

# Economic Aid, Marginalization, and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

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Economic aid and peacebuilding efforts to transform the Northern Ireland conflict impact grassroots, civil society organizations (CSOs) and vulnerable people of concern. Brexit is an example of how democracies privilege white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied voices, exclude marginalized voices from peacebuilding efforts, and maintain structural violence that exacerbates sectarian identity conflicts. A qualitative methodology was used to interview 120 participants who shared their experiences of grassroots peacebuilding efforts to transform the Northern Ireland conflict. Findings revealed that community audits are critical to inclusion of local needs, and helped to assess what escalates conflict, British job cuts create needs that overwhelm CSOs and youth who feel hopeless are attracted to sectarian paramilitary groups. They reject peace and trigger further conflict as a result.

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

## Introduction

Economic assistance is used by states and international agencies to bolster their national security interests as well as nurturing economic development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding efforts in divided societies shaping their peace dividends (Paczyńska 2019). Economic aid is part of the prefabricated IKEA liberal democratic peace package reshaping local milieus to emulate modern Western democracies (Mac Ginty 2006) that tend to centre white, Christian, heterosexual, and cisgender voices, and exclude marginalized communities (Byrne, Mizzi, and Hansen 2017). For example, in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement (AIA), the British and Irish governments created the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) to promote development, peace, and prosperity on the island of Ireland initially supporting mainstream economic

development projects. The United States (US) has contributed more than \$540 million to development there with another \$540 million coming from the European Union (EU), Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Archick 2021). As a result of the 1994 Loyalist and Republican paramilitary ceasefires, the EU created the Peace and Reconciliation Fund (phases 1-4) to disperse €1.3 billion in economic assistance through community grants supporting 6,000 Civil Society Organization (CSO) projects facilitating local cross community development, peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland (Wilson 2020).

The peace through aid approach in Northern Ireland has resulted in interesting findings. Political tensions between local District and County Councils and local CSOs have hampered grassroots empowerment for both the marginalized and dominant communities (Byrne et al. 2009a). The two communities in Northern Ireland identified as the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community initially perceived that the Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) community was benefiting from the aid (Fissuh et al. 2012). Local development officers representing both funders have personal connections with local CSOs that are built on trust as they assist local communities to navigate through the maze of funding bureaucracy (Hyde and Byrne 2015). Political violence declined as the aid nurtured community self confidence that empowered local communities providing employment opportunities for staff within CSOs as local entrepreneurs made decisions based on local needs while at some level it also coopted and disempowered some local communities (Byrne et al. 2009b). The creation of a dependent culture around the aid failed to nurture local capacity building escalating conflict among the CSOs as they competed for limited resources (Byrne et al. 2010; Creary and Byrne 2014). The resulting peace industry has not addressed the conflict surrounding separate ethnic groups aligned with the same territory that is at the epicentre of the conflict (Skarlato et al. 2016).

This article explores how economic aid, peacebuilding, and contributions of CSO projects empowered local grassroots initiatives. It highlights how peacebuilders in Northern Ireland and the Border Area of the Irish Republic experienced and perceived how their projects had promoted social justice. What follows is a deeper exploration of the context, with attention to conflict, economic aid, and peacebuilding. The methodology is then explained. The study findings and a conclusion summarize the article.

## Conflict, Economic Aid and Peacebuilding

Liberal peacebuilding includes a universal intervention package that includes capitalism, democracy, elections, human rights, and security reform so that complex external-internal interactions often cause many frictions and a multipli-

city of conflicts between local and global actors (Björkdahl and Höglund 2013). The top-down professionalization and standardization of international funding agencies ensures that their bureaucratic and reporting structures stifle creativity and innovation (Faust, Grävingsholt, and Ziaja 2015). A plethora of local actors and exclusionary local elites compete with one another as conflict escalates between various local actors and donors assert a plethora of opposing agendas (Paffenholtz 2015). In contrast, emancipatory peacebuilding uses everyday people's local solutions and Indigenous practices to transform unjust structures (Visoka and Richmond 2016). Donors often undermine local resiliency preventing people from adapting to conflict by devising their own practices to address and cope with local problems (De Coning 2016).

