The peace is uneasy and needs to be won everyday: Economic assistance and peacebuilding among marginalized groups in Northern Ireland and the Border Area

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Abstract

While Northern Ireland is still recovering from the violent legacy of the 30-year Troubles during a global COVID-19 pandemic, people still experience violence daily. Economic and political inequalities heighten intergroup tensions and insecurity contributing to the promotion of destructive stories. Brexit has escalated the culture wars between the Protestant Unionist Loyalist and Catholic Nationalist Republican communities as Loyalist youth and paramilitary groups protest on Belfast's streets. Through 120 semi-structured interviews, we explore the experiences and understandings of Civil Society Organization (CSO) peacebuilding and reconciliation workers that liaison with ex-combatants and youth in Derry and the Border area of Northern Ireland. Findings indicate that working-class youth and former combatants continue to suffer from poverty and the legacy of the conflict with few employment opportunities. CSO led projects that empower youth may end when the funding ends as youth and ex-combatants continue to feel disenfranchised.

Keywords: *Brexit, civil society peacebuilding, economic aid, grassroots peacebuilding, Northern Ireland conflict, marginalized communities, peacebuilding.*

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The Peace is Uneasy and Needs to Be Won Everyday: Economic Assistance and Peacebuilding Among Marginalized Groups in Northern Ireland and the Border Area

Mehmet Yavuz and Sean Byrne

Post-peace accord Northern Ireland is experiencing ongoing tensions contributed by Brexit including challenges over culture and identity politics; the inclusion of marginalized communities; reconciliation; the Border poll; and the COVID-19 pandemic (Byrne et al., 2022; Clark, 2023). This article is informed by 120 local people's experiences and shows the role of external funding in relation to the process of reconciliation and their impact on ex-combatants and youth in post peace accord Northern Ireland and the Border Area of the Republic of Ireland. External economic aid is being used to empower the voluntary civil society sector's peacebuilding efforts there regarding marginalized groups like youth, women, the very poor, ex-combatants, LGBTQIA+ citizens (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and allies are all included under the umbrella term LGBTQIA+ which is inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations), disabled people, and newcomers.

The Northern Ireland conflict is one of the most written about and it has been characterized by systemic social segregation between the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) communities (Carter et al., 2009).[1] Sectarianism and voluntary segregation have resulted in two socially separated communities and their traumatic experiences and victimhood traumas from the Troubles have prevented some from fully reconciling with each other (Byrne et al., 2009). While Northern Ireland is still recovering from the violent legacy of the conflict during the global COVID-19 pandemic, people still experience violence daily. According to recent data, "330,000 people in Northern Ireland experience poverty which severely impacts their enjoyment of basic human rights and dignity" (NIHRC, 2022). Consequently, economic

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[1] The use of the anacronyms PUL and CNR is for parsimony purposes while recognizing that there is a diversity of perspectives within and among both communities on issues related to the flags, language, and the Protocol conflicts (Byrne & Mallon, 2023). Brexit and controversary over the Northern Ireland Protocol are also important for Border communities highlighting the necessity of recognizing the plurality of interests within the communities (Byrne, 2023).

and political marginalization contributes to promoting damaging stories, heightening intergroup tensions and insecurity (Senehi & Byrne, 2006).

In this article, we explore the role of external funds to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working with ex-combatants and youth in supporting peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland. The following section provides a discussion of international aid and local people followed by an overview of the flag controversy which was a decision to limit the Union party flag's display over Belfast City Hall reducing the number of days to eight that was perceived by the Loyalist community as an attack on their culture. Similarly, Brexit's Northern Ireland Protocol and the recent British-European Union Windsor Framework Agreement and the Stormont brake are perceived by the Unionist community as a violation of sovereignty and against their interests. The methods and data are then presented, and some research findings are outlined.

International Aid and Local People

The liberal peacebuilding model that includes the universal package of a capitalist economy, democracy, elections, human rights, security reform, and state institutions attempts to engage in statebuilding that is not local, unique, or sustainable; rather it promotes democratic political institutions and liberal economic reform to only manage conflict (Thiessen, 2011). This top-down approach can often exclude the needs of locals as its values are contrary to peacebuilding itself (Yavuz et al., 2022). The export of liberal institutional frameworks into local communities might not be expected to work as a quick solution when communities are not ready for a dictated liberalism or an international statebuilding agenda around democracy, human rights, and social-economic development (Paris, 2004 as cited in Chandler, 2021, p. 432). Yet, Thania Paffenholz (2015) warns about the bifurcation of international neoliberal malign practices and local emancipatory benign practices. Peacebuilding is complex and messy, and the micro local can sometimes be partial and not emancipatory (Mac Ginty, 2006).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, international actors gathered around a new peacebuilding framework that was called bottom-up (Chandler, 2021). This so-called approach was adopted as a prescriptive and general solution in international statebuilding such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland (Bennet et al., 2016; Collinson,

2

2016 cited in Chandler, 2021, pp. 432-438). Different frameworks and indicators, such as relational sensitivity (Chadwick et al., 2013); locally based, non-prescriptive and reflexive and open to change practices (Mac Ginty, 2013); hybridity (Millar, 2014); and the local turn (Randazzo, 2017) were developed as an alternative to this so-called bottom-up approach.

