

Laying the Foundations for Peace

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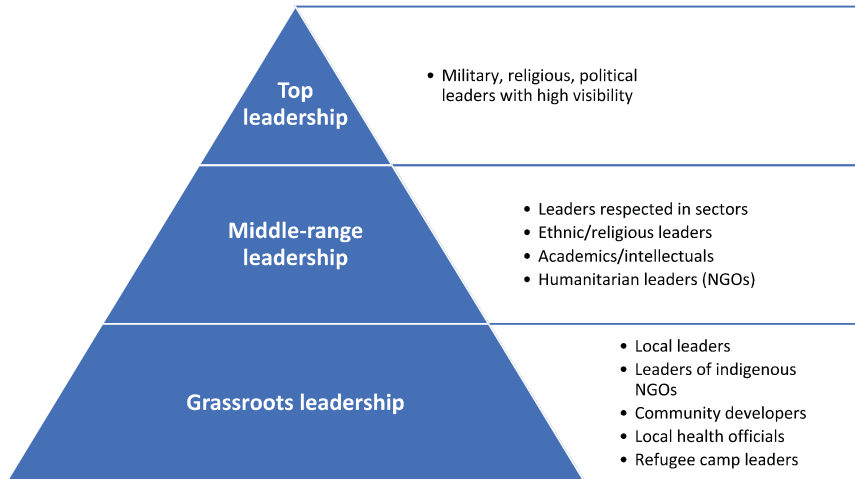


The flurry of plays, banquets, seminars, webinars and documentaries commemorating and celebrating the 25th anniversary of the 1998 *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* this year generally had one thing in common. They tended to highlight the contributions of those individuals who were ‘at the table’ and directly involved in negotiating the *Agreement*. We had revelations and reminders about the various exchanges – in the public domain or in secret – that led to the choreography of talks, ceasefires, and eventually elections that determined what Northern Ireland politicians would be granted seats at the table, ultimately culminating in the referenda north and south.

The contributions of the thousands of ordinary women and men working in their communities – who may or may not have thought of themselves as ‘peacebuilders’ – have largely been lost in this narrative. But without them, our peace process and our precious, yet less than perfect, *Agreement* would never have been.

In the past quarter-century, many academic careers have been built upon dissecting and analysing conflicts worldwide, not least in the Irish context.

John Paul Lederach was one theorist whose work had considerable resonance among community-based practitioners here. The Lederach Pyramid below represents a series of interdependent layers emphasising a mass movement of civil society and grassroots organisations. Simultaneously the activities of top- and middle-level leaderships are taking place.¹



Lederach defined peacebuilding as the attempt to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions at the root of conflict to underpin peacemaking and peacekeeping processes. Peacebuilding aims to address both the causes and effects of conflict. It is a process of transforming from a society characterised by conflict and division to one based on equality and justice.²

Lederach’s model incorporates political developments in conjunction with initiatives undertaken by civil society. Those at the grassroots have often experienced the conflict most intensely. Therefore, local leadership is most suitable for facilitating community-led peacebuilding efforts. The ‘top-down’ approach is ineffective in creating a sustainable, peaceful society.³

A small industry of conflict resolution theorists has developed their analyses of multi-track diplomacy with similar pyramids, not always with Lederach’s emphasis on the importance of community-led initiatives. Readers will be relieved that I will not rehearse these theories further here. Nevertheless, the 25th anniversary events would appear to confirm a conceptual hierarchy

of peace process ‘players’. At the top are the ‘peacemakers’, many of whom are household names; at the bottom are the generally anonymous ‘peacebuilders,’ now largely written out of the script.

This does not diminish the exceptional impacts of the European Union’s PEACE programmes (of which more below) and certain other funders that have supported grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. When the peace process has stalled, community-based peace projects have played a vital role in maintaining and developing relationships within and between communities. The PEACE programmes have supported community-based peacebuilding initiatives in a challenging political environment.

Perhaps the first shibboleth to slay is the ‘bravery’ of the politicians for their ‘management’ of their constituencies and ‘delivering’ the vote for peace and reconciliation. In truth, the people were then and are now frequently far in advance of the politicians who are meant to represent them. My purpose here is to highlight just a few of the community-led initiatives that helped to lay the foundations for what is now known as the peace process and, ultimately, the *Agreement*.