Local people's wisdom and practical knowledge inform local peacebuilding actors and local peacebuilders agency as they transform relationships creating sustainable peacebuilding processes (Stanton and Kelly 2015). Local people's close relationships provide legitimacy to a locally inclusive ownership of peacebuilding as local people adapt to address the local realities of dynamic and ever-changing conflict patterns (Thiessen 2011). Local peacebuilders resistance to external donors and local elites that are impeding their efforts prevents them from being overwhelmed by different agendas and ideas (Paffenholtz 2015). Peacebuilding is heterogeneous, messy, and untidy, and includes a myriad of local peacebuilding actors (Mac Ginty 2006). Insider-partial local mediators are known and trusted by local actors, and they facilitate solutions respected by those parties that they know (Lederach 2010). In Northern Ireland, local ministers and priests were important in getting Republican and Loyalists paramilitaries to commence dialoguing with mainstream political parties in the late 1980s. Insider-partial mediators remain in the context of the conflict in contrast to outsider-neutral mediators that can come and go at will (ibid.).

There is a rich diversity of local and unique CSOs in Northern Ireland's civil society voluntary sector such as ex-combatants, disabled people, religious leaders, youth, activists, women, artists, and musicians using their Indigenous and local knowledge, wisdom, and practices to facilitate peace and reconciliation goals, and meaningful lessons can be learned from their projects work (Acheson and Milofsky 2008; Hill and Hansen 2011). For example, Northern Ireland's PUL and CNR women's nonviolent "transversal peacebuilding" activities challenged the gendered nature of militarism and structural violence to build relations across ethnopolitical identity boundaries (Kim 2019). Women's community development group's strategic location empowered them to navigate across bicomunal tensions building alliances as their transversal peacebuilding activities were often described as the work of "wee women" (Donahoe 2017, 1). The 1996 Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) transcended identity politics helping to create the Civic Forum so that labour unions, disabled people, religious, leaders, survivors, youth, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer

(LGBTQ), and women could consult with government on cultural, economic, and social issues. The forum was sidelined and marginalized by the politicians. Women's non-political community development practices built cross communal local capacities and empowered local women to traverse the constraints of gendered public spaces to advocate for women's needs, access resources, and challenge the sociopolitical patriarchal milieu. Women's peacebuilding efforts continue even though the Northern Ireland peace process remains liminal and fragile (Kim 2019). Women provide peace services, peace education nurturance, partnering, and creating micro zones of peace within their communities (Ashe 2020). LGBTQ peacebuilding efforts are like women's peacebuilding efforts in that they are liminal and fragile, but also resilient, enduring, and ongoing despite encountering hostile, cisnormative, and heteronormative situations. Receiving ongoing support, achieving justice, living without fear and insecurity remains paramount for LGBTQ people (ibid.). Losing the protection of EU laws and treaties escalated anxieties within Northern Ireland's marginalized communities (ECNI 2017).

The 2004 forums on truth recovery encouraged paramilitaries to develop their analyses of key conflict scenarios and create favourable circumstances for paramilitaries to engage with a plethora of societal actors (Mitchell 2008). Former Loyalist and Republican combatant networks such as *An Coiste* (the Committee), the Ex-Prisoners Interpretive Centre (EPIC), and *Tar Abhaile* (Come Home) were critically involved in grassroots peacebuilding interpreting political debates into terminology that paramilitaries will comprehend as well as informing working-class politics. The British government has advanced directly from their peacebuilding efforts while being reticent in granting them peacebuilding funding and political recognition (ibid.). Loyalist and Republican ex-combatant peacebuilding groups cooperated in mediating with active paramilitaries to terminate punishment attacks, facilitated restorative justice practices, removed paramilitary flags, replaced military murals, and mediated interface conflicts during parades (ibid.).

