Civil society leaders and Northern Ireland's peace process: hopes and fears for the future.

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CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS AND NORTHERN IRELAND'S PEACE PROCESS: HOPES AND FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

By

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interview narratives of 98 Northern Irish participants (consisting of NGO and community group leaders, development officers, and civil servants responsible for funding grassroots peacebuilding work) regarding their hopes and fears for the future. These civil society leaders expressed a wide variety of hopes and fears addressing both the micro grassroots and the macro political levels of society. An analysis of these expressed hopes and fears is both instructive and significant. Civil society peacebuilding actors have been given significant voice in the Northern Ireland peace process. Hopeful envisioning of the future by civil society leaders will serve to increase the probability of achieving long-term sustainable peace. The findings reveal significant hope that reconciliation work at the grassroots level will be successful, but conversely, reveal noticeable fear regarding the political peace process and the resumption of political violence.

PERSONAL REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

We, as a cohort of academics and practitioners from the Arthur Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice at the University of Manitoba, are deeply concerned with the continuing epidemic of violence and human rights violations in our world today. Our current research project is aimed at investigating peacebuilding activities in conflict-affected communities in Northern Ireland. Due to substantial economic aid provided by the United States, Canada, and the European Union, the Northern Irish peace process has been given the opportunity to flourish. However, the peace process is facing continual challenges and thus must be carefully evaluated and analyzed in order to better facilitate the transformation of Northern Ireland's embattled communities and citizens, and further, be prop up the Northern Irish peace process as a model for other post-violence contexts. We hope that our research will highlight fruitful peacebuilding practices and inspire community leaders in Northern Ireland to creatively work towards establishing sustainable peace.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It's as if in all this conflict we have the assumption that we have all the time in the world, and the reality is we don't, you know. We are going to die. So what's worth doing? Let's find that out and do it.

Derry community group leader

Spurred on by a global trend of increased support for foreign intervention into conflict zones (Crocker 2001), civil society groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have markedly increased their role in the rebuilding of conflict-affected societies such as Northern Ireland, the African Great Lakes region, the Balkans, and Afghanistan (Carter 1996; Goodhand 2006; Thiessen 2008). Some scholars have defined the recent explosive growth in NGO numbers worldwide as a global civil society movement (Boulding 1988; Chatfield 1997; Hawken 2007; Taylor 2004). This global civil society movement can be described as a network of non-governmental and non-profit organizations which have a transformative purpose (Lederach 2001; Lederach 2005). In contrast to the political elite, civil society organizations such as the community groups, the business community, trade unions, academia, churches and other religious organizations, cultural organizations, the media, arts groups, peace groups, and NGOs, are concerned with politics at the community level (Cochrane 2006).

Northern Ireland has certainly witnessed this grassroots civil society movement (Byrne 2001). Thousands of internationally funded civil society groups have ensured that elite actors do not exclusively shape Northern Ireland's peace process (Cochrane 2006). Civil society groups such as NGOs have proven their ability to impact the political climate in post-violence regions (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Scholms 2003).

The current surge in transformative civil society activity is certainly not disjoint from the Northern Irish civil rights movement of the 1960s from which emerged the violence of the

'Troubles'. The creation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in 1967 channeled and organized widespread Catholic Nationalist discontent with discriminatory housing and employment policy, Protestant paramilitary activity, the Special Powers Act, and perceived gerrymandering in key electoral districts. The Northern Irish civil rights movement was inspired by similar movements in India and the U.S. under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and was propagated by the newly emerging Catholic Nationalist professional class in the 1960s (as a result of education grants received from the Rab Butler Education Act) who were not prepared to accept the status quo and pushed for radical change (Farrell 1976).

NICRA marches allowed Nationalist civil society to escalate the conflict and raise awarness regarding their plight on the world stage. For example, a 5 October 1968 NICRA march was beaten and baton-charged by the RUC – injuring several people. Film footage of the battery of nonviolent marchers garnered international indignation and criticism. More significantly, the 30 January 1972 NICRA anti-internment march ended with thirteen unarmed, Catholic, male demonstrators being shot dead by British Army paratroopers. These "Bloody Sunday" killings served to effectively end the activities of NICRA and helped to burgeon the ranks of Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), thus propelling the 'Troubles' down a significantly more violent course.

Post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland has witnessed the reemergence of an active, influential, and courageous nonviolent civil society movement. Because political parties have continued to be perceived as at an impasse and ineffective in initiating peace processes, both Protestant Unionist and Catholic Nationalist citizens are being increasingly drawn to civil society organizations such as NGOs in order to contribute to social policy (Cochrane 2006).

Numerous civil society organizations have positioned themselves as significant actors during the current peace process. To provide a sense of the movement's magnitude, an estimated 5,000 NGOs served Northern Ireland's 1.7 million people in 2002 (Cochrane 2006).

