

# **Building Peace Through Participation: A Case Study of Northern Ireland**

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**Abstract:** Post conflict peace building is a relatively new and important concept within the context of peace research, but also one that has gradually been put into practice by the international community in many countries. However, an accurate analysis of the implementation of the so-called UN post conflict “standard operational procedure” shows that this has not always been successful in achieving longer term peace objectives. Here we argue that one of the major flaws of such a model has been the tendency to impose templates of peace building that often neglect local people and their resources and skills for building peace. We advocate for an alternative approach which stresses the centrality of participation to sustainable peace building. This argument is illustrated with the case of Northern Ireland and the implementation of the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme, which has sought to directly involve local populations in all stages of the peace building process.

Ever since its creation in 1945, the United Nations have been involved, among other activities, in conflict resolution and peacekeeping missions. However, the end of the Cold War brought with it an increase in the number of conflicts worldwide, sharing as a common feature their internal character. This dramatic new reality has obviously put a number of challenges to the UN and its work aimed at the maintenance of international peace and security. Progressively, a new type of concern emerged within the international community in general, and within the UN in particular, related to the need and obligation to participate in and contribute to the post-conflict rehabilitation of war-torn countries. The concept of post-conflict peace building, first mentioned and referred to in UN's Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali 1992 *Agenda for Peace*, thus emerged defined as *“an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict, rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife, and tackling the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression.”* (Boutros-Ghali, 1992)<sup>1</sup>

The underlying concern was the need to include a more comprehensive approach in post-conflict peace building, by identifying and supporting structures which tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people. Although this concept has been expanded ever since, to cover broader objectives aimed at alleviating the worst effects of war on populations and promote a more sustainable and

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.un.org/Docs/SG/agpeace.html](http://www.un.org/Docs/SG/agpeace.html)

long-term development,<sup>2</sup> the progressive practice and involvement of the UN in this context ended up consolidating what has progressively been known as the UN's post-settlement peace building 'standard operational procedure'. This is a sort of multifaceted 'model' that has been implemented mainly in the course of the 1990's in a number of countries- Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mozambique, Kosovo, East Timor and which includes a number of crucial and well-defined efforts and processes. These range from addressing the return of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons to the disarming, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants into civilian society, providing assistance for democratic development, re-establishing the rule of law and supporting economic and social development.<sup>3</sup>

Given the devastation of most societies in post-conflict contexts, these are major tasks and needs that must be addressed in a necessarily long-term process, thus presenting major difficulties to all those involved in peace building efforts. However, and despite the relative overall success of many UN-led peace building missions, it must be acknowledged that there have been some failures and limitations, and some criticism has arisen concerning the implementation of this standard procedure in supporting political, economic and social community development in many countries.

Although theoretically the UN acknowledges the uniqueness and the different circumstances of each post-conflict situation, denying the type of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Michael Pugh defends that in the context of the UN-authorized peace support measures, peace building can be defined as a policy of external international help for developing countries designed to support indigenous social, cultural and economic development and self-reliance, by aiding recovery from war and reducing or eliminating resort to future violence. (Pugh, 1995:328)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.una-uk.org/UN&C/Peacebuilding.html>

'one-size-fits-all' peace building model, the practice tends to show the imposition of such a model that often ignores the local resources for peace existing in each conflict setting. Simultaneously, many of the dilemmas of peace building (especially in its initial phase) arise from a tendency for efforts to result in long-term dependency, placing the beneficiaries in a passive and merely accepting role, thus undermining the local capacities for peaceful change. In this sense, our main critique to the UN 'standard operational procedure' of peace building focuses on the lack of attention, in its practice, to participation and empowerment of the local population. A more careful analysis of most of the peace building processes in which this model has been, or is being, applied shows that there is a worrying tendency of major actors involved, including the UN, to adopt a state-centric, top-down approach to post-settlement peace building which neglects the population, smaller NGOs, local agents and indigenous resources. (Miall, Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, 1999: 198)

