative at different times.
- There were also those within the identified list of potential participants who did not have a relationship with others and who might well be influenced by perception and hearsay.
- Some of the individuals were already involved in other initiatives that were bringing together representatives of various groups or constituencies either for single issue collaboration or in regard to wider considerations. Most of these other initiatives were single identity in make-up or mono-political in outlook. This could well influence how people worked together and perceive each other.
- A number of the priority groups and constituencies from where potential participants might be drawn, already had formal agreements in place as to how they would work together and resolve difficulties.

What was important was that the Reference Group would not duplicate or complicate any existing relationships or arrangements between, within or among participants or groupings. It needed to bring added value to conversations about moving forward and away from conflict in a sustainable and collegiate way.

The element of commonality on offer was the fact that many of the individuals identified for membership were already involved in community-based projects funded under the International Fund for Ireland's (IFI) Peace Impact Programme (PIP). This gave some assurance that these activists would not be supportive of armed actions and were committed to working for progressive change within both their community settings and their political constituencies. The PIP framing provided the added benefit of offering a degree of cover to those individuals who might be open to criticism within their own wider community or constituency for engaging with people from 'the other' side. This might be due to paramilitary/political factionalism within 'single identity' communities or antagonism between Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist and Catholic/Nationalist/Republican communities, constituencies or groupings.

It was crucial to the process that the activists selected should be prepared to participate in the Reference Group on an individual basis rather than being representative of any particular project, group, constituency or community. It was felt that a representative role would constrain discussion and exacerbate tension as many groups were traditional enemies thereby bringing a negative power dynamic into the proceedings. For this reason the decision was taken to move away from involving people who were closely associated with the major power bases of Loyalism and Republicanism in the main urban settings. However, while the emphasis was placed on individual membership, the balancing of differing perceived identities, allegiances and backgrounds was carefully taken into account. The overall balance between Republicanism and Loyalism was crucial as was the need to ensure that no one perceived grouping (in terms of individuals seen as being associated with any particular group) could be seen as dominating the Reference Group. Everyone in a contested society can read a room, so the issue of tackling perceptions is important.

Political considerations also came into play in identifying individuals that fell outside the mainstream Loyalist and Republican affiliations. It was also important to identify individuals that might be seen as 'Dissident' Loyalists or 'Dissident' Republicans, i.e. those who were likely to be more critical of the on-going peace process and political process. This then brought in a different dynamic of the involvement of people whose sharp differences occurred within a shared macro political alignment, whether that be Republicanism or Loyalism.

Geography was also an issue to consider. Participants were drawn from across the North of Ireland/Northern Ireland and from some of the Border areas in the Republic of Ireland. It was recognised that even where there were shared political ideologies, the nature of activists and activism differed considerably given different circumstances. The urban/rural division was particularly pertinent in terms of differing experiences to both conflict and peacebuilding. Likewise, most of the armed or formerly armed groups had leadership or organisational structures, that although they differed from group to group, allowed for differing levels of autonomy which were usually along geographical or brigade area type structures. This in turn means that there were very often differences within organisational structures and geographical/brigade areas about tactics (political or otherwise) during the conflict and responses during the various stages of the peace process and support for actions in regard to a political process which led to many of the former structures factionalising.

Having refined a list of individuals to be invited as members of the Reference Group, invitations were extended to 10 people – 5 individuals from various Loyalist backgrounds and 5 from Republican backgrounds. An event was organised to bring people together prior to the first Reference Group meeting. This gathering set the tone and parameters for positive engagement on peace and conflict issues by focusing on building relationships and trust within the group. It was envisaged that the Reference Group would be the first group to involve so many individuals from such a wide variety of backgrounds in a dedicated process of engagement around peacebuilding and conflict transformation (whatever term people felt comfortable with). The idea of involving people from so many different perceived backgrounds excited many of the participants but was also a cause of some trepidation. This initial bringing of people together, as a precursor to a Reference Group meeting was a carefully managed process.

## **Rules of Engagement:**

It was important to be clear with people who were signing up as members of the Reference Group what the Rules of Engagement would be. These were agreed by participants at the first meeting and were expanded at subsequent meetings to take account of any potential difficulties or unforeseen situations. The rules included -

- All participants attend purely as individuals and represent only themselves.
- No group, party or initiative is represented in the room by any member at any time. Any reference to any position held by such groups are personal interpretations only and cannot be confirmed or denied.
- There is to be no outside or public personal attribution to comments or agreements or decisions made during any meeting or activity unless agreed by the individual concerned – Chatham House rules apply.
- There is to be no social media or other reporting of the activities of the meeting unless agreed by the meeting.
- There will be no recording of the meeting unless agreed by participants. General notes would be kept and agendas set to facilitate the work of the Group.
- All contributions and opinions are valid and valued and should be listened to respectfully. All or any contributions or opinions can be challenged in a respectful way.
- Every participant will be asked to outline their current work and the issues they face.
- Every participant will be asked to contribute to discussions about the environment (political, cultural, historical etc) that we all work within, according to their own individual perspectives.
- Each participant will be asked to contribute to discussions about topics that have been identified for the meeting.
- Each participant will be asked to contribute to the agenda and future work of the Reference Group.

While much of this seems basic it was incredibly important to be clear with people as to expectations of themselves and to each other. The Rules of Engagement were reinforced at the start of meetings and, where necessary, individuals were challenged by the meeting Convenor if they drifted into party or group political statements or positioning.

The Rules of Engagement also provided some protection for individuals as any potential leak of discussions could be taken out of context and pose a threat to individuals or their wider constituencies. Some participants felt they needed the permission of their group or constituency to participate as individuals in the Reference Group. This was based on the premise of full disclosure so that any rumours or potential hearsay could be dealt with by leadership of their respective organisation immediately. A number of individuals were therefore given permission by their own constituency or group to participate in the Reference Group on the understanding that they did so as individuals and not as representatives. The agreed Rules of Engagement therefore offered reassurance and protection to these groups and constituencies as well as to those participants.

It is important to note that while the Reference Group members abided by the rule that they were participating as individuals, it was not uncommon for feedback to be relayed to their respective group or constituency. This was regarded as a success rather than a flaw as the discussions often reflected on or challenged wider organisational or political views. Over time, there were cases where conversations held and relationships built resulted in wider inter or cross constituency collaboration in other situations or circumstances.

Finally, there was agreement that meetings and events would be organised at appropriate times and in relevant venues. Rather than opt for neutral and safe venues, it was decided to rotate meetings and events mainly within the premises used by the members themselves. It was felt that this would build trust and provide challenge, require people to be committed in offering to host events, but also genuine in their desire to participate and visit areas or venues that would actually be or perceived to be uncomfortable for some. This proved to be a very positive decision.

### **Initiating the process:**

Even before the first formal meeting opportunities were sought to introduce the members to each other in a less formal setting. In September 2018 one such opportunity presented itself when the members of the Foundations for Peace Network were being hosted in Northern Ireland. The Foundations for Peace network (FFP) brings together a number of indigenous Foundations that support and fund localised peacebuilding in their own country or territory. Members include Foundations in Northern Ireland, Serbia, Palestine, Georgia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Indonesia. Their visit included a peer learning programme focusing on 'The role of Social Economy in supporting communities emerging from conflict', located in the Derry/Londonderry region. Based in the Rath Mór centre in the Creggan area of Derry, meetings and an exhibition were held to feature various social economy projects. Many of these were represented by activists that had direct experience of the impact of the conflict, including former politically motivated prisoners and/or combatants and people who had suffered injury and/or bereavement. Projects on show demonstrated skills learnt in prison as well as ventures showcasing political, cultural or historical significance. The projects were drawn from groups and constituencies from across both the CNR and PUL communities.

These local groups included the 10 individuals who had been identified to participate in the Reference Group, in addition to a number of others (some of which who would later join the Reference Group). Each group set up 'stalls' to display their social economy products. Group representatives were then asked to talk about how their project contributed to moving their community or constituency forward in terms of emerging from the Troubles/conflict; about how their project engaged former combatants/ex-prisoners/victims/families etc.; and how their project helped address difficult community issues such as commemoration/symbolism/cultural identity, etc. This was the first time that all Reference Group invitees (and others) shared the same room and participated in the same workshop. The workshop was challenging in a number of aspects - one was the venue, in the heart of the "Republican" Creggan housing estate in Derry (perceived by some as being in the heart of "Dissident" Republican Creggan). There were social economy projects linked to mainstream and dissenting Republican groups, Independent Republicans, various dissenting and mainstream Loyalist groups and projects identified with advocates of the Ulster Scots and Irish language constituencies.

Prior to the workshop beginning it was clear that there was some discomfort in the room, some suspicion and some nervousness. However, the presence of the international visitors helped to ease tension and broker positive participation. The workshop allowed each group to talk about their work. We looked at commonalities and differences. There was then discussion about the differences in terms of the social economy emphasis, but how the focus on moving communities forward was practically identical in all cases. The potential for sharing ideas, collaboration, cross-marketing and other ways of providing support was raised, given that each project was at a different stage of development, but virtually all in their infancy. There was already a relationship between the Reference Group Convenor and the groups/projects represented through their participation in the Peace Impact Programme and the emphasis placed on seeing the social economy approach as addressing the dual objectives of building sustainability and as a method of engaging with the 'harder to reach' factions or constituencies.