Ecumenical inter-church peacebuilding and reconciliation CSOs also created safe spaces for people to interact with each other to listen to their stories, address stereotypes, and understand belief structures and ethno-political identities that challenged sectarian attitudes, promote reconciliation, and create peaceful relations in Northern Ireland (Power 2007). Ecumenical communities like Columba, Cornerstone, Lamb of God, and Shalom House were centred on interfaces and peacelines in Belfast and Derry to establish partnerships and relationships across community relationships to uncloak the beliefs, experiences, and value systems of both communities (ibid.).

The rich diversity of these peacebuilding initiatives demonstrates the eleven CSO leaders' wisdom, experiences, and extensive capacities in knowing and improving conditions in their local communities through their local peacebuilding and reconciliation projects that nurture dialogue, build informal

social networks and local capacities, create safer and inclusive spaces, and build on common interests to improve the everyday challenges people face.

## Methods

A qualitative methodology explored respondents' experiences and perceptions of their CSOs peacebuilding efforts. The first author undertook a comparison of a plethora of CSOs that received funding from the IFI or/and the EU Peace 3 Fund. He interviewed 120 individuals, eighty males and forty females, during the summer of 2010 (June to August) that included CSO leaders in charge of diverse community development, peacebuilding, and reconciliation projects as well as civil servants responsible for administering and auditing the funding, and development officers assisting community groups to translate funding requirements to local groups to determine how their practices associated with both funding agencies. Semi-structured interviews took place in the respondent's workplaces in Derry City and Counties Armagh, Derry, Fermanagh, and Tyrone in Northern Ireland as well as in Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, and Monaghan Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland. The interviews took between 60 to 120 minutes to complete as each interviewee responded to ten open ended questions to elicit their ideas about the impact of the funding on the Northern Ireland peace process in terms of community development, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. The first author explained the ethics protocol to each person who signed the form indicating their consent to participate in the study. He transcribed and inductively analysed the transcripts and assigned pseudonyms to protect the respondents' anonymity and to ensure that they remain safe. Eleven respondent's ideas are presented relating to how they perceived their projects empowering local communities.

## The Peace Process: Peacebuilding Projects are Empowering Local Communities

Contemporary issues threatened the fragile liminal peace process as set out in the Executive's (2013) Together Strategy. Northern Ireland's PUL politicians and citizens feared that the recent Brexit means the loss of their traditions and place within the United Kingdom (UK) as well as the introduction of an economic union on the island that would jeopardize and impact relations between Northern Ireland and the UK as well as the relations between the PUL and CNR communities (Van Abswoude and De Vries 2020). These losses also affected disabled people; LGBTQ people; and racialized PUL youth as they lose the protection of the EU treaties and laws (Byrne, Mizzi, and Hansen 2017). Flying

controversial flags became increasingly more contentious as the PUL flag protests organized on social media increased division and segregation in public spaces (Bryan 2015). Unemployed and alienated PUL youth have become disillusioned with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as they perceived their ethnocultural and British identity as under threat as the parades, murals, and bonfires have created their wokeness and resistance amid this cultural war on PUL symbols and Britishness (Halliday and Ferguson 2016). This has created conflict between a traditional aggressive and a more moderate and contemporary stream and form of Loyalism (Long 2018). PUL youth have been encouraged by Loyalist paramilitaries, who withdrew their support for the GFA in March 2021, to orchestrate protests especially in interface areas fanning the flames of sectarian violence as it was interpreted that Sinn Fein (SF) is attempting to erode the Britishness of Northern Ireland that generated anxiety in the PUL community (Van Abswoude and De Vries 2020). Disabled, LGBTQ and racialized youth identities intersect (Crenshaw 2017) with their British and Irish identities, and often have a heightened fear of anxiety that they had experienced at the margins.

