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The Challenge of Peace Building and Conflict Transformation: A Case Study of Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of the transition from armed conflict to peace in Northern Ireland between 1994 and 2016. It discusses the main stages of the peace process and the main elements of the peace Agreement in relation to the development of global thinking around peacebuilding as set out in the United Nations 1992 report *Agenda for Peace* and the 2000 *Brahimi Report*. The paper argues that while Northern Ireland is often highlighted as a positive example of peacebuilding, it is not without its limitations and overall the experience of the past twenty years emphasises the importance of ensuring a broadly inclusive process and the need for a sustained commitment over a long period of time.

Key Words: Northern Ireland, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, inclusiveness, sustainability, United Nations.

Biography: Neil Jarman is a Research Fellow at the Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University, Belfast and is the director of the Institute for Conflict Research, a Belfast-based not-for-profit organisation. He has worked extensively on issues associated with the political transition in Northern Ireland, including inter-communal violence; police reform; hate crimes; immigration and migration; as well as general human rights and equality issues. Much of his work is focused on the importance of dialogue and relationship building as part of the process of peacebuilding and on the role civil society organisations play in conflict transformation work.

Introduction

The ending of the armed conflict in Northern Ireland and the ongoing transition to a more peaceful society has been widely regarded as one of the more successful examples of global peace building and conflict transformation. The conflict, which began in August 1969, formally came to an end with the signing of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 by the British and Irish governments, with the support of the main Northern Irish political parties. The peace process and Agreement was one element of an important decade in relation to global peace building and which began with the transformations in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, and which led to the end of the Cold War. This in turn led to new initiatives and developments in relation to ending conflict. At the beginning of the decade the United Nations initiated a broad review of international approaches to conflict, which led to the elaboration of the concept of peace building in the 1992 report *An Agenda for Peace* by Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and at the end of the decade, the year 2000 saw the publication of the *Brahimi Report* on United Nations peace operations, as well as the passing of UN resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. From another perspective the decade was marked by contrasting experiences in dealing with violent conflict. There was important progress in bringing to an end long running conflicts in Lebanon, South Africa and Northern Ireland, as well as what has since proved to be misplaced optimism, on progress on the other major long running conflict between Israel and Palestine. The counterpoint to this apparent progress, however, was the failure of the international community to respond effectively to the violence in Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Northern Ireland is widely highlighted as one of the more successful recent examples of global peacebuilding. In twenty years it has transformed from being a site of persistent conflict to a stable democracy, albeit one which still occasionally still appears in the global media as a result of crisis or an act of violence. More frequently Northern Ireland is presented as a model of how local participants, with the support and assistance of international actors and institutions, can transform a long standing armed conflict into a viable and sustainable peace. Many state and non-state actors from other conflict areas frequently visit Northern Ireland and in turn Northern Irish politicians and peace builders are often invited to other conflict zones to explain what they have achieved and how they did it. This is perfectly reasonable. In the early stages of the Northern Ireland peace process people in Northern Ireland had sought the advice and assistance from other countries coming out of conflict, and in particular drew inspiration from the example of the transition in South Africa. Northern Ireland is also significant as it has been one of the relatively few examples of an armed conflict in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, and while it is never possible to draw exact parallels between different conflicts, some broad lessons can be learned and adapted to fit other contexts. While it is important to acknowledge examples of success in peace building, it is also important to understand why building peace was possible, what were the key elements of peacebuilding, and also to

recognise the limitations of any process of conflict transformation and the challenges that are always faced in trying to moving any society away from the use of violence to achieve political ends.

This paper draws on more than twenty years work on the political transition and peace process in Northern Ireland that has been carried out by the author. This includes work carried out at the grass roots and by civil society organisations, as well as with government departments, politicians, former combatants, faith leaders, young people, supporters of the peace and those who oppose or reject the process. This work has involved academic research, evaluation, documentation and policy development as well as advocacy, training delivery and practical activism. At the very least this work highlights the sheer length of time it can take to begin the process of transition after a violent conflict, the complexity of the process and the diverse actors who may be involved. Factors that are often overlooked when considering the process of conflict transformation from afar The paper provides an overview of the Northern Ireland peace process to outline the various steps and stages that have been taken, highlights the key elements of the peace agreement and its implementation, and reflects upon the progress that has been made and the challenges that remain. The paper begins by contextualising the discussion of the Northern Ireland context within the framework of the broad models of peace building and conflict transformation that have been developed over recent decades by academics and by international bodies such as the United Nations. In particular it reviews the key elements of any process of peacebuilding that have been identified by the United Nations and considers how far they have formed an element of the Northern Irish transition, while also considering some of the absences and limitations of the international vision, by drawing on a bottom-up and inside-out perspective in contrast to the United Nations' top-down view.