After the round table workshop, the international visitors from FFP took some time talking to each group about their social economy venture. The exhibition of products included the production of Loyal Order regalia and other cultural items; political/historical/cultural engraved commemorative mirrors; the manufacture of Bodhran drums and model cottages based on prison skills/prison craft; design and production of Ulster Scots dance costumes and related cultural items; production of wooden items by former prisoners working through a new Men's Shed initiative; drone and other technology training; as well as training and support services (restorative practice) for dealing with contentious community commemoration issues, security businesses etc. The interest shown by the international visitors created a more relaxed atmosphere and allowed the local group representatives to interact and talk to each other.

A second workshop facilitated broader discussion between the Northern Irish activists and the FFP member representatives and enabled an exchange of experience as to how communities emerged from conflict and the role of the social economy in helping. A number of the potential Reference Group members were invited to make formal contributions which allowed everyone to get a better understanding of the views of other local activists. This approach worked well as previously unheard perspectives were shared. 'Dissident' Republicans described what it is like to be labelled as 'dissident'; they then heard from hard line Loyalists about how their communities reacted to continuing Republican violence (dissident or otherwise) and the pressures that they experienced in a range of areas including policing, for example, an equally contentious issue for Republicans. The international visitors also outlined the context in which they were operating and the challenges that they were dealing with. In between the organised sessions, local activists who had not met prior to this event were introduced to one another and encouraged to mingle. This deliberate engagement process worked well, enabling people to build confidence and to check out perceptions of 'the other'. They had the opportunity to hear about where people were coming from, to make a judgement about their genuineness and to assess their credibility. These initial impressions were vital in the overall engagement process and allowed the early meetings of the Reference Group to take place in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Alongside laying the basis for the planned engagement process, additional positive yet unplanned developments emerged from the meetings that took place on the side-lines of the Foundations for Peace gathering. One Republican activist had been rather uncertain about participating in the FFP event as he had not previously met some of the other participants. His own community and constituency had suffered severely at the hands of Loyalists and the security forces over the course of the Troubles. He was also dealing with internal criticism from his own constituency

(who were only starting a journey/process of change), for considering meeting activists from other communities. Consequently, participation in the Derry event was particularly challenging for him. After describing his social economy project, he was approached by one of the Loyalist groups who were interested in one of his products which they felt could be adapted for use in the Loyalist community. The adaptations were made and now this group is making similar items for both main political communities. In reciprocation, two of the Loyalist groups (from different factions) agreed to supply surplus materials for recycling by the Republican group to help in producing a number of items. In addition a mainstream Sinn Féin aligned group who would be politically opposed to the perceived 'dissident' Republicans built a relationship that delivered material support when the latter was under financial pressure. Some of the Loyalist groups also provided support in solidarity with these marginalised Republicans. This pooling of mutual support was facilitated by the Reference Group Convenor who was aware of the circumstances of each of the organisations.

Another example saw a Loyalist group displaying Loyal Order and Loyalist regalia and commemorative items in the Creggan – a 'single identity' Nationalist/Republican community. The display was viewed by those attending the Foundations for Peace workshops, but also by members of the public locally. For the Loyalist group, whose constituency had previously been critical of both the Loyalist ceasefires and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, this was as a major development. Although they still worked under an organisational ban on any contact – either formal or informal – with Republican groups, it had been agreed to lift the ban for this occasion after negotiation with the people involved. In the event, the constituency was represented in fairly large numbers at the Creggan workshop (possibly seeking a degree of security in a show of strength). When asked to speak to the gathering, the group representative said that he had never imagined that somebody from his constituency could, should or would address a meeting in Creggan. He then spoke about the process that led him to being in the room and the negotiations and discussion necessary for him being there. He undertook to report back in positive terms of his experience of the engagement. True to his commitment he duly reported back, with the result that his constituency agreed to allow further engagement, his individual attendance at the Reference Group and inter-group dialogue when necessary to quell damaging rumours, to deal with incidents and avert potential retaliatory violence.

The introduction of the local activists to the FFP international members also served to underline the global challenges of peacebuilding and to broaden an understanding of conflict transformation.



## **The first Reference Group meetings:**

The first Reference Group meeting was held in County Derry, in a small town, in a rural area of Northern Ireland. Importantly, it was hosted by a Loyalist group, as there were particular fears within this constituency about a number of major political developments at that time – the divisive nature of the ongoing Brexit debate, pressure for a Border poll as provided for by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and increasing opposition within Loyalism to engagement with Republicans. The hosting organisation was asked to take on this role as the Reference Group did not have any resources of its own and relied on those organisations with premises to arrange meeting space. The hosting organisation had connections to an individual member of the Reference Group but no other person from the hosting organisation was present at the meeting.

Despite all participants being conscious of each other's perceived political allegiances, as agreed all attended the meeting as individuals. There was a good attendance although a couple of those invited sent apologies and gave genuine excuses. There was little awkwardness amongst those who were in the room as they had already met each other informally at the event organised for the FFP delegation.

The rationale for the Reference Group and the ground rules for engagement were discussed again (the first time in an open forum as members had previously had these discussions on a one to one basis with the Convenor) and everyone agreed to accept them. A process was then adopted that became the standard agenda for ordinary Reference Group meetings:

- 'Round robin' of what each individual is doing in their everyday work which was a useful way for all participants to contribute, for everyone to be heard and for all others to listen.
- Discussion of wider political and other considerations (Brexit, parades, shooting incidents, etc) facilitated by the Convenor.
- Discussion of international models of micro peacebuilding.
- Discussion of potential Reference Group agenda items for future meetings.
- General awareness of other events and invites to each other's events.

The dynamics of this first meeting were very interesting. While everyone was content to be in the room given the fact that they had already met each other, they shared involvement in the funded Peace Impact Programme (IFI) and they now knew each other, there was still some obvious guardedness. This was the first time that individual mainstream Republicans (associated with Sinn Féin) had been in the same room with individuals seen as dissident Republicans, and the latter tended to round on the perceived mainstream individual from the start. Although this was not unexpected, participants had to be challenged and reminded that everyone was attending as an individual not as a representative of an organisation. The Loyalists found this dynamic interesting, as while they are aware of the often intense differences and factionalism within their own community, they rarely recognised it within Republicanism. For many within Loyalism there is little distinction or even interest in the distinction between various Republican groupings, the main view being "a Republican is a Republican and they are all the same and that dissident groups

are just mainstream Republicans in disguise”. Likewise, the general view and understanding amongst Republicans of Loyalism is very limited and negative, with all Loyalists being associated by them as being involved in “collusion and criminality”.

Even at this first meeting there was a clear desire to go beyond the set agenda in order to discuss current local and macro-political issues. Although there was some interest in the international dimensions of peacebuilding that had been raised by the Reference Group Convenor, the participants’ emphasis was on local issues.

After the first meeting, the Convenor spoke separately and at length with each of those who had attended. All agreed that the meeting had been useful, and given this, a second meeting was planned to be held in Co. Tyrone. On this occasion the meeting was hosted by a Republican group. The individual associated with this host had perhaps been the most reticent/guarded of all the invited participants initially. However, following the success of the FFP gathering and the inaugural Reference Group meeting, this individual welcomed the opportunity to host.

This second meeting followed a similar process to the first. The meeting was more relaxed and discussions more in-depth and probing, with the participants fully engaged and all members now attending. As with the first meeting, everyone showed great patience and respect for each other. The tone of voice, the use of certain words, the timing of questions, etc, was more respectful than controlled and it became clear very quickly that everyone had found a level of comfort (not total comfort, but a working level of comfort that would increase as time went on). They were participating not just out of interest but with the intention of making an actual difference. It was during this meeting that it became clear that while the examination of international models of peacebuilding might involve interesting discussion, it was not really the primary motivation for members’ participation. What people wanted to discuss were the more immediately challenging issues arising out of the work that each person was involved in and the impact of the overall political environment as it affected that work. For everyone in the room, this was the only forum where they were meeting each other in such a collective way. The opportunities that this created were critical to their involvement.

Meetings continued to be held on a monthly basis and rotated around venues, mainly but not exclusively in rural areas, to help keep them under the public radar. Meetings went from being a half day event to an almost full day event with host organisations providing lunch and refreshments. All day meetings were deemed to be a good use of time as most participants had to travel some distance. As time went on the high level of comfort and trust within the Reference Group became one of its key features. The work of the host group was explained at each meeting and examined for learning and, over time, there was discussion of suggestions about expanding the membership of the group to include other voices.

## Expansion of the Reference Group:

By the third meeting it had been agreed to expand the Reference Group, which eventually ended up with a sizeable membership, with individuals drawn from a range of geographies as well as a variety of Republican and Loyalist backgrounds. While the original membership had included individuals connected to groups involved in funded Peace Impact Programme (IFI) projects as a form of commonality, some new members were invited from outside this network. Expansion was necessary as once the model proved itself valuable, the initial members were keen to have others involved. While the involvement in the PIP programme still offered a focus, some of the new members were invited from the key urban hubs of Belfast and Derry. There was still an emphasis on avoiding the 'usual suspects' or well known 'main players', with the idea being to introduce new and emerging leaders (of all ages) - or leaders taking on new challenges - to each other. It was felt that a primary purpose or function of the Reference Group was to be able to give a platform and voice to people that did not normally have this opportunity, as well as access to like-minded peers from a range of backgrounds. There was also a determination to avoid those personalities who would merely parrot an established party line. One of the biggest issues for the expansion of the group was the fact that it was male dominated. This continued to be a challenge given the predominance of male former combatants and prisoners. We would also find later that there were jealousies within the wider groupings over those chosen to participate in the Reference Group. Some of the people deemed to be the 'usual suspects' now knew about the Reference Group and the value it had for participants but they had no control or direct input and this would become a slight challenge as time went on.