In order to be effective, peace building initiatives require, among other things, careful participatory planning, and coordination among all actors involved. We therefore defend the need for alternative and more positive approaches to peace building which must necessarily pay particular attention to local resources for peaceful change, focusing on those strengths, capacities and best practices which are present in every society and culture and that should be more actively mobilised for peace building objectives. Therefore, participation must be central to peace building, emphasising the fundamental human rights principle that people are subjects who must determine and freely pursue their own development and

well-being. Some developments have been made in this field and there has also been a growing awareness by international organisations and non-governmental actors, of the need to rethink the role and importance of fostering effective participation in peace building. The European Union, for example, which is one of the world's major donors for development and peace building projects has progressively stressed in several official guidelines and documents, this same need. In the final "Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Member States on the role of development cooperation in strengthening peace building, conflict prevention and resolution,"<sup>4</sup> for example, the EU underlines that the peoples concerned must take a lead role in peace building, conflict prevention and resolution, and that viable solutions can only be achieved through enhanced local ownership. Defending that activities must, to the largest extent possible, build on local capacities and institutions, pays at the same time, particular attention to the impact of EU's policies and peace building involvement on prospects for peace and sustainability in countries involved. These concerns and policies also have concrete and practical implementation consequences, as shall be illustrated in our case-study. Having identified the lack of attention to participation as one of the major flaws in UN peace building, we argue below how participation may contribute to the sustainability of peace building processes.

Since the late 1970's the concept of participation has dominated the field of sustainable development. There has been a range of interpretations of the term's meaning since then. Pretty et al (Pretty et al 1995: 61) have

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<sup>4</sup> Council Conclusions 1998, available at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/theme/prevention/conclusions-1998.htm>

developed a typology ranging from passive participation to self-mobilisation, where people participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions. In this paper, participation is understood as the active involvement of the people in the conflict setting in the peace building process. This entails that not only the local people should be involved in peace building, but also their skills and resources.

Two arguments will indicate how participation contributes to the sustainability of peace building processes. It not only enhances the feeling of ownership of the people in the conflict setting but also empowers them. Below we discuss how participation may promote both ownership and empowerment, and the link between ownership and empowerment on the one hand and sustainability on the other.

Participatory peace building means, first of all, that the local population is involved. Consequentially, the peace building process will become *their* process, in which they are closely involved. They will determine to a great extent how the process will look. It is not someone else's plan imposed upon them. Participation also means that it is drawn from the local conflict handling potential, which is per definition home-grown. This approach generally enjoys a high level of legitimacy and credibility. No methods, concepts or models for resolving conflicts and building peace are imposed from outside. Rather they are based on the local understanding of conflict and resolving conflict and fit their ways of being and doing. All this will increase the feeling among the people in the conflict setting that they *own* the peace building process.

Why ownership is so important for the sustainability of peace building processes is indicated by Laurie Nathan when she stated “when peace agreements are not shaped and embraced by the parties, in other words not owned by the parties, they have little chance to endure”(Nathan 2001:184-198). People want to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives and resent being treated as the object of someone else’s plan. A further argument is that a participatory peace building process is less likely to elicit resistance from the people in the conflict setting. We believe that because of the ownership feature, support for the peace building process will be high and therefore success is very likely, since people are more willing to maintain its momentum.

Bush and Folger define empowerment as “the restoration to individuals of a sense of their value and strength, and their own capacity to handle life’s problems” (Bush and Folger 1994:2). According to the authors, the consequence of empowerment is “a greater awareness of their potential resources; resources they can draw from in the future” (Bush and Folger 1994:2).

Participatory peace building has an empowering effect for people in a conflict setting. First of all, because the people are fully involved in the peace building process, nothing is decided and applied above their heads, without their involvement. Furthermore, drawing from the local resources and skills for dealing with conflicts creates an awareness of the society’s own conflict handling and peace potential, which has an empowering effect.

The main argument to explain how empowerment may contribute to the sustainability of peace building processes is one of capacity-building. A

participatory approach generates a greater awareness of the local population of their own conflict handling and peace potential. It also provides the basis for a long-term infrastructure for dealing with present and future conflicts.

Having argued in favour of a more participatory approach to peace building, we turn to a case in which the EU has implemented such ideas in its provision of programmes for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

In order to understand the role of community empowerment and participation as central to the sustainability of peace building processes, it is necessary to conceive of peace building itself in broadly defined terms. We take the case of Northern Ireland to explore the ways in which participation in peace building has been implemented hand in hand with community development generally. The progression of these projects over time points not only to their sustainability, but to their greater capacity to adapt to the changing needs of local populations as the nature of conflict also changes. This flexibility has been something that larger institutions - those traditionally empowered with the construction and implementation of peace building processes - have been largely unsuccessful in achieving.

The Community Reconciliation Council (CRC) recognised this when, in 1990, it sought partnerships with non-traditional actors and agencies in the peace building process. Church councils, school and health boards, sports and cultural organisations and groups from the voluntary sector were drawn in, and their knowledge utilised in the development of new programmes (Fitzduff, 1999). Sustainable outcomes, we argue here, are achieved not

only through capacity *building* at the community level but through the effective utilisation of *existing* capacities, expertise and local resources in a given context. For example, the CRC implemented in other sectors the strategies for anti-sectarian workplace practice first developed by trade unionists.