Concepts and Ideas in Peacebuilding

The debates within the United Nations and the ideas set out in the *Agenda for Peace* and *Brahimi Report* were important in relation to international perspectives on ending conflict as they broadened the understanding of what needed to be done from international interventions that focused on making and keeping the peace to highlighting the need for approaches that would assist in consolidating a sustainable peace. The *Agenda for Peace* report introduced the term 'post-conflict peace building' to the established lexicon of peace making and peace keeping, as a form of 'sustained, co-operative work to deal with underlying social, cultural and humanitarian problems' and which were considered necessary steps to provide a durable foundation for peace and prevent a recurrence of violent conflict.¹ The *Brahimi Report* elaborated on this to identify six key features of any peace building strategy: (1) the active engagement with local parties and the creation of

¹ Boutros Boutros-Ghali. *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992), para 57. Available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/a47-277.htm> Accessed 25 May 2016.

quick impact projects designed to have a real impact on quality of life; (2) free and fair elections; (3) reform of policing and justice systems based on international standards; (4) establishing a culture of human rights in the new institutions; (5) the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants; and (6) a co-ordinated strategic framework for all aspects of peace building.² UN Resolution 1325 expanded the approach still further, by highlighting the need for gender perspectives in all aspects of post-conflict peace building and ‘the need to support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements’.³ The two reports and the resolution were significant in highlighting the importance of developing a longer term perspective on the transition from violent conflict to a sustainable peace, and in recognising that such transitions are often complex and uncertain processes.

It has been acknowledged that peace processes are often fragile and unstable, and too often the peace collapses as one or more parties resort to the use of force because they may feel they have not achieved sufficient of their objectives or they have obtained insufficient power or other benefits from peace.⁴ In part as well, the fragility of peace has been because the international community has too often failed to commit sufficient time, attention and resources to building peace, and instead has hoped that securing agreement among the political elite would prove sufficient to end the violence. Such a formal approach to peace building may involve little more than a process of dialogue that results in a peace agreement among the local political elite, with a commitment to reform of the political and security institutions and a process to disarm and reintegrate irregular armed groups. Such a process will then culminate in an election and the creation of a new government. Then, after a relatively short period of time the process will be declared a success and the international community will begin to shift its focus elsewhere. However, the situation in the supposed ‘post-conflict’ society is often less stable than hoped and too often some form of violent conflict will recommence. If such violence is contained in a discrete area or remains at a low level, it may come to be seen as part of the ‘new normal’. The situation may be recognised as not ideal, but it is may also be accepted as better than it might have been.

While the elements outlined in the UN reports are undoubtedly important features in building a sustainable peace, and have all been aspects of the political transition in Northern Ireland, they are rarely sufficient. Practical experience on the ground has highlighted additional factors that are important to creating a sustainable peace. These may include the role of grass roots peace building work as a complement to elite level negotiations; the

² Brahimi Report. *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (New York, United Nations, 2000), paras 37-46. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/55/305 Accessed 25 May 2016.

³ UN Resolution 1325, para 8c. Available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/#resolution>. Accessed 25 May 2016

⁴ See Paul Collier, Paul. *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London, Vintage Books, 2010).

provision of adequate resources to support and sustain peace building; the duration of any process; as well as recognising the importance of relationships, attitudes and social justice as well as infrastructure, institutions and elections as factors that ensure a peace is embedded. Johan Galtung has highlighted two contrasting forms of peace that he terms as a negative peace and a positive peace.⁵ Galtung argues that a negative peace involves situations where there is an absence of violence and a degree of safety and security for the civilian population, but where the main issues that helped to ignite the conflict in the first place have not been addressed, thus leaving the society open to a resumption of violence. In contrast he defines a positive peace as one where the structural inequalities and injustices that ultimately led to the violence have been addressed and thus a more sustainable peace is possible. A negative peace is something that may be achieved, or sometimes imposed, relatively quickly, but building a positive peace is a longer and more wide-ranging process, and it demands a more extensive commitment from a wider range of sectors of society.

Galtung's concepts overlap with other academic thinking about ending conflict and in particular the development and elaboration of such related concepts as conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation.⁶ Conflict management usually refers to actions designed to limit, mitigate or contain violent conflict, while approaches to conflict resolution may focus on seeking accommodation and compromise between warring parties and on reaching an agreement to share power as a path out of violent conflict. Neither of these approaches will necessarily aim to address the deeper roots of the conflict. In contrast models of conflict transformation aspire to a more wide ranging transition including transforming personal and collective relationships, building deeper understandings and recognition of difference, as well as addressing the often deep rooted structural factors and inequalities that generate tensions that can lead to violence.

Conflict management and conflict resolution are thus more limited and pragmatic responses to violence, which aim to end a conflict and establish a degree of stability in a relatively short time, whereas conflict transformation is a more radical and challenging approach that looks to a longer term response to build a more equitable society based on social justice and human rights. And whereas approaches to conflict resolution may be top down and elite-led processes, models of conflict transformation emphasise the need for a broadly inclusive process, which involves both the political elite as well as grass roots activists, and highlights the roles of 'middle level' leaders who help to link and connect the elite and the grass roots.⁷ In such an approach peace has to be built from the bottom up as much as from the top down and those on the grass roots are important actors in the process rather than simply being reliant on the trickle-down benefits of high level deals.

⁵ Johann Galtung. *Theories of Peace: A Synthetic Approach to Peace Thinking* (Oslo, International Peace Research Institute, 1967).

⁶ Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001).