The third meeting of the Reference Group started looking at issues that the group would like to examine in more detail. A list was drawn up and individual members agreed to bring items forward, to take the responsibility of planning events or training sessions and to work collaboratively on issues of interest, without remaining in constituency clusters but rather working across traditional boundaries. This resulted in some new and very interesting collaborations.

Consideration was also given to planning a wider variety of events, particularly in terms of who should be invited. This resulted in a variety of agreed approaches given different circumstances:

- If a public event was being organised, then the members of the Reference Group would have the opportunity to meet privately with the speaker(s) before the public event. This was important as it maintained the ability for Reference Group members to probe issues in a closed discussion as well as being able to share the expertise of the speaker afterwards with broader audiences.
- Other events would continue to be closed events, just for Reference Group members.
- Then there were those events that would be primarily for Reference Group members, but with the potential for them to bring one or two additional participants each. This approach was adopted during the first residential event organised and it proved successful. In this case some new/additional voices were invited to contribute to the two-day discussion on the theme of Referenda It explored referenda related to Brexit, Scottish Independence and an Irish Border Poll, with various scenarios/outcomes for each considered. What was potentially a divisive theme showed that information and an exchange of views could be handled in a respectful manner. The additional participants strengthened the ability to engage with the various constituencies and communities. These participants attended on the same understanding as the Reference Group members – in their individual capacity and with no attribution of comments or discussion. The additional participants offered the added value that they were women as well as men.

- Finally, there were those events that essentially were open to invited groups and the general public. These generally took the form of invited speakers addressing a chosen theme or topic in a public venue. One particular event attracted over 100 people. Again, such gatherings were preceded by a closed private session for Reference Group members, event speakers and a small number of additional invitees. One such event was held at a hotel in Belfast. This was jointly hosted by a Republican and Loyalist group, with support from individual members of the Reference Group. The theme was 'Ireland United within the Commonwealth of Nations'. Speakers came from Seanad Eireann, the Trade Unions and Academia. The speakers were not party political and the selected theme challenged both Republicans and Loyalists. The audience was very varied, ranging from senior members of the Loyal Orders to well know Republicans and Loyalists, as well as including dissident Republicans and dissident Loyalists, former and current security force members, elected politicians, community activists and interested individuals. It was particularly significant that two members of the Reference Group had been able to plan an event co-sponsored by two ex-prisoner organisations (one Loyalist and one Republican), groups that came from opposing political viewpoints. The concept of a united Ireland is challenging for Loyalists, whilst any suggestion of becoming a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations is equally challenging for Republicans. This mutual challenge was recognised in the framing of the discussion by the Reference Group members involved.

As the Reference Group membership and range of activities expanded, the Convenor always had to be mindful of balance to ensure that selected topics were equally, or alternatively, challenging to the full range of perspectives represented, that the meeting venues were rotated, that the Group membership was balanced and that opportunities were created to include new voices. When there were new members of the Reference Group it was important to explain the established rules and (more crucially) the ethos that they had to abide by. Resourcing the Reference Group and its activities would remain an issue.

### **Development of Reference Group relationships and engagement:**

The relationship between members of the Reference Group quickly became very close, with high levels of openness and honesty, which brought matching levels of enhanced trust. All issues were up for discussion and it was not unusual for members to question each other about their respective histories, ideologies and aspirations. The Reference Group became a learning platform as well as a means of sharing information. This was due to a respect for both the agreed ground rules, but also for one another as individuals. While this is very much the case and can be evidenced, it should always be remembered that all members continued to be dedicated to their own political ideologies. All members continued to be challenged by the various engagements and by the Reference Group process. However, they were also genuine in their desire for engagement and learning and for working towards a better future. They also had to contend with varying positive and negative reactions within their own communities and groups, especially when outside incidents had a wider impact; incidents such as violent attacks, shootings or bombings; none of which were supported by members of the Reference Group but then the whole of society was not engaged in the Reference Group process and therefore did not have that understanding of or the relationships with Reference Group members. This in turn allowed for the exploration of such issues and led to even deeper discussion and dialogue.

Examples of improved intra and inter-constituency relationships between members was seen at events such as the Reference Group residential. As already noted each member could invite along a small number of additional participants. The Reference Group Convenor had to keep an eye to ensure an overall balance of perceived constituency allegiance so as not to skew the discussion. Tensions could, and did, arise and this was positive as it showed the level of difficulty that participants were willing to address. On one occasion, an individual associated with a particular Republican background brought three additional participants to an agreed open event. A political party had heard about the planned session and wanted to attend with a strong local delegation because they were excited about the prospect of engaging with both Loyalists and other Republicans around the selected issue. The Convenor had to make clear that no organisation or party had the right to select representatives to attend. Any additional participants had to attend as individuals at the invitation of the Reference Group member. This was duly adhered to, although when additional participants turned up to the event there was a threat from others that they would walk out because they initially interpreted it as a political party delegation. It was explained that this was not the case, and over the course of the discussion it became clear that there was no agreed line being taken by these additional Republican participants. The fact that there was a certain amount of disagreement between them during discussions and workshops had a positive effect (especially with other Republicans) and shifted perceptions and the potential for engagement.

At the same event, discussions continued informally over meals and during non-working hours. New relationships were built that included the additional attendees. During the course of these informal private conversations it came to light that tensions in one particular rural town, with sizeable Republican and Loyalist communities, were rising due to the erection of flags in a contentious interface area by a person who had recently been released from prison. This led to a wider escalation of Republican and Loyalist flag flying in the town, territorial marking, an escalation of tension, sectarian attacks and some violence. Aware of the potential for conflict the Reference Group Convenor introduced a leading Loyalist who had voiced concerns over the situation to a leading Republican who was attending the residential. They had never met before. When they came together with the Convenor, they talked about issues in and around this particular location. Both made phone calls and put a process of engagement in place involving themselves and local leadership figures. This resulted in resolving the tensions around the flags within 48 hours. This was possible due to the relationships built and the willingness to resolve difficult issues.

There are other examples of cooperation, problem solving and direct action taken to avert or alleviate violence. In several situations where there were shootings, sectarian incidents, attacks or perceived threats, it has been possible to go through the Reference Group network to seek information, clarity, assurances or, where needed, agreed intervention to resolve issues. In other cases more in-depth work was required which entailed setting up a small working group or sub-committee that had a reach or credibility within the affected areas, or on the issues, in question. The idea behind the sub-committee process is to have a transparent process chaired by the Reference Group Convenor when requested by the members. This provides neutral space and a sense of security, enabling better collaboration and information sharing. This process is particularly effective at times where there is not a tradition of inter-constituency contact.

There is also the option of Reference Group members either raising issues, or referring issues, to the Group as a whole. Clarification can be sought about issues and tensions, whilst rumours can be addressed. Reference Group discussion of an issue can quickly cut through other more complex processes. One example was that of a perceived threat issued against a Loyalist in a rural area. It

was felt that the threat had emanated from within a dissident element of his own constituency but, in order to muddy the waters, they had used an individual from an opposing Loyalist faction in a different and distant rural location to actually issue the threat so that it would be more difficult to trace. There are already formulas and methods to deal with intra Loyalist tensions and threats (not least the Monkstown Agreement between the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando which followed a series of deadly intra Loyalist feuds and sets out how each organisation will behave and engage at times of intra loyalist tension or if an event occurs involving personnel from different groupings. The agreement was reached in the mid-2000s and is still in place today). On this occasion the organisation that the individual who had received the threat belonged to, made an approach to the other organisation and invoked the Monkstown Agreement initiating a formal process of mediation between the two organisations. However, when this process was unsuccessful an approach was made to the Convenor of the Reference Group. Enquiries were made and within 24 hours the matter had been resolved by individual Reference Group members. The individual who had issued the threat was identified, was spoken to, his links to dissenting Loyalists confirmed and approaches made that resulted in the threat being lifted without any recourse to violence.

In another situation a Loyalist activist was informed that he was a person of particular interest to a well-known Campaign Group which was strongly identified with Republicanism. Approaches were made to this group on behalf of the Loyalist by Republican members of the Reference Group, explaining the difficulties that were being caused. The Campaign Group agreed that their interest was more in tackling a wider issue than targeting an individual, and so their approach changed. This helped to de-escalate tension within a large Loyalist constituency who felt the individual was being unduly focused upon and increased regard for Republicans that were prepared to intervene and help address this potentially volatile situation. These types of actions speak volumes and allow people to see the genuine actions of individuals that want to transform relationships and move away from conflict. They also show the value of interpersonal relationship building amongst and between emerging/new leaders who have lived experience of conflict.

Two other instances (amongst many) of the contribution of Reference Group members can be cited. In one, a group of Independent Republican councillors attended a Loyalist band parade in a small rural village, during which there were various altercations and people arrested. There was concern within one of the largest Loyalist paramilitary organisations that some Republican organisations were planning to use the parade issue to raise their profile, with specific concerns around the intentions of one of the larger Republican armed groups. One quick phone call to the Reference Group Convenor led to a face to face discussion that assured everyone that this was not the case and that there were other reasons for the independent Councillors being present. Again, tensions were diffused almost immediately with paramilitary leaders understanding that the Reference Group was a channel through which questions about such issues could be raised and dealt with. A similar issue occurred around the erection of Republican flags in another fairly large town but with a majority Loyalist population. The matter was again resolved through Reference Group contacts. After resolving the flag issue, a sub-committee of the Reference Group was established to continue work in the area to ensure that other points of tension were dealt with as they arose. This is an ongoing sub-committee that continues to share information and agree interventions to de-escalate tensions on the ground. These are just a few examples of a number of cases where the Reference Group process and structure have enabled it to play a key role.

