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Tapestry of Hopes and Despair for Northern Ireland's Youth: NGO Leaders Perceptions on Youth Development

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Youths are a sensitive and very important segment of Northern Ireland population. Their proper grooming up should thereby be prioritized especially for a society emerging out of a long drawn ethno-political conflict. A Few researches have studied the youth motivation behind the persistent sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In this backdrop, this article shows the perceptions of 120 civil society NGO leaders and funding agency development officers those who are involved in youth development as a part of their peacebuilding projects. External economic aid has played an important role in the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland in terms of funding community based grassroots intervention projects. The findings from the study reveal important reasons behind youth violence in Northern Ireland and Border Counties and also illustrate how the peacebuilding projects undertaken by the NGOs are striving to improve the condition.

Keywords: Youth violence, dissident paramilitary activities, sectarianism, Northern Ireland, IFI and EU Peace III funding, peacebuilding

Introduction

The "long war" between the security forces, Republicans, and Loyalists has now terminated following the signing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement; another new conflict has emerged. Northern Ireland's youth are embroiled in dealing with "the ghosts of the Troubles" that now threaten the macro peace process and "community relations" (Jarman, 2004, p. 421). Thus, the phenomenon of Northern Ireland's youth violence necessitates rigorous and innovative research to uncover the underlying causes of youth motivation to join dissident paramilitaries who subscribe to violent means by connecting their sense of despair to a nationalist fantasy of the past (Jarman, 2004, p. 421).

The youth are the future of Northern Ireland and some of the external funding from both the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the European Union (EU) Peace III Fund have focused on nurturing youth development. It is important to examine how much effect peacebuilding efforts have had on youth transformation in Northern Ireland as the external funding draws to a close in 2013. Consequently, this article explores the impact of economic aid in youth development in Northern Ireland and the Border Area.

Economic Aid and Peacebuilding

The IFI and the EU Peace (I, II and III) Funds are the two principal funding bodies that provide economic assistance to Northern Ireland and the Border Counties (S. Byrne et al., 2009). Both funding agencies support and nurture grassroots level NGOs and community organizations implementing peacebuilding projects. Both funds are channelled through Northern Ireland's devolved government so that community based NGOs are the prime beneficiaries of the funding supporting their reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives (Thiessen, Byrne, Skarlato, & Tennent, 2010). The funds have boosted

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the local economy and have contributed greatly to producing new skilled workers (Buchanan, 2008).

Some argue that if economic aid is used strategically, it can reduce inequalities and competition for scarce economic resources (S. Byrne & Irvin, 2001) and it can help to end direct and structural violence providing new socioeconomic platforms where interaction, and cooperation can take place, whereby people can envision a common goal between embroiled communities in conflict (S. Byrne et al., 2009). In addition, economic aid as an integral part of an overall multi-modal and multi-level peacebuilding intervention effort can start to address structural inequality (del Castillo, 2008) and provide much needed material resources to rebuild damaged infrastructure where the survivors of protracted ethno-political conflict can undergo new job training to gain self-confidence and eventually become self-reliant (S. Byrne, Fissuh, Thiessen, Irvin, & Tennent, 2010). Yet, economic aid is not a panacea as various other factors also contribute to the escalation of ethno-political conflict (Mac Ginty, 2008; Ryan, 2007).

External economic aid can also create undesirable hostility and trigger unhealthy competition between and among the recipients if they are competitively locked into rivalry for a limited amount of funding (Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). Furthermore, in the process of channelling economic aid, donors may inadvertently impose a "liberal peace" (it is assumed as an approach that "…goes beyond traditional approaches of conflict prevention, or 'negative peace'; towards the external engineering of post-conflict societies through the export of liberal frameworks of 'good governance,' democratic elections, human rights, the rule of law and market relations" (Chandler, 2010, pp. 137-138). Therefore, the "liberal peace" imposes a Western paradigm and process on local people that may not be within their interests (Mac Ginty, 2008; MacGinty, 2012).

