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Meeting Rising Expectations of Hopes for Peace in Post Peace Accord Northern Ireland: The Role of the Good Friday Agreement and the Implication for External Economic Aid

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) formally brought about the cessation of open political violence and a semblance of normalcy returned to Northern Ireland. Over the years varied peacebuilding efforts were undertaken both by external and internal actors in Northern Ireland and the Border Area to support the peace process. This study explores the impact of peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties based on interviews with funding agency community development officers, and NGO civil society leaders engaged in the overall peace process. The participants' narratives indicate how the GFA has contributed towards de-escalating violence, reducing sectarianism, fostering cooperation between macro political level efforts and micro grassroots level peacebuilding initiatives by creating an institutional framework for cross-community cooperation.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Good Friday Agreement, peacebuilding, economic aid

Razmišljanja o naraščajočem upanju na mir na Severnem Irskem po mirovnem sporazumu: vloga Velikonočnega mirovnega sporazuma in njegove posledice za zunanjo ekonomsko pomoč

Velikonočni mirovni sporazum je formalno prinesel konec odprtega političnega nasilja in Severno Irsko vrnil v navidezno normalne razmere. Pretekla leta so zaznamovala različna mirovna prizadevanja v podporo mirovnemu procesu s strani notranjih in zunanjih akterjev na Severnem Irskem in v obmejnem območju Republike Irske. Raziskava obravnava vpliv izgrajevanja miru in sprave na Severnem Irskem in v obmejnih pokrajinah Republike Irske, temelji pa na razgovorih z uradniki agencij za financiranje lokalnih skupnosti in vodji civilnodruženih nevladnih organizacij, udeleženih v vsesplošnem mirovnem procesu. Pričevanja intervjuvancev nakazujejo, kako je Velikonočni mirovni sporazum z oblikovanjem institucionalnega okvira za medskupnostno sodelovanje prispeval k popuščanju nasilja in sektaštva, kot tudi k spodbujanju sodelovanja med prizadevanji na makro politični ravni in mirovnimi pobudami na lokalni ravni.

Ključne besede: Severna Irska, Velikonočni sporazum, izgrajevanje miru, ekonomska pomoč

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1. Introduction

Ethnicity has long been used by elites to gain power by fomenting conflict between rival ethnic groups (Brubaker & Laitin 1998; Carter et al. 2009). The Northern Ireland conflict is a long standing ethnic conflict where the hostility of Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists created extreme political polarization between both communities (Byrne & Irvin 2002). Consequently, the ongoing political violence from 1968 to 1998 commonly termed “The Troubles” destroyed many lives, property, and the hopes and dreams of the people of Northern Ireland and generated intense intergroup animosities (Byrne et al. 2010; Skarlato et al. 2010). Rival political leaders used ethnic myths that were transmitted transgenerationally to entrench hatred within both groups (Byrne et al. 2008). These leaders perpetuated the conflict by manipulating micro-nationalistic sentiments to promote each group’s ethno-political identities and to sustain group cohesion (Byrne et al. 2010). Thus, Unionists and Nationalists adopted certain identities that mostly reflected their denominational ethnic group affiliations rather than social-economic class (Dixon 2007). The island was partitioned by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty resulted in Northern Unionists opting out of the Irish Free State (Byrne et al. 2009). Partition reinforced territorial demands expressed through nationalistic feelings as unequal power relations set within an imperial British context divided Unionists from Nationalists (O’Dowd & McCall 2008). Consequently, the vital national question regarding territoriality and sovereignty became a deep-rooted concern for both the Unionist and Nationalist communities coupled with inequalities at the economic and social level especially economic deprivation within the Nationalist community (Ryan 2007). As a result, Northern Ireland’s Troubles was characterized by violent ethno-political strife between the Unionist and Nationalist communities (Paul & Gillespie 1999).

The transformation of violent ethno-political conflict necessitates an understanding of the root causes of the conflict. Therefore, any transformational intervention process must address the core underlying causes of ethno-political violence, such as poverty, inequality, social-political exclusion and systemic injustices (Solimano 2005). Further, income inequality, unemployment and poverty fosters violence and have obstructed reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland (O’Hearn 2000). Thus, “external economic aid, properly administered” under well-articulated socioeconomic policies must empower disenfranchised groups by distributing resources equitably and as part of a multi-track post accord intervention approach (Byrne & Irvin 2002, 78). Economic aid is considered by the international community as an authentic intervention tool within the ambit

10 of liberal peacebuilding efforts in the aftermath of peace agreements as evidenced in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in many Latin American and African countries (Byrne et al. 2010). The liberal peacebuilding view is that external economic aid can address economic deprivation to redress structural inequality by providing deprived communities with resources to infuse self-confidence and encourage the grassroots to engage in a milieu of mutual interdependence (Byrne et al. 2008). Thus, economic aid can be used in humanitarian relief efforts, cross-border conflicts, natural disasters, as well as initiatives that focus on demining, the reintegration of combatants into their communities and the establishment of effective judicial systems and democratic infrastructures so that “economic growth will spill over into peace” (Byrne & Irvin 2001, 426).