Women’s Support Network

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, many, if not most, grassroots initiatives were framed as ‘community development’ rather than ‘peace projects’. The conceptual framework was a social change based on equality and social justice, a rights-based approach, often resisting compliance with an externally-imposed ‘good relations’ agenda. Nevertheless, there was, in fact, considerable cross-community engagement and once funding began to flow, some ‘back-to-back’ projects were developed for mutual gain. However, alliances made based on genuine shared interests were the most effective.

A particular feature of the mid-to-late 1980s was the emergence of local women’s centres alongside several issue-based women’s organisations similar to those campaigning for women’s rights and gender equality elsewhere.⁴ The women’s centres were different. While their ethos was unapologetically feminist, they were based in working-class neighbourhoods, generally areas that were among those most affected by the conflict and high on the indices of deprivation. As well as campaigning and advocacy, the centres offered services to local women such as information and advice, informal education (accredited courses generally came later), drop-in

facilities, personal support and counselling, always supported by childcare. The centres were a lifeline for many women, especially single parents and those isolated in their homes. They also provided some employment for local women. Their activities tended to be delivered with a patchwork of funding and a lot of volunteer effort. A limited amount of local government funding offered some stability and helped to reassure other funders.⁵

Within local communities, there was still a range of needs to be addressed by those women who were often balancing enforced single parenthood through the imprisonment of male partners and relatives, dealing with the trauma of bereavement or the care of the injured, seeking to prevent children from becoming caught up in the on-going violence; responding to community expectations and struggling to cope with inadequate incomes increasingly the target of UK conservative government cuts. Local self-help women's groups came together to discuss things and offer mutual support in the single identity areas where people lived, defined by 10-foot-high 'peace walls' in Belfast.⁶

In 1989, Belfast City Council informed Falls Women's Centre and Shankill Women's Centre of grant reductions. Simultaneously, Ballybeen Women's Centre received news of funding cuts from Castlereagh Borough Council. The Falls Women's Centre is located in a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist/Republican area; the Shankill and Ballybeen Women's Centres are in predominantly Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist areas.

Ballybeen Women's Centre had previously surveyed the Ballybeen estate and, not surprisingly, identified high levels of deprivation and social need. The women proceeded to convene several public agencies to address some of the problems and successfully lobbied to have Making Belfast Work extended to Dundonald. Thus, these women who didn't know their place had already annoyed some local councillors, who had made no such efforts. The DUP-dominated council's wrath escalated when women from the Falls joined the Ballybeen women on a picket of the council, resulting in complicated relations between the centre and the council for a very long time.

The threatened funding cuts catalysed the establishment of the Women's Support Network (WSN), which gradually expanded to include a wide variety of women's projects and infrastructure groups in Northern Ireland.

Ireland's first woman president, Mary Robinson, was elected in 1990 and, in February 1991, invited the WSN to visit Áras An Uachtarán. The northern women ensured this was more than tea and a photo opportunity. They used the visit to inform the president of the needs of their communities and the challenges they faced.

The women's assertion that they were not a 'reconciliation group' took the president somewhat aback. When asked why they were so adamant, they said:

Because we're fed up with being supported as a reconciliation group but not as a women's group. In other words, they won't support us for what we're really about. They'll only fund us if we're a reconciliation group.

Neither side wanted to be sanitised or cleaned up. The west Belfast women, in particular, wanted to be valued for their loyalty to their traditions as much as their involvement in cross-community activity.

But I think they recognised ... that they were part of a very advanced reconciliation ... They didn't want to be homogenised; they wanted to maintain the difference and find strength in that difference, respect the difference.⁷

The president visited Belfast in February 1992 at the invitation of WSN, "a coalition of women's organisations from the most disadvantaged areas, and from both traditions ... at the Equality Commission offices in Belfast."⁸ It was breaking new ground for the president, who 'informed' the Irish government she would be crossing the border but did not ask permission. The visit was the first working visit by an Irish president to any part of Northern Ireland.⁹ Nigel Dodds, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Lord Mayor, refused to meet her, and she was denied diplomatic security protection.¹⁰

The WSN returned to the Áras in 1992 to present a copy of their recently published study of Northern Ireland women's groups, *Grant-Aided...or Taken for Granted?* When a group of 200 from the same women's network came one beautiful summer's day, Mary remembers the sun streaming in the windows of the Áras drawing room—