The IFI and the EU Peace and Reconciliation (I, and II) Funds provided economic assistance to local community projects in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties (S. Byrne et al., 2009) by targeting five key objectives: a) economic regeneration, b) social bridging, c) local development, d) regional development, and e) across Border partnership (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2007). In continuity with the earlier funding, EU Peace III funding provides resources to various peacebuilding and community capacity building activities undertaken by local NGOs to address the root causes of the conflict. External economic aid can be a critical component of the post accord peacebuilding phase in the overall macro peace process when combined with other intervention tools to ensure forging a sustainable peace (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2007). However, sustainability depends greatly on the creativity, commitments, and willingness of citizens already embroiled in conflict as they must own their peace and create it together piece-by-piece (Mac Ginty, 2008; Ryan, 2007).

Peacebuilding is a holistic and integrative process whereby efforts are made to stop the recurrence of political violence using creative conflict transformation methods (Byrne, Thiessen, Fissuh, Irvin, & Hawranik, 2008; Jeong, 2005) . For example, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan outlined the essence of peacebuilding as a dynamic process culminating in creating an environment ripe for "reconciliation, reconstruction and recovery" (Annan, 1998, p. 29). Annan (1998) also emphasized "laying a solid foundation" so that a post-accord society prevents the resurgence of conflict by prioritizing critical elements like, "reintegrating ex-combatants and others into a productive society" (p. 29). Thus, the ultimate success of any peacebuilding process reflects upon the proper timing of

intervention; a mix of multifaceted coordinated approaches; and a process that is adequately financed (Annan, 1998). The Multi-Track Diplomacy framework identifies and coordinates approaches within a multi-track peacebuilding intervention model with various stakeholders (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). Moreover, Paffenholz and Spurk (2010) contend that independent voluntary NGOs can undertake peacebuilding initiatives by interacting closely with a state's political sphere. In the case of Northern Ireland, a multi-track initiative includes governmental, voluntary NGOs, and private citizen involvement through a melange of civil society groups using indigenous peacebuilding approaches (McCall & O'Dowd, 2008).

Northern Ireland has experienced a plethora of community development organizations activities that are local, collaborative, voluntary and located within Republican and Loyalist communities. Their strength is the "social cohesion produced by a common sense of disadvantage and a common opposition to an alien government" (McCall & Williamson, 2001, p. 370). These organizations are a part of broader civil society actors. Lederach (2006) points out that the middle-range leadership of these civil society actors are important within an integrated peacebuilding approach. They can play an effective role in connecting the top-level leadership of government elites to grassroots level community development organizations. Additionally, these actors can contribute to engaging civic society by adopting non-violent conflict resolution methods (Ahmed, 2011; Ahmed & Potter, 2006; Scholms, 2003). This approach is also termed "bottom-up peacebuilding" as governments today along with external interveners prefer to actively involve communities in implementing peacebuilding programs (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 42). Consequently, civil society actors have the unique advantage of possessing local knowledge about the conflict milieu, as well as the interests of the parties involved in the conflict, which allows them to successfully facilitate conflict transformation processes (Jeong, 2005; Lederach, 1997). In this regard, the British government's 1993 Strategy for the Support of the Voluntary Sector and of Community Development (DHSS, 1993) can be said to usher in a new era in the government's relations with the voluntary sector, highlighting that civil society NGOs can also positively impact peace processes by influencing the political milieu (Birrell & Williamson, 2001; Lederach, 1997, 2005). Thus, during the last thirty years Northern Ireland's voluntary and community sector has played an important role as "respected interlocutor with government" and also as "an advocate for marginalized sections of the community" (Birrell & Williamson, 2001, p. 217). Moreover, Cocharne (2006) suggests that these NGOs can also contribute to building a "consensus building exercise" to transform conflict by integrating various peacebuilding efforts (Cocharne 2006 cited in Cox, Guelke, & Stephen, 2006, p. 255). As a result, the contribution of these organizations is manifested by their key role in the "Civic Forum, participation with government in the Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum, in respect of European funding programmes, and influence in many other policy arenas [of Northern Ireland]" (Birrell & Williamson, 2001, p. 217).