Often, vulnerable groups in conflict are mainly bypassed by the so-called liberal peacebuilding approach because their interventions are aimed at democratic institutions, statebuilding, security reform, and social-economic development and leave little room for meaningful peacebuilding at the local level (Paffenholz, 2013). Thus, peace formation gains legitimacy when it is connected to the locals and without it, international actors distribute "material and epistemic resources as a simulacrum of peace" (Richmond, 2021, p. 585). Therefore, attention to society itself is more critical as the lack of ideational and cultural agency would prevent international statebuilding from embedding in social practices and relations (Paris, 2004 as cited in Chandler, 2021, p. 432).

The local turn was a reaction against external top-down peacebuilding processes emphasizing instead peace from below that included local people (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Thus, the idea of the local turn came about because of the negative impact of top-down externally focused peacebuilding interventions with the local turn emphasizing a discussion of peace from below, local agency, and dealing with local partners (Gorkoff et al., 2021; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013).

Providing targeted international aid, therefore, is critical in post-peace accord societies where communities experience deep structural roots of conflict (Brynen, 2000). These funds can have tangible results in supporting people who live in poverty or experience marginalization daily. Yet economic aid as part of the liberal peace does come with strings attached as the donor's agenda included growing the economy, getting local buy-in to the political process, and nurturing grassroots peacebuilding (Creary & Byrne, 2014).

That said, the Northern Irish peace process was initially provided with an enormous boost with significant economic aid from the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the E.U. (Thiessen et al., 2010). The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the European Union (E.U.) Peace III Fund provided support for local cross-community projects to nurture

peacebuilding efforts, and to create a peaceful atmosphere to ease reconciliation (Byrne et al., 2023; Skarlato et al., 2016). While these funds created some economic and social opportunities for both communities, the external economic assistance model was inordinately hierarchical and bureaucratic as local CSOs had to comply with auditing, reporting, and project management regulations that created a lot of stress for volunteers within these organizations (Hyde & Byrne, 2015; Mac Ginty, 2011). CSOs couldn't influence the EU Peace and Reconciliation Program's decision-making processes in contrast with the more consultative and inclusive IFI project development and delivery mechanisms (Acheson & Milofsky, 2008). While Peace II included community partners in decision-making through the Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs), Peace III's coordinating body, the Special EU Programs Body's (SEUPB) inflexible procedures put undue pressure on voluntary CSOs (Buchanan, 2014).

Both communities' dependence on E.U. Peace funds in Northern Ireland was perceived as an issue for the community members, especially for ex-combatants, women, youth, and the disabled and LGBTQIA+ communities (Byrne et al., 2022a). As is often the case in other post-peace-accord societies, "having 'pockets' of money and distinct programs available to minoritized groups does not challenge the normative assumptions underlying the peace process, nor does it lead to a widespread effort to embrace and value social difference so that the conflict is not ongoing or leads to a resurgence of violence" (Byrne et al., 2018, p. 25). The danger of being solely dependent on economic assistance through the IFI or/and E.U. peace funding created a perception of needing to be rescued.

Peace funds made some headway in building a strong grassroots civil society yet the fundamental root causes of the conflict including discrimination, identity, disengagement, and social exclusion remain deep in the society (Karari et al., 2013; Byrne et al., 2018). Marginalized groups including ex-combatants, youth, LGBTQIA+, disabled, newcomers to Northern Ireland, and the very poor haven't fully benefitted from the peace dividend as peacebuilding is framed by politicians within the ethnonationalist narrative (Byrne et al., 2022a).

To continue peacebuilding work in Northern Ireland supported through the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund in the wake of Brexit, the British government created the

PEACE PLUS program (2021-2027) and the Irish government, the Shared Island Fund (2021-2025).

The next section discusses the Northern Ireland conflict through the flags controversy and Brexit.

The Northern Ireland Conflict

The 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) brought an end to the Northern Ireland Troubles. Over $4 billion was allocated to Northern Ireland from the IFI and the E.U. Peace and Reconciliation Fund (PEACE I, II, III and IV phases) to build the peace dividend (Byrne et al., 2018). One might argue that the GFA attempted not to solve the issue at the heart of the conflict but to provide enough safeguards for each identity group to pursue their own political aims using nonviolent rather than violent means which could be seen as part of conflict transformation. However, the GFA brought a deep division between the communities. Despite the GFA and a range of measures including E.U. funding, Northern Ireland remains a very much divided society in terms of segregated living patterns; attendance at different schools and churches; and the playing of different sports (Byrne, 2008). The 1998 GFA's fuzziness and ambiguity allowed both communities to interpret it in ways that satisfied their interests providing them with safeguards to use nonviolent means to pursue their political interests as part of an engagement and conflict transformation process as the Agreement didn't resolve the issue at the core of the conflict (Anderson, 2009; Tannam, 2001).