⁷ John-Paul Lederach. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

In reality, building peace and transforming a conflict is always a process rather than an event. It will be messy, complex and uncertain. It will rarely be a simple trajectory but rather will oscillate between periods of stable peace and periods of tension and disorder and even a return to violence.⁸ The process of transition will be impacted by such factors and the nature, scale and duration of the conflict; the nature of the peace, whether it is a victor's peace, involves territorial division or a military stalemate and compromise (Brewer 2010); the nature and scale of any involvement by other states or international bodies; as well as the expectations and relative power of the different actors. At times the future will look positive, at other times less so; opportunities may appear but then disappear again; external factors such as relations in or with neighbouring peoples, regions or countries or elements of the global economy may impact in significant, but unforeseen, way; internal dynamics and power relations will almost certainly change over the course of a peace process; mistakes will be made and hindsight will serve as a source of reflection. Establishing a stable peace may also take much longer than expected, which will impact on the level of resources and support available to different actors. The duration and trajectory of a transition may thus impact on whether one aspires for a more pragmatic resolution or a more idealised transformation of the wider social, political, institutional and economic context.

The next section offers a very brief outline of the background to the conflict in Northern Ireland. It highlights some of the key stages in the attempts to build peace over the course of the conflict and offers an overview of the main elements of the peace process and the overarching context of peacebuilding. It is followed by a discussion of the key stages of the peace process between 1994 and 2015. It outlines some of the successes that have been achieved and challenges that remain to be addressed. This later section also contextualises the peace process in Northern Ireland in relation to the academic ideas of peacebuilding and conflict transformation that have been outlined above.

From Conflict to Peace: The Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland was established in 1921 when Ireland was partitioned by the British Government following an, at times violent, campaign for independence. The majority of Ireland became an independent state, while the north-eastern part of the island remained a part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has always been a divided society, with the majority Protestant population supporting the union with Britain, while the minority Catholic population supported a united Irish Republic⁹. In the 1960 a civil rights campaign

⁸ See Tristan Anne Borer, John Darby and Siobhán McEvoy-Levy. *Peacebuilding After Peace Accords: The Challenges of Violence, Truth and Youth* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) and John Darby (editor). *Violence and Reconstruction* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

⁹ The terms Protestant and Catholic are widely used as descriptors of the two main communities in Northern Ireland and while they imply a religious underpinning to the conflict the two terms should better be considered as ethno-national communities. The conflict is over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland within either the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland The Protestant community largely identifies as British and favours remaining within the United Kingdom, politically they are Unionists, while hard-line more radical sections are referred to as Loyalists. The Catholic community largely identifies as Irish and favours a

began to demand an end to discrimination against members of the minority Catholic community, drawing inspiration from the civil rights movement in the USA. This was opposed by members of the majority Protestant community, who were backed by the local police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Increasing tensions in the late 1960s led to serious inter-communal rioting, and in 1969 the British Army was deployed by the government in London to restore order. However, this led to a further polarisation of positions. The demand for equality soon became a demand for a united Ireland, while street protests escalated into armed conflict. This three-sided conflict, which involved state forces (the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary) and paramilitary groups from within the Nationalist community (Irish Republican Army and Irish National Liberation Army) and the Unionist community (Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association) lasted until 1994 when the paramilitary groups declared ceasefires.

Throughout the conflict there were attempts to reach a political solution to the violence, which, while unsuccessful at the time, did serve as the foundation to the subsequent peace process. The British government introduced legal reforms to address the issues of discrimination in the early 1970s, but by then the armed conflict was raging. A political agreement was made in 1973 to establish a power sharing government, but this collapsed after opposition from sections of the Protestant community. In the 1980s dialogue between the British and Irish governments led to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave the Irish government an advisory role in relation to the government of Northern Ireland for the first time. The British government also maintained informal channels of communication with the IRA throughout the conflict, but these did not really bear fruit until the 1990s, by which time there was an element of war fatigue, with both the British Army and the IRA realising that they could not win a purely military conflict. Alongside these processes, Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, began to develop a more overt political strategy from 1981, which was designed to run in parallel with the armed campaign of the IRA. This in turn led to more structured talks both with the constitutional Nationalist parties and with the British government through the informal 'back channels'. These paved the way for the IRA to declare a ceasefire on 31 August 1994. The Loyalist paramilitary groups followed suit six weeks later and the formal public peace process began.

The Northern Ireland peace process per se can be broken down into three broad phases. The first phase, which involved elite level political negotiations and a diverse array of grass roots work, ran from the ceasefires in 1994 until support was secured for the peace Agreement and elections held in June 1998. The second phase, which lasted until May 2007, was marked by a period of instability in the devolved government and by a flourishing of grass roots peace building activities. The third phase began with the restoration of a devolved power sharing government in May 2007. Overall peace building in Northern Ireland has been a broadly inclusive multi-party, multi-level process which has involved the

unified Irish state, politically they are Nationalists, while hard-line more radical sections are referred to as Republicans.

local political parties, the British and Irish governments and local civil society. It has also drawn on the support of the American government at key stages, involved key international figures to assist in various aspects, and has benefited from the financial support of the European Union and various American and international donors.