While economic aid cannot redress the centuries old conflict that is deeply ingrained in the minds of both communities, it can start to address structural problems as an integral part of an overall multi-pronged intervention effort so that the war-to-peace transition can take place (del Castillo 2008). Moreover, if the aid is targeted correctly it can reduce structural inequalities and reduce competition for scarce economic resources thus reducing violence and by providing a social platform for interaction by connecting former foes to a common goal (Byrne et al. 2009). The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the European Union (EU) Peace and Reconciliation (I, and II) Funds provided economic assistance to local community projects in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties (Byrne et al. 2009). Under Peace III both Funders are providing resources to various peacebuilding and community capacity building activities undertaken by local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to address the root causes of the conflict. Moreover, the Peace III Fund has earmarked “those areas that experience the debilitating cycle of social exclusion and poverty that, in part, has been fed by violence and conflict” (SEUPB 2007, Parag. 1.4). Both funders have targeted five key objectives namely: economic regeneration, social bridging, local development, regional development and across border partnership (Byrne et al. 2009, 635). Although external aid is a critical component of post-peace accord peacebuilding it should be used in conjunction with other peacebuilding intervention tools to ensure sustainable peace (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See 2007). However, economic aid is not an external panacea to resolve protracted ethnopolitical conflicts; local people must own their peace (Mac Ginty 2008, Ryan 2007).

Peacebuilding in post peace accord societies is envisaged as a holistic process whereby the recurrence of violence is reduced with creative intervention peacebuilding methods (Byrne et al. 2008). Peacebuilding should be understood

as a dynamic process aimed at building and reorienting various creative activities to “reduce the risk of a relapse into conflict” culminating into creating an environment ripe for “reconciliation, reconstruction and recovery” (Pantev 2004, 122). The success of the peacebuilding process depends on timing, a mixing of multifaceted approaches, waging diplomatic, political and economic means and the process must be adequately financed (ibid.). Thus, the Multi-Track Diplomacy framework suggests that peacebuilders must identify and coordinate approaches within a multidimensional peacebuilding intervention model (Diamond & McDonald 1996; Byrne & Keashly 2000). In the case of Northern Ireland the multi-track initiative should include governmental, NGO and private citizen involvement through a mix of advocacy and civil society actors’ undertaking various indigenous peacebuilding approaches (McCall & O’Dowd 2008). In this regard Paffenholz and Spurk (2010) contend that voluntary NGOs can undertake peacebuilding initiatives because they are independent from the state, while they also interact closely with the state and the political sphere.

Within this broad array of civil society actors Lederach (1997, 2005) argues that an integrated framework of peacebuilding is important where the middle-range leadership of civil society actors can effectively connect to the top-level leadership (or government elites) and the local grassroots level leadership. Consequently, a wide network of local non-profit voluntary organizations can work together to facilitate conflict transformation (Lederach 1997; Jeong 2005). These civil society NGOs can positively influence peace processes by stabilizing the political milieu in many post-peace accord societies (Lederach 1997, 2005). NGOs enhance a society’s wellbeing by expanding its “social space” making it accessible to all conflict parties (Boulding 1990: xvii). Moreover, civil society functions to enlarge civic engagement, and promote non-violent conflict resolution methods (Ahmed & Potter 2006, Ahmed 2011, Scholms 2003). In Northern Ireland these NGOs are often termed Peace and Conflict Resolution Organizations “have taken a leading role in denouncing violence, supporting the peace process” and in transforming conflict (Cochrane 2006, 265). Moreover, transformational peacebuilding integrates the personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions of peacebuilding efforts (Lederach 1997, Jeong 2005). Thus, a first step towards materializing a lasting and comprehensive peace in Northern Ireland witnessed the historic signing of the GFA on April 10, 1998. The Irish and British Governments and various political parties within Northern Ireland signed it.

The signing of the GFA was a turning point in Northern Ireland’s turbulent and complex history. The British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland’s political parties not only signed a political accord but they also started their

12 journey forward on the path of peace (Cochrane 2002; Hennessey 2001). For example, Dr. Mo Mowlam, Northern Ireland's former Secretary of State described the significance of the GFA in the following way:

The agreement reached on Good Friday could be a significant turning point in the history of Northern Ireland. It could herald in a new era of peaceful co-existence and constructive co-operation. But let's have no illusions. It will take a long time to repair the physical and emotional damage of the past and bring about a sense of reconciliation and partnership (Knox & Quirke 2000, 3).

British sovereignty claims to Ireland and Irish national self-determination claims are at the core of the conflict (Knox & Quirk 2000). Past political efforts to negotiate this difficult political terrain (for example, the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement) ended in failure (Byrne & Irvin 2001, Byrne 2001). In contrast the GFA emerged out of multi-party talks and was approved by referenda that was formulated by "Peace Polls" and covered a total of eight polls in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Irwin 2001).