The historical journey of NGOs in Northern Ireland has not been immune to struggle. The development of civil society groups such as NGOs has differed within the Unionist and Nationalistic communities. Because Northern Ireland's government has been historically dominated by Unionists, Unionist citizens have generally perceived their government as initiating appropriate social programming (Cochrane 2006). Nationalists, however, have historically felt minimal allegiance to statutory institutions and processes and did not believe they could rely on government sponsored program delivery. Thus, Nationalists have established a well-developed system of social program delivery at the community level (Cochrane 2006). Consequently, Nationalist community development NGOs have been regarded with suspicion within the Unionist population (O'Brien 2007). Further, responding to the consistent and seemingly unrelenting political violence over the last four decades, a large number of NGOs have emerged who are focused on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Interestingly, these NGOs have been viewed with suspicion by both Nationalists and Unionists – perhaps due to their reluctance to accept governmental support (O'Brien 2007). International economic aid through the U.S. sponsored International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the European Union's Special Support Fund for Peace and Reconciliation (EU Peace II) have served to challenge these perceptions by initiating substantial growth in the NGO sector in Northern Ireland. For example, the funds have served to gather Unionist groups into the civil society movement leading to peace – albeit not without challenges (Byrne, Thiessen, Fissuh, Irvin, and Hawranik 2008). Further, foreign economic aid has enabled NGOs interested in peacebuilding, cross-community contact,

and conflict resolution to engage their constituency with the support of both the Unionist and Nationalist communities. However, the substantial international monies have served produce a burgeoning NGO sector. The employment of thousands of staff has certainly stimulated local economies, but perhaps will prove to be problematic given the eventual reduction or even termination of international funding.

International donors such as the IFI and EU Peace II fund seem intent on allowing NGOs and other civil society groups considerable voice in current peace processes. The substantial aid flowing through NGOs is expected to address both economic deprivation and structural inequality (Byrne and Irvin 2002) as well as improve relations between Northern Ireland's divided communities. Several NGOs are attempting intensive reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives with aid monies. For example, several civil society groups have recognized the pervasive destructive images of the "enemy" as pervasive in local culture and have included storytelling, dialogue groups, and problem-solving workshops as central to their conflict resolution processes (Senehi 2000; Senehi 2002; Senehi 2008). Other NGOs and civil society groups are employing their post-GFA influence to address sectarian murders and paramilitary activity. On several occasions, civil society groups have organized rallies and demonstrations with hopes of convincing "spoiler" groups to terminate sectarian violence (MacGinty 2006).

Civil society group leaders in Northern Ireland hold considerable sway, not only over their staffs, but over their communities. The willingness of international donors to circumvent traditional political structures, and rather empower civil society groups provides these organizations with significant political and social weight. Civil society leaders, as well as leaders within the funding bureaucracy, are emerging as strong voices in forging social processes which address conflict-related tensions in Northern Ireland.

Before delving into the respondents' narratives, a note of caution and modesty is perhaps necessary. Economically aided civil society peacebuilding work on its own is not a panacea to transform relationships and structures in NI. Civil society peacebuilding work, situated as but one track in a multi-model and multi-level intervention model that utilizes a multiplicity of actors at the micro grassroots and macro levels, is more effective in transforming conflict (Byrne and Keashly 2000; Diamond and McDonald 1996).

METHODOLOGY

This study incorporates a predominantly qualitative research design because of its suitability for an inquiry into economically aided civil society peacebuilding project work. Qualitative inquiry produces data that is rich in description of both personal perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and behavior, as well as political processes and action (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Charmaz 2005; Druckman 2005). Data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 98 participants chosen by random selection from a list of 5800 IFI funded projects and 5300 EU Peace II funded projects. Potential respondents were contacted by email and follow-up phone calls. The interviewed participants included 86 NGO and community group leaders who had received international funding, 6 funding agency development officers, and 6 senior civil servants managing the IFI and the EU Peace II funds. NGOs, as a subset of civil society, tend to focus on campaigning, advocacy, service delivery, human rights, community development, and reconciliation. Community organizations tend to be more informal in nature and respond to particular needs in communities or districts. It should be noted that the participants in the sample do not represent a cross-section of the entire civil society movement in Northern Ireland, but rather represent a cross-section of economic and community development, women's, youth, and

peace and justice groups involved in sustainable economic development, capacity building, and peace and reconciliation.

Participants were asked the questions, "When you envision the future for yourself and your community, what are your best wishes and hopes for the future of society in Northern Ireland?" and "What are your worst fears and worries for the future of society in Northern Ireland?" Eight supplementary questions were presented to the participants, whose responses fall beyond the scope of this article. The interviews were conducted over a period of fifteen weeks during the summer of 2006 in Belfast, Derry, Dublin, and the Border Counties Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Monaghan, and Tyrone. The researchers were very well received and experienced no resistance during the interviewing process. The data set is unique and has not been previously published.

The qualitative research software package HyperResearch® was used to systematically code, organize, and search the interview transcripts in order to generate a list of relevant responses to the research questions. All relevant interview responses were then categorized, counted, and summarized in Tables 1 and 2, to provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of the participants' perceptions.

In this article we attempt an investigation into the expressed hopes and fears of Northern Ireland's civil society leaders. Specifically, this article: (1) presents *hopes* for the future regarding the micro grassroots and the macro political levels; (2) discusses *fears* for the future at both the micro grassroots and macro political levels; and (3) in conclusion we examine the findings as they relate to Northern Ireland's peace process. We hope that our reporting of respondents' hopes and fears will paint a picture instructive and significant for concerned

Northern Irish citizens, donor agencies, and political policy makers, who are curious of the symbolic, as well as objective consequences of their "peace process" decisions.