Whilst the peace has resulted in a massive decline in acts of armed violence, deaths and bombings, it has also been marked by sustained periods of street protests and rioting that have threatened to collapse the process. Thus while the declarations of ceasefire initiated a shift away from armed conflict, the early stages of the transition were marked by sustained mistrust and suspicions between the two main communities both at political and grass roots levels. To reverse the Clausewitzian aphorism, in Northern Ireland 'peace has been a continuation of war by other means'. This was in large part due to the form that the peace process took. John Brewer has argued that conflicts come to an end in one of three ways: by the victory of one of the parties (what he terms conquest peace); through geographical division and the redrawing of national boundaries (cartography); or through compromise and negotiation involving the main conflicting parties.¹⁰ The peace in Northern Ireland has followed the third of these. Unlike in South Africa, there was no ultimate victor who could dictate the terms of the peace; division had been tried in Ireland in 1921, but this had only served as a temporary remedy; and thus the peace process has pursued dialogue and negotiation in search of a compromise that could provide the foundations for a sustainable peace. And while the peace has been pursued as an inclusive process (at least for those who profess to be committed to peaceful means) it has also been multi-layered, involving two national governments, numerous political parties, representatives of several armed groups plus sections of civil society. It has also included parties and groups with differing demands, expectations and commitments to the ongoing process. So while the armed groups considered their declarations of ceasefire as sufficient ground for inclusion in talks, other parties, particularly the Unionist parties demanded initially at least more evidence of a commitment to peace and they refused to engage in dialogue with the Sinn Féin while the IRA retained its weapons. The nature of the beginnings of the transition highlighted the importance of the process being broad, inclusive and involving work on relationship and trust building at grass roots level as well as focusing on negotiations towards an agreement.

Phase One: Ceasefires to Agreement

The first phase of the peace process was focused on the political negotiations between the two governments and the local political parties, primarily to reach an agreement over the form and content of any future political institutions in Northern Ireland. This process lasted for more than three and a half years and was marked, as noted above, by persistent and serious inter-communal tensions, disputes over the involvement of Sinn Féin in the discussions and the breaking, and then resumption, of the IRA ceasefire. One of the distinctive features of this stage of the process was the elections in May 1996 to the

¹⁰ John Brewer. *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge, Polity Books, 2010), 23-27.

Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, a body which was established to legitimise political participation in the peace negotiations. The ten parties with the largest number of votes in the elections were entitled to seats in the Forum, and ultimately the right to participate in negotiating the agreement. The process was specifically designed as a means of enabling two small parties associated with the Loyalist paramilitary groups in the dialogue, but also resulted in the participation of the newly formed Women's Coalition and a left wing Labour grouping, which further broadened the range of political perspectives around the table.

The multi-party negotiations reached a conclusion on 10 April 1998 when the text of what became known as the Belfast (after the location of the negotiations) or the Good Friday (after the date on which the agreement was concluded) Agreement was signed off by the British and Irish governments and the ten political parties. The Agreement was then put to a popular vote in a referendum in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in May 1998. The Agreement received the support of 94% of voters in the Republic and 71% in Northern Ireland and, while Catholics in both areas were heavily in favour of the Agreement, only an estimated 53% of Protestants in Northern Ireland supported it. This equivocal support from the Protestant community was in part due to an unease at the participation of Sinn Féin, who were perceived as a front for a 'terrorist' organisation; in part due to a fear of being 'betrayed' by the British government; and in part because the Agreement had been written with a considerable degree of ambiguity that enabled Sinn Féin to present it as a triumph for their views and thus served to feed into Protestant suspicions and sense of mistrust. It was only due to a very strong campaign to encourage support for the Agreement, and the personal intervention of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, that a slim majority of Protestants eventually voted in favour. The third and final piece of this initial stage of the peace process was an election to the proposed Northern Ireland legislative Assembly. This took place in June 1998 and paved the way for the establishment of a local parliament and a devolved power-sharing government for Northern Ireland.

Key Elements of the Agreement

The Agreement outlined the key constitutional and institutional proposals for Northern Ireland and its relations with both the rest of the United Kingdom and with the Republic of Ireland. It provided for changes to the constitution of the Irish Republic to remove the existing claim to authority over the entire island of Ireland, and acknowledged that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the United Kingdom, as long as the majority of the population so wished it. The Agreement also recognised the most Catholics considered themselves to be Irish rather than British and thus enabled all those born in Northern Ireland to claim either British or Irish nationality or both as a right. While many argued that the constitutional changes guaranteed the status of Northern Ireland within the UK, many Protestants saw this as still leaving the option open for Northern Ireland to become part of a united Ireland in the future.

The Agreement provided for a devolved Assembly of 108 members to legislate and govern Northern Ireland. This was proportionately far more than similar devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales but was designed to ensure that there would be broad representation of political views. It would also provide for an Executive based on consociational principles, whereby the larger parties had a right to be part of the Executive and to hold ministerial positions. This meant that the government would be an enforced coalition of the four or five larger parties rather than any form of majority rule or a voluntary coalition. The format of the consociational executive meant that there was no allowance for a formal opposition.¹¹ The Agreement also included the creation of both cross-border (north-south) bodies involving the Northern Irish and Irish governments and other bodies that would interconnect the structures of government between Britain and Ireland.