The GFA recognises the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's union with Britain as long as the majority of its population desires it (Byrne et al. 2009). The Irish government also changed the Irish constitution by referendum laying claim to the national territory of the island (Hennessey 2001). Thus, the GFA significantly influenced grassroots level peacebuilding in two ways. First, in Strand One — Democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, "a consultative Civic Forum will be established. It will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors". Second, the provision was created of "the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity" (The Agreement 1998). Both of the strands are instrumental in ensuring macro political and micro grassroots level coordination for peacebuilding (Ruane & Todd 2003). The GFA also established a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to promote awareness of human rights, to review existing laws and practices, and to advise the Northern Ireland government on matters related to human rights (The Agreement 1998, Chpt. 6). For example, Christine Bell concludes that "human rights measures can be useful to a peace process, not just because they address root causes of violence but because they can assist parties in finding agreement on issues such as political accommodation by reducing the zero-sum dimension to intercommunal power tussles" (Bell 2006, 367). Despite slow progress on the macro political process the GFA has improved conditions on the ground creating a milieu to channel external economic aid to grow the local economy to reduce security concerns, and to promote public optimism and tolerance (Aughey 2005). Although there was an occasional political impasse, the principal militant Loyalist and

Republican paramilitary groups kept the ceasefire diminishing the prospect of a resumption of widespread political violence (Mac Ginty et al. 2007).

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2. Methodology

This study analyzes the narratives and stories of 120 respondents to distil their perceptions, images and life experiences of the effects of the GFA on the peace process and the various interrelated and complementary initiatives undertaken by multitrack peacebuilding. The respondents from Londonderry/Derry and the Border Area were asked about what aspects of the GFA supported the peace process, and what were the contradictions/ambiguities in the GFA that tended to hinder the overall peace process and the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland and the Border Area. The respondents' are funding agency community development officers and leaders of peacebuilding projects supported by either the European Union (EU) Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland (Peace III) or/and the IFI. Key themes were identified based on the respondents' narratives.

Thus the article maps the perceptions and images of 120 civil society NGO community group leaders, and funding agency development officers in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties about the GFA's effect on the peace process, and the effectiveness of external aid in building the peace dividend. A qualitative research methodology was used in this study using in-depth interviews that generated data rich from the participants' stories of conflict and conflict transformation. The in-depth interviews elicited the interviewees' perceptions of the peacebuilding process, and the GFAs contribution to the Northern Ireland peace process.

The lead researcher used in-depth semi-structured interviews during the summer of 2010 to explore the perceptions of 120 respondents directly involved in implementing peacebuilding projects in Derry/Londonderry and the Border Area that includes Counties on both sides of the Irish Border, namely Counties Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Monaghan and Tyrone. A semi-structured interviewing strategy (Bogdan & Biklen 2007, Charmaz 2006, Druckman 2005) was used since it allowed the lead interviewer to further develop and expand upon particularly interesting and intriguing responses (Bernard 2002). The 120 key people interviewed included those from a plethora of local NGOs, working to implement peacebuilding programs. The participants were first identified and then contacted in advance of the lead researcher traveling to

Northern Ireland through emails, telephone calls and letters. The interviews were conducted over a period of ten weeks with each person interviewed for roughly between 80 to 120 minutes. The participants in the sample do not represent a cross-section of the entire civil society of Northern Ireland. However, they do represent a cross-section of local NGOs who are directly involved in sustainable economic development, capacity building and peace and reconciliation funded cross community projects. The interviewees responded to eleven carefully designed open-ended questions to express their images and perceptions about the effectiveness of the funding in the peace process and how the GFA supports the overall peace process in Northern Ireland. In this study, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and the participant's stories were transcribed verbatim. The respondents' quotations are presented in their original words and their identity is not exposed to maintain anonymity. The data set is unique and has not been previously published. Data analysis was done inductively in a grounded theory approach (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, Druckman 2005). It is important to note that we cannot generalize the findings from this qualitative study to a broader global context.

The participants' perceptions of the peace process and its connection to the GFA highlighted the following: (1) how the GFA supported the peace process and (2) why did the GFA not support peace process.

3. Positive Influences of the GFA in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

Many respondents argued that a positive synergistic function existed between micro grassroots level peacebuilding initiatives and macro political level efforts, which are made possible by the GFA. For example, a community group leader in Derry expressed how one of the provisions in the GFA outlined creating a Civic Consultative Body to empower grassroots community leaders to be heard:

ROGER: There is room for some optimism, in terms of the gradual adoption of responsibility for our own matters. I do think that a civic voice has a chance to maybe be somewhat amplified ... so basically that the channels of upward communication are worked on, if people are able to use those channels that capture the civic voice and have confidence in them then it wouldn't be just peace and reconciliation, which would be back in the centre where we are. There is something that needs to feature in this conversation and it does exist in this town and it is the perception of the peace and reconciliation industry.

In a similar vein, another community group leader from Derry expressed how the people of Northern Ireland have transformed politically into active citizens in the following manner:

MICHAEL: I think there was a tremendous achievement it gave all of us each and everyone of us a fillip a very necessary fillip, and it helped to reenergise. I also think it does this tremendous thing particularly for people from a Republican Nationalist Catholic background, and it says well here's an opportunity now for years we have been very reluctant subjects and now here is an option to become active citizens and build a new society together. Now that is a big leap from reluctant subject to active citizen. I think many, many people within the Catholic Nationalist Republican community have made that leap.

Another community group leader from Derry also highlighted how macro political level efforts are being synchronized at the micro level to maintain a sustainable peacebuilding process:

LYNNE: I think when we started out in this process going back even 30 years ago the theory that everybody put forward was the chain reaction theory that if everybody did a wee bit eventually it would be built up to a chain reaction and the whole thing would take off, and I think that has been part of the peace process that everybody doing small bits has gradually added to it. It is very important at the other end, the political end of it that they are seen to work together.