Causes of the Current Youth Violence in Northern Ireland

Long term sustainability and success of the peace process in Northern Ireland largely depends on its young peoples' will, power, and sincere commitment to renounce violence for social change (McEvoy, 2006). However, O' Connor (1993) notes, referring to the result of a survey in one study, that young Catholic people who have witnessed most sectarian violence are

fearful of a cohesive society due to "class-based political differences and intra-communal resentment" (McEvoy-Levy, 2006, p. 91). The Centre for Young Men's Studies (CYMS) captures some of the underlying conditions that Northern Ireland's youth is facing by stating that "it is a society in transition emerging from a period of prolonged violence. In many communities young men are caught up in this transition but have not been equipped to manage or cope with change" (CYMS, 2012). CYMS's recent study on Northern Ireland's youth indicates that while young men deal with violence, their personal safety continues to be at stake. CYMS also highlights that despite the optimism of the macro level peace process the situation concerning youth development seems to have changed little and especially "with regard to these young men's experiences and attitudes towards violence, leaving them 'stuck' somewhere between paramilitary ceasefires and the rhetoric of peacebuilding" (Harland, McCready, & Michael, 2009, p. 49). In addition, the present suicide rate of young people is increasing alarmingly (Mary, 2011). For example, former West Belfast MP and leader of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams has called it a "crisis" (Harland et al., 2009). Young people are a critical component of the post accord peacebuilding situation because they have the potential either to disrupt the peace process or to contribute to peacebuilding depending on the motivation and resources invested in them (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). The findings of the CYMS's study also reflect the reasons why "a lack of tangible benefit from or affiliation with the peace process" is a critical one since youth violence is related to "a lack of trust towards young men from the 'other' community" (Harland et al., 2009, pp. 49,55). For example, a CYMS report contends that youth violence is heavily dependent on location, religion, and age (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth, & Wong, 1999). According to another report:

> The troubles have been a killer of young males from North and West Belfast, Derry Londonderry or the border areas, and who are rather more likely to be Catholic. This is also the group, which is among the most likely to become perpetrators of acts of violence (Marie, 1999, p. 37).

McGrellis (2005) also points out how Northern Ireland's youth are subjected to the fear of sectarianism and violence and how it has shaped their responses to life. From a psychological point of view, the fear are passed down orally by reviving the memory of violence committed against family members and friends during the Troubles. These memories have shaped their behaviours and attitudes so that they justify violence as a legitimate and necessary means to settle conflict. This explains how "family background is often influential in shaping political views and aspirations" (McGrellis, 2005, p. 56). Thus, the "transgenerational transmission of trauma" has played a significant role in shaping young people's mindsets to possibly consider violence as a means to lash out at the perceived other (Volkan, 1997). Crozier (2001) also connects "pride, image, self-esteem, risk-taking, and group identity" as some of the important factors that link young men and their involvement in political violence (p, 3). Consequently, a large number of Northern Ireland's young men may accept using violence as a way of life and become prone to a "culture of revenge" (McGrellis, 2005, p. 57). In addition, some scholars pointed out that this attitude is related to the "…believe that it is by 'acting tough' that they will gain status and respect and the contradictory nature of masculinity and its association with risk taking behaviour are key reasons why young men refuse to seek emotional support" (Harland, 2008). Thus, John Whyte (1990) points out that social segregation is one of the main causes of youth frustration because "[Northern Ireland's] society is segregated at various levels, including work,

education, leisure, and interpersonal relationships such as friendships and marriage" (Cited in McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004, p. 148). Consequently, "socio-political identities and in-group and out-group attitudes" are some of the contributing factors behind youth violence in Northern Ireland (Nesdale and Flesser, 2001 cited in Muldoon, 2004).

In addition, Thomson and Holland (2002) argue that while most young people express their hopes and fears over those issues of which they have some control, they often are "fatalistic and resigned" about issues they feel are beyond their control, such as Northern Ireland's peace process and economy. Therefore, "it was here, rather than in the intimate spheres of family life and friendships that young people blamed adults, expressing frustration with their failures, their 'short termism' and their greed" (Thomson & Holland, 2002, p. 105). Cummings and Davies (2010) and Merrilees and colleagues (2011) also identified in their research (by using a focus group discussion with mothers living in Belfast) some of the social ecological factors associated with youth violence since family wellbeing is impacted by mothers and "maternal distress is an important factor for family well-being" (Cummings and Davies 2010 and Merrilees et al. 2011 cited in Taylor et al., 2011, p. 345). Cummings and Davies (2010) and Merrilees and colleagues(2011) studies also explored sectarian (political, dissident) and non-sectarian (criminal activities, anti-social behaviour) violence and the fact that the paramilitaries do not control social violence (Taylor et al., 2011). The studies also found that the reasons for sectarian violence ("overt violence and perceived intergroup threats") are sectarian boundaries (e.g., where it comes from), time of year (e.g., marching season), or events associated with group identity (e.g., Celtic vs. Rangers game)" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 355).