In addition to the new institutions of governance, the Agreement provided for the creation of a Human Rights Commission and brought a number of existing anti-discrimination bodies together in a single Equality Commission. Both bodies were to be underpinned by new legislation and there was also a requirement for the Human Rights Commission to bring forward proposals for a separate Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and which would reflect the particular circumstances of the region. The Agreement also included a number of actions to address two of the key elements of peace building: security sector reform (SSR) and the demilitarisation of paramilitary groups. The Agreement set out the terms of reference for an international body to develop recommendations for policing reform and another to review the wider criminal justice system, and it also committed the British government to the removing the British Army from its enhanced security role and the removal of Northern Ireland specific emergency legislation. The approach to dealing with the paramilitary groups was less comprehensive than DDR processes are generally envisioned, since the Agreement only provided for, on the one hand, the release of all paramilitary prisoners by the state and on the other a commitment by the political representatives of the armed groups to decommission their weapons. The Agreement was thus broadly in line with the thinking emerging through the UN process and which was subsequently consolidated in the *Brahimi Report*. This included the focus on engagement with local parties, moves to hold elections to establish a local government, reform of the security and justice sector, highlighting the importance of human rights and equality provisions in the new institutional structures and a commitment to the disarmament of the various paramilitary groups.

Phase Two: Implementing the Agreement and Building the Peace

I have already noted that the Agreement was supported by a majority of the population of Northern Ireland in the referendum in May 1998. However, there were significant dissenting

¹¹ Rupert Taylor. *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2009).

voices. While Catholics voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Agreement, some within the Republican community felt it involved too much of a compromise with the British government and continued to assert their demand for a united Irish republic through the use of 'armed struggle'. Their campaign of violence has continued, albeit at a much reduced level. Many within the Protestant community were in turn ambivalent about the Agreement. They welcomed the ending of the IRA violence and the changes to the Irish constitution, but felt that the British government were too lenient towards Sinn Féin and should have pursued the military campaign against the IRA. They also resented the proposals to reform the police, which they considered to have sacrificed much over the course of the conflict, objected to the release of any prisoners (including those involved in Loyalist paramilitary groups) and opposed Sinn Féin's inclusion in a power sharing government because of their links with the IRA, which consistently refused to give up its weapons. And, while the British government, and many from civil society, argued that the Agreement confirmed Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future, many Protestants saw the Agreement as ultimately being a temporary measure that offered too many concessions to the Catholic and Irish constituency and left open the possibility of a united Ireland in the foreseeable future.

Following the elections in June 1998 the Ulster Unionist Party, the larger of the two main Protestant political parties, supported the implementation of the Agreement, but the smaller Democratic Unionist Party refused to participate in the Executive, because of the refusal of the IRA to comply with the requirement to decommission their weapons. As a result the Assembly was formally suspended for much of the period between 2000 and 2007 and Northern Ireland was governed by direct rule of the British Government, as it had been between 1971 and 1998. Thus from one perspective this was a period of political crisis and uncertainty for the peace process, however from another this was a period of sustained progress in peace building. This apparent contradiction existed because peace building is always a complex and multi-dimensional process, or at least successful peace building always needs to take place on multiple levels and involve multiple actors. The ongoing tensions and crises in the Northern Ireland peace process was largely a crisis in the elite level political process. In contrast many of the wider institutional reforms continued with the support of the British and Irish governments and work done on the ground by civil society organisations flourished at this time. In fact much of this work provided the foundations for the successful re-establishment of the devolved political institutions in 2007.

Much of the work in implementing the Agreement was the responsibility of the British and Irish governments, rather than the local Assembly. The British government established the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission and passed the Human Rights Act in 1998. This latter incorporated the rights included within European Convention on Human Rights into UK legislation and made a remedy for breach of a Convention right available in UK courts, without the need to go to the European Court of Human Rights. The Irish

government in turn passed legislation amending Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, which related to claims of sovereignty over Northern Ireland. The British government also set in train the process for the release of paramilitary prisoners, which was completed by June 2000, and began the process of reducing the role of the British Army in Northern Ireland and the removal of the military infrastructure. However, the most significant action was related to the reform of policing, which had long been a controversial issue in Northern Ireland.¹² The Agreement provided for the formation of an international panel to develop proposals for a thorough reform of all aspects of policing. The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland was established in June 1998 under the chairmanship of Chris Patten, a former British Conservative Party minister. Its report, published in September 1999, is widely considered to have produced a model blueprint for a modern police organisation.¹³ The report provided for a new body to be called the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to replace the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The PSNI was to be structured around three core elements: a culture of human rights running through all aspects of police work and training; an extensive process of public accountability to a number of external independent bodies; and a commitment to working closely with wider society under the concept of 'policing with the community', which was described as recognising that policing was too important to be left to the police alone. The report also addressed issues of the scale, representativeness and symbols of the new organisation, all issues that were vitally important in Northern Ireland if the new organisation was to achieve widespread public acceptance and legitimacy. The *Patten Report* was accepted by the British government, who agreed to implement all 175 recommendations. The report received a diverse response from the political parties, but who generally viewed it with some caution. The Unionist parties were broadly opposed to any changes to policing, while Nationalist parties had wanted a more radical transformation than that outlined in the report. Eventually, most parties agreed to support the proposals and to participate in the oversight bodies designed to build public accountability. The exception was Sinn Féin, which was cautious in its response and refused to endorse the proposals. The party had wanted a completely break between the old RUC and the new PSNI, rather than a transition that involved existing police officers retaining their posts while the organisational change took place around them. After a period of public debate the police reform process began and the RUC was formally transformed into the PSNI in November 2001.