... and everyone sitting on the floor and the fags being smoked and the very real sense of solidarity. At one stage, I left them, and I

remember looking down from upstairs to the garden, and there was a wonderful interaction going on. I had a sense of dialogue expanding all the time. All I was doing was staying in touch with it and giving it that recognition and oxygen of support and respect.¹¹

Behind-the-scene communications continued between these visits, and the doors to the Áras were opened to many other northern community groups. Over time, the president made 18 visits to Northern Ireland but she would recall: “The most significant, certainly the most controversial, was my visit to Belfast in June 1993. ... There was no ceasefire and no peace process at that stage, and the violence was escalating.”¹² The famous handshake with Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, took place during this visit.

I knew this was going to be difficult. Nobody was going into West Belfast, and nobody was meeting with Gerry Adams; ... it was still illegal to broadcast his voice on radio or television. This community in west Belfast felt completely isolated ... Yet it had a vibrant community; it was full of good people working hard to counter the lack of facilities and resources and the discrimination they suffered. That is what I wanted to honour.¹³

“I will never forget,” wrote Mary Robinson, “the palpable sense of excitement when I went into that community hall. Everyone was excited and knew that something had happened, some taboo had been broken.” This ice-breaking exercise contributed to an evolving peace process, including secret British government/Sinn Féin contacts and the Adams/Hume/Reynolds dialogue. Later, there were other prestigious visits to west Belfast by Albert Reynolds, Bertie Ahern and Ron Brown, President Clinton’s Commerce Secretary.¹⁴

Dialogue with WSN continued. The Windsor Women’s Centre in the Loyalist village area in south Belfast invited President Robinson to visit in September 1996. During the visit, protesters picketed and shouted abuse: “Go home, Fenian bastard”. The following day, the centre was fire-bombed, causing extensive damage. Over the next two months, the centre was attacked seven times, including three arson attacks and personal threats against the mainly local staff. Plans for an event involving members of women’s groups from across Belfast, voluntary organisations and trade unions to show solidarity with the centre had to be called off after a counter-protest was planned by the group that had originally picketed the centre.¹⁵ Today, Windsor Women’s

Centre is still going strong, working within a community development framework to develop and promote equality of opportunity and champion practices and policies to better the lives of women and their families.

Clár Nua: The west Belfast community agenda

After the 1994 ceasefires, a coalition of eight ‘umbrella’ organisations for Nationalist West Belfast¹⁶ came together to discuss their shared concern that the potential of the anticipated ‘peace dividend’ should be most effectively maximised to meet the real needs of the west Belfast community. An ambitious and intensive consultation over six weeks culminated in the Clár Nua conference in November 1994. Discussion papers were presented at ten policy workshops and – based on these discussions and later written submissions – the *Clár Nua Report* was published soon after. The strategy covered housing, human rights, economic development, language and culture, women, health, education and young people.

In her opening address to the conference, Eileen Howell, Director of Falls Community Council, said:

*The time has come to end those processes through which others decided what was best for us. Gone are the days of mediation between policy decision-makers and the west Belfast community. This community demands a process which listens to us, which involves us, a process in which decisions are made with us, not for us.*¹⁷

Early in the new year, Clár Nua groups set out a plan to target power holders and influencers – the Northern Ireland Office, Making Belfast Work, Belfast City Council, Chambers of Commerce and all the political parties in both jurisdictions. The Taoiseach John Bruton and President Robinson would receive the report, and a presentation was made to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

In March, Clár Nua sent a submission to the European Commission regarding the anticipated EU Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland (PEACE I). This document summarised Clár Nua’s background and the principles the conference agreed upon.

We believe that there now exists the momentum to initiate real change so that the disadvantage and political conflict of the past will

no longer be in evidence. If this change is to be realised, then the universal principles of equality, equity and parity of esteem must be recognised and implemented. This will require a reconstruction framework embracing economic justice and the political, social, cultural and human rights of our community. Clár Nua believes that real and effective reconstruction can only be achieved with the full participation of our community at all levels. ... We appeal to the European Commission and the European Parliament to ensure that the programme's fundamental objective, support to the peace process be guaranteed in both the content and delivery of the programme.¹⁸

The submission went on to make several detailed proposals about the content and administration of the new programme.