Another community group leader in the Border Area also noticed the presence of a level of coordination between micro and macro level actors as facilitated by the GFA:

MARGE: There is a lot of coordination going on at both the macro level and the micro level because a lot of our projects are developed in partnership with our local cross Border partners, they go through the approval process of the Special EU Programmes Body... I think there is a certain degree of cooperation that's taking place along all those different tiers. So again I would agree that I think it is working as far as Donegal is concerned ... well we're hoping it's a bottom up approach to planning as opposed to top down.

Moreover, another community group leader in Derry identified the shift in some of the young people's political attitudes and how they differ from the sectarian politics of the old guard politicians:

ROBERT: There are some politicians still to this day, who would be reluctant to interact and who would still be in their minds fighting an old battle and I think now young people have moved forward in the sense that we would find groups now, for instance the group that is currently on the Wider Horizon preparation they talk about their music, they talk about their football teams, they talk about their different issues, they don't talk about the Troubles anymore, because they have nearly put it behind them.

16 Another EU Peace III community development officer in Derry felt that the provisions mentioned in the GFA need to be supported wholeheartedly to bring home the peace dividend:

MOIRE: I think that we have got to work the provisions of the Agreement because it is the only thing that is going to bring about a level playing field for communities like ours... The provisions under the Good Friday Agreement aren't perfect but they do represent an historic compromise of sorts that can get us started on the work that we need to do, and I think it needs to be supported.

However, a community group leader in the Border Area explained that the GFA should be viewed as a work in progress:

WILLIAM: But the Good Friday Agreement is a working document, so people viewed it as a settlement, it isn't. It's an agreement. It's an agreement to work on, and I suppose for this community it's a work in progress in the big macro sort of politics of a United Ireland and that is what Republicans want but it is also a work in progress of building the structures in a society that is fair for everyone.

A EU Peace III officer in Derry also underlined that the GFA has created powersharing between Unionists and Nationalists changing the dynamics of the conflict:

CYRIL: Well clearly we wouldn't be where we are now without the Good Friday Agreement, from the Good Friday Agreement certain things flowed, chief one which was probably that Unionists finally accepted that they had to share power, and once they accepted that everything else flowed from that. It took some people longer than others. The Democratic Unionist Party took time to get there and so on, but it clearly changed the dynamic of the conflict in a fairly dramatic way.

A community group leader in the Border Area also mentioned how the present political situation made it possible to create institutions and norms that exerted pressures from the bottom grassroots level up to the political elites so that they were aware of their responsibilities to deliver the peace:

GRAINNE: Communities do know that we won't go back to those days. I feel that communities want the politicians to get on with it, they almost say look if we can do it here in communities why are you not able to do it up there and get on with it. So I think it is a double-edged sword. It is great that we are here but why aren't we further on and let the politicians get it sorted.

A community group leader from the Border Area also highlighted that the GFA created a political milieu where political initiatives at the macro level are synergistically connected to the micro levels of peacebuilding:

RACHEL: I think that the political process couldn't happen without some move on the ground ... So I think there is a very, very important connection between them, and in fact like right through all those levels if you really want to have peace, you have to get from top to bottom, you've got to kind of keep building those bridges, and I think at the level of politics, at the level of community and on a personal level, I think that is happening and I think the reason the peace process is a result of it.

A community group leader in Derry perceived how the changed political landscape had opened up opportunities for grassroots NGOs to dialogue with politicians on restorative justice issues:

FRANK: I think there is a lot for the politicians to hear and learn. [We] have had a series last year of meetings with the politicians to say look this is devolution how do you feel about crime and punishment, you know what you think is important, what do you think about prisons and how we deal with offenders. So we have been trying to do that and at least get our view in there on some of that. Yeah, so that's the conversation I think that's happening, or needs to happen, or is happening, or should continue to happen between the communities and the voluntaries, and the politicians I think.

A community group leader in Derry mentioned how the new political terrain has nurtured creative measures like the arts and music to be used as peacebuilding tools in the following way:

AOIFE: I'll give you a quote from somebody else Professor Goodwin, and he was saying that there are changes that society are bound to go through whether they like it or not both are evolving and that artists are the antenna they pick up these changes from wherever you think they come from and disseminate them through their work. I think we were doing that, blindly and intuitively and naively and stupidly and that is what we were doing saying here's another way, you know here's the two communities coming together and creating something new. I remember at one point Mo Mowlam called us the music of the future, you know we use it in our website now, a good quote for us you know that she saw a potential future of the two communities working together.

In contrast, a community group leader from the Border Area highlights how the funding helped his NGO to undertake creative peacebuilding initiatives in the arts that are not politically motivated:

NIALL: I think politics in general is a difficult thing because it tends to put people off and I think the reason we see the arts as playing such an important role in peace building is because it is something that isn't political. You may see some political influences in terms of artistic endeavour but as I say it's not political ... if you can change particularly with younger people if you can change their perceptions at a younger age, if people's perceptions are changed through integration at a younger age is that maybe if they do go on to politics they'll take that with them into politics.