The political and institutional changes were complemented by an extensive range of activities involving a diverse array of civil society organisations to help build the peace on the ground. From one perspective, this work had begun as soon as the ceasefires had been declared, but in reality it was an extension of work that had been ongoing throughout the

¹² See Graham Ellison and Jim Smyth. *The Crowned Harp: Policing Northern Ireland* (London, Pluto Press, 2000).

¹³ Patten Report. *A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, 1999).

conflict among community and voluntary groups through forms of dialogue, advocacy and the provision of services. This work was able to expand, in part because of the change in political and security context, and in part due to funding being provided by the European Union under its Peace Programme. The initial Peace Programme allocated €667 million over a four year period to support peace building both directly and indirectly. This include infrastructural, regeneration and employment initiatives as well as training, capacity building, education, dialogue, mediation and community development projects with a wide range of grass roots organisations. The early availability of peace funding served to enable the delivery of a diverse array of quick impact projects that were designed to illustrate the benefits of peace and build support for the wider process, but it has continued as a vital part of the overall transition process. European Union funding along with funding from the USA and from the British and Irish governments has continued to support a wide range of peace building activities over the past twenty years.¹⁴ The grass roots peace building work involved a wide range of civil society actors in its activities including community workers, trade unions, churches and faith based groups, former paramilitary prisoners, women's groups, youth workers, victims of the conflict and others. Much of this work has focused on the 'softer' end of peace building work including building relationships and establishing trust between both individuals and communities, as well as between members of former armed groups, but it also involved building relations and trust between communities and government agencies and state organisations. The work was understood within Robert Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital and which highlighted the value of both bonding social capital within a distinctive ethnic or residential group, bridging capital involving building links with distinct or opposing communities and also between individuals and communities and the institutions of state and authority.¹⁵ An example of one sustained area of work can highlight some of the work that was done and the impact it has had in the process of building the peace is given below.

I noted earlier that the while the armed groups had ended their military campaign in 1994, Northern Ireland continued to be beset by inter-communal tensions and public disorder associated with the residential segregation that marked many working class communities and the annual cycle commemorative parades.¹⁶ In July 1996 Northern Ireland experienced a week of rioting across the country, many community workers in Belfast felt powerless to have any impact beyond reacting to the needs of victims in the aftermath of violent attacks. However, in the months that followed they began to build local networks that linked people within and between communities through the use of the then newly emerging mobile phone technology. The mobile phones enabled community workers to monitor tense situations and flashpoints on the streets throughout the summer of 1997 while all the time

¹⁴ Kenneth Bush and Kenneth Houston. *The Story of Peace: Learning from EU PEACE Funding in Northern Ireland and the Border Region* (Derry, Incore, University of Ulster, 2011).

¹⁵ Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000).

¹⁶ Neil Jarman. *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, Berg, 1997).

remaining in contact with each other. This meant that they were better able to respond in real time to counter rumours, disperse crowds and intervene if violence began to occur, as well as to co-ordinate responses in neighbouring segregated communities and to liaise with the relevant authorities. One of the key agencies in this regard was the police, whose interventions or even presence on the streets could serve to escalate tensions and provoke acts of violence. At this stage, before the police reform process had begun, few people had much trust in the police, although some recognised the pragmatic necessity of trying to engage with them to reduce the potential for violence. Over a long summer of responding to rioting and disorder the seeds of trust began to take root between Protestants and Catholics and between community activists and the police. This emergent network was sustained through the winter and re-energised as tensions arose once again in the spring and summer of 1998. The new model of 'mobile phone networks' to monitor and respond to tensions was disseminated through diverse other networks in Belfast and other towns across Northern Ireland, such that it soon became a ubiquitous part of peace building activity.¹⁷ This was not an instant success however. The mobile phone networks helped people to be able to reduce tensions and prevent rioting, but they were not always effective. They helped begin the process of building trust, but relationships sometimes broke down due to a variety of factors. Sometimes this was due to local disputes and sometimes due to events in the wider political sphere and which were beyond local control. Initially such breakdowns in trust were quite serious and required time and energy to rebuild, but gradually the relationships became stronger such that they were able to withstand temporary stresses and strains. Over a number of summers tensions were reduced, trust was consolidated and outbreaks of violence less common.