## **Taking the work forward:**

Members of the Reference Group have also been considering how to replicate successes by using similar approaches within their own communities/constituencies. For example, a movement behind a large political campaign successfully brought together a range of Republican views at a series of meetings to discuss publicly the campaign issues. Such events included activists and a range of groups that had previously refused to engage, or share platforms, with each other. However, individuals connected to the Reference Group were able to persuade the campaign to adopt a non-partisan approach that facilitated the involvement of speakers from different groups.

Work has been undertaken on the, often divisive challenge, of addressing the legacies of the past as well as on language issues that have also been a matter of contention. On the latter, a number of both Loyalist and Republican Reference Group members, and some of the groups they belong to, discussed how they might usefully consider the issue. This led to Loyalist Groups engaging civil rights and campaign groups to navigate them through the most recent political agreement (New Decade, New Approach, 2020) as to how it will impact on areas such as culture and language. One member organised a public event based around the theme of Ulster Scots and the Irish language, that was well attended by Loyalist groups and organisations including the Loyal Orders, political parties and local activists. The attendance also included representatives from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and the US Consulate. The Reference Group member (Loyalist) pointed out that while there had been a new political agreement he was unable to find any Unionist party representative who was able, or willing, to adequately explain the consequences of the new agreement on the Ulster Scots tradition or the British and Ulster cultural identity. He then produced a document from a campaign group that did just that for the Irish language community. Having called out his own political representatives, he informed the gathering of almost 80 people that he was asking the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) to do the same for his community. This was followed by a meeting held one week later in Belfast which was attended by all the Reference Group members from the Loyalist community. A series of similar meetings were organised in other areas of Northern Ireland. This was a noted and extremely positive development for people who previously might not countenance engagement with Republican or campaign groups. This was a major change in direction for some groups which signalled their frustration at being held back or constrained in their quest to transform their community. Such groups have clearly signalled their desire to work with anyone who can help them progress the needs and aspirations of their constituencies and sometimes such help may not always come from traditional allies but rather, unexpectedly, from those associated or perceived to be closer to previous enemies.

As the wider impact grows, it is important to think though how to protect the integrity of the processes developed. Part of this consideration is how to continue to expand membership of the Reference Group in a meaningful way without losing the one-to-one relationships that are so central to its success. Another issue is how to engage more women and young people in its work, as well as to develop a programme that has a greater reach to activists outside the Group. Consideration also has to be given to protecting the process from individuals, groups and agencies who would seek to undermine or try to control the Reference Group for their own particular reasons.

Resourcing the Reference Group also became an issue, although this has now been partially addressed by programme funding from an independent Trust which has been allocated to an outside group to provide support to the Reference Group with the full agreement of members.

Further support is being sought, in a similar way, to engage a dedicated Convenor to build upon the successes and momentum achieved to date.

The members of the Reference Group feel it is important to have an independent convenor who will also act as chairperson of the meetings and sub-committees. They feel that this ensures the independence of the Group. Currently a Management Team, drawn from original Reference Group members, are planning for the way forward. As part of this process the Management Team will also look at the wider resource, governance and structural issues regarding the Reference Group as it evolves. The recommendations developed will be important to ensure the consolidation and further expansion of the work of the Reference Group.

As the forward planning continues the contact and engagement goes on. There are high levels of cooperation across a very wide range of areas from the core work of peacebuilding, tension monitoring, de-escalation of conflict and violence to co-operation in terms of community development, social justice, social economy, campaigning, and dealing with contentious community issues as well as the positive influencing of various constituency groups. This cooperation can take many forms, for example one Republican group makes benches: a Loyalist group in another area needed two new benches for its Remembrance Garden but had no funding. The Republican group made, donated and delivered two benches on the basis of the personal relationships built within the Reference Group. These apparently small gestures can create positive multiplier effects, as can the visits that take place on a regular basis between members to each other's areas.

Reference Group members have also engaged with peacebuilding initiatives developed and promoted by other organisations and agencies. One such is the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) entitled "Roots of Restraint", another is the Open Door PEACE IV project. The ICRC Roots of Restraint process of engagement had been with single identity groups up until the collective engagement of Reference Group members in a workshop that offered a different and valuable discussion dynamic and outputs involving people from different community backgrounds and experiences. In the case of the Open Door Peace IV project, Reference Group contacts were able to ensure that Loyalist speakers sat alongside those from different Republican constituencies to speak about Irish Unity and Loyalism on one occasion to an audience of over 100 interested activist participants. This very successful event reflected the Reference Group approach of avoiding the promotion of political party positions, reflecting instead personal views and experience. Examples such as this show the relevance of the Reference Group to larger platforms outside of its own programme. The expansion of its sphere of influence is part of the agenda moving forward but is limited by the lack of resources currently available to the Reference Group.

This agenda will hopefully also look at other examples of practice. While much attention has concentrated on local issues, there has also been some interest in exploring peacebuilding approaches within regions such as the Balkans. Priorities also now include an interest in social justice and participatory democracy – the latter encouraged by a workshop that looked at a variety of models to better engage marginalised groups and communities. The interest in other models comes after relationships around more localised issues have been built and members now see the value in exploring other methodologies.



## **Concluding comments:**

The work of conceptualising the Reference Group and making the connections to explore its potential was taken over the course of a year-long Fellowship with the Social Change Initiative. The actual implementation of the work was, however, dependent on the willingness of the individual members to take the risk of engaging with others who in the past were absolutely viewed as ‘the enemy’. This was not always an easy process and required both curiosity and courage as well as a sense of commitment to the betterment of their communities and constituencies. It is now clear that those individuals understand exactly who is in the room and the roles they can play within their own, and other, constituencies. Everyone values the input that others provide, the opportunities to engage on difficult issues and to hear a range of perspectives. Everyone values the openness and honesty and the extra mile that members go for each and every other member of the group. There is a level of comfort within this group which allows new questions to be asked and challenges to be addressed rather than avoided. There is a strong feeling that the Reference Group is genuine, that its processes enable powerful individual contributions from people who can and do make a difference on a daily basis. It involves people who can move constituencies and bring others along to share the learning.

As previously stated, there is also an ongoing challenge and while relationships and trust have been built, all members remain true to their own constituency and political allegiances. What is changing is the shared view that pathways can interact and that we can achieve more for our own people when we achieve more for everyone. While there is absolute opposition in terms of political aspirations there is a willingness to co-operate in areas of mutual concern, to help break down barriers, to help address violence and underlying causes of conflict and inequality. There is also a growing willingness to look for solutions that may be outside of previous absolutes and require more innovation or ingenuity that allows everyone to have more comfort in terms of addressing future scenarios relating to the national question. Some of this innovation and ingenuity will come from the generosity of Reference Group members, some will come from other community experiences throughout the world and some will come as a result of opportunities created by processes linked to the Reference Group.

This chapter has highlighted the importance of transparency, preparatory work, clarity of purpose and the essential element of relationship building. These, together with the willingness to confront difference with respect, are the tools of community-based peacebuilding. To this end, it remains clear that the Reference Group has a vital role to play in supporting peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.



**Social Justice And Rights:  
Supporting Challenging  
Conversations**

**Monina O'Prey**

While much community development work is targeted towards disadvantaged geographical areas, there are also ‘communities of interest’ who feel alienated and/or voiceless particularly during periods of conflict and change. Programmes were designed to raise awareness and support work on rights, equality and social justice to engage with these specific groups. The premise was that while there may be an assumption that ‘social justice’ is intrinsic to community development and peacebuilding, very often this is not the case in areas where communal conflict continues to impact, and where sensitive and divisive issues (including rights) hold communities back. In Northern Ireland/North of Ireland, there was evidence that ‘rights’ was viewed as a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican issue rather than having universal acceptance. The subsequent failure to obtain party political consensus on the need for a Bill of Rights, as promised in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, remains a case in point.

This chapter describes approaches drawn from five programmes developed by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and funded mainly by the Atlantic Philanthropies – The Sustaining Transition Initiative (2004/06); The Bill of Rights: Making Rights Work for Communities Programme (2007/09); The Social Justice Approach to Community Development and Peacebuilding initiative; the Voices Project; and the Communities in Action project. These interventions all combined proactive approaches to grant-making and added value training and support. Some 444 community-based groups were involved, comprising many thousands of individuals.