Methodology

This article highlights the perceptions of 120 civil society NGO community group leaders and funding agency development officers in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties about some of the causes of youth violence and the impact of funding in providing opportunities to intervene and prevent youth violence. A qualitative research methodology was used because it creates rich data that describes participant's behaviour and their perceptions of conflict and conflict transformation (Bernard, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Druckman, 2005). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used with people to elicit the interviewees' images and perceptions of the peacebuilding process with particular emphasis on youth development in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone.

The people interviewed over ten weeks during the summer of 2010 included those from various local grassroots NGOs working to implement peacebuilding and reconciliation programs supported by IFI and/or EU Peace III funding. The participants were contacted in advance of the lead researcher traveling to Northern Ireland and the Border Area. The tape recorded interviews lasted between 80 to 120 minutes. The participants in the sample do not represent a cross-section of civil society NGOs. The interviewees' responded to eleven carefully designed open-ended semi-structured questions to express their insights into the impact of the funding including promoting services and resources for young people that are crucial to building a sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. The respondents' identities and the name of the peacebuilding projects are not presented to maintain their anonymity.

A grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Druckman, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allowed themes to emerge inductively from the data, which are organized into two broad categories: a) respondents' perceptions of the causes of youth violence, and b) what the peacebuilding projects are doing to support youth development.

Perceptions of Some of the Causes of Youth Violence

Our respondents identified certain broad trends of youth violence including a lack of political leadership at both the micro and macro level; young people's hateful and vengeful attitudes against the traveller community; a juvenile sense of adventurism in taking part in violent activities; the lack of fulfillment of young people's basic human needs; the transmission of the trauma of past years; the growing trend of drug abuse and the drug trade; and the effect of the education system on young people in Northern Ireland**.**

A lack of political leadership at both the micro and macro level was regarded as one of the primary causes behind the rise of dissident youth violence in Northern Ireland. A community group leader from the Border Area opined that the present political leadership is not strong enough to generate hope in the minds of disaffected youth. She also believed that the political leaders are sectarian in their political dealings across the bi-communal divide.

An EU Peace III development officer from the Border Area also pointed out a growing hateful attitude among young people that is now giving birth to new xenophobic violence manifested against the traveller community in Northern Ireland and the Border Area. In this regard, he opined that understanding the cycle of hate and how young people inherit it from schools is important to fully comprehend the xenophobia motivated violence. In addition, a Derry community group leader also highlighted the thrill and adventure of young people taking part in violent activities. Several Border Area community group leaders and funding development officers pointed out that young people's basic human needs (for example, food, cloth and shelter) haven't been fulfilled in a holistic way and that is why some of them prefer violent means to achieve these. Further, the transmission of the trauma of past years is also perceived by a community group leader from the Border Area as adding a cumulative negative effect on the behaviour of the youth living there. A Derry community group leader also explained how he perceived changes taking place during and prior to the peace process. He mentioned that currently many young people were steadily becoming involved in drug abuse and the drug trade. He believes that this is happening due to the lack of societal and parental control, the promise of juvenile excitement, and the pernicious activities of drug traders. Some of the respondents commented about the education system and its failure in preparing youths; for example, the Northern Ireland education system is still fraught with the "avoidance syndrome", although, new laws (Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998) were enacted to promote citizenship schools they still cannot address the deep division within society. Although the Workers Education Association (WEA) and the integrated school movement do positive work, a transformation is needed in the educational system to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change in young people (Byrne, 1997).