The recent Brexit and British withdrawal from the E.U. mean that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland continue as before in terms of allowing the free flow of trade across the Border while Northern Irish goods face inspection and control processes going into the United Kingdom (U.K.) (McCall, 2021). Indeed, Loyalist paramilitaries recently withdrew their support from the GFA until the Northern Irish Protocol as part of the 2020 Brexit Treaty is amended to ensure the flow of free trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K. (Phinnemore, 2021). They are angered by what they perceive as ex-Prime Minister (P.M.) Boris Johnson's sell-out and betrayal in allowing a trade border in the Irish Sea and an Irish economic union that is diluting their British identity (Hearty, 2015). Loyalists are feeling mistrust and under siege as they protest to protect Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the U.K. (Haverty, 2019).

Thus, the 24-year Northern Ireland peace process is fragile and delicate because of contention within the PUL community over the Northern Irish Protocol and the sea border (Long, 2018). In addition, on March 25, 2022, Simon Coveney, Ireland's foreign affairs minister left an event in Belfast because of a Loyalist dissident hoax bomb alert while on October 31, 2022, the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) representing the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Red Hand Commandos, prevented a paramilitary attack on a government building in the Republic of Ireland (McKay, 2022). In effect, Brexit may have speeded up the process of Irish reunification and the "break-up of Britain" (Nairn, 1981, p.1) as Scotland may soon vote to leave and choose to become an independent country within the E.U.

The Flag Controversy

The 2012-2013 Union flag controversy in Belfast sparked violent protests after Belfast City Council made a democratic vote to limit the previous practice of flying the British Union flag 365 days a year to 18 days allowed by law for government buildings (Goldie & Murphy, 2015). Unionist councilors were against the decision, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) distributed leaflets in East Belfast denouncing it and encouraging locals to protest, stating it was an attack on the Unionist community's cultural identity (Halliday & Ferguson, 2016). Although nationalists on Belfast City Council wanted the union flag to be removed entirely, they eventually agreed to compromise with the Alliance party that it would fly only on certain days (BBC, 2021; The Irish Times, 2021). This decision led to massive protests with members of the PUL community taking to the streets to protest the removal of the British flag from Belfast City Hall, injuring several police officers and demonstrators in the ensuing fracas (Guelke, 2014; Halliday & Ferguson, 2016). Most of the protests involved roadblocks and picketing the offices of the Alliance party and some of the protests became violent in December 2012, with Loyalists destroying one Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) office and damaging many others (Melaugh, 2013).

In other words, the dominant view was that the violent conflict had been transformed and the outbreak of unrest presented a challenge to British and Irish political leaders through a power-sharing Northern Ireland government and Anglo-Irish cooperation (Guelke, 2014). However, citizens voted mainly for political parties with opposing views

of the British union or Irish unity indicating that the ethnonational conflict has mostly remained a nonviolent one. In other words, the dominant view was that the conflict had been resolved. However, people continued to mainly vote for parties with diametrically opposed aims of union with Britain or Irish unity suggesting that the ethnonational conflict remain, albeit a nonviolent one. The real challenges around the peace processes are not only limited to the flag controversy. It is critical to understand the perceptions and understandings of both communities about their sense of security, equality, political progress, cohesion, and open dialogue (Nolan, 2013).

These complex issues angered Loyalist youth and Loyalist paramilitaries, and they found themselves in a culture war where the CNR and PUL communities appear to be in a battle for cultural supremacy (Byrne, et al., 2022a). Historically, their cultural and historic symbols help define each community, and the attachment to symbols has been a common practice for both communities in preserving their identities (Gorvett, 2020).

Although the main unionist parties supported Brexit, these concerns escalated with the decision of the U.K. government to depart from the E.U. in 2020 and the resulting Withdrawal Agreement and its Northern Ireland Protocol deepened concerns within the PUL community about Northern Ireland's constitutional future within the UK (Holland, 2022). Protestant Action Force (PAF) and dissident paramilitary elements from within the LCC are behind some of the Loyalist youth street disorder against the Northern Ireland Protocol and the Irish Sea border as they perceive that the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement has weakened the union (Angelos, 2021).

These actions led to the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) (2021) describing paramilitaries as a "clear and present danger" in Northern Ireland suggesting that "consideration of a transition process for paramilitary groups is required, with the aim of disbanding the groups" (p.116). Another report underlines the vulnerability of children and youth in the conflict (Walsh, 2021). For instance, several young people began to describe the long arm of the paramilitary presence in their local areas and how it affected their socialization, and with whom they spend time (Walsh, 2021). In addition, Brexit and the Withdrawal Agreement also created tensions within the PUL community.

Brexit, Xenophobic Nationalism, and the UKIP

The post-Brexit trading rules that came into force in February 2021 are some of the key factors to fuel tension in Northern Ireland (Phinnemore, 2021). When trucks cross the border from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland, the Northern Ireland Protocol allows them to transport produce without having their papers or goods checked (Edgington & Morris, 2022). Before the advent of Brexit, both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were part of the E.U., so they automatically followed the same E.U. trade rules which did not require checks. When the U.K. left the E.U., a new arrangement was put in place as the Republic of Ireland is an E.U. member state. The British, E.U., Irish, and Northern Irish governments created the PEACE Plus Program (2021-2027) with €1billion to support cross-community peacebuilding CSOs (Byrne, 2023). The Irish government supports the GFA and created the Shared Island initiative and Shared Island Fund (2021-2025) providing €500 million to support North–South cooperation, inclusive dialogue and peacebuilding, and an all-island economy (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022).