In addition, another community group leader from Derry explained how the storytelling process helps to heal past trauma in the following manner:

LISA: For groups like ourselves what we find is that we are dealing with a lot of the issues that are not really dealt with in the Good Friday Agreement, the chief one which is dealing with the past, and that has not been dealt with, it is still being dealt with in a haphazard way. Part of the problem is the people I think there is still a large element of sectarianism in how people deal with the past and what they think about. I mean I honestly believe that there are many people in the Unionist community who dismiss Bloody Sunday partly because there were Catholics getting killed and they felt they deserved it.

Consequently, civic bodies or forums enhance sustainable peacebuilding and can support peacebuilding activities of grassroots level NGOs by promoting “active citizenship” – a concept that underpins citizens obligations to render their services for social good (Bell 2004, 566; Kearns 1992, 20). For Northern Ireland, the peace process was not restricted only to the formal Track 1 (i.e. elite level) initiative as many key local groups “within civil society” (i.e. the Civic Forum) played dominant roles in the grassroots level process (Bell 2004, 566; Cochrane 2006, 253). In this regard, the Civic Forum outlined in the GFA provisions emerged as a new critical space where the voluntary and community sector can act together to become a dominant actor in the peacebuilding process (Birrell & Williamson 2001). Although, the Civic Forum could act as a key bridge builder between “the Executive and the Assembly” through facilitating “formal dialogue” regarding matters relating to grassroots level development this hasn’t been achieved due to the recalcitrance of both Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) who are fearful of grassroots empowerment (McCall & Williamson 2001 cited in *ibid*, 214–215). Many of the NGOs represented at the Civic Forum have also acted to promote democracy and people’s inclusion during the “anxiety and expectation” generated by the passing and implementation of the GFA (Aughey 2005, 2). Nevertheless, the GFA introduced a new model of “institutionalization of the ideal of deliberative democracy,” as a critical space to give voice to Northern Ireland’s women as well as facilitating a peacebuilding process through a “bottom-up, civil society approach” (*Ibid*, 93). Moreover, both funds empowered citizens to become active at the community level that solidified existing social connections (Birrell & Williamson, 2001, 5). For example, the EU funded “the Leader and Leader II, that reinvigorated rural voluntary groups to promote community based employment, and INTERREG which has assisted community groups in economic development activities” (McCall & Williamson 2001 cited in Birrell & Williamson 2001, 6). However, tension continues to prevail between those who advocate for the Civic Forum’s grassroots actions and mainstream political leaders who “are expected to deliver and the consequence of trying to deliver will continue to be communal tension, mistrust and low-

level violence” (Aughey 2005, 105). Many of our participants observed that the actions of grassroots activism and the Civic Forum are disconnected with the political machinations taking place at the devolved Belfast Assembly in Stormont. The people’s distrust of politicians has a legacy that goes back to the late 1960s when the Unionist government established a Community Relations Commission that never functioned properly due to the suspicion of Protestants and Catholics (Griffiths 1972, 128), which perhaps carried on to stifle the work of present Civic Forum. In this regard, Sinn Fein and the DUP termed the Civic Forum as “an unnecessary and costly layer of bureaucracy” (Bell 2004, 568).

Macro political level and micro grassroots level synchronization of developmental efforts are important in implementing a sustainable peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland. The root causes of the conflict in Northern Ireland cannot be adequately handled solely at the macro political level (Birrell & Williamson 2001). Macro political level actors get maximum media attention to remain visible in the public domain yet the smaller community organizations work daily to resolve local level conflict (Knox & Quirk 2000, 50). In Northern Ireland, many NGO community-based organizations are working towards peacebuilding by creating a common ground for both the Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionists communities (Buchanan 2008). However, many of our respondents argued that coordination among both the funders and the government need to be further improved. Others expressed that the lack of synergy between government and NGO community based organizations impedes the overall peace progress. They also highlighted the duplication of efforts in terms of projects working in the same sector to obtain identical goals. Further, they pointed out that the political actors are sometimes fearful of losing ground and influence that is vital to securing their votes in local constituencies. This kind of negative environment breed’s mistrust and ultimately harms the sustainability of the peace process and the critical grassroots work of community organizations.

Young people are the future of Northern Ireland and they need more long term economic, political, social and psychological support (Senehi & Byrne 2006). The Office for National Statistics of Northern Ireland mentioned that “today Northern Ireland has the fastest-growing and youngest population of all UK countries” as a result of lower death rates (Northern Ireland also has the lowest all age mortality rate within the UK) (Office for National Statistics 2009, 13). However, many of today’s young people living in Northern Ireland did not witness the violence of the Troubles. They were born in the early 1990s when the violence started to recede finally culminating in the historic GFA. In contrast, a study of 15–16 year-old Belfast youth found that exposure to violence led to three-quarters of the sample having psychological health issues in the

transgenerational transmission of the trauma of the Troubles (McAloney et al 2009). This phenomenon has manifested itself in higher levels of depression, psychotic symptoms, substance misuse and a tendency toward suicide (Thiessen et al. 2010). Thus, many respondents opined that young people are frustrated and are feeling hopeless regarding employment opportunities. The peace projects are not able to deliver a sense of security to them while many young working class people feel cheated out of a proper education. Their sense of frustration not only hurts them individually; it also motivates them to join various dissident paramilitary groups to find a sense of community as well as to seek thrills.