Discussion

While mapping the perceptions of our respondents, a majority unequivocally pointed out the need to create a desegregated and inclusive education system in Northern Ireland because the segregated education system is keeping the youth from both communities apart. The

respondents further noted that the education system is also responsible for nurturing an "avoidance syndrome" so that the real conflict issues are intentionally and conveniently overlooked. However, Gallagher et al. (2003) state that "although the number of integrated (mixed sex, ability, Catholic, Protestant and other) primary and secondary schools has steadily increased since the establishment of the first integrated school in Northern Ireland in 1984, today only 5 percent of all pupils are enrolled in these schools" (Gallagher, 2003 cited in McGlynn et al., 2004, p. 150), which is a recipe that continues to foster sectarianism (as cited in McGlynn, et al., 2004, p. 150). Consequently, if young people are socialized to remain segregated in their childhood, educated in separate schools, and are living in different neighbourhoods, they are bound to remain segregated from each other in the future (Sean. Byrne, 1997). An integrated education system might help to reduce sectarianism and prevent the "transgenerational transmission of trauma" (Volkan, 1997). However, in this regard the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) tried in the early 2000s to promote an inclusive education system to enhance the role of education for mutual understanding to build a more peaceful and tolerant society. For example, a recent DENI (2006) policy document on the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) outlined an extensive new post-accord school curriculum for Northern Ireland that would ensure consistency in religious education opportunities to help young people develop "the spiritual and moral development and mutual understanding among those from different backgrounds (Branch, 2006, p. 3). Indeed, CCEA (2003) says that "the new statutory area of Local and Global Citizenship can be viewed as pivotal to the 'big picture' of the future curriculum" (CCEA, 2003 cited in McGlynn et al., 2004, p. 151). However, how much these changes can really bring about a deep impact in young people's minds are yet to be seen.

The current worldwide recession and the worsening unemployment situation have a debilitating effect on Northern Irish and Border Area young people as well. As a result, young people are leaving in search of a better future in Australia, Canada, the U.S., and New Zealand resulting in a substantial 'brain drain.' This trend was highlighted during the launch of the 'Generation Innovation' project aimed at reversing the brain drain in Northern Ireland. More so, a "recent research published by the Department of Employment and Learning also suggests that as many as 6 out of 10 who leave to study in Britain never return here to work. Many others only retain fleeting relationships with home and subsequently miss out on opportunities to pursue their careers or start a business here" (Meagan, 2011). Consequently, there will be a void in the production and service sectors in the future due to the departure of young skilled persons (Heather, 2011).

Young people are the future of Northern Ireland and need more long term economic, political, social and psychological support (Senehi & Byrne, 2006). For example, the Office for National Statistics of Northern Ireland mentioned that "during the period 2001 – 2011, Northern Ireland had the fastest growing population of any UK region, with an estimated increase of 7.5 per cent" (Research and Library Services, 2011, p. 1). Most of the young people living in Northern Ireland today did not live through the Troubles. Some of these young people were born in the early 1990s when the political violence was ending and the peace process was taking place, finally culminating in the historic signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement/GFA. Nevertheless, a Belfast Youth Development Study (BYDS) carried out in 2003 indicates that Northern Ireland's youth are actively involved in the drug

induced criminal activities ("a third of the young people under study were reported being in trouble with the police (31 percent)…there was a clear association between drug use and contact with the Criminal Justice System…over half of those young people who had tried an illicit drug had also reported being in trouble with the police (56 percent) compared with one fifth of nonusers (20 percent)" (Study, 2010). In addition, young people also have become victim of social, emotional, and psychological health problems or trauma (McAloney, McCrystal, Percy, & McCartan, 2009). The Northern Ireland Crime Surveys (2001, 1998) suggest that "the most likely victims of violent crime are young males aged between 16 and 24 years, with almost one in six young men reporting that they had been the target of a violent crime" (Sam, Ken, & Karen, 2006, p. 2) .

Young people and children are getting exposed to violence by observing, as well as listening to stories of violent activities from their immediate family and community members (McAloney et al., 2009). This phenomenon is particularly common in Northern Ireland. In this way, the violent legacy of the Troubles may have been passed now onto the new generation through a "social remembering process" (McGrellis, 2005, p. 56). This phenomenon in turn has manifested itself in higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and a burgeoning suicide rate among the youth (Thiessen et al., 2010). Fulfilling young people's basic human needs are also important because these needs are the "primary motivating factors in both development and conflict dynamics. Individuals strive to fulfill their basic human needs (security, access and acceptance) through the formation of communal identity groups" (Azar, 2002, p. 18). The resources needed to provide for young people's needs are fast diminishing in Northern Ireland and the funded peace projects are not yet able to deliver a sense of security to them while many young working class people lack a proper education and are forced to immigrate. Their sense of frustration not only hurts them individually; it also motivates them to join various dissident paramilitary groups to seek a sense of community, as well as to seek new thrills.