The Protocol known as the Brexit Deal was established to maintain the peace process by removing customs checks on the border with the Republic of Ireland allowing some European laws to continue to apply in Northern Ireland, and this angered the PUL community due to its reinforced long-held fears that they are becoming split off from the rest of the U.K. (Fleming, 2021). In other words, many in the PUL community believe that the Protocol has weakened Northern Ireland's political status within the U.K. and brought it closer to the Republic of Ireland, an E.U. member state, increasing the likelihood of Irish reunification. This fear has led to a resurgence of Loyalist youth and paramilitary violence (Sullivan, 2021). In this increasingly violent atmosphere, criminal gangs connected to Loyalist paramilitary groups have attacked the police, and many of those taking part in the attack were "ceasefire babies" born after the 1998 GFA (O'Brennan, 2021; Sullivan, 2021).

As much as Brexit is dominated by an economic and political discourse, Britain's xenophobic departure from the E.U. created a culture of intolerance and disrespect for human rights and equality in Northern Ireland (Meghji, 2020 cited in Martin, 2021, p. 28). Since the Brexit referendum, there has been a significant public debate in Northern Ireland about the rise in attacks and harassment directed against migrants, asylum seekers, and marginalized and minority ethnic communities (Curtis, 2020; Mintchev, 2020). Brexit has

closed Britain's doors to inclusion and diversity, as both the PUL community and English nationalists have resisted a plural European identity and diversity in unity favoring an "us versus them" identity conflict instead (Maccaferri 2019 cited in Martin, 2021, pp. 27-28; Meghji 2020 cited in Martin, 2021, p 28).

E.U. skepticism can be traced back to 1993 when Nigel Farage's right-wing populist United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) was born out of Euroscepticism (Usherwood, 2008). The UKIP advocated for the U.K.'s withdrawal from the E.U. opposing the very principle of European integration (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004 cited in Tournier-Sol, 2021, p. 381). The DUP supported Brexit while the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein opposed it. The Northern Irish leader of the UKIP, David McNarry, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), constantly argued that Brexit would be best for Northern Ireland (O'Leary, 2016).

This was one of the driving forces behind the U.K.'s campaign to leave the E.U. over concerns about "immigrants, criminals, and traffickers" that concealed the real issues such as Northern Ireland's position within the U.K., the power-sharing system of government in Northern Ireland that faces significant challenges, inequalities faced by the communities, increased unemployment rates, and poor reconciliation efforts (Clark, 2023; Irish Examiner, 2023). Withdrawal and the Protocol have affected peace in Northern Ireland threatening devolution and Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK (Tonge, 2016). With this context in mind, the present study again aimed to critically understand the role of external funds to CSOs working with marginalized communities and to create opportunities for reconciliation for all in Northern Ireland. The following section outlines the qualitative methods used in the research.

Methods

Qualitative research is used to better frame people's experiences, understandings, and perceptions about the issues and conflicts that surround them (Cooper & Finley, 2014). Understanding the connection between economic aid and its impact on reconciliation and ex-combatants and youth is critical. Hence, this study fills a void by empirically exploring the voices of 22 locals on the role of economic aid and its impact on ex-combatants, youth, and peacebuilding. The interviews were conducted by the second author in the summer of 2010. These included semi-structured interviews with 120 individuals including 102 CSO

leaders based in Derry City and Counties Armagh, Derry, Fermanagh, and Tyrone in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, and Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland that received designated peacebuilding funding from the E.U. Peace III Fund and/or the IFI. To capture every perspective, the second author also conducted interviews with five senior civil servants and 13 funding agency development officers who oversaw managing the peacebuilding funds and interpreting funding criteria and requirements.

By using a purposive sampling method, the second author conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with 80 male and 40 female participants. Informed consent was obtained from the participants and the interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and coded, and each participant was matched with a pseudonym to protect the respondent's identities. We used the grounded technique to go through all the interviews inductively to extract significant themes. We used grounded technique because researchers may not predetermine a priori, particularly, when it comes to ongoing conflict such as in Northern Ireland. Such social phenomena can only be examined by developing an in-depth understanding of narratives that later can be grounded to make sense of a particular conflict (Milliken, 2010). A grounded technique can also identify the contextual nature of knowledge, as well as the nature of practice (Milliken, 2010), and as a result, it may adapt to changing as conditions that influence behavior. The respondents presented below are from the PUL and CNR communities. The next section outlines the research findings.

No Trouble in the Leafy Burbs: Fragmented Communities, Ex-combatants, and the Lost Youth Generation

Marginalized groups, particularly youth and former combatants, continue to suffer from the legacy of the conflict with little hope for the future in terms of employment. Donnacha believes that IFI and Peace III funding has supported cross-community projects that bring young Protestants and Catholics together to address sectarianism by nurturing an understanding of each other's cultures.

DONNACHA: Video conferencing equipment enables them to also network and link into groups on both sides of the Border and both sides of a sectarian divide and

talk about issues of mutual concern wherever it would be training, wherever it would be access to funding, and social economy projects. (CSO leader)

Video technology empowers young people to discuss issues they normally would not have the opportunity to do that are impacting groups on both sides of the Border and on both sides of the community.