The 1998 GFA provided a framework for a devolved assembly with full executive and legislative authority, and underwent approval via referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (McAloney et al. 2009a, Irwin 2001). Between April 1996 and May 2000 eight public opinion surveys were conducted to garner people's feedback and support of the peace process (Irwin 2001) and to ensure the inclusion of peoples opinion (Knox 2011). In our study, many respondents equivocally expressed their vision about the macro political level and the micro grassroots level working in unison. They argued that the GFA is not just a piece of paper signed by political parties rather its provisions must be implemented as part of the overall peacebuilding objectives. For example, the devolution of power posed a challenge to both the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin as Unionists realized that they had to share power with Nationalists. The powersharing executive at Stormont brought together two former enemies onto the same political platform who now have to cooperate with each other politically. Some of our respondents also noted that the political leaders came down to the local level to seek support for the GFA while others argued that they were out-of-step with local issues. The GFA will take a far longer time to implement than initially envisaged, yet change is a foot in Northern Irish politics.

A bottom grassroots level up peacebuilding approach is crucial to build sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. After the end of Cold War while undertaking post accord reconstruction the UN engaged in comprehensive peacebuilding by adopting a liberal market economy model (Mac Ginty 2008). A comprehensive peacebuilding strategy utilizes existing infrastructures and involves local citizens in choosing the methods to mitigate violence (Lederach 1997) that includes local grassroots people in praxis and policymaking (Campbell 2011). However, while local community groups and the Northern Ireland government are closely involved in all peacebuilding efforts their expectations may not follow the same direction. Sometimes, a government may coopt community groups to further its goals (Chopra 2000, Paris 2002). Many of our respondents discussed this

dilemma agreeing that grassroots up peacebuilding is more sustainable in the long run. Many aspired not to return to the sectarian past and to pressure their politicians to make sure this never happens. They also opined that Stormont politicians travel to their local constituencies to dialogue with local people while local residents travel to Hillsborough to express their political demands. Such a process would not have been possible under direct rule. In this way, the people at the local level are exerting pressure on the policymakers to listen to their political demands. For example, community based restorative justice projects run by political ex-prisoners and former combatants are addressing everyday crime in local communities (Eriksson 2009). This kind of restorative justice approach facilitates the reconciliation process and builds trust both for individuals within the community and between communities and the state in a conflict transformation process to resolve societal conflict peacefully (Campbell 2011).

Dialogue is an effective peacebuilding tool to be used in the peaceful resolution of local conflicts (Eriksson 2009). There are various underlying deep-rooted tangible and intangible causes that have perpetuated the Northern Ireland conflict as people continue to suffer from the trauma of the past. Dialogue and storytelling processes open up opportunities for people to tell their stories and to contribute to healing by providing psychological release from the past (Senehi 2002) in order to deal constructively with conflicts (Eriksson 2009; Senehi 2009). Dialogue allows people to grasp a greater understanding of diverse ideas aiding in the deescalation of conflict through minimizing the demonization of the other (Ropers 2004). Many respondents expressed the point that the funding has created the space for numerous socioeconomic platforms to emerge whereby Nationalists and Unionists can come together and engage in dialogue. Many of our community group leaders considered dialogue, based on an interfaith platform, a useful tool to build trust and confidence among the dissident paramilitary groups (Smock 2002). They also argued that dialogue assists in removing psychological barriers behind which both communities hide their differences and wage conflict. Once Unionists and Nationalists are engaged in dialogue, they can understand each other's needs, hopes and fears. In addition, they considered that dialogue between micro level and macro level actors to be important in building the civic culture. For example, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO 2009) has organized a series of meetings with Unionist and Nationalist politicians to understand the broader aspects of crime and punishment, using mediation services to work with offenders in the prison system.

Innovative peacebuilding methods such as music, storytelling and the arts can be used to construct a positive self-image and to heal from past trauma (Senehi

2009). Creative processes such as music, storytelling and the arts can be effective catalysts for peacebuilding in divided societies (Senehi 2002). Some of our respondents argued that using a strategic soft approach incorporating the arts, storytelling and music into peacebuilding work creates a common space where people can come together freely to express their hopes and fears that acts as a healing mechanism and a reconciliation tool to remove stereotyping (Shank & Schirch 2008; Senehi & Byrne 2006). For example, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, hip-hop music is used to discuss social and political issues. In Sri Lanka, children and adults participate in music, painting, theatre, yoga, and sculpture in the Butterfly Peace Garden. In Israel, the Peres Center for Peace brings together young Palestinians and Israelis to “promote peacebuilding between Israel and its Arab neighbours and in particular between Israelis and Palestinians... [it] conducts dozens of projects, involving thousands of Israelis and Palestinians, fostering socio-economic cooperation and people-to-people interaction” (Peres Centre for Peace 2012). In Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada each year the Winnipeg International Storytelling Festival brings together schoolchildren and storytellers-peacebuilders to discuss complex issues (WISF 2012). Hence, a community based approach in the aftermath of violent conflict can also act as an effective tool for bringing segregated groups together to share their common cultural backgrounds to become aware of their roles in past conflict (Senehi 2009). Northern Ireland has a classic history of maintaining and referring to past historical and cultural traditions that contributed to the conflict and entrenched group identities (Cairns & Mercer 1984). For example, since the start of the Troubles in 1969, the parading season from Easter to September has annually created tensions and necessitates an extensive amount of law enforcement presence to prevent violence (Zelizer 2003). The marching season foments inter-group conflict and separates young people hindering integration and acting as an obstacle to coexistence and creating a shared society as envisioned in the GFA (Byrne 2009). Many of the respondents in our study opined that incorporating the arts, storytelling and music into peacebuilding work in an apolitical way can build new friendships and bring young people together under a fresh peacebuilding approach.