It is then not so much a case of increasing levels of *self*-confidence (Gould, 2000) within communities, but rather levels of confidence in the establishment which is said to represent them. Particularly where there is a history of institutional discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds, as was the case in Northern Ireland, feelings of mistrust must be recognised in implementing community level peace building. By reinvesting power in the local population, this sense of alienation from the structures of power can be abated, and thus resistance to peace building avoided. The Glencree Centre for Reconciliation, a project focussing on grassroots involvement and ownership, (Glencree Centre for Reconciliation, 2003), provided a safe and non-partisan environment in which informal dialogues could begin between local politicians as well as ex-prisoners from both loyalist and republican factions. According to Fitzduff (1999), a more centralised approach to reconciliation would have met with both suspicion and resistance to participation than those undertaken at Glencree.

But participatory peace building is not simply about the involvement of the political sphere; a vital component of the approach which draws on local resources is the integration of peace building initiatives with other forms of community development. In 1995, the EU became involved in this broader agenda of peace building, instituting a Special Program for Peace

and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Its strategic objectives are 1) to promote the social inclusion of those at the margins of economic and social life and 2) to exploit the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process in order to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration (<http://www.seupb.org/prog.htm>, accessed 7 September, 2004). Thus, projects ranging from skills retraining for adults, to tourism development, to basic childcare fall under its remit. Within this context, it becomes necessary to adopt a broader concept of peace building as the promotion of social justice, drawing on the capacities of all in the community.

Perhaps one most under-recognised agents within this model is the arts community. A holistic approach to peace building in Northern Ireland has utilised theatre, literature and visual arts in a variety of effective ways. The Belfast Carnival, for example, first set out in 1995 to engage socially excluded community members, regardless of background, in creating a more positive image, for residents and visitors alike, of a city that had historically been associated with bitter antagonisms (Gould, 2002). This highlights the way that transforming conflict goes hand in hand with economic development, and thus with reinventing perceptions of communities marginalized through conflict (Ryan, 1995).

Another way that the arts are being used in the peace process is by encouraging communities and individuals to rethink group identities at the base of social conflicts and inequalities. Drama workshops in which participants are asked to re-examine their perceptions of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' provide an alternate forum for exploring entrenched

discriminations. These positive transgressions allow people to articulate ideas about identity and diversity, (historically obscured by a 'Culture of Silence') and thus to contribute to the public discourse, in a depoliticised context which can nonetheless have political applications.

Returning the process to this level also enables those in the peace building process to see the internal diversity of each community. Discourses externally created and applied have tended to dichotomise the situation in Northern Ireland as one of 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' conflict, while individual and community realities are far more complex and situational. By decentring the Protestant/Catholic divide and encouraging communities to see the similarities and differences between them, such programmes are encouraging communities to rethink essentialist identities.

One aspect of multiple identities that has traditionally been overlooked is the role of gender in reconciliation. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, formed in 1996 as a response to this, brought together activists from all sociocultural backgrounds, sharing their common experience as women excluded from the peace process. This exemplifies how open dialogues about diversity and the recognition of untapped indigenous leadership can facilitate peace building.

The aim of this analysis has been mainly to start from the traditionally adopted peace building model in the context of the UN and move to alternative approaches to peace building which tend not to be focused only on short-medium term infrastructure and institution building, but which give people a more active and decisive role in the peace building

process. The EU Peace programmes, for example, did not explicitly create any of the above projects. We argue that such programmes have been effective at the local level precisely because they sought to empower communities in developing their own strategies for peace and reconciliation, and drawing on existing models and local resources, (as in the case of the CRC, which existed prior to EU intervention). The success of this approach thus far has relied upon participation at all stages, from conception and development through to implementation and evaluation. Such a participatory model also necessitates the collaboration of agencies, communities and individuals with varied interests in the peace building process; a system of cooperation both laterally and horizontally. Finally, we wish to highlight the belief that participation in sustainable peace building must be viewed in terms of multi-directional flows. When we talk of capacity building, therefore, we may think in terms not only of developing capacities at the community level, but within supranational institutions themselves, as they learn to address the transformation of conflict and develop flexible systems for thinking about peace in shifting contexts and broader terms. In our understanding, effective participation and empowerment of the local population in any peace building context is no longer an option, it is a necessity.

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