

The Growth of the Northern Ireland Peacebuilding Organism

An Addendum to:

Putting the “Up” in Bottom-up Peacebuilding:

Broadening the Concept of Peace Negotiations

Bruce Hemmer, Paula Garb, Marlett Phillips, John L. Graham

Center for Citizen Peacebuilding

University of California, Irvine

In our forthcoming article in the International Negotiation Journal, we develop the concept of a “peacebuilding organism” consisting of a broad network of peacebuilding organizations that (1) specialize in various types of activities, at the interpersonal, community or national levels, (2) coordinate and cooperate to share information, time and spread activities efficiently, and (3) pool resources and expertise as needed. We assert that in societies attempting to democratize in order to achieve peace, a long process is required of developing the human, social and cultural capital for a peacebuilding organism to develop and incrementally create an effectively politically engaged peace constituency. Here we provide a more detailed account of one of the most successful examples of this development.

While Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, it has a democratic deficit from the mismanagement of the conflict by the regional government leading to the imposition of rule from London in 1972, and much de facto power fell to paramilitaries (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002, 151). Civil society had not yet developed much legitimacy, and this round of troubles began with the government treating a civil rights movement as a separatist threat. Civic organizations that bridged the nationalist/republican (Catholic) and unionist/loyalist (Protestant) communities were very rare. In 1966, the Corrymeela Community was established, which later became an important peacebuilding organization, but at that time focused on less ambitious arenas of reconciliation than the main societal conflict. An early effort at citizen peacebuilding in the mid-1970s, the Peace People, bit off more than it could chew. It organized a series of sizeable demonstrations

against violence, but mobilized primarily the already peace-oriented middle class. It did not build a consensus among its adherents on anything but anti-violence, meaning it had no clear alternative vision for which to negotiate. It succeeded mostly in discrediting protest and political engagement as the violence and political stalemate continued (McCartney, 2000).

Most citizen peacebuilding efforts in the 1970s were embedded in community work involving localized efforts to improve socioeconomic conditions - nothing too radical, nothing too political (Fearon, 2000, 2). These were encouraged with funding from the government's Community Relations Commission (CRC) that also held conferences where community activists had contact across lines (McCartney, 2000). Some inter-community discussion of politics and peace began in the margins of these conferences, but the activists became disillusioned as this failed to translate to change in their communities. While some explicit peacebuilding groups emerged in this period, efforts at inter-community contact were primarily social, rather than addressing the political issues of the conflict. An exception is Protestant and Catholic Encounter (PACE) which developed some meaningful intercommunity discussions, but only among middle class participants. Community work was more successful at building credibility with the working class in economically depressed areas (Gidron, et al., 2002, 159), but these tended to be nationalist, and most unionists and loyalists were estranged from civil society, seeing it as threat to the state (Fearon, 2000). Government support for civil society was curtailed and the CRC closed when hopes were placed in a doomed power-sharing executive in the mid-1970s.

In the 1980s, activists recognized the need to reach the more hardline elements on both sides, and some began stronger efforts to promote dialogue on the underlying political issues. This was impeded by new restrictions on resumed government funding that precluded support to organizations with any suspected ties to paramilitaries (McCartney, 2000). Government funding was also available only to charities that, by definition, could not be engaged in overt political advocacy (Gidron, et al., 2002). The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (which drew from both public and private funds) in the late 1980s was more effective in fostering increasingly difficult and more direct conflict resolution activities (McCartney, 2000, 4). A number of groups focused on conflict resolution developed in this period, starting as small volunteer groups and becoming increasingly professional, such as the Mediation Network. However, working with the government on less overtly political problems built credibility with officials, helping civic groups gain not only resources, but influence on policy-formation (Fearon, 2000). This resulted in relaxed funding restrictions in the Making Belfast Work program. Additionally, geographical and topical networks developed among civic organizations in this period which would facilitate joint actions in the next decade.

In the 1990s, civil society became more openly engaged in politics and explicit peacebuilding, first at the community level and then the Northern Ireland level, with the British government aiding this development. It established a new CRC (Community Relations Council) which distributes funds, coordinates training and information-sharing, and aids organizational development in support of more strategic citizen peacebuilding by a broader set of organizations. The CRC explicitly began to promote debate and persuaded local councils, which previously tended to be sectarian, to support more intercommunity work in cooperation with citizen peacebuilders (Bloomfield, 1997, 133-65; McCartney, 2000). This helped to link politics to civil society and peacebuilding. A turning point came with Initiative 92, in which a commission of

activists engaged over 3,000 citizens in discussions of the conflict and its solution. McCartney suggests its greatest contribution was to give the public greater confidence in putting forward its views and engaging with the political process and politicians from which it had felt alienated for so long (McCartney, 2000, 5). Beyond the rallies leading to the 1994 ceasefire, it contributed to ongoing civic discussions that became rather common (though they varied in participation, inclusiveness, and practicality) (McCartney, 2000, 5). Fearon also notes a massive union rally in November 1993, which called on politicians to talk and was much more political than any that had been held before.