The 2017 collapse of the Northern Ireland executive over the handling of the energy scheme by ex-first minister Arlene Foster until its restoration in 2020 left Northern Irish politics in a perpetual limbo creating a precarious situation as government failed to function, unable to introduce bills and formulate policy with ex-Secretary of State, James Brokenshire using minimalist intervention measures (Heenan and Birell 2021).

Brexit replaced the backstop with the Northern Ireland protocol and the Irish sea border that had prevented a hard border on the island and political violence from dissident Republicans supported by the Irish government as an EU member state. Yet it weakened the capacity of the Northern Irish executive in Stormont to maintain the peace process as more CNRs favour a united Ireland while the PUL community remained under siege (Doyle and Connolly 2019). The Northern Ireland protocol ensures that Northern Ireland remains a part of the UK's customs territory with unfettered access to its markets that require customs checks while it preserves the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) effectively creating an economic union on the island as Northern Ireland remains with the single market avoiding border checks on goods (Harvey 2020). British Eurosceptism over immigration has had a spillover as other EU countries like France, Hungary, and Italy have been emboldened to act harshly against immigrants. The process of European integration facilitated cooperation in Britain over logical, political, and territorial boundaries so that Brexit has restrained the EU's involvement in enabling dialogue and cooperation in Northern Ireland (Hayward and Murphy 2018). In Northern Ireland, politics fell along polarized sectarian lines with regards to political parties as SF, the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP), and the Alliance party supported *remaining in the EU* while the DUP, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)

supported *leaving* (McCann and Hainsworth 2017). Nationalist and Republican political parties were able to influence the negotiation process more through their relationship with the EU than Unionist and Loyalist political parties who were more connected to the British position (Van Abswoude and De Vries 2020). The PUL working class were more likely to vote to *leave* compared to those in the middle class (McGowen 2018).

Far right anti-establishment populist politicians such as Nigel Farage of the Reform Party, and ex-President Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement have ignited a resurgence in authoritarian populism based on anti-immigrant and racist sentiments (Edwards, Haugerud, and Parikh 2017). White nationalism also targeted LGBTQ, especially trans, disabled, and queer people of color (QPOC) (Janik and Hankes 2020). The populist emphasis was on ethnonationalism and protectionism was linked to securitization by labelling certain groups and policies as existential threats with immigrants as job stealers, rapists, and terrorists and trade agreements and climate change as fake (Magcamit 2017). The emphasis of populism to draw on the fears and biases of people in Britain and the US especially around immigration, economic concerns, the threat to White, cisgender, straight, able-bodied privilege, and economic resentment exploited their disquiet that played into their voting behaviors (Edwards, Haugerud, and Parikh 2017). All of this had a spillover into the politicized and internal dynamics within Northern Ireland's fractured society.

CSO community development, healing, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and social justice projects have created real opportunities for local communities to address equity issues that creates a sense of a leveling the playing field in terms of meeting social justice, diversity, and inclusion goals.

A CSO leader explained the necessity of having a community audit to identify what community development needs should be addressed to create a just local milieu especially in providing employment opportunities for young local people so that they can choose to remain in their towns and villages, and they are not forced to migrate in search of employment. A community audit is not entirely unfamiliar in social development. In an LGBTQ context, a "rainbow audit" is one way to assess organizational inclusiveness and effectiveness in addressing LGBTQ concerns and needs (Mizzi 2015).

A Peace 3 development officer (pseudonym known as Eoin) recognized that the conflict festered over the years since partition and the creation of the Border. People's internalized anger and frustration eventually exploded in the late 1960s when the civil rights movement took to the streets of Northern Ireland to protest for human rights for a neglected CNR community. Eoin remarked,

So, I think that the funding has at least provided the platform where equity and justice can happen. So, justice, equity. Yes. I would think that they have provided the platform for that to be at least delivered. Do I think are we there yet? No. Do I think

there's a level of complacency about what has been done and what has happened? Yes.