FINDINGS

The participants' interpretations of the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland are reflected in the interview narratives. Emerging from the interview data were two distinct categories of hopes and fears. First, hopes and fears located at the *micro grassroots level* revealed concerns situated at the personal and/or community level (Knox and Quirk 2000). Second, hopes and fears positioned at the *macro political level* addressed the elite top-level politicians and other officials appointed to reach a 'political' solution to the conflict (Knox and Quirk 2000). Micro grassroots and macro political level peacebuilding processes are interdependently responsible for establishing sustainable peace (Lederach 1997; Lederach 2001).

The qualitative investigation into the participants' hopes and fears for the future revealed four major themes discussed in this article: (1) micro grassroots level hopes; (2) macro political level hopes; (3) micro grassroots level fears; and (4) macro political level fears. Tables 1 and 2 include a breakdown of the four themes into various sub-themes, which are discussed in detail in this article. In exploring these sub-themes we include a significant number of supporting quotations to reflect the narrative nature of the study. The participants' quotes are presented in their own words. Fictitious names have been given to the participants in order to conceal their identity.

Table 1. Categorized *Hopes* for the Future in Northern Ireland

Hopes (66%)		% of Hopes
Micro Grassroots Level		72
	Personal/Community Reconciliation and Peacebuilding	51
	Personal/Community Development and Empowerment	21
Macro Political Level		28
	Politicians Embrace Peace Process	9
	Integrated Education	7
	Unity in Ireland	6
	Other	6

Table 2. Categorized *Fears* for the Future in Northern Ireland

Fears (34%)		% of Fears
Micro Grassroots Level		42
	Change in Values and Attitude	17
	Continuance of Segregation and Sectarianism	14
	Personal Economic Struggle	7
	Culture of Violence	4
Macro Political Level		58
	Political Peace Process Fails	27
	Renewed Political Violence	21
	Other	10

Micro Grassroots Level Hopes

Table 1 indicates that a strong majority (72%) of references by community group leaders

regarding their hopes for the future of Northern Ireland's society and its citizens addressed

grassroots concerns. Analysis of these grassroots level hopes exposed two significant themes.

First, 51% of hopes revealed desires for reconciliation, healing, and peacebuilding at the personal

and community level. Second, 21% of all hopes highlighted longings for development and

empowerment at the personal and community level.

1) Hopes for Personal/Community Reconciliation, Healing and Peacebuilding

Community group leaders expressed desires for advances in peacebuilding at the community

level along three themes. The interview narratives reveal widespread hopes for: a) increased

tolerance and the celebration of diversity; b) increased engagement with the European and world

community; and c) increased freedom to travel about in safety.

a) Hopes for Increased Tolerance and the Celebration of Diversity

Perhaps resulting from the post-GFA decrease in paramilitary violence, community group

leaders surveyed in this study are expectant of a reduction in sectarianism and eagerly

anticipating increased celebration of diversity within Northern Irish communities. Of primary

concern was ameliorating the traditional tensions between Northern Ireland's Protestant Unionist

and Catholic Nationalist communities. Underlying several participants' comments was a

recognition of the role of *space* in the violence and political discord. Sectarianism has been

closely tied to the maintenance of neighborhood boundaries through symbols such as flags and

through sectarian violence (Shirlow 2006). A Derry NGO leader justified his vision of decreased

segregation in Derry's neighborhoods:

> HENRY: I think the primary vision has to be about segregation … and I think that
> there is this veneer of normality, which is undermined by the reality of
> segregation. It is self-imposed segregation to some extent, because even middle
> class areas tend to have a dominance of one religion.

In a similar vein, a Belfast community group leader expressed a desire for reduced sectarianism

that would result in decreased residential segregation:

> JESSICA: Obviously I would love to see a reduction in both sectarianism and
> racism in society… Catholic and Protestant communities can all live side by side
> where we have less segregated housing.

The desegregation of residential neighborhoods will be both particularly challenging and rewarding for Northern Irish citizens. Recognition will be required by both sides that the other party is not going to relinquish its space and deserves to remain where it is. Another Belfast resident summarized appropriately, "we need to move toward where we talk about one community rather than two communities."

Other interview narratives revealed a desire to move beyond spatial concerns and engage with "the other" in an authentic relationship. A Belfast community group leader identified forgiveness as a prerequisite to the difficult task of forging relationships with the enemy:

> FEARGAL: So I suppose my hopes are that we become a community which is founded in forgiveness and a recognition, an acknowledgement, of what we have done to one another, and have a vision to work with each other into the future – a future in which we engage in the process of building a positive relationship.

Several other participants provided similar statements.

Many participants were, however, careful to condition their hopes for celebrated diversity by clarifying that they were not proposing an identity melting pot on the path to peace. A Belfast community group leader warned:

> MARTIN: I don't want to be the same as everybody who lives within my neighborhood or my community. You just need people to appreciate difference - celebrate it.