### **Programme Design:**

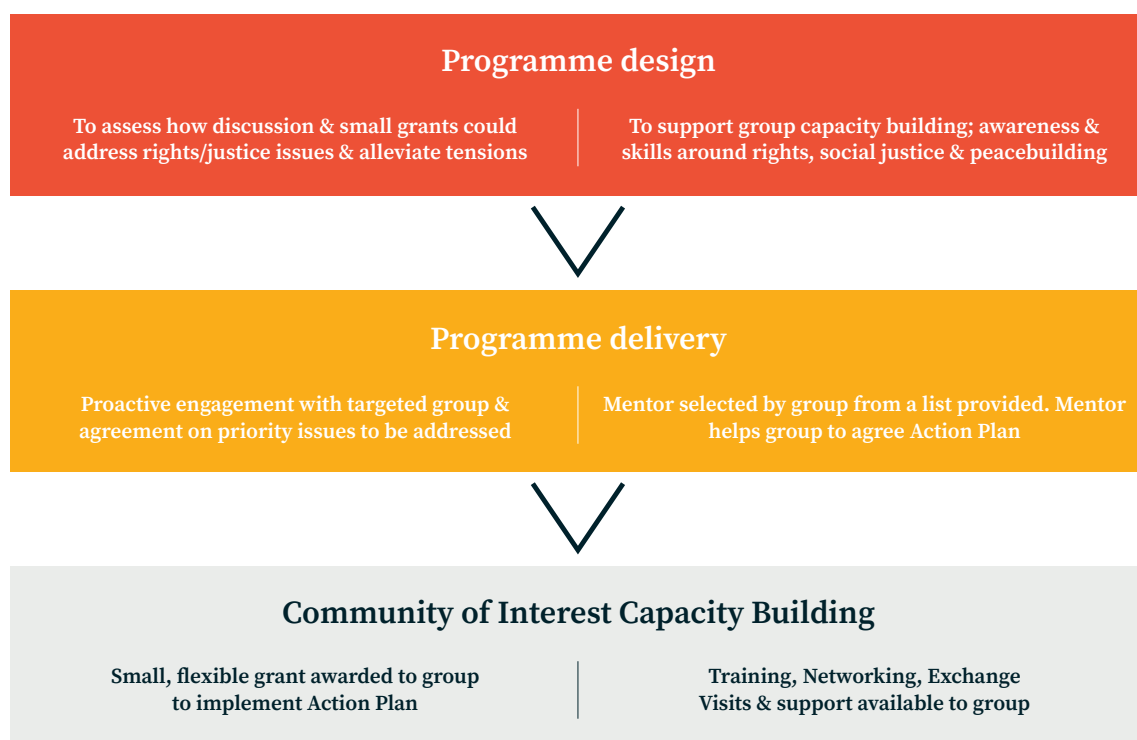
Each programme was designed to support a ‘challenge process’, encouraging and enabling difficult conversations to take place among people whose comfort zone was generally in talking to ‘single identity’ peers. The objective was to contribute to a participative exercise in challenging perceived injustice and exclusion, while promoting participation and giving voice. All programmes were action-research in nature, with in-built evaluation, monitoring and reflection throughout the course of the work. This focused on the difference made for the direct beneficiaries, the participants involved, their geographical areas or areas of interests and the contribution to community activism, social justice and peacebuilding.

Attention was paid to mapping which communities of interest were most likely to feel excluded in the context of both the politics and the socio-economic circumstances of Northern Ireland at any particular point in time. Those identified included people working with marginalised young people, with women, with victims of the conflict, ex-prisoners/combatants, LGBT activists, as well as people working on divisive identity and cultural issues. The programmes understood ‘communities of interest’ to mean groups developed to focus on particular issues impacting on the lives of specific groups of people.

Two aligned, but distinct, strategies were on offer. Community-based groups (both geographical and communities of interest) could apply for small, flexible grants to address issues of rights, social justice and peacebuilding. These were awarded through an open grant call which provided guidance on the issues to be prioritised. The guidance varied depending on the focus of the individual programmes. Thus, the Bill of Rights Programme encouraged discussion of the meaning of a rights-based approach with particular reference to what issues might be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Data collated showed that 75% of the groups in receipt of these small grants (£10,000 maximum with the average being £4,500) made written submissions to the Bill

of Rights Forum consultation process that was taking place over that period. Similarly, the later Communities in Action Programme which sought to give voice to people experiencing persistent poverty resulted in eight films being produced that enabled people to tell their stories about the impact of the welfare benefit cuts (2010/12). Alongside the small grant, groups were offered the support of a mentor to help them maintain a focus on the rights and social justice framing. It was seen as important that the reactive grants application criteria and guidance would be broad enough to allow for innovation and creativity of ideas/response from applicants.

The second strategy was based on pro-actively inviting a number of communities of interest groups to participate in a programme that they might otherwise not have considered becoming involved in. The selection ensured that there would be participation of a diverse range of groups and areas. The model of intervention took the following form:



The on-going action-learning that underpinned this programme strategy reflected on (i) personal empowerment; (ii) increased confidence and capacity of the community of interest; (iii) enhanced level of awareness of rights, community action and peacebuilding issues; (iv) the nature of positive action and the impact on the community of interest through implementation of the agreed Action Plan; and (v) enhanced ability to understand power dynamics at all levels through a community of interest power analysis.

While 323 groups benefited under the CFNI open call for grant awards under the various programmes, an additional 121 groups were included in the pro-active programme which offered added value development support. Like the first cluster, the latter groups benefitted from a small grant and the support of a mentor, but they also had access to bespoke training, action planning and networking across issues and community divisions.

## Learning from the mentor approach:

The use of mentor support for groups was a crucial aspect of the programmes on offer. All groups were given mentor support hours in addition to their small grant/budget allocation. The cost of mentor hours was met directly by the programme and either allocated to the group and paid by them or where the group was not formally constituted, managed directly by the programme. In a number of cases where communities of interest came together to contest an injustice they did not have a bank account and were reluctant to formalise the group. Rather than insisting on structured groups, the Programme Manager was more interested in working with the individuals involved and arranged for CFNI to pay invoices directly to the supplier.

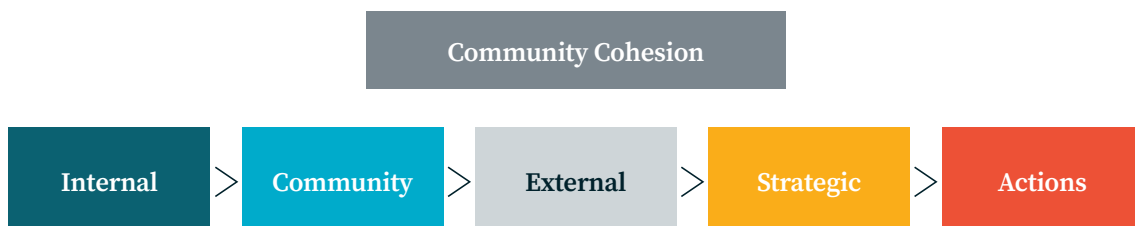
The Programme recruited a list of mentors with a range of community development skills and experience. These mentors were provided with rights training to sharpen their focus on human rights and social justice issues. They could also call on specialist human rights advice over the duration of the programme. Groups participating in the programme could select a mentor from the central list provided. They could also change their mentor if the relationship did not work out or if it was agreed with them that they would benefit more from a different skill set.

Mentor support was particularly valuable during the early group engagement process, helping to build relationships and enabling difficult conversations or critical friend challenges to happen rather than being avoided. Where there were specific difficulties in negotiating a particularly divisive issue at local level, the designated group mentor could introduce another external facilitator to help move things along. The value of this was that the group mentor facilitated the mediation process while being able to maintain positive working relations with people on both sides of the issue; the external facilitator was able to engage in the direct mediation.

Group mentors worked with their nominated group to help them develop an Action Plan for their work. Mentors also encouraged group members to reflect on the dynamics of delivering the Action Plan, with particular attention to power relations at both community and policy-making levels. Questions were posed which included – who holds power in the area? What is community development and engagement? How should we approach lobbying and advocacy? At the core of these reflections is how community cohesion can be more just and inclusive; what are the barriers (gatekeepers) and how might change be achieved?

Three distinct approaches taken by the mentors were documented, analysed and subsequently referred to as Linear; Issue-based; and Conceptual, across the Internal relations; Community relations; External relations; Strategic relations indicators.

Each approach worked well where it was applied, so it was a useful process and helped with options for the follow-on training for groups, mentors and facilitators in this field. A key aim of the Programme was to build community cohesion, it overlaid all three approaches.



### Issue Based Approach:

This is where the facilitator uses the process of addressing a pressing issue as the core means to explore the various themes, again with building 'community cohesion' being the overall objective.



### Conceptual Approach:

This is where the facilitator uses broad concepts to analyse the different relations: who holds power in the area/what is community development/how should we approach lobbying: Concepts are used as the lens to explore the various relations between the themes. All have community cohesion at the core of what is agreed for the follow-on action plan.



The Social Justice Approach to Community Development (SJACD) produced a body of learning that influenced further CFNI grant programmes.

It also published the case studies of the project's achievements available as the *'Taking a Social Justice Approach to Community Development: September 2011'*.

The Programme Manager and Evaluator developed an ongoing relationship with the mentors in order to help overall programme reflection and initiate a shift in emphasis where required.

### **Programme tools:**

Over the course of the suite of programmes a number of useful tools were identified and developed –

**Individual project stories** were strong advocacy tools and attracted media and political attention. People telling their own stories in an authentic and reflective manner is a powerful tool in the right circumstances. In the case of the Voices and Communities in Action programmes, short films produced were also an invaluable advocacy tool.

**Handouts and In-Briefs** demystifying the jargon in use across the Human Rights sector were also important tools for raising awareness and understanding. Some were developed internally within the Programme Team, others were commissioned from Human Rights experts. One such was a Training Pack produced by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) which explained rights, responsibilities and how these could be exercised, complete with interactive exercises. Another was a useful training tool (included later in the chapter) which distinguished between Human Rights and Social Justice work and responses, developed by Geraldine Scullion, a solicitor, human rights activist and programme mentor and which proved to be a great support to local groups in terms of de-mystifying some of the issues/jargon.

**A Power Analysis Tool Kit**, was designed by two members of the Programme Team (Kat Healy and Paddy Logue). This again was a training manual with a series of support DVD's that helped to translate the learning into practice. It contained questions to explore how power works and how it is experienced within communities; how it is experienced when groups engage with other communities, agencies and political power-holders; how groups can influence power-holders; how to analyse power in terms of different communities of interest (class, gender, special needs, race, politics, culture, religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity); and how power is manifested in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland.