Some CSO projects have created an equality of opportunity for some local communities that were spiraling out of control in terms of their utter socio-economic decline. External funding has at least provided the platform where equity and justice happen so that PUL and CNR citizens can express their hurt, anger and frustration and not bottle it all up inside so that they can move forward.

A CSO leader (pseudonym known as Niall) explicated that funded grassroots projects were tackling deprivation, isolation, and sectarian attitudes and behaviour creating positive relationships in the wake of rising tensions within Northern Ireland. Staff members who lived in those communities were leaving important capacity building and leadership skills behind in those communities. Multi-cultural and anti-sectarian training programs were not having much of a dent on youth behaviour because these projects were developed without a very clear conception of what basic human needs they were trying to nurture. People are cynical of dissident paramilitaries trying to access funding while at the same time they are encouraging the youth to use violence on the streets. There were scandals in the past whereby Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries accessed funding and used it for nefarious activities to continue the war. Niall commented,

The dissident is real, and we know that recruitment is rampant, and that the young folk who are disillusioned think well, they aspire to become members of the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) because of the excitement that they heard that comes with that. And like it's apparent, the basic need is for your child to grow up and have the opportunity, and hope for the future.... And these are youngsters, who have never lived in the Troubles.

The most fundamental basic need was for people in Northern Ireland and along the Border corridor to feel safe. People are feeling increasingly vulnerable, uneasy, unsafe, and afraid to engage because of Republican dissident activities while young people entrenched within sectarian attitudes aspired to join the RIRA not appearing to give too much ground, where as the DUP and SF politicians remained estranged from each other in the public forum while working closely together behind closed doors.

A CSO leader (pseudonym known as Cormac) believed that CSOs were promoting contact and behind the scenes peacemaking were addressing local people's human rights. The funder's fixation on measuring success meant that CSOs should focus their activities on quantity rather than on quality of delivery to the same group over time to break down barriers of mistrust to build a solid relationship amongst those group members. He felt that the violence of the Troubles would not return. Yet the recent violence by New Irish Republican Army (NIRA) and the Protestant Action Force (PAF) in the wake of the changing political terrain post Brexit suggests otherwise. Cormac expressed,

I don't think it will ever go out of hand again because now there is too much community involvement to let it. When the Garvaghy Road [in Portadown, Co. Down] was very delicate through contacts with other community people in the North they were able to diffuse it kind of behind the scenes, and it was having this link with people in Belfast, and people here who were basically working for peace. Yeah, I think people now hopefully have tasted peace and what it's like. It's just unfortunate with the recession, you have unemployment, and all those young people are unemployed.

CSO funded projects have made a difference in bringing people together to break down barriers to create tolerant and respectful communities, and the contact has brought about a deeper understanding of what issues are impacting people in the communities. Hearing other people's stories humanizes them. He also believed unemployed youth were drawn toward dissident paramilitary groups.

A CSO leader (pseudonym known as Conan) revealed that understanding different cultures provided local people with a broader global view that enriched the cultural and economic wellbeing of the local community enhancing people's quality of life. Transformative learning assists youth to have a pluralistic view of the world, and a greater understanding of different cultures and what their perspectives are. New immigrants to the island of Ireland bring diverse cultures that enrich local cultures and contribute to local peacebuilding. Intracommunity or single identity work is also important in building up local community's capacities. As Conan said,

If you have grounding in a broader global view of things or if your mind understands broader cultures, then I think you have a better platform to start out from. But I also think a lot of people as well find it very difficult to access the resources that are open to them or the channels that are open to them if they're isolated at a time within one you know if it's an insular kind of community view. You know where it kind of just stays to one community now.