The revamping of social identity in order to recognize the enemy as human is not meant to replace previously developed national or religious identities, but rather to make them subject to a new overarching umbrella and shared identity (Byrne 1997; Wallach 2000).

Another demographic tension noted by numerous participants was the tension between Northern Ireland's traditional citizens and the new immigrants entering the country in search of work. Northern Irish citizens are now being forced to move beyond the Nationalist/Unionist

conflict and are needing to embrace a wide variety of foreign ethnic groups as well. A Belfast

church leader believed the church had a role in welcoming and caring for the newcomers:

> PAUL: So our job, I think, within the church sector, is to create a vision of civic responsibility and a vision of welcoming diversity rather than being threatened. So that is our aspiration - to try and create political and cultural structures that would accommodate, more than tolerance, as tolerance is a good thing, but will actually accommodate pluralism and diversity and see that as something important.

> A couple of participants spoke about the perceived impact of an increasingly ethnically

diverse demographic on traditional conflict dynamics. Some respondents believed that the

sudden influx of minority peoples will help ameliorate the traditional Nationalist/Unionist

tensions. For example, a County Cavan community development worker perceived the influx of

immigrants very favorably:

> FAVEL: But in general I think the more people who come to Northern Ireland and start integrating in the community the better it will become. It will only help the situation and get rid of the polarization.

A Derry community group leader pointed out that ethnic minorities are starting to apply as part-

time police officers. Diversifying the police force may have a positive effect on the public's

perceptions of the police.

b) Increased Engagement With the World Community

Another salient theme that emerged from the interview narratives was a hope that Northern

Ireland would become a "beacon for others countries" (Roger, a Derry participant). Another

Derry community group leader put it this way:

> GORDON: We are not just a group of people who are living on a tiny island. We are citizens of the world and we have something which I think is unique, and that is our imagination. We should be out there stirring people, stirring it up and making things happen. That's what my future for the Irish is.

Several of the community group leaders believed that the collective wisdom gleaned by citizens during the turbulent time of the 'Troubles' had earned them experience in modeling for the world effective peacebuilding practice. A Belfast respondent gave details:

> ANDREW: Northern Ireland is a place that can showcase to the wider world what it is to have lived with violent conflict, to have come through that, have suffered, have felt trauma, and know what to do about it.

It seemed as though some participants were motivated to reach out by a desire to reciprocate in response to the perceived generosity of the wider European community. A Belfast interviewee pointed out:

> BRICE: I think its only right that we start to pay Europe back, if you like, for its investment in us, and sort of say, "Yes we have got some things that you could use elsewhere, now folks."

> *c) Hopes for Increased Freedom to Travel About in Safety.*

One particularly poignant consequence of the 'Troubles' was severe restrictions placed on the movement of Northern Ireland's citizens. Fear of paramilitary violence resulted in widespread enclaving and the establishment of boundaries within communities defining areas for acceptable and safe travel. Several of the study's participants hoped that the peace process had ensured freedom of movement as a lasting reality. For many respondents, freedom of movement was most celebrated at the social level – people are free to move about, socialize, and be entertained where they desire. Further, a County Monaghan respondent dreaded the possibility of returning to a time when crossing the border was "too much hassle" and craved an increasingly open border.

2) Hopes for Development and Empowerment at the Personal and Community Level

A significant portion (21%) of expressed hopes for the future attempted to elucidate the requirement of increased development and empowerment at the personal and community level.

The interview data revealed four themes which are discussed in order of their prevalence: a) grassroots empowerment; b) self-esteem building; c) economic development; and d) improved educational opportunities.

   a) Grassroots Empowerment

Prominent in the interview narratives were hopes for the empowerment of local communities and grassroots structures. Perhaps stemming from widespread frustrations with tentative peacebuilding progress in the upper political levels, several community group leaders called for increased self-determination – the realization of freedom to control one's life (Jeong 2000). For example, a County Leitrim NGO worker shared the following:

> ELIZABETH: My hope for the future is that those behind the big desks in the six counties come out and listen to the people on the ground. I think that the best way forward for Northern Ireland is to work with the people on the ground - build up the relationships.

Moreover, a County Monaghan participant argued for "consumer-type, customer based participation in decision making processes" in order to gather power at the community level.

   Several community group leaders realized the necessity for a developed community infrastructure in empowering the grassroots level of society. For example, a Derry community development worker stated:

> MICHAEL: I would love to see the development of a very healthy vibrant community infrastructure, which could possibly have the potential to become the political people's skeleton in society.

Another Derry participant echoed the belief and insisted that "somebody living in a community will have the best interests of that community at their heart".

   b) *Self-Esteem Building*

The self-esteem of Northern Ireland's residents is tied to the positive social identity of their particular identity group (Tajfel 1982). Henri Tajfel's (1982) 'social identity theory' proposes that

members of an identity group will attempt to achieve a positive social identity vis-à-vis an

opposing identity group through comparison with and discrimination of the other group. Several

of the interviewed participants hoped that as higher levels of self-esteem were achieved the

transformation of negative perceptions regarding "enemy" groups would be possible. In this

regard a Derry NGO leader explained his hopes as follows:

> HENRY: Part of the vision would be that people are comfortable about their own tradition, and not embarrassed to say, "I am a Catholic" or, "I am a Protestant". I think we need to be proud of our individual separate - not shared - [identity].