In the aftermath of the Northern Ireland peace process, new kinds of social problems have surfaced. Out of all crimes committed in Northern Ireland, the illicit drug business has increased under the influence of dissident paramilitaries who have contributed towards this burgeoning trend (Higgins, Percy, & Mc Crystal, 2004). For example, one of our respondents opined that during the Troubles young people were less involved in drug abuse and the drug trade. He explained that today the loss of social control by Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries has created a vacuum where drug lords now thrive and the PSNI has failed to curb their activities. Before the 1998 GFA, the paramilitaries had the capacity to deliver some sort of 'drum court justice' that prevented drug businesses from growing. In addition, during the Troubles, young people were ideologically motivated and thereby remained committed to nationalist goals, which discouraged them from indulging in anti-social activities (McEvoy, 2006). Now drug traffickers supply Northern Irish and Border Area youth with narcotics either to escape from their frustration or to earn easy money by selling drugs to other youth.

Promoting Youth Development

In this study, our respondents mentioned more than twenty projects that receive funding under the IFI and/or EU Peace III Fund to nurture youth development. Most of the projects are still ongoing and our respondents explained at length how the projects are contributing toward peacebuilding by focusing on youth development. For example, a community

group leader working in the youth sector in the Border Area expressed the types of projects her NGO initiates, which includes the promotion of social justice for young people. A Derry community group leader also highlighted how her project had created an atmosphere of understanding between both communities, which is essential for reconciliation. Another community group leader from Derry explained how one of his funded projects is influencing a changing future political culture by training the youth while the other Derry community group leader outlined the importance of a funded youth project aimed at networking and providing peer education and leadership training. In addition, one community group leader from Derry opined that his project helped the city's youth by providing them with employment training and also in motivating them to abstain from substance abuse. One community group leader in Derry also mentioned how his project laid the ground for offering restorative justice to young offenders. Further, another community group leader from Derry mentioned how her youth club is providing community education to prepare young people for future jobs by providing them with a platform for learning and individual development. Improving economic condition was taken up as one of the priority sectors in Northern Ireland and one community group leader from Derry mentioned how her project is providing an economic base for training Derry's youth so that they become economically self-sufficient. In the same vein, another community group leader from Derry pointed out how her project bridged the gap between both communities, deconstructed young people's mindsets, and is working towards bringing people from different cultures together. However, a community group leader from the Border Area informed that his organization has created a social platform for young people to connect together on various apolitical issues, which is one of the cornerstones for peacebuilding. Further, a community group leader from Derry also expressed how his work in youth justice (Agency, 2003) helps to protect young people from repeat offending so that they can seek legal support. Moreover, a community group leader from the Border Area mentioned how her group formed a youth work consortium to challenge young people's attitudes towards discrimination and racism. A community group leader from Derry also elaborated how a Peace III funded project assisted with training young people in a collaborative environment where they learned to tolerate and get to know each other. A community group leader from Derry also described how his project is training the youth to understand equality so that they become more tolerant. In addition, he explained how he is creating and managing facilities where young people feel accepted and welcome. In addition, a community group leader from Derry mentioned how storytelling methods helped young people to bridge the bi-communal divide.

Discussion

We explored some of the projects' contributions toward youth empowerment through the narratives of various NGO community group leaders. We found that , in general, the projects have positively contributed toward peacebuilding by providing platforms for a) individuals for employment training; b) infrastructural support for individual trainers; c) community meetings that facilitate fostering cross community relationships; d) changing traditional political culture through training and motivation; e) nurturing creative alternatives to share and discuss many issues other than political violence to shift young peoples' paradigm of thinking away from violence; (f) creating an environment of working together and nurturing friendship; (g) creating leadership training and peer education; (h) helping young people to

deconstruct stereotypes and understand the vicious effects of discrimination; (i) supporting and encouraging young people to use information, and communication technology (ICT) to connect and share ideas; (j) training youth to abstain from substance abuse as well as creating opportunities to raise young peoples' spiritual needs and providing them with moral and positive values; (k) providing a new creative energy for restorative justice and reconciliation; (l) providing cross-community as well as a cross-Border community platform (for example, the All-Ireland Youth Arts Cultural Network) for arts training as a means of providing cultural space; (m) infusing confidence in the minds of the young people through vocational training; (n) preparing emerging societal leaders; and (o) using storytelling methods to dispel myths and to create a shared space to discuss past traumas.