The political Border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has changed as more immigrants from West Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia moved into the north-west region, and the demographic patterns shifted and changed dramatically over the past ten years. Including and getting new immigrants to participate in local projects was welcoming and validated their knowledge and cultures. New immigrants were working with local people on joint projects to understand real cultural differences and complex problems to build cross community relationships.

A CSO leader (pseudonym known as Rory) highlighted that CSOs were successful in promoting citizenship rights, and equality and fairness in single identity communities, and working together in partnership with community organizations in minority communities to address alienation and people's needs

within these communities. The complexity of what is needed on the ground can sometimes overwhelm local people as they struggle to come to terms in clearly identifying people's needs. According to Rory,

I am also conscious of the level of need that is out there. Sometimes the need is so great in our own communities that the people don't even understand it.... The first thing I would think of is the lack of provision for young children in the area that's a key issue and has been identified across the board, so how do you address that. We understand that communities like ours have suffered multigenerational unemployment and poverty.

Minority communities such as the long-term unemployed, disabled people, LGBTQ citizens, youth, women, new immigrants, and former combatants should be included in local communities decision-making processes. They should be provided opportunities to engage with other communities around poverty and unemployment, and the flags protocol to influence policy making in the statutory bodies to meet their needs. Lack of engagement with these marginalized communities may result in gaps in policy development because of an absence of specialized knowledge and reification of socially exclusive systems (Byrne, Mizzi, and Hansen 2017).

A CSO leader (also known as Hanna) revealed that justice was about everyday people caring about each other and listening to each other and having the safe space to speak about what is on their minds. Sharing one's story and one's lifeworld with persons from the other community opened the possibility of co-creating a new story as they hear, recognize, and understand the teller's experience. The power of hearing another person sharing their story is very human and empowering because the interactive process is emotional and compassionate as it touches the heart of the listener who opens to see similar events in a different light. Hanna commented,

I think with storytelling sometimes is the only justice people are going to get. They're not going to have their day in court. They're not ever going to express in the public realm of what has happened to them. But in very safe spaces speaking their story maybe is the only form of justice. And when I say justice, it's about people being allowed to say and speak out about what had happened to them.

When one hears another person's story in a profound authentic way it rehumanizes that person, and it becomes difficult to dehumanize and otherize that person. Survivors can understand what happened to them through the process of telling their stories. There was a level of healing that also took place where they experienced a form of natural justice, they could not encounter through the criminal justice system. People, especially marginalized identities, have suffered traumatic events in their lives such as losing a family member

or friend or suffering an injury so that they are traumatized and may not fully realize. There is no process for them to think and work through the trauma and they become stuck in their lives as they can't get it back on track.

A CSO leader (pseudonym Senan) highlighted that the third voluntary sector was instrumental in opening dialogue and providing people with an understanding of what the peace process was all about as well as articulating the need to address the issues around conflict that included a gender specific focus in the mind of the executive and the various departments. People needed to acknowledge the truth about the past in an international independent commission process of truth recovery that met the needs of the local community. For example, the 2009 Eames-Bradley report highlighted the importance of truth recovery to remember and address the legacy of the conflict so that both communities can heal from the hurts of the past to create future stability in the society.

The acknowledgement of the truth is so important in perpetrators taking responsibility for their actions that caused harm and as a core component of the healing and reconciliation process. For example, Derry's Bloody Sunday in 1972 was a significant watershed event that escalated the Northern Ireland conflict into a long war. Ex-Loyalist and Republican combatants are now sitting together and talking and supporting each other about issues in common to these groups. Senan revealed,

So, I think truth is crucially important. People go on about the cost of the Bloody Sunday enquiry and all the rest. It wasn't the seeking of truth that cost the money it was the denial of truth that cost the money.... And I think that they are vitally important to create the kind of trust.... And I think that recognition and acknowledgement are hugely important alongside truth.