**Cluster meetings** between groups helped to break down perceptions and deal with sensitive and previously divisive issues. Residential workshops helped to build and sustain relationships throughout.

### **Key points of learning:**

- Strong relationships and sense of confidence were built within communities (both geographic and communities of interest) as well across divides (including the sectarian divide). These relationships have been maintained long after the end of the programmes.
- Communities and groups brokered relationships with agencies and other service providers that helped to meet their needs and supported future sustainability.
- Political engagement and advocacy increased and, in some cases, influenced strategic policy, or resulted in local solutions for local issues.
- The mentor support system proved a key added value dimension to the grant-making available.
- Support networks developed between groups that often started out with very different interests proved useful for challenging stereotypes, building relationships, developing collaborative partnerships and drawing learning from shared stories.
- The small amounts of funding invested through grants leveraged more than double that investment for the groups and areas involved.

What can happen when the LGBTQ community of interest came together with the Bogside/Brandywell community to celebrate Gay Pride week (2007).



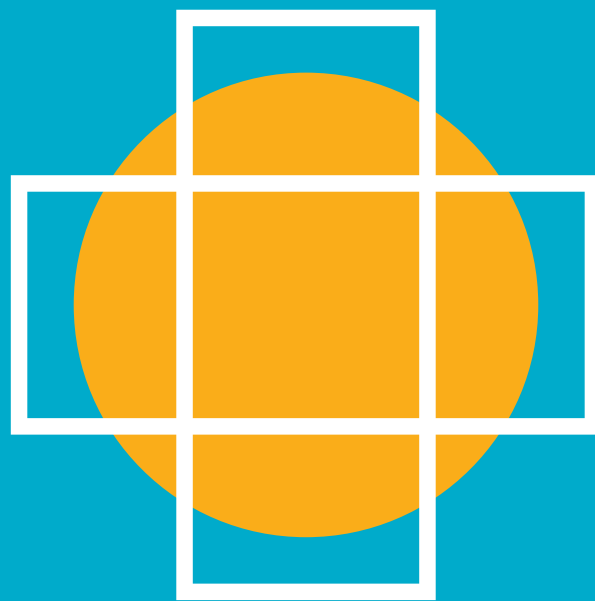


## Human Rights and Social Justice: Training tool.

A social justice approach to community development builds on human rights principles. Human rights and social justice approaches to community development are complimentary; both have a role to play in building a culture of rights; they are not mutually exclusive. Some differences include:

Human rights	Social justice
Focus is on the rights of the individual	Focus is on the community and collective action; focus is on process
In NI, human rights approaches have used the mechanisms of legal cases in courts with help of institutions (PILS/NIHRC/ECNI etc) to challenge decision-making	Emphasis is on process of building participation and challenging injustice both at state and community level
Strongest rights are civic and political rights; weakest rights are economic, social and cultural rights	Mainly concerned with social and economic inequalities
Challenges state power – state is the duty-bearer	Challenges all sources of power – state, private sector and individuals in the community
Orientated towards making state bodies act in accordance with their human rights obligations	Yes, but broader approach as human rights obligations do not apply to private bodies e.g. communities and individuals, funders, private sector bodies, churches etc
Orientated towards court challenges i.e. judicial review of state actions/decisions	<p>Process involves a broader range of challenges to, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal injustices e.g. exclusion of certain groups within ‘the community’ – women, young, old, disabled, BME, gay, non-Irish nationals, different political viewpoints etc</li> <li>• Exclusion of the voices of such groups in decision-making</li> <li>• Challenges community/collective decision-making processes</li> <li>• External injustices include negative perception of the community by others (statutory agencies, politicians, media, other communities) as well as injustices re inequitable allocation of resources - jobs, health, housing etc</li> </ul>
<p>Positive human rights outcomes include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in law or government policies e.g. following Art 8 complaint re lack of effective access to abortion facilities in Republic of Ireland, ECtHR ordered law to be changed for benefit of all women</li> <li>• Access to rights for individuals and therefore for others e.g. right of domestic violence survivors to be protected by the state following Arts 2 &amp; 3 complaint</li> </ul>	<p>Laws may change (as result of HR legal challenges), but doesn't always translate into action that improves the lives of disadvantaged people. Social justice creates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to make groups more accountable, tackle gate-keeping, tackle real and perceived injustices</li> <li>• Framework for understanding systems, power and power relationships</li> <li>• New opportunities for community development created by inclusion of wider range of voices</li> <li>• New opportunities to build solidarity within the community and with other communities</li> </ul>

Created by: Geraldine Scullion: Human Rights and Equality Consultant.



# **Working in Support of Political Ex-Prisoners**

**Avila Kilmurray**

*This section has been written drawing on materials collected in cooperation with Paddy Logue  
(Consultant) and the late, Maurice Healy.*

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) promised that the British and Irish Governments would put in place mechanisms to provide for an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners, with any such arrangements protecting the rights of individual prisoners under national and international law. This provision was to apply to all qualifying prisoners (convicted of scheduled offences) affiliated to organisations on ceasefire. There was a further commitment by the Governments to 'recognise the importance of measures to facilitate the reintegration of prisoners into the community by providing support both prior to and after release'. There was no provision for amnesty in the Agreement, nor reference to the political motivation of prisoners. Narrative continued to be important, resulting in uncertainty about the numbers of politically motivated prisoners and internees (those detained without trial in the early 1970's). Informal estimates count the number of people involved as 25,000-30,000, with many more family and community members being affected. Politically motivated prisoners (prisoners of war/political prisoners) were affiliated to a range of Republican and Loyalist organisations, with the majority being Republicans. The prisoners were both men and women, although vastly greater numbers of men. A very small number of Loyalist women served prison sentences, with considerably greater numbers of Republican women being imprisoned.

The terminology of both 're-integration' and 'politically motivated ex-prisoners' was itself a matter of controversy, with many ex-prisoners pointing out that they didn't need to be 're-integrated', and a number of politicians questioning whether there were political ex-prisoners or just criminals. The official British Government mantra since 1974 had focused on a policy of criminalisation, with the previous 'Special Category Status' being removed in 1976. This resulted in years of acrimonious prison struggle, culminating in the Republican hunger strikes for the recognition of political status in 1980/81. Welfare of prisoners had been organised largely on a self-help basis by their respective organisations since the early 1970's. Statutory funded initiatives tended to be viewed – particularly by Republicans – as unacceptable given their armed struggle.

### **Supporting self-help activism:**

Much of the prisoner welfare offered by organisations themselves consisted of transport to prison visits; small stipends for families; and some informal support for prisoners on their release. By the mid 1990's this had been formalised into three self-help ex-prisoner centres – Tar Anall for Republican ex-prisoners (West Belfast), EPIC (Ex-Prisoners' Interpretative Centre) in the Loyalist Greater Shankill area of Belfast and LINC (Local Initiatives for Needy Communities) in North Belfast. In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 ceasefires, all three centres received funding from the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (now the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland), under a measure of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace & Reconciliation (1995-1999) being managed by the Trust. These centres were to be the pioneers of what was to become a movement of self-help political ex-prisoner centres and services across the island of Ireland, although largely clustered in the North. As they developed they served the three main Republican groups (Provisional IRA, Official IRA and INLA) as well as the three main Loyalist constituencies (UVF, UDA – including the breakaway South East Antrim Brigade – and Red Hand Commandos).

The multi-million euro EU Special Support Programme identified the 're-integration of politically motivated ex-prisoners' as one of a number of priority measures designed to support the ongoing peace process. The Community Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a small

endowment, agreed to take on the role of an Intermediary Funding Body to manage a number of the Programme measures. Recognizing the long tradition of self-help within Republican and Loyalist communities, it consulted with both to ensure buy-in to the design and delivery of the funding options available. It was agreed to have three levels of grants – (i) Seeding grants of £3,000 and less; (ii) Development grants of up to £20,000; and (iii) Organisational grants of over £20,000. This approach allowed for pilot work and support for the paced development of initiatives. In addition, the main organisations that political ex-prisoners were affiliated to were invited to nominate two representatives each to a Grant Advisory Committee. A small number of NGO activists who had been involved in prison work were also invited to participate. The Committee met under the chairpersonship of a Board member of the Community Foundation, who himself had close association with the Troubles. All applications for funding under the Special Support Programme measure were considered and agreed by this inter-community committee. It was then approved by the Foundation Board who held legal responsibility for decision-making. This participative approach proved very important in delivering a peacebuilding dimension to the grant-making.

Alongside the fact that representatives from previously warring organisations were sitting around the same table involved in grant-making, their contributions ensured that sensitivities were aired and discussed and detailed knowledge was shared. Emerging from thirty years of censorship, conspiracy theories and counter-narratives these insights and relationships were essential. A number of added value activities and opportunities put in place by the Community Foundation enhanced relationship building. Members of the Political Ex-Prisoner Advisory Committee travelled on a study visit to Leuven/Brussels to consider how Belgium had moved from occupation during World War II to being a founder member of the EU a mere seven years later. A number of Ambassadors to the EU (including from South Africa) quizzed the ex-prisoner representatives as to their positions on the peace process, with it becoming evident that the Northern Irish were listening carefully to each other's answers. Alongside the EU visit, conferences and activities were deliberately designed to both bring different ex-prisoner groups together to build relationships among themselves but also to interact with policy makers and agency representatives that they might not meet otherwise. Specific interest was shown when the Community Foundation sponsored speakers from other societies emerging from conflict to share their experience on peacebuilding. It was quickly recognised that external voices are more likely to be listened to and heard than those of locals, given that the latter are at risk of being categorised as 'aligned'.