In April 1995, Clár Nua made a second submission to the European Commission welcoming the planned Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE I). It endorsed the intention that the programme be 'social inclusion and reconciliation proofed'; but expressed concern that the social inclusion guidelines directed that partnerships should be "designed and managed on a cross-community basis":

We believe that this narrow definition of reconciliation would appear to pander to tokenism rather than addressing the needs of communities. It does not recognise the developmental process which will lead to full social inclusion and real reconciliation based on equality, equity and parity of esteem, nor does it reflect the complexity of conflict in Ireland or of its communities and their relationships.

If this is to be the basis of the 'social inclusion and reconciliation proofing' then this clause would exclude worthwhile, valid and much needed projects as it links the development of a community to the consent of another community. This runs contrary to the targeting of resources to tackle disadvantage and ignores the rights and needs of communities.¹⁹

US President Bill Clinton appointed Senator George J. Mitchell as his Special Envoy for Northern Ireland in 1995. At first, his remit was on economic development, and a team under Charles 'Chuck' Meissner, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, supported Mitchell's team. One of the first interventions was a US trade mission that would include west Belfast. Community organisations from the Falls and Shankill areas came together to

assist the Department of Commerce staff plan the trade mission. The Industrial Development Board (IDB) and Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) were dismissive of the communities' representations and actively hostile to proposals for serious investment in north and west Belfast. In contrast, while Mitchell and his team became more engaged in the 'political' side of things, the Department of Commerce people were positively involved with community groups working for economic and social development.

In May 1995, when President Clinton hosted a major conference in Washington, community groups participated in consultations about the format, and a large contingent of community activists received invitations. Clár Nua made the case to White House representatives that the conference should encompass a range of economic development issues rather than focus narrowly on industrial development promotion. The conference would be taking place in the context of the peace process and should be clearly linked to that process. Inward investment should target the areas most affected by neglect and discrimination. Agencies promoting investment should engage directly with people living in those communities. "The possibilities, assuming there is a genuine commitment to consultation and mutual respect, are infinite."²⁰ Clár Nua would use the Washington conference "to explain to potential investors that they can make a significant contribution to the peace process – or exacerbate existing problems and undermine the peace process – through their investment choices."²¹

Following a plane crash in April 1996 that claimed the lives of US Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, Chuck Meissner, and 33 others, the US State Department took on a more prominent role, inevitably more interested in political negotiations and less supportive of community development. However, community groups were still invited to the follow-up 1996 conference in Philadelphia.

Despite intensive lobbying, no overall funding package in support of the Clár Nua strategic framework was forthcoming. A purportedly friendly departmental official suggested that west Belfast community representatives were too strident in their demands. Making Belfast Work officials suggested that Shankill Road groups should have been involved. Nevertheless, since then, the Clár Nua agenda has informed many of the social, economic and cultural developments in west Belfast and beyond.

The Springvale ‘Peaceline’ campus

In 1993, the University of Ulster (now Ulster University) first announced its plan for a ‘Peaceline Campus’ on a site between Belfast’s Falls and Shankill areas. Like many others, they had their eye on the much talked about ‘peace dividend’, and the university was selling it as both a peace project and a regeneration project. It would require external funding, such as the EU Regional Development Funds, to be viable and external funding would not be forthcoming without community support.

Community leaders on both sides were initially dubious. A significant concern was safety; although peace was in the air, the situation on the ground remained dangerous. Still, the university proposed a multi-million-pound investment, and both communities badly needed regeneration. The Foundry Regeneration Trust on the Nationalist side and the Forthriver Regeneration Trust on the Unionist side had been working to encourage economic and social development in their areas, which suffered from significant economic and social deprivation and educational underachievement. Early discussions with the university were not inspiring. While they waxed lyrical about the economic benefits for local communities, these amounted to not much more than some student housing and small-scale retail – pizza parlours were mentioned – serving the student population.

Eventually, after many difficult discussions and the inclusion of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE), the Springvale Community Campus Partnership was set up in 1997. A Memorandum of Understanding between educational bodies and community representatives was signed. The partnership included the two trusts and several other community leaders, including Billy Hutchinson of the Progressive Unionist Party. Again, it was a situation when local people sharing common interests could build alliances without compromising their political allegiances.