> One Belfast participant who worked on an educational project emphasized the

importance of encouraging Northern Irish youth to engage with each other and in the broader

European context:

> IRIS: The image that we would have for those children is that they would be very well educated, and not necessarily in the traditional sense, but that they would be people who are able to think and deal with complex difficult question and issues, problem solvers, confident in themselves and confident with their fellow citizens.

Development of critical thinking skills will enable Northern Ireland's youth to explore

their social identity and redefine their social situation to include members from

"opposing" social groups (Cairns 1982).

c) *Economic Development*

The IFI and EU Peace II fund are intended to further community development goals in Northern

Ireland (Byrne, Thiessen, and Fissuh 2007). Numerous participants hoped for economic

advances in the areas of poverty reduction, job creation, and economic development. For

example, a Derry NGO worker explained his hopes for Northern Ireland:

> GERRY:…where everybody is happy enough and there is enough money coming in that people are able to have jobs and make a living and have a quality of life. So that would be my ideal vision for Northern Ireland for the future.

d) *Improved Education*

Several community group leaders and funding officials hoped for improvements in the delivery

and content of the education system. For example, one Derry community development worker

believed the education system needs to be reflective of the job market. Effective educational

programming has been shown to be foundational for a successful development scheme in

conflict-affected contexts (Thiessen 2008).

<center>*Macro Political Level Hopes*</center>

Table 1 reports that a minority (28%) of references by community group leaders regarding their

hopes for the future of Northern Ireland's society and citizens spoke to macro political level

concerns. Analysis of these macro political level hopes revealed three significant themes.

Participants hoped that politicians and political institutions would embrace the peace process

(9%), called for an increasingly integrated education system (7%) as well as calling for increased

integration of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland (6%).

1) Hopes that Government Would Embrace the Peace Process

Participants who expressed hopes regarding their politicians and political institutions referred to

needed political stability, avoiding extreme positions and ideology, implementation of the GFA,

and ensuring grassroots security.

a) Hopes for Increased Political Stability

Governmental instability is a typical concern within weak states who are especially prone to

violent internal conflict because of a lack of both political legitimacy and the ability of state

institutions to control its territory (Brown 2001). Perceived governmental stability amongst a

nation's citizens serves to bolster governmental legitimacy. A Belfast community group leader

affirmed this notion in her story:

> LAURA: I would like to certainly see a stable government, a government that
> people could feel is inclusive of them, and is not polarizing the communities.

A desirable future in Northern Ireland may hinge upon establishing and maintaining a stable and inclusive government.

b) *Hopes for the Political Avoidance of Extremes*

Several participants were critical of the propensity of Northern Irish politicians to migrate towards extreme positions and ideology. It was perceived that the avoidance of immoderate partisan politics would increase political legitimacy. For example, a Belfast NGO leader asserted this idea in the following way:

> BRIAN: You need to bring the extremes into the middle. If they are the only ones there in government they have to work together. And eventually they will work together and pull into the centre, and maybe politics in Northern Ireland will become something that generally people are quite prepared to take an interest in.

In addition, a County Fermanagh community worker hoped for a shift from a "politics of difference" to a political process interested in tackling pressing social issues.

c) *Hopes for the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement*

Several of the community group leaders believed that the full implementation of the GFA by Northern Ireland's government was a prerequisite for sustainable peace. As a Derry community group leader stated:

> FRED: Well, my best wishes and hopes for the future is to see the full potential of the GFA realized in its entirety. I would like to see it totally implemented. I would like to see the governments playing a fuller role in ensuring that implementation.

Citizens are evidently expectant of progress in achieving the benefits of the historic 1998 GFA.

d) Hopes for Protection from Violence and Crime

Other participants believed it is crucial that their government bolster security at the grassroots level by ensuring a reduction in overt violence in Northern Ireland's communities. A Belfast community group leader stated, "We have to make sure that people as individuals are not

personally insecure and afraid." Another Belfast respondent believed that "the big nut to crack is street crime."

2) Hopes for Integrated Education

Prevalent in the macro political level hopes were desires for increased access to integrated education. Northern Ireland has a highly segregated education system, with the majority of students attending either Catholic or Protestant controlled schools. Education plays an influential role in shaping the worldview of youth in conflict-affected zones (Thiessen 2008). It is widely perceived by Northern Irish citizens that segregated education encouraged the development of negative attitudes towards "the enemy" during the 'Troubles' (Byrne 1997; Stephen 2006). However, with the help of civil society organizations like the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education (BELTIE), an increasing number of schools are being integrated (Byrne 1997). A 2003 Ulster Omnibus survey found that 81 percent of people polled believed that integrated education was important for sustainable peace in Northern Ireland (Stephen 2006).

Several of the study's participants believed that the current school system was facilitating polarization in society. A Belfast community development worker stated for example, "What I would like to see … is a school system that doesn't divide people – and that would be my real hope." Several other participants were very direct in suggesting the necessity of integrated education. For example a County Monaghan community development worker voiced his hopes in the following way:

> FRANCESCO: At the most formative years of development in society I think that segregation is wrong…so my vision is for integrated education.