In contrast, Killian noted that it was difficult to attract overseas businesses to the Border Area during the height of the Troubles as the region was perceived to be a lawless bandit country where anything goes. He reported that he sees so many problems on the Monaghan-Armagh Border. "I see more activity kind of a subversive nature and it's worrying" (CSO leader). He also suggested that the Border community isn't loyal to either the British or Irish state because it doesn't perceive that it is part of it. The community feels neglected by the state and it wants to rip it off, not pay taxes, and get what it can for themselves. He explicated that it was a wild frontier that could not be tamed politically as the youth turn to new dissident Republican paramilitary groups like the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) and the New IRA.

Ruairi indicated that while he recognized that the external funding has promoted the stabilization and normalization of society, former combatants still feel disenchanted and alienated by the funders.

> *RUAIRI:* One of the big difficulties always is in a post conflict situation where a lot of those that have come through the conflict, and particularly those that have been engaged in the conflict turn around at a certain stage and say, "Well I have got very little out of this conflict, and I have contributed so much and find myself in a very sad situation now."
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> Now already there are signs of that in some parts of the six counties of Northern Ireland where there are those people who at one time may have been part of the Republican movement or part of the Loyalist grouping or even part of the

state's official armed forces and police forces saying that they contributed and gave their all for a period, and now find themselves discarded. (CSO leader)

To build an inclusive and sustainable peace, former combatants and members of state security forces, especially wounded ex-combatants, must have their basic human needs addressed.

At the same time, however, Oran reported that once the funding ends many of the CSO-led projects that keep the youth out of trouble will disappear and that good work will be undone especially in interface areas in urban settings. Peace is fragile.

ORAN: I think a lot of work has gone on at the interface areas in terms of organizations attempting particularly at this time of the year to make sure that young people are kept busy and are kept away from engaging in activity like in worsening the situation. So, in that sense on the peace level that has been effective and that is my greatest concern long term because once those bodies are removed you have got another generation of people who made the contacts coming through. And once you have what I would call tribal housing, tribal societies, and then the contact is always going to be at the interface rather than in a natural contact.

So, there is always going to be an issue there in terms of the long-term sustainability and having said that I think as things become more normal when you get back to a more normal society particularly economically and socially some of those issues will take care of themselves. One of the big issues could well be the current recession, and the affect that has on jobs and community cohesion etc., because you can very, very easily go from a vibrant society to a recession society. (CSO leader)

Oran reported that the global economic recession could impact the peace process and heighten tensions between the PUL and CNR communities.

In contrast, Darren avowed that the British government did not fund any CSOs populated by Sinn Fein activists during the Troubles. That position has since changed, and the British government's strategy became one of providing funding to former combatant CSOs to coopt ex-paramilitaries into supporting the peace process.

DARREN: I think it's a coincidence that the change in the narrative of the development of community organizations changed at the same time over a relative short period of time.

Far from discouraging the involvement of people who may have had an association with paramilitary groups now particularly the British authorities in the North sought out the involvement and encouraged the involvement of people who had an association particularly with the Provisional Republican movement. (CSO leader)

Darren went on to say that the professionalization of funding in the voluntary sector has frozen out some CSOs including former combatant organizations.

DARREN: That has caused tensions as well with some grassroots people who founded a little community organization, and then found that as Peace money became available and so forth and certain criteria had to be reached and business plans were necessary, and an understanding of the maze of rules and regulations surrounding the funding and accessing the funding, which was available, and professionalism was called for. And they would move in and original organizers, the people who had sparked off community organizations found themselves frozen out and dejected.

Darren articulated that the CSOs applying for funds had to fulfill criteria set forth by the E.U., and the British and Irish governments, so that many projects did not truly represent the interests of local communities. Local grassroots CSOs got entangled in that top-down and bottom-up power struggle as the funders and both governments dictated terms to local CSOs.

DARREN: Plans were handed down from above rather than emerging from below that has changed the character of community organizations in the North…. I think many community organizations have become sort of not genuine representative organizations of the people of that community but conduits for government policy in relation to these.

And it would seem to me that they have long ceased to be organs for campaigning or for struggling on behalf of people in communities. And to become

part of the control mechanisms, sort of whereby a discontent is bought off and channeled in directions, which are not dangerous to the established order of things. Darren noted that the requirements placed by the E.U. and both governments on CSOs were manipulative and seek to control the peacebuilding agenda. He went onto add that advocacy organizations doing critical work were bought off by the funding and their energies were channeled in a certain direction that didn't upset the status quo.

Alternatively, Callum noted that some of the funded projects have been purposeful and have had intrinsic merit while others were not because sectarianism is still entrenched within the society and is passed on through the generations to the children.

CALLUM: So, we have an institutionalized structure for peacebuilding now, so we have legislation. We have funding but in terms of the emotional different engagement, it is not doing that because we see the children at the primary schools, eight and nine-years old. They still have an entrenched attitudes that they have received from their parents.