As the Northern Ireland Audit Office report later indicated, there was a very high elevation of expectations. Eileen Howell of Falls Community Council advocated a radical suggestion that would have been truly transformative. She proposed a ‘health’ corridor linking the university to the teaching colleges and the City and Royal Victoria Hospitals. The university and new industrial development would build a research cluster based on biotechnologies. Community activists worked hard to develop this idea. Visits were made to New York City University and community development

corporations in the United States. Many conversations took place with US policymakers and potential investors.

The proposal was for a £71.7 million project with three main elements:

- Main campus: To be shared between 1,500 further and 1,500 higher education students, at an estimated cost of £59 million.
- Community outreach centre: To act as a hub for various community and outreach programmes and as a training facility (£4 million).
- Applied research centre: To draw on existing research in the university, stimulate inward investment and develop local companies in start-up units (£8 million).

After almost five years of complex negotiations, the Springvale Educational Village Project was officially launched. US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair cut the first sod on 3 September 1998. Professor Patrick Murphy, Director of BIFHE, said: “Today we begin the new Northern Ireland.” University of Ulster’s Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lord Smith of Clifton, said the start of the campus was “a triumph for the people of north and west Belfast” and “a symbol of hope for the future of Northern Ireland”.²²

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was the largest external funder; it contributed a total of £8.2 million. IFI Chairman Willie McCarter praised what he called a “particularly imaginative project. ...The creation of an inner city campus in west Belfast, which has endured so much of the violence of the Troubles, will prove to be a major regenerative engine and will contribute directly to reconciliation in the area.”²³

In a letter to Mr McCarter, President Clinton wrote: “You should know that my view of the fund is that it has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in community regeneration, creating the conditions for peace to thrive.”²⁴ In two years, the first phase was to be completed.

In October 2002, five years after it had submitted the Springvale proposal, the university announced that it was withdrawing from the project due to its concerns about affordability. Up to that point, the project had spent £9.2 million. Regarding the planned facilities, only the community outreach centre was complete, with a cost of £4 million covered by funding from the Millennium Commission and a private donor. Building work on the main campus and applied research centre had yet to start.²⁵

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report was scathing. It said that direct losses amounted to £3.6 million but that overall costs, in terms of time expended by government departments and local communities, “cannot be quantified”. There were “poor financial planning” and “unduly optimistic” viability predictions. Damningly, it added:

Of particular concern to the committee was the pattern that, when the university wanted Springvale, it was affordable and viable but, in the later stages, when the university clearly had a change of heart, it became unaffordable and unviable. Indeed, the contrast between the early optimism and the later assessments of viability is so great as to raise the concern within the committee that project appraisals were not only carried out at below the appropriate standard but may even have been manipulated to get the desired results.²⁶

Today, Ulster University’s newly-expanded city centre campus “is situated in the artistic and cultural centre of the city, the Cathedral Quarter. ... the campus spans an increasing and exciting range of subjects, including computing, engineering, business, politics, policy, law, communication, sports, architecture, hospitality, event management, photography and digital animation.”²⁷ Medicine and Health Sciences are located at the Derry/Londonderry campus. The Community Learning Centre at Belfast Metropolitan College (formerly BIFHE) occupies the Springvale site, “providing conference facilities and office space to businesses, community groups and the public sector.”²⁸

PEACE I consultative forum

The EU’s Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland 1995-1999 (PEACE I) brought a different perspective and many new opportunities. The impacts of the EU programmes (we have had PEACE II, III, and IV and are now in PEACE PLUS) cannot be overestimated. Most of these have been well documented elsewhere and came after the 1998 *Agreement*, so they are not for discussion here. However, the first of the programmes was unique because it is the only one with a Consultative Forum involving a wide range of civic society actors as an integral part of the programme structure.

One of the game-changing features was the EU’s insistence on the ‘partnership principle’; that is, the statutory bodies were required – at

different levels – to engage civil society actors in designing and implementing the programmes. Subsequent programmes never repeated the PEACE I Consultative Forum; like the Northern Ireland Civic Forum written into the 1998 *Agreement*, it was the victim of hostility by politicians and influential civil servants. The rationale for PEACE I was unambiguous:

... there is a forceful argument that the single most important constraint on Northern Ireland's economic and social development has been the existence of the community conflict in the region ...