3) Hopes for Unity in Ireland

The 1998 GFA assured that Northern Ireland's future would be directed by its citizens. In other words, Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK until a majority of citizens vote to unify with the Republic of Ireland (MacGinty 2006). The topic of Irish unity was evident in a significant number of interview narratives. Participants revealed two varying views regarding Irish unity.

First, a majority of responses regarding this topic revealed hopes for increased north/south integration but did not believe complete political integration to be beneficial at this time. A Belfast community development worker summarized the perceptions of several respondents:

> SEAN: I would like to see a society where there is much more engagement on a North/South axis than there has been before, because I think the primary relationships that have to be resolved lie on this island. And there is far too much waste in having two different systems on the island. There is a lot of mistrust on the North/South axis which I think has to be dealt with.

Second, a minority of responses in this area revealed hopes for an imminent political unification of Ireland – North and South. A County Monaghan NGO worker made clear his hopes in the following quote:

> JON: My vision of what I would love is a United Ireland, a thirty-two county Ireland with England no longer having control over Northern Ireland - and equality for all.

Others making similar comments were careful to premise their hopes for unity with desires for continued peace and cooperation between Northern Ireland's Nationalists and Unionists.

Micro Grassroots Level Fears

Table 2 indicates that a minority (42%) of all references by community group leaders regarding their fears for the future of Northern Irish society addressed micro grassroots level concerns. Analysis of these grassroots level fears revealed four themes: (1) a shift in communal values and

attitude (17%); (2) increased levels of sectarianism and racism (14%); (3) personal economic struggle (7%); and (4) the continuing prevalent culture of violence in Northern Ireland (4%).

1) Fears Regarding a Change in Values and Attitude

Numerous participants feared attitudinal and value shifts in society in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. Of primary concern was the perceived abandonment of a communal orientation and the embracing of individualism. The interviews revealed that community group leaders living in the Border Counties were particularly sensitive to and aware of this change. A County Cavan development worker explained as follows:

> RACHEL: Community is changing so much and becoming where people don't know their neighbors anymore. And the traditional sense of community, where you have the farmer down the road with his hay and he would come up and help you, that doesn't exist. The American people coming to look at Ireland who have this picture of traditional Ireland, that it's so friendly, it's so warm and so welcoming, it's not anymore. That is all gone. Nobody has any time for anybody else.

Several community workers linked the recent individualistic trend to the successful "Celtic Tiger" Irish economy and the resulting increase in family income levels. A County Monaghan respondent stated, "as Ireland becomes more economically successful there is a tendency to become more individualistic." Another County Monaghan community development worker echoed the same belief:

> CATHAL: We can see the changes with the way people are living nowadays. It is more about money. People don't have to be as involved in community activity because they have more money to spend. When people had less money to spend they needed to be more involved because it provided your entertainment and it provided you social life, whereas you buy it now.

Other respondents were concerned about high levels of complacency – particularly amongst youth - and called for a return to a culture of volunteerism.

2) Fears that Segregation and Sectarianism Would Continue

A significant number of interview participants feared the continuance of segregation and the possible escalation of sectarianism in Northern Irish and Border County communities. This fear is evidenced in the following two quotes. Fiona, a Belfast respondent stated, "my worst fears would be that polarization gets worse and that communities would remain or even become more divided." Along the same lines, Philip, a County Cavan participant shared, "the worst fears are that sectarianism continues and the healing process is curtailed or abandoned."

Other participants expressed fear regarding the perceived increase in racism directed at recent immigrants. For example, one County Fermanagh academic viewed racist actions towards immigrants as a scapegoating process in which traditional Protestant/Catholic hatreds are being projected onto a third party.

3) Fears of Personal Economic Struggle

A third grassroots level fear concerned imminent personal and community level economic difficulties. For example, a Belfast community leader dreaded a "big external economic shock and the effects that would have." A County Cavan community worker feared that if the economy would start to struggle, unemployment would rise, and would motivate increased paramilitary activity. The respondents' fears appear to be well-founded as evidenced by the 2008 recession in the Republic of Ireland which has witnessed plummeting real-estate prices, rapidly increasing unemployment, and significant bank losses (NYTimes 2009). Economic strife in the Repulic is increasingly affecting economic recovery and growth efforts in NI (IrishTimes.com 2009). It remains to be seen, however, how the peace process will fare during the current economic decline.

4) Fears of a Continuing Culture of Violence

Several study participants were wary of the continuing legacy of the 'Troubles' – particularly, a lingering culture of violence. One Derry community group leader feared that Northern Ireland would follow a similar path as South Africa where conventional crime has overcome political violence as a destabilizing factor in the country (Darby 2006). The Derry respondent feared that violent residue would linger in society and would create a social milieu where citizens do not feel secure. Another Derry respondent feared a lingering disrespect and suspicion for the legal system and the police. Further it was perceived that another remnant of the 'Troubles' was a thriving street crime scene. For example, ex-paramilitary personnel were believed to be instrumental in the burgeoning illegal drug industry.