Northern Irish peacebuilders had ample media coverage, but complained of simplistic and sensational coverage (Gidron, et al., 2002, 219). Whether this was due to inadequate media handling skills of these groups, or irresponsibility of the media or both, is not clear in our sources, nor is the development of media over time. However, by the early 1990s, Peace Train conducted a smart media campaign against paramilitary violence that got across its message and expanded its membership. Families Against Intimidation and Terror also used the media and other means to publicly oppose the paramilitaries in this period (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002, 159, 61). Interestingly, Cochrane and Dunn (2002, 167-8) find no evidence that these peacebuilders were attacked or even clearly threatened by paramilitaries for such activity, though fear may still have limited the numbers involved. Note that these were effectively political campaigns targeting the de facto non-democratic centers of power.

The EU's European Peace Package beginning in 1995 sizably increased funding for citizen peacebuilders (Fearon, 2000). Importantly, it was distributed through district partnerships boards, on which NGOs held one third of seats alongside politicians, which applied to intermediate funding bodies of which one was the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (itself an NGO). This further legitimated NGOs and fostered communication and cooperation both among NGOs and between them and politicians. These bodies funded peacebuilding projects on which the political parties would not otherwise have agreed, including for ex-prisoners and victims of violence. Additionally, during the 1990s the EU-fueled economic expansion in the adjacent Republic of Ireland made possible a new array of citizen peacebuilding activities through cross-border commerce.

Relations among civic groups further developed during the peace talks of 1996-98, and discussions became more overtly political (Fearon, 2000, 6). Groups specializing in facilitating such discussions emerged, such as Community Dialogue. Civic groups were also providing politicians with ideas and venues to meet unofficially. While citizen peacebuilders were not the only influence leading to the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998, they did make it clear to politicians that the majority on both sides rejected intransigence. Additionally, they infused politics with a culture of inclusive and productive debate and aided the incorporation of paramilitaries into democratic politics. Some citizen peacebuilders even brought the knowledge and skills they garnered from their work to the negotiating process and played a major role in the political settlement reached on April 10, 1998 (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002, 168-70). Now having enough shared thinking and experience working together to be able to convene representatives quickly and take timely joint action, they quickly organized a successful campaign across Northern Ireland to urge a yes vote on the referendum on the peace agreement, with veterans of the Initiative 92 effort at the core of this one. This campaign was critically

important to passage, as the pro-agreement political parties were lackluster in their support, while others were vociferous in campaigning against it (McCartney, 2000, 6).

A peacebuilding organism developed in Northern Ireland. A variety of citizen peacebuilding organizations grew in niches specialized by location or tactics. Many built legitimacy with the working class and local politicians through socio-economic work at the community level. Some, such as the Quakers, worked quietly, away from the press, allowing them to facilitate sensitive meetings between hardliners (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002, 162). Others publicly opposed paramilitary violence using the media, or specialized in public dialogues on a political solution. Peacebuilding organizations became networked and able to work together in society-wide campaigns regarding political negotiations, with effective use of media. Over the past three decades, they have been building peace by developing the cultural, social and human capital of civic democracy. As bottom-up and top-down peacebuilding struggled along in tandem, both citizen peacebuilders and politicians increasingly recognized the complementarity (Bloomfield, 1997) of their work, with government agencies supporting citizen peacebuilders by conferring added legitimacy and financing, and with citizen peacebuilders supporting the formation and implementation of political agreements by building public support, and even through direct involvement in their negotiation. Peacebuilders still have work to do to incorporate remaining paramilitaries into constructive politics, but though the peace agreement implementation remains troubled, Northern Ireland is undeniably closer than ever before to resolving its troubles.

Authors

Paula Garb is the Associate Director of International Studies and Associate Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. She is co-director and founding member of UCI's Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, and a facilitator and researcher of citizen peacebuilding projects with a primary emphasis in action research on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

John L. Graham is Co-Director of the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, Professor of International Business and Marketing, and Associate Dean (1994-95) at the Paul Merage School of Business, at the University of California, Irvine. He has written extensively on intercultural negotiation and connects business development to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

Marlett Phillips is a Co-founder and research associate for the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California, Irvine. She holds a M.A. from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, and more than a decade of experience in US-Japan trade negotiations.

Bruce Hemmer is a PhD candidate in Political Science and graduate research fellow with the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, at the University of California, Irvine. He has two years of experience in peacebuilding and democratization in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

References

Bloomfield, David. *Peacemaking Strategies in Northern Ireland: Building Complementarity in Conflict Management Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997.

Cochrane, Feargal, and Seamus Dunn. "Peace and Conflict Resolution Organizations in Northern Ireland." In *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa*, edited by Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz and Yeheskel Hasenfeld. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Fearon, Kate. "Civic Society and the Peace Process." Paper presented at the The Role of Citizen Peacebuilding in Conflict Transformation, Irvine, California, June 1-4 2000.

Gidron, Benjamin, Stanley N. Katz, and Yeheskel Hasenfeld. *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

McCartney, Clem. "Community Groups as Agents of Community Relations and Community Reconciliation." Paper presented at the The Role of Citizen Peacebuilding in Conflict Transformation, Irvine, California, June 1-4 2000