4. Negative Effects of the GFA in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

In this section we have highlighted the respondents’ images and perceptions about the negative effects of the GFA in the overall Northern Ireland peace process. They expressed their frustration and despair with the GFA mostly

grounded in the fact that the promised delivery of the peace dividend by the GFA has not yet materialized. For example, a community group leader in Derry expressed how the Civic Forum has not really worked:

SIAM: There has been sort of civic bodies, which have tried, and they haven't worked. You know there was under the Good Friday Agreement a civic forum where it was going to be community representatives and business men and so on would have actually sat on influential bodies that would try and steer the politicians you know that would make thing better in communities and in a business sense but they just didn't really work.

Another community group leader from Derry mentioned how young people are frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities caused by the worldwide recession and the failure of the GFA to deliver jobs:

CAROLINE: You know the sense of hopelessness and despair which is again rising in working class areas for reasons that has got very little to do with Irish politics and everything to do with economic developments and the economic crisis across Europe and indeed across the world. I mean the main reason you have got younger people in larger numbers than ever officially admitted to support dissident Republicanism, it doesn't really have to do with these young people thinking to fight for a United Ireland or not to recognise British authority, it is a fact that they are very angry at the situation that they find themselves that they can see no hope and at least the Real IRA is having a go at least it is still fighting, so that's the reason for this.

In addition, another community group leader in Derry explained that the GFA and the peace process has failed to create any significant major investment into Northern Ireland:

MARTY: I would say that the peace process hasn't actually driven economically at all; by itself it didn't generate any investment... I don't think the process could have led to any significant major investment and I say that for two reasons a) I don't see it on the ground and b) I don't believe that business people internationally put their money where there has been a peace process because there has been a peace process, business men are in there basically because they see it as the best natural turn.

Another community group leader from Derry opined that the absence of adroit political leadership at the macro level was in stark contrast to the positive influence of the voluntary community sector:

CHLOE: The community and voluntary sector in Derry in particular grew up with a lack of political leadership and the growth of the community sector during the Troubles it was largely church based within itself ...that power is something that our Councillors and politicians find very, very frightening... I think overall we lack leadership on all parts of life, I think our difficulty is we have very few leaders and in terms of the Catholic community it had the church but the church has lost so much creditability and there's

an act of mistrust on the church's involvement in the communities. I think a lot of our community organisations are middle management for government agencies and that they service the needs of the government rather than the people.

In addition, a community group leader from Derry mentioned how the politicians were acting as gatekeepers and blocking various grassroots initiatives. This is what he had to say on the issue:

KEITH: I suppose is a bit of work that the community development can play, but what there are the gatekeepers... It's a dangerous thing, and again that's where back to the peace process and back to the Peace and Reconciliation Funds that it's all been superficial, nobody engages in the serious issues when you put up the serious issues for discussion the gatekeepers shut the door, they don't let you in.

A community group leader in Derry argued that sectarian politics continues to frustrate the unfulfilled promise of the peace accord in the following manner:

OONAGH: People want to see action, people have ten and eleven year old kids who you know want to go in terms of they don't know what's happening they don't know what it is, they see factories closing they're just sick of the orange and green arguments and they want to see policy... but I suppose alongside that as well is that ordinary politics at times now are dreary and drudgery and people are probably switching off and particularly at a time when jobs are under pressure and there are economic restraints and all the rest it's not as easy for people.

Similarly, a community group leader from the Border Area articulated the disconnection between promises and the delivery of the peace dividend in the following manner:

GEAROID: It's about delivery because government is about delivering to the people who you represent so there would be a fit between all those and sometimes there can be a disconnect... so it is not a single fix you know that they are totally gelled, they are running parallel, or they are separate, it's a combination and a mixture of them all.

In addition a community group leader from the Border Area echoed the same frustration in the following way:

RAYMOND: So the Good Friday Agreement, alright it was fantastic but what happened, it took a lot of time to do it and understand that there was a lot of other people involved ... a lot of the very top people are not singing from the same hymn sheet. There are a lot of people who are dragging their heels and really just wanted to just drag as much as possible. The Bloody Sunday enquiry is a perfect example why did that take so long to come out the truth.