Macro Political Level Fears

Table 2 indicates that a moderate majority (58%) of all expressed fears were located at the macro political level. Analysis of the macro level data revealed two dominant concerns: (1) fears of political peace process failure (27%); and (2) fears of renewed political violence (21%). The remaining data (10%) unveiled a hodgepodge of worries often focusing on needed political structural change.

1) Fears of Political Peace Process Failure

Fears of potential political failure to sustain the peace process were significant in the interview data. The study's participants highlighted five prominent fears and worries in this area. First, participants feared the failure of the GFA. For example, a Belfast NGO leader shared the following:

> MARIE: I suppose if the GFA completely disappeared and we reverted to the kind of conflict that was going on before, and where investment was difficult to come by, and people felt threatened in their home.

Second, several interviewees feared that intransigent party politicking would impede the political peace process. For example, a couple of respondents believed that Unionist infighting between pro-GFA and anti-GFA groups could result in violent acts directed at Nationalists thus ending the current cease-fire. A Derry community worker explained this point as follows:

> FRED: Normally when there is a rupture or fracture within the Unionist/Loyalist community, it sometimes manifests itself in violence inflicted upon the Nationalist/Republican community and we end up sliding back into some sort of conflict. That would be my worst fear ever.

Further, some respondents feared that fundamentalist elements within both Unionist and Nationalist parties would derail the progress towards peace.

Third, interviewees feared that political leaders would personally interfere with the peace process despite support for the process from their constituents. Participants leveled several strong criticisms towards their politicians. A NGO leader, for example, believed political leaders should be modeling progress in peace:

> BRICE: My fear, I suppose is that cynicism grows too much and that at the highest political level there is a logjam. That has implications for all of us in how we perceive the future…you have that model, because people do look to their leaders. We need the ultimate political leaders to really model a lot of what we have been trying to do, and not just talk the talk. A lot of them have learned the talk - which is progress - but they need to walk it as well. They might be limping their way towards it, but I hope they get off their crutches quite soon for all our sakes.

Another Belfast NGO leader clearly laid out perceived consequences of having narrow-minded political leaders:

> CHRIS: We are frustrated and hampered by inward-looking narrow-minded politicians who want to maintain the status quo because it is in their interest. They have power, negative power in doing that. If they succeed they will further drive wedges between communities, between people. They will lose any possibility of economic prosperity, of social cohesion, of an educated informed population and we will continue to do unto ourselves what we have done for seven hundred years.

Another community leader from Derry feared that political leaders would wait too long to adequately deal with violence and sectarianism. He believed that as memories of the 'Troubles' slipped into history, it will become increasingly difficult to effectively heal the painful wounds of the conflict.

Fourth, several participants worried that the international aid-assisted peacebuilding work would result in "little tangible effect on the ground." Moreover, a Derry community worker lamented that the protracted conflict had resulted in personal skepticism regarding any future change. Along the same vein, other participants feared that the peace process would remain in limbo with minimal progress in healing past wounds.

2) Renewed Political Violence

A second prominent theme at the macro political level was fear of renewed political violence. For example, Arthur, a Belfast community development worker stated, "my worst fears would be bombs on the street again and people getting killed." Another Belfast NGO leader also raised this issue as follows:

> STEPHEN: A return to violence would be the worst possible thing that could happen. It seems unthinkable but then you look at other peace processes in the world that you think are stable, and suddenly one day they aren't. So that would be the big fear.

Even though a ceasefire has ended the majority of overt violence, a couple of NGO and community group leaders feared that paramilitary splinter groups may again resume violence since paramilitary personnel are seldom unanimous in their support for ceasefires (Darby 2006). Some participants expressed concern that paramilitary groups would intentionally play a "spoiler" role in the peace process despite the wishes of their constituency. Several participants believed that if the 'Troubles' were to return, they would return with increased intensity and fanaticism.

DISCUSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The participants' expressed hopes and fears are instructive and significant for Northern Ireland's

peace process. Two main discussion points stem from the analysis of the interview data. First, a

significant gap between the perceptions of hope for the micro grassroots level (72% of hopes)

and the fearful expectations for the macro political level (58% of fears) was evident in the data

(See Tables 1 and 2). Community group leaders were hopeful that reconciliation and

empowerment work at the grassroots level would be successful, but conversely, were cautious

and often feared for their country's future. One may speculate as to the reason for this

dissonance. The concentration of hopes at the micro grassroots level may indicate where the

most effective peacebuilding work is perceived as being situated. The last twenty years have

witnessed a rapid expansion of civil society grassroots level work with diverse mandates and

goals (Ahmed and Potter 2006).

The dissonance may, however, reveal feelings of disempowerment and frustration with

the political peace process. Many of the participants made explicit their frustrations with the

traditional political venues for resolving conflict. Several participants believed politicians were

either stalling necessary change or were not initiating appropriate reform. In Northern Ireland,

civil society groups such as development NGOs, peace groups, churches, media groups, cultural

organizations, business communities and associations, are perceived as leading the way in

initiating peacebuilding activities while the political parties struggle to build a unity of vision

(Cochrane 2006; MacGinty and Darby 2002). However, civil society organizations will not

achieve sustainable peace in Northern Ireland on their own. John Paul Lederach believes that

deliberately engaging all levels - upper level elites, middle-range leadership, and the grassroots -

will magnify any attempts at building peace in post-violence societies (Lederach 1997; Lederach

2001). Effective political structures require a vibrant relationship between the grassroots and upper-level political actors. One must be mindful that post-conflict governments such as in Northern Ireland typically require a period of transition and focused capacity-building attention (Byrne et al. 2008; Junne and Verkoren 2005).