An eight-year-old might have a parent who's thirty-one, who would have been young when the GFA was signed. So, they shouldn't have those sectarian attitudes. But it is a transfer that's going on in which I don't see the Peace money really hitting that. (CSO leader)

Callum also reported that the quality of the applications was not great as there seemed to be confusion over projects that focused on diversity issues compared to sectarianism and peacebuilding in a sort of soup bowl process.

That said, Daniel recognized that the influx of aid to support a myriad of funded projects in a politically unstable Northern Ireland following the signing of the 1998 GFA provided politicians with the opportunity to coopt ex-combatants into the peace process.

DANIEL: That can be seen to be an important safety net that provides the breathing space for politicians as they engage in things that politicians do which is horse trading. Basically, to buy-off, to increase the incentives for those armed stakeholders to pause for a little while.

So, in one sense we can say that the influx of money has helped to create the breathing room within which the major stakeholders, the political, and the

14

armed stakeholders can begin to think and recalculate their interests and what is most beneficial to them in the future. (CSO leader)

Contrary to what Daniel said, Jacob observed that the peacebuilding CSOs have made some inroads, yet peace is directly related to economic opportunities. If young people are unemployed, then they are going to turn to criminal activities or to the paramilitaries.

JACOB: We have a limited success. There would be people who would accept them and go along with them, and there would be people who would be entrenched in their own communities and their own views and would not accept them. And again, it is a question of employment or unemployment. People who are unemployed are not very susceptible to peace or anything else.

They want some money to spend and if they can't get it legitimately, and the government continues to ignore their plight or are unable to do anything then a small percentage will turn to paramilitaries where they can get money by, for example, protection money, shooting policemen, shooting soldiers, holding up banks, counterfeiting, and by all manner of criminal activity. (CSO leader)

Jacob noted that it would take time to build a realistic peace as the problem has lasted for centuries. A lot of young people wish to forget the past and move forward and they are totally neglected as a group in society. There are far too many young men who are disadvantaged and unemployed so that employment, peace, and reconciliation are inextricably intertwined. He went onto say the following in his story.

JACOB: Unfortunately, in this community young people have been brainwashed for centuries by their parents. They tend to believe what their parents tell them whether what they tell them is the truth or lies or a half-truth. They will believe generally what they are told. Then there's their peer group.

Extremist views are difficult to change overnight because they are deeply entrenched in the collective mind-sets of both communities and are passed onto the youth by parents and peers.

The funding programs represent external agencies' views of what peacebuilding is rather than representing the reality of what peacebuilding means to the local communities. Some young people who did not grow up during the Troubles and feel alienated from the

peace process feel nostalgic for experiencing the violence of the Troubles. They feel that they have lost out on something that their parents had experienced.

Discussion

Northern Ireland is a good example of understanding the impact of funding on inclusive peacebuilding with youth and ex-combatants, and we included here the voices of funded peacebuilders working with both groups. Grounded in the respondent's understandings, five key findings were generated from the data.

First, the respondents pointed out that unemployed youth are neglected by politicians and the peace process, and they turned to criminality or joined rival paramilitary groups. CSO peacebuilding projects targeted youth in deprived communities while cross-community youth projects trained participants in anti-sectarian behavior and this work was underfunded. Yet some gatekeepers in deprived areas blocked these CSOs from working with their youth. When the funding ceases, many of these funded groups doing important work in rural and interface impoverished communities would end.

Consequently, Protestant and Catholic youth feel estranged since the implementation of the GFA as they perceive that they have limited employment opportunities as they harbor a deep nostalgia and reverence for the Troubles or 30-years' war. Previously, young Protestants more easily found employment at Harland and Wolff shipyard for example. The recent global recession and the ongoing global economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war means that is not the case today for PUL youth. A mobile highly educated youth has resulted in a vibrant and confident CNR professional middle class emerging in Northern Ireland today (Holland, 2022). However, as the interviews indicate, some CNR working-class youth with little job prospects were also celebrating violent Republicanism. In addition, some PUL young people believe that the CNR community was bequeathed all the GFA's benefits. These youth were also incensed that the PSNI didn't prosecute Republican mourners that attended the 2020 funeral of former PIRA intelligence chief, Bobby Storey for a breach of Northern Ireland's COVID-19 social distancing rules (Young, 2021). Young Loyalists believed the PSNI supported the CNR community and several PUL politicians called on the Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, to resign.

Second, the respondents believed that ex-combatants were initially excluded from the funding process and that their basic human needs were not met by both funders. The British government scrutinized and blocked the funding of Republican peacebuilding organizations and then sought to coopt them by providing them with funds. The professionalization of the funding process also froze out many former combatant peacebuilding organizations until they built their capacity skills and were able to then compete for the funds. In addition, the respondents noted that extremists feel threatened by peacebuilding CSOs coming into their communities to build peace.