The conflict in Northern Ireland came a long way and it has also experienced changes in terms of conflict intervention (moving from violence to political settlement); however, in this article we propose to gauge the impact of these peacebuilding projects based on a 'conflict transformation' approach because a conflict transformation process locks into a "continual focus on the question of change" (Lederach et al., 2007, p. 18). "Good peacebuilding practices are very similar to good sustainable development strategies; for example, building sufficient community participation and consensus is a requirement for both successful peacebuilding and successful development…sustainable peace requires a convergence of activities and actors, in different spheres and at different levels, from local to global. It can be difficult, if not impossible, to attribute particular changes to particular processes or projects" (Lederach, Neufeldt, & Culbertson, 2007, p. 2). In addition, although overt political violence subsided in Northern Ireland after the ceasefire, youth anti-social violence now prevails that necessitates exploring some of our study projects' effects in all four dimensions of conflict transformation. Moreover, Lederach et al. (2007, p. 20) contend that peacebuilding needs to be "understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships" and to create an infrastructure that is not "merely interested in 'ending' something that is not desired [rather] oriented toward the building of relationships that in their totality form new patterns, processes, and structures" (Lederach et al., 2007, pp.20, 84–85). The external funding has supported local community groups as they undertake many projects with various objectives and goals in empowering youth development while also contributing to peacebuilding by bringing about changes using Lederach and his colleagues peacebuilding model (2007).

Conclusion

Our respondents highlighted some of the causes of youth violence in Northern Ireland. One of the major findings is the prevailing lack of political leadership both at the micro and macro level that is hampering to devise any long-term intervention mechanism to stop youth violence. They also pointed out young people's xenophobic attitudes directed against the traveller community, as well as the juvenile thrills and adventures of young people who take part in violent activities that is counterproductive to the overall peace process. Finally, young people's basic human needs are denied to them as they experience negative job growth. More so, the youth are impacted by the transmission of the past trauma of the Troubles; the growing trend of drug abuse and the drug trade; and the negative effect of the segregated education system.

Our respondents also expressed that their peacebuilding projects are contributing positively toward changing young people's attitudes by creating a vibrant creative social space. In addition, these projects provided means to increase cross community interactions, by challenging negative stereotyping. Some of the projects also provided training opportunities for young people so that they can join the skilled workforce, which helped them to get gainful employment. In addition, the projects make psychological support available to young people (for example, counselling services for young offenders) and most importantly with leadership training so that they can become good productive citizens. At the government level many initiatives are also being undertaken to boost grassroots level efforts. Although, many of the projects in our study will not be continued once the funding ends in 2013, the residual effects of the training and skill development will remain with the NGO staff and the young people. However, despite our respondents' optimistic responses, Northern Irish society is rife with violence and many Catholic Republican and Protestant Loyalist young people are getting involved in undesirable dissident paramilitary activities. Invariably, this current anti-social behaviour of the Northern Ireland youth questions the real effectiveness of these youth development projects. Nevertheless, if we take stock of sectarian (i.e. politically motivated) and non-sectarian (i.e. criminal) violence in Northern Ireland, the frequency and intensity of sectarian violence is on a steady decline (this trend was also recently reported in The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report published on February 29, 2012 stating that "violence has declined but it most certainly has not gone away") (Paul, 2011).

Overall, there are many positive steps being undertaken to improve the conditions of young people and at the macro-political level there are positive changes taking place in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. For example, during Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee celebration Sinn Fein leader, Mr. Martin McGuinness, told the Queen that their meeting was a powerful signal that peacebuilding requires leadership" (BBC, 2012). Mr. Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein also echoed the same sentiment while speaking to reporters in Dublin about the Queen's visit stating that "it brings our journey of relationship building within this island and between these islands onto a new plane." Leveraging all of these current positive political trends Northern Ireland's young people can now benefit and become more hopeful for the future; however, the crucial aspect still depends on how these grassroots peacebuilding projects are sustained with the support of creative minds as well as a socio-political-economic system that continue to empower the youth by removing the historical baggage of the past. It is hoped that they can now embrace a new future based on equality, justice, and inclusivity.

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