Second, noticeably dominating both categories of hopes and fears was an intense desire for an end to both sectarianism and overt violence in a communal journey towards peace. As evidence, 66% of all expressed hopes and 65% of all expressed fears addressed the topics of reconciliation, political peace processes and policy leading to peace, the ending of sectarianism and segregation, the prevalent culture of violence, and political violence.

This journey towards peace was perceived by interview participants as winding through all levels of society – the grassroots as well as the macro political level. Their hopes at the grassroots level were for widespread celebration of diversity, peacebuilding amongst citizens and communities, and the reduction of sectarianism between Northern Ireland's Protestant Unionist and Catholic Nationalist communities. For example, participants hoped for reduced segregation in residential areas, increased opportunities for authentic relationship-building with 'the other', widespread forgiveness, and the creation of a new identity as Northern Irish citizens which would transcend previously dominant religious/political identities.

Numerous obstacles lie in the path of reconciliation between Unionist and Nationalist citizens. For example, political and religious symbols persist in carrying significant meaning and continue to play a divisive role in post-GFA Northern Ireland (MacGinty and Darby 2002). Parading still presents the opportunity for sectarian confrontation, and arson and vandalism attacks on identifiable Unionist or Nationalist properties continue (MacGinty and Darby 2002). However, the civil society leaders interviewed for this survey reveal their desires to ameliorate

traditional tensions and address symbol-induced conflict with civil society driven resolution processes (Taylor 2001).

Participants also believed that political engagement in the peace process and the avoidance of political violence are crucial at the macro political level. Dominant in macro political level hopes and fears were desires to see political elites fully implement the GFA, assume a leadership position in nationwide peacebuilding by avoiding extreme positions, ensure bipartisanship, support integrated education, build economic and social ties with the Republic of Ireland, and deal effectively with rising levels of street crime.

While not considered a failure, the GFA has not been able to achieve its full potential (Cox, Guelke, and Stephen 2006). Despite valid criticisms, it is very difficult to deny that much has changed since the Agreement's signing in April 1998. For example, the respondents in this study recognized increased freedom to move about, increased tolerance for diversity, effective community development ventures, increased openness to educational reform, and expanded connections with the Republic of Ireland, to name a few. However, there continues to be significant political resistance to the implementation of the GFA – particularly from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) (Cox, Guelke, and Stephen 2006). Decisions on how to advance the political peace process in the current political milieu will be harrowing and risky. For example, the post-Ian Paisley political stance of DUP leaders, the uncertain reactions of Unionists to Sinn Fein's political ambitions in contentious districts, and the eventual pursuit of a self-determination referendum by Sinn Fein may cause continued political instability (Byrne 2009). Our study, however, reveals widespread hopes and calls for all political parties to cease party politicking, bridge the partisan divide, and ensure accountability to their constituents.

A primary threat to Northern Ireland's political peace process is violence (Darby 2001; Darby 2006; MacGinty and Darby 2002). Participants repeatedly referred to their fear of renewed violence and a return to the 'Troubles'. A significant number of participants made clear the advantages of a violence-free region and lamented the potential suffering of citizens with a return to widespread violence.

The use of violence to achieve political leverage has been a common facet of Northern Ireland's politics (Bew 2007; Fitzduff 2002). Preceding the GFA, Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups used violence to coerce Nationalists and Unionists to follow chosen political options. Following the GFA, paramilitary activity and other violent actors have continued to threaten the success of the Agreement. The likelihood of peace process success is a function of the likelihood of violent spoilers challenging the peace agreement (Stedman 2001). As is typical in most intrastate conflicts, violent parties are "loath to end hostilities" (Darby 2001). They may be inherently resistant to entering into processes of accommodation with their former enemies since cooperation would jeopardize their original mandate and render their organization obsolete. It remains to be seen if spoilers such as the RIRA and the Orange Defenders can bring down the GFA by ratcheting up violence (Byrne 2009).

In conclusion, the participants of this study appear to be hopeful for a peaceful future. It is significant that two-thirds of all responses were framed in a positive hopeful sense. As a group, the respondents called for intensified efforts in bridging the sectarian divide. Northern Ireland's civil society leaders have named, and are striving to achieve, the prerequisites of sustainable peace. Their timely efforts have been bolstered by the economic and political benefits of European Union membership, a 'hurting stalemate' between paramilitary groups, recent commitments by Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries to lay down their arms, and increased

creativity, flexibility, and the eschewal of military ventures in NI on the part of Britain. However, their grassroots peacebuilding work is perceived as occurring inside of an unstable and precarious political and economic climate, one which could spawn destructive processes and even mark a return to widespread violence. Much will depend on whether civil society actors, such as the NGO and community group leaders interviewed in this study, can maintain their stamina, creativity, and vision in this disempowering milieu.

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