Although the mobile phone networks largely involved activists from Protestant and Catholic communities, they also increasingly demanded contact with the police. The police reform programme had begun in 2001 but at that stage Sinn Féin did not formally support the process and therefore party members and many people in Catholic communities did not engage with the police. However, a common interest in helping to prevent rioting increasingly led to dialogue between Sinn Féin supporters and the police in working class areas of Belfast. Initially this was done discretely and was publically deniable, but over time contact, particularly involving Sinn Féin political representatives, became more open and routine. This in turn helped provide the foundation for Sinn Féin to formally recognise the changes that had taken place in the transition from the RUC to the PSNI and which had

¹⁷ See Neil Jarman. Managing Conflict by Phone: The Mobile Phone Networks in Northern Ireland. In *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*, edited by Paul van Tongeren, Malin Brenk, Marte Hellema and Juliette Verhoeven, 435-40, (Boulder Co., Lynne Rienner, 2005); Neil Jarman. Vigilantism, Policing and Transition: Informal Justice in Northern Ireland. In *Global Vigilantes: Anthropological Perspectives on Justice and Violence*, edited by David Pratten and Atreyee Sen, 319-48, (London, Hurst, 2007) and Neil Jarman. Managing Violence and Building Peace from Below. In *Democracy in Crisis: The Dynamics of Civil Protest and Civil Resistance, Peace Report 2012*, edited by Bert Preiss and Claudia Brunner, 263-83, (Vienna/Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2013).

become one of the key issues to be addressed before the devolved power sharing government could be restored.

Phase Three: Devolution and Stagnation

While the peace building work on the ground continued, attempts were being made to restore the local Assembly and re-establish the power sharing Executive. This involved a number of distinct activities. The first significant move was when the IRA announced an end to its armed campaign and then formally decommissioned its weapons under the oversight of members of the Independent Monitoring Commission in September 2005. Secondly, Sinn Féin agreed to accept the legitimacy of the police reform process and in response the DUP agreed to participate in a renewed power sharing Executive with Sinn Féin. This was set out in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 and new elections were then held in May 2007. The final stage of devolution occurred three years later following further negotiations which led to the Hillsborough Agreement in 2010 and which provided for the devolution of policing and justice to a minister in the Stormont Assembly. On one level this marked a new phase in the peace process with an inclusive power sharing government in place since May 2007. In practice the devolved government has struggled to achieved any degree of coherence, the Unionist and Nationalist parties have not been willing to work together very effectively, identity politics has continued to dominate debate and this has led to frequent stalemates over policy and political process, and frequent crises have threatened the continuation of the Executive (similar challenges have been experienced in other consociational governments in countries coming out of conflict, for example in Bosnia and Lebanon.¹⁸ Only recurrent interventions by the British and Irish governments ensured that the Assembly has not collapsed on a number of occasions. On one level having a fragile government has been better than having no local government at all, but on another the constant crises and the lack of effective decision making has also helped to undermine confidence in the Agreement, the new institutions and the political parties. For example, the percentage of people voting in the Assembly elections declined by 15% between 1998 and 2011, and barely 55% of those eligible to vote did so in the 2016 Assembly elections.

The lack of a strong and coherent political leadership has also led to a sense of drift in terms of consolidating the peace. One of the first acts of the newly restored devolved government in 2007 was to abandon the existing strategy relating to peace building work with the promise that they would introduce a new policy of their own to replace it. It took three years to produce a draft policy for consultation and the new text was widely criticised as lacking substance and detail. It took a further two years to produce a revised version, which many civil society organisations felt was only marginally better as it still lacked a sufficiently

¹⁸ See Sumantra Bose. *Bosnia After Dayton: Nationalist Partition and International Intervention* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002) and Amal Hamdan. The Limits of Corporate Consociation: Taif and the Crisis of Power Sharing in Lebanon since 2005. In *Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution*, edited by Are Knudsen and Michael Kerr, 39-59, (London, Hurst, 2012).

broad strategic overview and failed to offer a clear vision for the future or a roadmap for how it would be achieved. This has meant that much of the peace building work on the ground has been undertaken in the absence of any clear framework or longer term strategy and this has also occurred at a time that much of the funding for grass roots work was coming to an end. Although there has been no resurgence of paramilitary violence, the period has witnessed a decrease in public confidence and a decline in relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities on the ground. It has also seen resurgence of street protests and inter-communal disorder from December 2012 through to late spring 2013, which was associated with a decision by Belfast City Council to fly the British Union Flag less frequently than previously.¹⁹ The protests have had a sustained impact on community and political relations, on relations between working class Protestant communities and the police and on general public confidence on the political institutions.

Discussion: Progress Made and Challenges to be Faced

More than twenty years on from the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 Northern Ireland has achieved a degree of stability. Many of the key elements of a peace building strategy identified by the *Brahimi Report* have been implemented to some extent. Local actors have been centrally involved in the work of peace building, elections are generally free and fair, policing and justice has been reformed, a culture of human rights and equality underpins public institutions and the main paramilitary groups have disarmed. For many people these developments along with the reduction in inter-communal tensions, riots and incidents of public disorder are the new normal. Peace has been achieved. However, such views often fail to acknowledge the relative fragility of the peace and the amount of work that continues to be done to make sure that nothing happens to disrupt the relative peace. Groups and individuals continue to undertake activities that are designed to build relations, increase trust and promote mutual understanding, as well as to manage tensions and mediate disputes. Northern Ireland remains a highly segregated society, with contrasting and competing collective identities and with little in the way of shared symbols, shared history or a shared vision for the future. It is true that the military and paramilitary violence that dominated the 1970, 1980s and early 1990s has largely ended and for many that is the key success. To return to Johann Galtung, many appear content with a level of negative peace, where the absence of routine acts of violence has provided sufficient security to go on with, and to live a normal life. Many of the political elite appear to have accepted a negative peace as an adequate foundation for future stability. And while the absence of violence is undoubtedly evidence of major progress, and substantial improvements have occurred to the infrastructure and physical environment in many urban areas, it is arguable that