*The importance of the socio-economic difficulties in the context of the Peace Initiative is that disadvantage often feeds and sustains the conflict. It is frequently the most deprived areas which have suffered the most and been most involved in the conflict. It is axiomatic, therefore, that socio-economic difficulties must be tackled if the peace process is to be embedded.*²⁹

The Consultative Forum was the first of its type in Europe. It had a responsibility “to ensure that the principles of peace and reconciliation and social inclusion are reflected in the administration of the programme.”³⁰ It had 80 members (60 from Northern Ireland and 20 from the border counties); the membership comprised representatives drawn from the voluntary sectors, the community sector, local government, employers and employee organisations, representatives of women’s groups, the agricultural and fishing industries, the education sector, statutory bodies and other interests.³¹

The forum had some significant rights and responsibilities. These included:

- drawing the attention of the Programme Monitoring Committee to any issues of concern about programme implementation;
- to be consulted about any significant amendments to the programme;
- to comment on the annual report of the programme before its adoption by the monitoring committee;
- to offer an opinion on the outcome of any interim assessment of the programme’s effectiveness before the monitoring committee adopts such an assessment.³²

Over the programme's life, the forum would give opinions on the annual reports and mid-term review, raising issues of sustainability, additionality, complementarity, bureaucracy and accountability. While fulfilling these responsibilities, the forum frequently conflicted with Northern Ireland's Department for Finance and Personnel (DFP). For example, it recommended withholding approval of the 1998 programme annual report for its failure to provide basic financial data; for failing to show allocations, commitment and spending levels; and for providing data in inconsistent periods. In his review of the PEACE II Programme, Brian Harvey noted that the European Court of Auditors' report on PEACE I had found significant problems with PEACE I "almost universally on the government side."³³ An achievement that could be credited to the forum was establishing the Special EU Programmes Body to manage the cross-border EU programmes. Project promoters no longer have to negotiate for 'match' funding from public bodies in the two jurisdictions. No small thing in this island's political and fiscal context and envied in other EU cross-border regions.

The PEACE I programme was designed to catalyse middle and grassroots activities to reinforce the climate for top-level negotiations, compensating for the conflict's costs and expediting overall development. The Consultative Forum, often to the chagrin of the programme's civil servants, was effectively catalysed from the start.

During its first meeting, members received guidance that the Consultative Forum would convene twice a year during office hours, reimbursing participant expenses. The forum came into existence without a constitution or standing orders. It was evident that a considerable disparity existed between what was required from the forum as set out in the programme and the intentions of the DFP; the dead hand of which required frequent addressing. From its earliest days, the forum found itself embroiled in a struggle to get a budget. Much time was taken up with negotiating and lobbying for the payment of basic administration costs. Two years after the forum was established, there was still no agreed budget for the secretariat, and it took the intervention of European Commission representatives to get funding released to provide additional consultancy support to the forum.³⁴

Forum members very quickly had to establish a set of structures and procedures that would allow them to carry out the tasks defined for them by the monitoring committee. Even though most delegates had never worked together – or even met – before, there was much enthusiasm and

commitment; two meetings per year, they quickly recognised, would be insufficient. “The forum was considered by many delegates as a ground-breaking opportunity to ensure that the programme really was ‘special’ and delivered real social and economic change to communities most in need.”³⁵

From the inception, there was a broad consensus that the principle of a single programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties should be embedded in the Consultative Forum structures and ways of working. The joint chairs were nominated separately by delegates from each side of the border and then elected by the membership as a whole at the second meeting of the forum in July 1996; they were deemed two halves of a single chairperson. At the first meeting, delegates agreed on establishing an independent secretariat, appointing the Sligo Chamber of Commerce after a tendering process. In October 1996, a monitoring and evaluation working group was established. By November 1996, a steering group became formally constituted; its 14 members were drawn from business, trade unions, rural development, farming, local government and the community and voluntary sector. The steering group met 31 times between July 1996 and December 1999; and was newly reconstituted in June 1998, March 1999 and June 1999, as some people withdrew and others volunteered.³⁶ Early in 1997, the steering group prepared an ambitious two-year development plan and a detailed work plan. In all, there were 12 forum meetings, with an average attendance of 40, over the programme’s life.