As envisioned in the GFA, astute political leadership at the macro level is a

precondition to build a peaceful society in Northern Ireland. The GFA provided institutional provisions of devolved government where political powers are decentralized so that the citizens can directly participate in the decisionmaking process, and in envisioning a peaceful Northern Ireland society (Tonge 2000). Effective peacebuilding strategies should encompass three essential elements “the local sources of hostility, the local capacity of change, and the (net) specific degree of international commitment available to assist sustainable peace” (Doyle & Sambanis 2000, 781). Again these elements function within a political space that must foster the capacity building of actors and institutions working for peacebuilding (ibid.). For example, as part of its Management of Diversity Issues, the International Conflict Research Institute initiated a project in 2004 entitled ‘Politicians and Community Relations’ (Ibid.). The research sought to determine the “potential role of politicians in contributing to the improvement of community relations, while also taking into account the perception that in some cases politicians foment division between communities rather than assist in peacebuilding” (Doyle & Sambanis 2000, 794). The research discovered several intriguing findings regarding politicians’ perceptions of community relations and what the politicians think about community-based peacebuilding organizations. In responding to the question, “What Community Relations means for a politician?” a large majority of politicians agreed that a ‘shared future’ should be the key concern of government policy (ibid., 781). The politicians were also divided over “sharing-oriented policy reforms” in education, housing and public service indicating that efforts to foster a more shared society should not compromise personal or cultural values (ibid., 783).

In our study, many respondents indicated that astute leadership is absent as some politicians act as gatekeepers to obstruct the peacebuilding process by polarising and fragmenting community groups using them in their drive to win sectarian votes during elections. Some respondents also explained how Unionist DUP and Official Unionist Party politicians play the orange card within working class Loyalist communities by attempting to influence funding bodies to favour certain groups over others. Similarly, Sinn Fein has taken over the community development industry in local Catholic communities as it cements its electoral power base. Thus, the narrow vision of Unionist and Nationalist politicians is detrimental to the overall peace process.

The international economic recession has also impacted the macro level economic environment of Northern Ireland stalling the peacebuilding momentum. Thus, creating a resilient micro level sustainable economic infrastructure is necessary to endure the adverse effects of external economic turmoil. Due to the worldwide economic recession, Northern Ireland’s economy

is also suffering. Although both external funds generated lots of employment through various peacebuilding projects the necessary capital investments in industrial sectors to generate more jobs did not take place as desired (Cohen & Solomon 2007). Northern Ireland's economy will have to survive in the face of stiff competition with other low-wage countries of Asia and Europe (Kerr 2003). Many of our respondents averred that youth capacity building has to be built up gradually and be continuously supported by both external funds as young people living in despair are either joining dissident spoiler groups or are committing suicide. However, the infrastructure created by both funds offers a solid platform to be harnessed and now all that is required is for the Stormont powersharing government to draw in Foreign Direct Investment to Northern Ireland and meld it with local entrepreneurship. Hence, the adoption of "social business" within the grassroots can build a sustainable economy with much needed resilience in the face of the current recession period (Robinson & Foley 2004). According to our respondents, the effects of a poor economy results in the joblessness of young people who continue to be the hardest hit with almost one in five, 18 to 24-year-olds in Northern Ireland unable to find work (BBC News 2011). In addition, some young males are joining dissident paramilitary groups while others commit suicide (Largey et al. 2009, 19).

Meeting people's rising expectations of hope in the aftermath of signing a peace agreement is often a difficult commitment to fulfill by the government. Ethnopolitical violence destroyed the infrastructure needed to build the economy in Northern Ireland. Consequently, political promises made in a peace agreement that are not delivered as expected results in grassroots frustration. Many scholars contend that while formal peace agreements bring an end to overt hostility they often fall short of establishing genuine peaceful relations as they merely manage conflict rather than bringing deep reconciliation to former adversaries (Senehi 2002; Mac Ginty 2008). In Northern Ireland many of our respondents indicated that although the signing of the GFA formerly ended the conflict, the peace dividend aspired to by the people has not yet been delivered. The people's frustration has occurred on both the sociopolitical and the economic spheres. People need to see the speedy implementation of the peace agreement on the ground. In Northern Ireland breaking down sectarian barriers, building a sustainable economic infrastructure, reconstructing people's mindsets, and devolving power peacefully so that politicians of all shades of political colour can work together has yet to be achieved as both communities remain embroiled in conflict. These issues are further complexified when the peace negotiators at the macro political level fall short of providing the constructive leadership to implement a long-term vision to create a peaceful society.

5. Conclusion

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In conclusion, the GFA has laid out an institutional framework and played a crucial role in reducing some of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Moreover, it facilitated the creation of a stable economic environment where external aid from the IFI and EU Peace III Fund could be injected into grassroots community peacebuilding projects to improve the socio-economic condition and repair damaged relationships. However, these localized peacebuilding efforts need to be continuously supplemented by actions at the macro level. The peacebuilding work of grassroots level NGOs are important in building trust between both the Protestant and Catholic communities so that they can move towards acknowledging the past and reconciling their differences so that they can cohabit and coexist in a peaceful society. However, the political work undertaken by political leaders must be synergistic with the work of grassroots level voluntary community organizations to deliver the peace dividend as promised in the GFA. Our respondents expressed both the positive and negative effects of the GFA. They also unequivocally pointed out that a future peaceful Northern Ireland depends on how the political condition of the Stormont powersharing government evolves and how it delivers the promises made in the GFA to all of the people of Northern Ireland. External funders must constantly critically review and gauge the success of their current peace methodologies and standard operating procedures in the formulation of policies for the constructive implementation of their aid programs.

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