Recognition and truth telling of what happened in the past would create an understanding of what were the root causes of the conflict to prevent people repeating past mistakes so that they can build trust and prevent the persecution of people. The British government's lack of political will to set up an international independent truth commission was a real stumbling block to creating a just society free from the horrors of the past that allowed people to move forward into a bright future together.

A CSO leader (pseudonym referred to as Thaddeus) made it known that the third sector's intention was also to tell the story, passionately through their commitment, belief, and labor of love of the communities they serve as part of a very human document about their local communities. CSOs provided skills and ethical collaborative working practices to get groups through administrative loops, and to prevent fraud. This third sector or the community and voluntary sector are facilitating equity across the community creating a level playing

field for single identity as well as cross community projects providing skills to entrepreneurial groups to advocate and lobby funders as well as writing grant applications. Thaddeus inferred,

And the health boards, the policing and justice, and the youth service need the communities on the ground to make everything happen. But it's how do we do that? And I think we do that through collaborative working practices and models.... Well, there must be recognition of the importance of the community and the voluntary sector. We talk to civil servants who talk down their nose to us.

The government should create a department of community and voluntary peacebuilding that would provide resources to CSOs and facilitate the development and implementation of a grassroots vision for the future of Northern Ireland. The CSOs facilitated dialogue that contributes to better intercommunal relations as groups get a clearer understanding of where they were coming from, appreciating the experience and point of view of other people. As people engaged with each other, prejudice and misunderstanding as well as negative opinions and attitudes changed because they began to feel free to discuss controversial issues openly about what happened to them and their families during the conflict.

A CSO leader (known as Dara) disclosed that the third sector built bicommunal bridges and facilitated much needed dialogue while new laws such as Section 75 were put on the books because of the GFA. Yet there remained a sectarian division in the society, and it is grounded in institutional structures like the educational system and is expressed at the interfaces and through the parades that shape sectarian and prejudicial mindsets that manifests itself through avoidance and coexisting rather than reconciling with each other. Under the law victims must feel that a hate crime is sectarian rather than racist before it can be categorized a sectarian incident. The society is discussing good rather than community relations that allows it to talk about relations with the wider community so that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is not collating sectarian hate crimes. Dara disclosed,

But while we're living in the prejudicial mindsets of sectarianism, we are divided more now than we have ever been, and it has manifested itself in the parades issue in those areas every year. Cultural traditions are being used as an example of why the other community is against one culture as opposed to be with the other community.

There was no coherent education strategy in Northern Ireland because of green and orange politics. The integrated education system is a wonderful idea, yet it was usually set-up outside of the areas that were affected the most by sectarian conflict. And the youth who came from those areas who went to integrated schools had to make sure they were not talking about the issues that divided them while at school, and then they went back into those same enclaves

that they lived in so that prejudicial sectarian mindsets continued to flourish (Byrne 1997). Resulting culture wars over flags and emblems, and marching has further alienated PUL youth, throwing the notion of a peaceful future into question.

## Findings

The preceding section of this article presented the respondent's perspectives about the role of external economic aid in empowering local communities in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland as their projects nurture cross community peacebuilding and reconciliation. Grounded in the participants' perspectives, five significant findings emerged inductively from the data.

First, the participants noted that peace and community audits are critical in determining local community needs. Micro based audits identify conflict escalators and potential risks as well as local capacities. These audits are an integral part of local participatory research methods to raise local community's awareness about conflict and their available resources as well as what their needs are. Peacebuilding must be informed by local meaning and complex cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of how local marginalized communities are dealing with post peace accord contexts (Lee and Özerdem 2015). Conflict is functional as it identifies issues that need to be addressed in a healthy and vibrant democracy.

Second, since the late 1960s, the CNR community articulates needs and advocates for people's human rights. This experience spilled over into successfully applying for funding as the PUL community were late in applying as it didn't have that same skill set. Both working class communities are still impacted by high unemployment rates as the British government's 2010 austerity program resulted in greater debt as benefit cuts and job losses have hurt the most vulnerable members of the community. The complexity of local people's needs overwhelms CSOs as new immigrants, ex-combatants, disabled people, youth, women, and LGBTQ individuals have become further marginalized and excluded by politicians.