The Grant Advisory Committee, in a range of different forms, continued to meet under the Community Foundation auspices over some fifteen years, including over periods when ceasefires were either under strain or had broken down. Notwithstanding criticism from a number of politicians, and in parts of the media, the importance of maintaining communication and, where possible, relationships was seen by the Foundation as an essential aspect of peacebuilding.

## The work of the self-help centres:

The self-help ex-prisoner centres that were established offered information and advice services, drop-in provision, training and educational opportunities. They were structured to address the individual needs of ex-prisoners and their family members, but also to collect data that could be used for policy and advocacy. Tar Anall, in CNR West Belfast was the first centre to recognise the importance of a counselling capability to meet the emotional needs of former prisoners, which, in turn, highlighted the necessity of training counsellors who would respect client confidentiality about all issues raised.

Given their location in disadvantaged areas, the centres quickly became responsive to community needs. The range of activities were summarised in a study carried out by Shirlow & McEvoy (*Beyond the Wire: Former Prisoners and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland: Pluto Press, London, 2008*) –

Type of Activity	Republican Ex-Prisoners	Republican Ex-Prisoners' Relatives	Loyalist Ex-Prisoners	Loyalist Ex-Prisoners' Relatives
Alleviation of Interface Tensions	63.3%	70.6%	33.3%	34.7%
Youth Work	53.3%	54.9%	26.7%	30.7%
Community Safety Issues	51.7%	45.1%	24.0%	22.7%
Supporting the Elderly	25.0%	17.6%	12.0%	5.3%
Women's Groups	30.0%	23.5%	6.7%	1.3%
Environmental Issues	36.7%	33.3%	12.0%	5.3%
Restorative Justice	33.3%	33.3%	25.3%	29.3%
Economic Regeneration	46.7%	43.1%	9.3%	8.0%
Other	16.9%	8.0%	6.7%	8.0%

While the above Table, based on a survey of political ex-prisoners' centres, is a snapshot in time, the higher proportion of individuals with Republican affiliations engaged in community-based work may be attributed to both a greater acceptance within CNR communities and clear political direction and purpose. The lower levels of Loyalist engagement may be explained by a more limited community acceptance and weaker community infrastructure generally. Alongside this is the view expressed by many Loyalist ex-prisoners that they acted as 'irregulars' in the war, consequently when the war was over so too was their activism. Notwithstanding these differences, the Table does indicate the wide range of community activities, many of which spun out of the work of the self-help centres.

Such engagement was not without its critics. Established community activists who were not politically aligned often questioned the role of political ex-prisoners, accusing them of taking a disproportionate share of scarce resources but also exerting a ‘controlling influence’ in the community linked to their political affiliations. As against this, it was suggested that political ex-prisoners brought a proven credibility to argue against continuing violence and were often motivated by the drive to ‘give back’ in a positive manner to their communities. This was encapsulated in the logo of one Loyalist group – *‘From Defend to Mend’*. Much depended on the nature of the leadership provided through the self-help centres, particularly a recognition that such centres could not be party political premises conveniently re-labelled.

Over the course of years the various politically aligned self-help support centres clustered under a number of coordinating organisations – Coiste na nArchimí, Teach na Fáilte and An Eochair within the Republican community, and Charter and EPIC for Loyalism. Where it operated effectively, this coordination helped with both advocacy and peer-learning. The failure by Government to put either well-resourced re-integration measures in place or to pass legislation to remove the criminal branding of political ex-prisoners resulted in the on-going need for advocacy. The EU PEACE Programmes (II, III and IV) continued to indicate support for re-integration.

### **Political ex-prisoners and conflict transformation:**

A major issue for non-State armed actors emerging from violent conflict is to maintain their organisational coherence and, where possible, to prevent fragmentation that might result in voices within the organisation arguing for a return to violence. Political ex-prisoners were identified as an important group who could influence acceptance or rejection of the on-going peace process. It was important to have points of ready contact where their questions could be answered and where ready information was available. Over time, however, there was a concern that those ex-prisoners who differed from the core political line of their respective political organisations on the peace process could be alienated from the support provided through the established centres. The ability to handle criticism without alienation was often difficult for centrally directed organisations.

If these internal issues continued to be a balancing act, externally the work of the ex-prisoner constituency highlighted activism in addressing conflict transformation issues both within, and between, their respective communities. Within ‘single identity’ communities work was carried out to enhance understanding of ‘the other’ community and to deal with inter-organisational tensions. There was ex-prisoner involvement in the community-based restorative justice initiatives developed to replace paramilitary kneecapping and beatings that had been used to ‘police’ local ‘anti-social’ offenders. There were negotiations over the display of flags, emblems and other aspects of territoriality; and efforts were made to address community-level social issues.

On an inter-community basis, dialogue sessions were organised between former ex-prisoners from different political perspectives. There was conflict alleviation at community interfaces and ‘peace walls’, which was to result in an inter-community initiative, the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium. There was particular interest in working with young people to dissuade them of the glamour of paramilitarism, with cross-community projects, such as political tours and the preparation of educational materials for schools. A ‘Prison to Peace’ School Pack was developed that explored Loyalist and Republican ex-prisoner experience in journeying from being a

combatant, to serving time in prison, to supporting the peace process. Funded under EU PEACE Programme II, through the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, and benefitting from the expertise of Queens University Department of Education, the curriculum pack was launched by the then Northern Ireland Minister for Education in June 2009.

It also required activism to address those political perspectives that continued to demonise political ex-prisoners as symbolic of the violence of the Troubles and what many viewed as an unacceptable politics. All too often this took the form of positing ex-prisoners in opposition to the needs and interests of victims/survivors of the conflict. The fact that many political ex-prisoners themselves suffered directly over the course of the conflict can be conveniently overlooked. The Shirlow & McEvoy 2008 study referred to the overlap between being a political ex-prisoner and also a victim/survivor of the violence –

	Republican Former Prisoners deaths in the Conflict	Relatives of Republican Ex-Prisoners deaths in the Conflict	Loyalist Former Prisoners deaths in the Conflict	Relatives of Loyalist Ex-Prisoners deaths in the Conflict
Family Member	32.0%	36.0%	34.7%	17.8%
Relative	54.7%	48.0%	42.7%	42.7%
Friend	94.7%	58.7%	78.7%	45.9%

Where acceptable to the individuals involved a number of initiatives have been developed to explore the political ex-prisoner and victim/survivor experience. One very arresting example is the Theatre of Witness supported by the Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry.

Ex-prisoner political activism – while not always welcomed by political parties of opposing viewpoints and ideologies – has long been an option for political ex-prisoners. Those with IRA affiliations can more effectively exercise this route through the electoral success of Sinn Féin. There has been considerably less political success for other constituencies, although the Progressive Unionist Party has provided a platform for a number of UVF related ex-prisoners. Where direct political influence is limited, the option of grassroots community activism can be attractive. This has resulted in a small, but increasing, number of independent political activists. It has also seeded a number of organisations, such as Resurgem in Lisburn, that have developed as community development hubs.

## **Learning from DDR – disarmament, demobilisation & reintegration:**

The Northern Ireland peace process has joined a long list of international examples of how to address conflict transformation and peacebuilding. While it focused heavily on disarmament and demobilisation, the need for re-integration of political ex-prisoners and former combatants was largely left to civil society and community-based initiatives. There are however a number of points that warrant attention. These can be looked at in terms of the self-help organisational work and the experience of fund management by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland.

### **Lessons from self-help initiatives**

- Political ex-prisoners and former combatants are diverse in their backgrounds, education, interests and experience of life. As such any support provision needs to be flexible and responsive, being able to signpost participants to a range of opportunities as well as providing core services itself.
- The vast majority of ex-prisoners that are politically motivated are, just that, political. As such it is important for them to have pathways to discuss and exercise their beliefs in place of violent struggle.
- The self-help nature of the various centres that worked with political ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland was important as a recognition of the ability of ex-prisoners to identify their own needs and to develop programmes to meet them.
- The initiative taken originally by Tar Anall to meet the emotional and psychological needs of political ex-prisoners and former combatants was a courageous acceptance that such needs existed.
- Given that the vast majority of political ex-prisoners were men, it was important that specific programmes of support were put in place for women ex-prisoners and the family members of ex-prisoners' families. The needs of children could often be overlooked.
- Where political violence and imprisonment takes place over a protracted period issues related to aging are often evident given the advanced age profiles of ex-prisoners. This can result in difficulties re-training to compete in the labour market, gaps in contributions to pension schemes, age-related health issues and isolation in the community.
- The failure of address the issue of 'criminal status', and the employment, travel and other restrictions that flow from this status, creates further systemic problems to effective re-integration.
- Ex-prisoner self-help centres need to balance the skills to offer an effective service with the ability to reach out to their constituency. Management structures need to be in place that reflect the self-help nature but that do not exert a political 'command and control' approach.