Thus, the funding was provided to some ex-combatant CSOs involved in cross-community peacebuilding activities to get the paramilitaries immersed in peacebuilding work. Most of these former combatants are working hard to bring dignity and respect to their local communities providing new community development and peacebuilding skills to build capacity as well as inculcating compassionate values among the youth (McCauley et al., 2009). Yet the active involvement of these former paramilitaries in peacebuilding could lead to "re-marginalizing and re-silencing the victims of their crimes" (Edwards & McGrattan, 2011, p. 367). For example, as the respondents highlighted, some paramilitaries are directing the youth's anger and organizing them to riot and attack the PSNI. The PSNI, for instance, investigated the nefarious and illicit activities of members of the South-East Antrim UDA, arresting five members on suspicion of organized crime and supplying drugs, while Loyalist youth attacked the police in retaliation (Young, 2021).

The NIRA also made it clear that it would target military and customs posts if a hard/soft border was introduced on the island because of Brexit (McGlinchey, 2019). The NIRA is responsible for killing Derry journalist, Lyra McKee; placing the Wattlebridge bomb on the Fermanagh-Cavan Border; attacking PSNI officers' cars with booby trap bombs; sending parcel bombs to Glasgow and London; and placing a car bomb outside the courthouse in Derry (Maiangwa et al., 2019).

Third, the respondents noted that some young people are brought together by externally funded CSOs to confront sectarianism and learn about each other's cultures. However, when the funded projects come to an end, there will be few employment opportunities for most peace workers, and this is a concern because at-risk young Loyalist and Republican people living in deprived areas have few job prospects. They are

17

recruitment targets for new extremist Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. Cross-community peacebuilding projects needed to engage youth in urban interfaces go underfunded as some young people are attracted to these new paramilitary groups. The NIRA is a credible security threat as it has access to Semtex explosives and automatic weapons, and it is actively recruiting Catholic youth in Derry City, Co. Fermanagh, and Co. Tyrone as well as from the Republic of Ireland (CISAC, 2019). At-risk youth have few choices in terms of employment or going to college and they feel alienated and disenfranchised as they express their anger through illegal activities submerged within traditional Republicanism and Loyalism. This is especially the case for young Loyalists disenchanted with Brexit and ex-P.M. Boris Johnson's behavior toward Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the U.K. Young Loyalists now feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens and use bonfires as part of a culture war that reinforces group boundaries as other conflicts over Brexit and the Protocol also continue to alienate both communities (Hall, 2022).

For example, the politicking of former P.M. Boris Johnson was evident as he promised that Northern Ireland's sovereignty in the U.K. would not be sacrificed in the Brexit negotiations with the E.U. as he enticed former DUP leader Arlene Foster and the DUP to support British withdrawal from the E.U. (Fabbrini, 2020). Then the P.M. did a complete U-turn in the negotiations with the E.U. with the Northern Irish Protocol agreeing to an Irish border in the Irish Sea and no hard border on the island so that there are customs and security checks between Northern Ireland and the U.K., and none between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Harvey, 2020). Since the May 5 Assembly elections, former P.M. Johnson flip-flopped as he threatened to dismantle parts of the Protocol to placate the DUP that enraged Irish Republicans and alarmed U.S. politicians (BBC, 2022b). The Protocol infuriated the Loyalist community who see this as a betrayal by the ex-P.M., and the creation of an economic union on the island of Ireland that threatens Northern Ireland's position within the U.K. (Hayward & Murphy, 2018).

The Northern Ireland Protocol with a hard border in the Irish Sea escalated tensions within the PUL community as it changed the relationship between Northern Ireland and the U.K., and speeds up possible Irish reunification that is part of Sinn Fein's political agenda (Harvey, 2020). The DUP underachieved during Brexit as Northern Ireland was

expendable for former P.M. Boris Johnston to get his way to leave the E.U. Consequently, former First Minister Arlene Foster was replaced as leader of the DUP by the more conservative Edwin Poots who then resigned and was replaced by the current leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson (Archick, 2021). As a result of the May 5, 2022, Assembly elections, Sinn Fein became the dominant political party that has caused a seismic sea of change across the political landscape with Donaldson's DUP relegated to the role of junior partner (BBC, 2022a). The DUP has refused to join a power sharing executive because the British government has not scrapped the Northern Ireland Protocol (Carroll, 2022). The PUL community ultimately feels betrayed by the British government so that their loyalty is conditional to the government to demonstrate their loyalty to the Queen (Phinnemore, 2021). The cross-community Alliance party doubled its vote tally to 17 seats showing that a significant percentage of Northern Irish people are now voting for the middle ground rather than for sectarian politics (BBC, 2022). The local grassroots CSOs leadership skills and peacebuilding work included the youth and ex-combatants in local projects. This lay in stark contrast with hardline DUP leaders as the Protocol dominates the political landscape preventing the formation of a power sharing government (Shrimsley, 2022).

Fourth, the economic dimension is often an ignored component of putting a peacebuilding architecture together. The respondents noted that border communities and the very poor were ignored by the funders as the top-down process didn't represent their interests. Consequently, excluded, and marginalized groups such as youth, ex-combatants, newcomers, women, disabled people, and LGBTQIA+ citizens have little stake in the success of the Northern Ireland peace process (Byrne et al., 2018). The socioeconomic marginalization of Northern Ireland's alienated youth for example assists new Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups' recruitment efforts and their illegal activities. Structural disadvantages faced by alienated and marginalized groups including youth and ex-combatants are not being addressed by the mainstream economy. Northern Ireland's power sharing government's priorities must include providing employment opportunities for the youth so that they have access to new socio-economic and educational opportunities.