Third, deprivation and sectarianism continue to challenge the peace process as marginalized youth with little hope for their future have become attracted to new paramilitary groups such as the NIRA, PAF, and the Orange Volunteers. These dissident groups reject the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement and are spending a lot of energy attracting disaffected youth into their ranks. Loyalism has fragmented into new splinter groups outside of the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) that represents the mainstream Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and Red Hand Commandos. Recent youth

violence on the streets against the Northern Ireland Protocol and the decision not to prosecute SF attendees at Republican Bobby Storey's funeral for a breach of Covid-19 restrictions were egged on by dissident Loyalist groups such as the Southeast Antrim UDA (Young 2021).

Fourth, the physical violence people endured during the 30-years Troubles would never return due to CSOs cross community peacebuilding and reconciliation work. CSOs have toiled successfully over 13 years to foster closer relationships between communities in cross-Border and urban settings such as Belfast, Derry, and Omagh, Co. Tyrone. They have built up a reservoir of local peacebuilding knowledge and wisdom that has benefitted local communities. CSOs are educating people by opening dialogue and analysis and translating the peace process down to the grassroots. They are providing the skills to build local capacity. A form of natural justice has taken place as local encounters in a safe setting facilitated by CSOs between both communities allows individuals to listen to express themselves while heeding to participants stories that humanize and permits people to heal from past trauma (Thiessen & Byrne 2017). In addition, truth recovery about the legacy of the conflict can bring about healing, reconciliation, and respect for everyone.

Fifth, contact has broadened people's cosmopolitan views as they learn whereby, they share mutual cultural exchange platforms where they can allot their music, arts, and sports traditions. New immigrants to the island from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe have enriched both cultures as local people meet new ideas and new practices. However, in recent years racist hate crimes have increased against immigrants and ethnic minorities as the economy relapsed (Doebler et al. 2017). Yet sectarianism lies deep within the society due to segregated communities, neighbourhoods as well as green and orange politics. The sectarian nature of Northern Irish politics was clearly illustrated over recent Loyalist reactions to Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol that places the political Border in the Irish Sea preventing checks along the Irish Border, in effect constituting an all-island economic union within the EU, while at the same time creating checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK (Harvey 2020). Loyalists feel that the Protocol threatens Northern Ireland's position within the UK (Hayward and Murphy 2018).

## Conclusions

This article explored economic aid and peacebuilding and the contributions of CSO projects to empowering local grassroots communities. It highlighted how peacebuilders in Northern Ireland and the Border Area of the Irish Republic experience and perceive how their projects are promoting social justice. External economic aid has nurtured cross community contact while its bureaucratic

auditing and reporting processes have put an undue burden on CSOs. Yet the root intersectional causes of the protracted conflict remain unaddressed such as identity (two ethnic groups with separate ethnonationalist identities competing for the same territory), inequality (poverty and unemployment), segregation (schools, sports, neighbourhoods), the siege mentality of the PUL community, demographic changes as the CNR population edges toward that magic 51 percent that would force the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to trigger a Border poll having implications for Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK and Irish reunification (numbers do matter in these protracted ethnic conflicts), and the now muted role of both external ethnoguarantors or regional intermediaries (the British and Irish governments) (Byrne, 2007). Top-level peacebuilding has caused further marginalization due to the failure of its efforts that existed before Brexit. Northern Ireland lies in a liminal frozen peace that is now complicated by Brexit and Covid-19 so that it is not a functioning society in the sense of other liberal democratic states; rather, it remains a more segregated society in the aftermath of the signing of the 1998 GFA (Marijan 2017). As we enter a post-pandemic society, we must take advantage of the opportunity for creating society that includes and emancipates everyone.

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