### Lessons for funders:

- Re-integration measures work best when they draw on the expertise, knowledge and contacts of the political ex-prisoners themselves as well as of their organisations. This approach also affords ex-prisoners the necessary rights-based framing for the work and respect.
- A grant system which allows for development is useful. This can offer smaller amounts of funding to research and pilot initiatives, with gradually larger amounts to develop and implement tested programmes of work. It also facilitates training and support to be put in place to ensure self-help projects can meet the requirements of major funders.
- Funders should accept that the work is long-term in nature, with time needed to build relations of trust with the political ex-prisoner groups. The legacy of conflict and political marginalisation means that trust-building can be difficult but no less necessary for that.
- Added value programmes and initiatives are effective in broadening the framing of the re-integration work. They can introduce self-help activists to a broader range of policy makers as well as to examples drawn from other societies. They can also be designed on an inter-organisational basis, bringing ex-prisoners together from previously warring sides.
- Funders need to be prepared to invest their reputational capital, alongside financial resources, in this area of work. It is likely to be always politically sensitive and open to criticism. Early attention to communications and messaging is a good investment.
- Funders must be prepared to challenge where the work is being overly controlled for party political purposes or where it is not engaging with the broad constituency of political ex-prisoners. However, while funding may be reduced or withdrawn for these reasons, it is important that channels of communication are kept open with the potential to re-negotiate strategic approaches and grant support.
- Funders should be prepared to underwrite the advocacy that self-help groups will necessarily engage in to improve the conditions for political ex-prisoners. However, equally, it is essential that the funder is a supportive friend rather than displacing the central role of ex-prisoners in representing themselves.

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland played an important part in facilitating contact and engagement between various Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoners over the period 1995-2015. It hosted international conferences that drew on learning from other societies emerging out of violent conflict and it organised meetings with statutory policy-makers and agencies in an attempt to build relationships at a local level. When ceasefires broke down or were fractured, CFNI maintained contact and relationships in recognition that conflict transformation is neither linear nor smooth. In short, it developed calculated risk-taking into an art form. As 'lead partner' for EU PEACE Programme funded initiatives, the Community Foundation put both financial reserves and reputational capital at risk. But it did so in recognition of the fact that the real risks were invariably incurred by the ex-prisoners themselves. Notwithstanding this, what is undeniable is that in a society of 1.8 million, with an estimated 25,000 -30,000 political ex-prisoners, the nature of ex-prisoner activism has been very important. It remains so today.



**Tips for Funders and Practitioners  
Supporting Community-Based  
Peacebuilding**

There are a number of recurring themes running through the stories recounted in this book. Many of them apply to both funders and practitioners interested and active in delivering programmes of community-based peacebuilding. Some of which touch on grant-making and community development more generally. These are summarised to offer a handy what to look out for guide. What are the issues and approaches that those interested in supporting local peacebuilding activism need to pay attention to from the outset?

## **1. Ethical starting point:**

It is essential that there is

- A strong belief that peacebuilding activism should be both community-led and community-owned if it is to sustain after the funding period;
- Understand that peacebuilding should be inclusive in approach and incorporate principles of social justice and human rights;
- Be transparent in stating your value base. Even where values, such as respect for human life and human rights, may be in conflict with parties to the conflict, it is easier to build the necessary relationships if people understand your position.

## **2. Understanding the political context:**

In advance of directly engaging at local level, it is necessary to invest time to learn and fully understand the political nuances and the cultural and power dynamics of the conflict and how these impact at community level. Funders and/or practitioners from the target region will be better placed to understand the political context although may well not know the local political nuances. Those from outside the region will have to invest time in understanding both the political context and the local nuances.

In advance of directly engaging at local level, invest time in learning about the area to fully understand the political nuances, and research the cultural and power dynamics of the conflict, the controls, the political players and gatekeepers including paramilitaries, and how these have impacted at community level. This entails engagement with a broad range of local stakeholders (may include government, policy-makers, academics, civic society, NGO's, churches, community representatives) to assess and understand the political/power nuances for the work. It is important that the information and views received are triangulated and checked as 'neutrality' may be a scarce commodity in conflict-affected areas.

Understanding the political context (or on a broader basis a Peace and Conflict analysis) requires regular stocktaking. The context can change very rapidly in circumstances of political violence. It is also important to realise that the political positions taken by individuals can change and allowance must be made for such dynamics.

### 3. Programmatic considerations:

There are a range of issues that need to be taken into account by both funders and practitioners in considering programme design and implementation, while some are more specific to one of the two groups. These include P – Practitioner; F – Funder:

Issue	Practitioner	Funder
Be prepared to work at a pace in line with local confidence and capacity	X	X
Invest time & resources in building relationships and trust	X	X
Recognise the need to commit for the longer-term	X	X
Be prepared to adopt a flexible approach to deal with both set-backs and exploit opportunities	X	X
Invest in, and recognise the importance of small 'wins' to build confidence	X	
Invest in good programme governance from the outset – uncomplicated arrangements that can ensure transparency and accountability	X	X
While being reflective, avoid being judgemental. Be inclusive in approach and encourage the broadest participation.	X	
Look for opportunities to invest in and build local leadership for sustainable peacebuilding	X	X
Think through reputational issues and challenges (including how to handle political and media relations)	X	X

**Practitioners** need a strong commitment to the community development principles of empowerment and inclusion. They must respect the position of local people and understand that, with support, they are best placed to develop and deliver local solutions to local problems, although conscious of the macro political circumstances. Peacebuilding also needs to draw out the connections between community-led and owned activism and the overall peace/conflict analysis, so that local communities have the information to engage in broader advocacy.

Community development and peacebuilding work is more successful and sustainable if it develops organically, with support. An Adaptive Management approach allows programme design to be

tweaked to meet new or emerging challenges, or indeed to take on board new opportunities as they arise. This allows for goals to develop as the programme grows, but also to change as and when necessary. Apart from the essential capacity building and development that will be an ongoing feature of the work, regular action planning enables local people to be involved in decision-making, becoming gradually more confident and ambitious as to outcomes.

Training opportunities in approaches to peacebuilding, social justice and human rights have been useful in introducing concepts and issues that people may be worried are potentially divisive. Again, it is important to move at a pace that people are comfortable with. Site visits to others who have delivered peacebuilding work resulting in positive change are useful tools, but it is also good to expose people to examples of when things did not go well. Where there is sensitivity or fear, seminars or events to hear from others can be used to enable difficult or challenging conversations to commence.

**Funders** need to invest resources and time to listen (and hear), in order to learn from local people impacted by the conflict. They must accept that small steps on issues identified as important to communities are essential in building confidence and relationships. Sustainable peacebuilding is slow and sensitive work that cannot be rushed just to meet the funder's deadline. Again, it is helpful to approach programmes for peacebuilding with an adaptive management framing rather than a pre-set outputs and outcomes framework. Action Research and Evaluation can be included in programme design from the outset as it will facilitate learning and analysis as the work progresses. However, MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) should not be simply outsourced to external experts without due regard to the participation of local people. Participative reflection and learning (iterative evaluation approaches) allows opportunities for people to review progress and learn together. It should not be solely an external intervention but an integral part of the development process.

Funders may also find that peacebuilding programmes can best be delivered if they can identify delivery partners with similar ethical-base and values but who have a strong local reach. Where this can be identified they should be prepared to protect/support that partner as work progresses as it is them/they that will be taking the immediate risks and reputational damage in implementing programmes that may not always be popular with one or more parties to the conflict. To achieve this in practice, funders need strong lines of communication with their partner. Funders should be prepared to take calculated risks for peace, but must also be prepared to cope with negative external pressures (gatekeepers/government/political and/or media) given that peacebuilding work is often as controversial and contentious as it is vital.

Finally, both funders and practitioners need to adopt a 'Do no harm' approach. Ensure that the work does not make things worse or even more difficult for local people/communities. Ongoing reflection and assessment of risk is essential as is the need for flexibility to change approach/programmes/priorities in consultation with local partners. When people engage with the work, it will be them taking the risks to build peace. Work with them to assess and plan for risks/challenges. Peacebuilding is not a linear process so these risks will vary over time. What is important is that people feel that they are being supported through both the worst as well as the best of times. This is what builds sustainable community-based peacebuilding in practice.

# Appendix

## Foundations for Peace (FFP)

Reference has been made to Foundations For Peace (FFP) Network. FFP was established in 2004 with a Mission Statement –

*Foundations for Peace is a global network of independent, indigenous funders working to advance equality, diversity and inter-dependence in areas of entrenched and persistent communal conflict, with a history of, or potential for, violence.*

Three strategies were adopted:

- To draw lessons from and share models of good practice in peacebuilding that have been implemented within and between local communities.
- To promote and advance public policy to support equality, diversity and inter-dependence nationally and internationally.
- To inform, promote and thereby increase the flow of philanthropic funds to support indigenous peacebuilding Foundations across the globe.

It was accepted that each network member would retain full autonomy to develop policies, positions and practices relevant to its context.

The current FFP position statement describes the Network as an international network grounded in peacebuilding and social justice.

*‘We believe that local activist funders are well placed to play a vital role in delivering and sustaining peacebuilding and social justice programmes. Local knowledge, direct access to affected communities and the ability to provide ‘the bridge’, are necessary elements to create relationships and work towards building equity, diversity and interdependence through providing equal opportunities’.*

The Network offers solidarity, learning, sharing and exchange of experience and knowledge. It helps promote a human rights approach to peacebuilding and social justice. It works to bring local stories and models to the international level and give voice to its members.

Membership of Foundations for Peace includes –

- Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust, Sri Lanka
- Taso Fund, Georgia
- Dalia Association, Palestine
- Reconstruction Women’s Fund, Serbia
- Dalit Foundation, India
- Tewa Fund, Nepal
- Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh
- Indonesia for Humanity (IndonesiaUntukKemanusiaan), Indonesia

For further information visit – [www.foundationsforpeace.com](http://www.foundationsforpeace.com)



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