Brian Harvey reported a feeling in the political and administrative establishment that the PEACE I programme had been ‘captured’ by the voluntary and community sector:

There was some pressure to push back the territorial gains of the sector, which were resented by some elected representatives. PEACE I was ‘too populist’, and civic society was ‘getting out of hand’.

There was strong pressure from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Confederation of British Industry for a more economic focus. Informal comments were made that PEACE I had supported ‘dodgy social projects’ and that PEACE II should go for substantial, sustainable, long-lasting economic projects ... One leading UUP representative reportedly told the monitoring committee that the new programme should be ‘economically driven’, with no more ‘waste’ of money on voluntary and community sector projects.³⁷

The European Commission, however, rejected the draft operational programme because it was “unclear, imprecise, failed to provide sufficient information, paid insufficient attention to a number of issues (e.g. the horizontal principles) or to the indicators.” It insufficiently linked north and south, failed to highlight the programme’s distinctiveness, inadequately identified target groups and failed to draw out the lessons from PEACE I. “The Commission questioned the absence of the Consultative Forum and the lack of justification for its omission.”³⁸

Ultimately, there was no PEACE II Consultative Forum, even though it was an “important feature of ... PEACE I ... was positively noted by the mid-term review and the European Court of Auditors. It ... [was] dropped from the [new] programme” without explanation.

Granted the importance of the forum and the valuable role it had played, this was extraordinary and deserves further investigation. ... It represented not merely an ‘innovative tool’ (European Court of Auditors, 2000; Coopers & Lybrand, 1997), but a practical working out of the ideas of new forms of participative governance in modern European civil society.

The absence of a consultative forum in PEACE II was explained at official level in terms that the forum was unproductive, costly and unrepresentative. This view does not appear to be substantiated by the evidence. The cost of the forum was slightly over £45,000 a year (1998, 1999), small compared to the programme as a whole (€500m) or even to its modest technical assistance budget. The forum experienced considerable difficulty in getting any financial assistance at all ... A considerable amount of voluntary time and energy went into the forum. ... It is certainly true that the forum gave critical opinions.³⁹

The evidence of the shortcomings of the forum was cited as a consultants’ report commissioned by the DFP and the Republic of Ireland’s Department of Finance (DoF) (1999).

In reality, the report had much to say about the forum that was positive, such as its qualitative impact, the balance of membership, its commitment to cross-border working, its success in raising a long list of issues, its enlistment of voluntary effort (up to 750 person days), the depth in which it considered matters, its ability to sustain itself on

limited resources and its low cost (less than £150,000 overall). It did what it set out to do. The consultants were critical of its under-resourcing, the monitoring committee for not taking it seriously enough and nominating bodies for not ensuring that their representatives attended. Although they were critical of some aspects of its work (so was the forum itself), for example, attendance levels, there were attenuating factors. They described the view that it was taken over by the voluntary and community sector as unfair and incorrect.”⁴⁰

As Brian Harvey commented, the Consultative Forum disappeared without options being weighed and considered; it was “airbrushed out of the heritage of the programme... doomed by a consultants’ report which had only limited circulation and which was, to say the least, selectively interpreted by government.”⁴¹

Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered just a few examples of where civil society groups and individuals came together, in Lederach’s words, attempting to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions that lie at the root of conflict, whose efforts underpinned the processes of peacemaking and peacekeeping on this island. I hope I have demonstrated that effective coalitions for positive social and economic change that can transform the causes of conflict can be built without asking or expecting those involved to abandon their identities or political allegiances. These cases also show that challenging the status quo can meet considerable resistance from people and institutions not used to being challenged. There is much unfinished business in our peace process. The efforts of civil society actors for social and economic justice before the *Agreement* set the agenda for the *Agreement*. I believe many of the changes since then reflect their legacy. But space needs to be created for a new generation to build on what has gone before. Much has been gained, but considerable ground has been lost as well. We must not allow further erosion of that legacy.

Endnotes

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- ⁸ Robinson, M. (2012) *Everybody Matters: a memoir*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p. 172.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 172-173.
- ¹⁰ *The Life of Eileen Howell* (2023) Falls Community Council: Belfast, p. 40.
- ¹¹ O'Leary and Burke, op. cit., p. 161.
- ¹² Mary Robinson, op. cit., p. 173.
- ¹³ Ibid. p. 174.
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