Anti-discrimination legislation through the Fair Employment Acts of 1976, 1989 and 1998 ensured fairness in hiring as one in four workers from the middle-classes work in the public sector (Holland, 2022). Class divisions and the asymmetrical distribution of

economic benefits have intensified the income asperity gaps between classes in both ethnopolitical communities. Poverty that exists in the poorest segregated working-class communities means that young men left behind by the peace dividend take solace and succor in their ethnonational identities (Holland, 2022). Building a new and inclusive Northern Ireland necessitates nurturing a working-class coalition across sectarian lines that requires coalition building among those economically marginalized for successful peacebuilding to take place (Holland, 2022). For example, the Alliance party and the socialist People Before Profit Solidarity party appear to be working together to break down those barriers today in Northern Ireland.

However, sectarianism continues to escalate social tensions in Northern Ireland so that people's living conditions will not be improved by just nurturing economic growth (Byrne et al., 2022b). Northern Ireland remains a highly polarized and segregated society as people live in homogenous enclaves and children attend separate schools except for 10 percent of those attending integrated schools (Landow & McBride, 2021).

Fifth, the CSOs have built local capacities, yet many peace projects are not sustainable beyond their current funding. CSOs have become dependent on external economic assistance from both funders and have often molded their peacebuilding projects to parallel the funders' agendas. At best some of these projects are managing local conflict over the short-term and are not building an adaptable and inclusive local sustainable grassroots peace process. When the funding dissipates, the domino implosion of CSO led intervention projects will significantly impact and hurt local youth and ex-combatants that already feel abandoned, alienated, angry, and marginalized by the politicians and the government. Both groups have few options and limited opportunities. The economic component of a post peace accord Northern Ireland is greatly needed so that the E.U. and the British and Irish governments' active involvement in coordinating economic resources to benefit both disenchanted groups is significant.

For example, the continuation of funding through the Peace PLUS program (2021-2027) supported with £1 billion from the E.U., the British and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland Executive as well as the Irish government's Shared Island initiative (2021-2025) providing €500 million in funding to the local voluntary third sector to support North-South cooperation, and an all-Ireland economy will provide much needed resources

to both communities so that they can access educational and employment opportunities (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022; Government U.K., 2021). These new resources will have a positive impact in empowering youth and ex-combatants to create a new generation of cosmopolitan citizens. Economic growth and inclusive social-economic development that is equitably distributed must include the youth and former combatants as well as other marginalized groups in rural and urban areas if a sustainable and adaptive peacebuilding process is to succeed in Northern Ireland (Byrne et al., 2022a).

Conclusion

While Northern Irish people have experienced traumatic events, it is vital for communities to move forward as the transformation of ethnopolitical conflicts must meet the goals of moving on (forgetting) and honoring (remembering) the past (Lederach, 1995 cited in Senehi, 2009, p. 233). As Senehi suggests, ethnopolitical conflict transformation necessitates acknowledging diverse groups' individual identities while also promoting "the co-creation of a shared identity and a set of common understandings that allows for unity" (p. 223). To do so, internal, and external solidarity is critical and the continuing commitment from international and regional actors is key as the current peace process is facing continual challenges. It is also important to understand the impact of international funding on local people like the youth, ex-combatants, and LGBTQIA+ and disabled communities. Creating inclusive and just peace is crucial for sustainable peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and it can only be possible if continued resources are provided by funders for peacebuilding work.

The U.S., as a critical third-party intermediary, employs a significant amount of influence in the Northern Ireland peace process (Byrne, 2007). Yet the Trump administration didn't really engage with various internal political actors in Northern Ireland. President Biden's administration appears to be taking a more hands-on approach as events begin to unfold. The traditional marching season will commence soon in Northern Ireland as both communities prepare for what may unfold as a very long hot summer (Byrne et al., 2022a).

Northern Ireland could be moving toward a border poll and once its population reaches 51 percent as stipulated in the GFA a referendum must be held on Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the U.K. The CNR community would most likely

vote to leave, and the Scottish Nationalist Party that dominated the May 5 election with 453 councilor seats also desire a referendum to quit the U.K. in what could become the "break-up of Britain" (Nairn, 1981, p.1). More negotiations are needed now to address PUL fears, yet ex-P.M. Boris Johnson didn't seem to have an interest in engaging with the PUL community especially as he became further engaged in the Russo-Ukrainian war to shore up the Tory base and direct the British public's attention away from Partygate, inflation, and a stagnant U.K. economy. Economic aid is critical for sustainable peacebuilding and consistent and increased aid to support peace processes creates a better path to a post peace accord reconstruction (Byrne, 2022c). As demonstrated above, the CSO workers constantly address the issues faced by community workers with unsustainable financial means which prevents Northern Ireland from building a common future for all. However, as the CSO workers clearly emphasize, economic and financial aid policies impact everyday peacebuilding in post-accord societies. Therefore, PACS scholars from diverse backgrounds can contribute to how we think about and understand economic reforms and policies in post-accord societies as they have a critical impact on building a lasting peace that is highly desirable (Vogel, 2022).

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