¹⁹ Neil Jarman and Geraldine Scullion. Protecting Rights or Limiting Disorder? Freedom of Assembly and the Right to Protest. *Shared Space* 15 (2013): 5-16 and Paul Nolan, Dominic Bryan, Claire Dwyer, Katy Hayward, Katy Radford and Peter Shirlow. *The Flag Dispute: Anatomy of a Protest* (Belfast, Queen's University, 2014).

significant work still remains to be undertaken if the peace is to be sustainable in the longer term.

Approaches to conflict transformation have argued that in order to build a sustainable peace in a divided society it is important not just to end the violence, but attempts must be made to acknowledge and address the core structural issues that underpinned the conflict in the first place. Unless this is done there is a risk that the conflict will re-emerge at a later stage. Historically, violent uprisings, of various scale and intensity, occurred in Ireland in 1798, 1803, 1848, the 1870s and 1916, before much of Ireland was given independence from the United Kingdom in 1921. Northern Ireland was born out of violent conflict and was governed for 50 years, in part at least through emergency legislation and the use of discrimination before sustained armed conflict erupted. This conflict continued for more than a generation. Much work has been done to address some of the immediate causes of the violence through, for example, the introduction of equality and human rights legislation and the creation of a local Assembly with a power-sharing Executive. But the new power structures have struggled to agree on ways and means to effectively address the wider legacy of the conflict, including the impact of the conflict on victims and survivors. Arguments over the value of a truth commission, of continuing criminal investigations or offering amnesties for past acts, continue. And while considerable work has been done in relation to security sector reform, there has been less focus on addressing the legacy of irregular armed groups. The British Army are no longer seen on the streets, military infrastructure has been removed and the reform of policing is widely regarded as a model to be aspired to in many other places, but many of the paramilitary organisations continue to exist and they retain a power base, through a mixture of threat and admiration, in many working class communities. In some areas they are still called upon to dispense forms of rough justice and they are also deeply involved in forms of criminal activity.²⁰

Northern Ireland also remains extremely divided and highly segregated. Working class residential areas in Belfast and other urban areas are almost all segregated, Protestants live with other Protestants, and Catholics live with other Catholics. The education system remains heavily segregated, only 7% of pupils attend mixed or integrated schools, the vast majority of children are taught with the ethnic peers. The scale of segregation in housing and education, plus similar divisions in sport and socialising, helps ensure that the patterns of division remain and are continually being reproduced. These divisions in turn help to ensure that identity politics remain prominent, and while the 1998 Agreement allowed everyone born in Northern Ireland to hold both British and Irish citizenship, most Protestants still consider themselves British, and most Catholics regard themselves as Irish. And although a growing number of young people describe themselves as 'Northern Irish' rather than British or Irish, this remains a minority identity and one with limited emotional

²⁰ Liam Kennedy. *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles? Essays on the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Dublin, Merrion Press, forthcoming).

caché, at best it is still a secondary identity. The ethnic polarisation within Northern Ireland, which extends through the political system and power structures of government, has been described as a form of 'benign apartheid', in so far as it has been voluntarily adopted by many, albeit aided and abetted by systems of patronage and favour, which suits the political elite on both sides. Thus while considerable progress has been made in moving beyond conflict, and the Northern Ireland peace process is seen by many as a positive example of successful peace building, it has been limited in its scope and impact. The focus has been on establishing new institutions of governance and ensuring that the representatives of the divided communities are able to work together rather than anything more radical. It remains more of an example of conflict management or of conflict resolution rather than one of conflict transformation.

Conclusions

Northern Ireland has been held as a recent example of successful peacebuilding, and indeed many aspects of the process over the past twenty years can be held as a model for other societies emerging from conflict, albeit as noted above it remains a work in progress. The key elements of the transition have in many ways validated the recommendations of both the UN's *Agenda for Peace* and *Brahimi Reports*, but it has also highlighted something of the narrowness of both reports. The Northern Ireland transition has highlighted the importance, and value, of a very broad inclusive process and the need for a long-term perspective for successful peacebuilding. As well as a broad array of local political, community and paramilitary actors being involved in forms of dialogue and delivery, the process has also relied heavily on the participation of the two national governments, which has served not only to help sustain the peace at critical times, but has also helped to develop and deepen trust and confidence between the two national institutions. Beyond this the process has highlighted the role that a wider network of international actors can play in peacebuilding. In the case of Northern Ireland, this has included the involvement in the US government as a chair for key talks or host for important visits and meetings; the role of the European Union in providing substantial and sustained funding over a twenty year period; the capacity of individual eminent persons to act as verifiers and objective chairs of bodies and institutions; and the willingness of participants in other peace processes to offer advice, support and guidance. All these factors highlight the complexity of peacebuilding practice and the need for a consistent commitment by diverse actors to enable a society to make the transition from persistent conflict to sustainable peace.

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