



## Northern Ireland: Changing perceptions of the 'other'

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*ABSTRACT* Mari Fitzduff and Cathy Gormley argue that there are three stages in changing perceptions of the 'other'. First, the recognition that these perceptions of the 'other' actually exist. Second, the realization that the perceptions of the other are in fact perpetuated by the alienation and ghettoization of the various sides. Third, by endeavouring to deal with this sense of ghettoization by bringing the communities together through various processes to dispel the myths. They show that since 1969 in Northern Ireland the society at large, with the help of government funded ventures, has managed to successfully work through these stages with considerable effect on the development of an agreed political solution.

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### Understanding the other

While the central role of changing people's perceptions of the 'other' as a method of conflict resolution in a divided society is often acknowledged, the theory is often easier to comprehend than the implications for practice. Who is the 'other'? Is it simplistic to assume that in any conflict situation there is always a 'them and us' mentality? The reality is that the majority of conflicts in today's society are multi-faceted in nature and rarely fit the two-dimensional 'them and us' paradigm. However, many of those living in such societies still see the 'other', whether that be one grouping or a series of groupings, as distinctly different from themselves and in many instances have contributed to the further perpetuation of the conflict by the consistent demonization of each other.

Dispelling the demonization myths is one way of contributing to the resolution of the conflict. But how is this to be achieved? There are three stages that need to be addressed. The first is the recognition by people that these perceptions of the 'other' actually exist. The second is the realization by society that the

perceptions of the other are in fact 'perpetuated' by the alienation and ghettoization of the various sides. And the third stage is to endeavour to deal with the attitudinal and behavioural results of this ghettoization by bringing the communities together through processes which help to challenge and dispel the myth that the others are negatively different, e.g. with 'horns on their head' as they phrase it in Northern Ireland.

### **Ghettoization in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland, there has been a significant history of the development of contact processes between the communities that appears to have helped towards changing the perception of the 'other'. As the instinct of communities caught up in a conflict is often to stay within their ghettos, this process did not usually come about as a result of demands from the communities themselves for such contact, but evolved through a series of policy and practice initiatives which were developed to nurture, guide and develop an increasing amount of cross-community contact and cooperation.

When the civil conflict erupted in 1969, it was generally recognized that because of the historical nature of Northern Ireland society, work, educational, social, religious, sporting and cultural contexts are usually ghettoized in Northern Ireland, and this has increased the suspicion with which each community views the other. Hence, since 1969 there have been significant increases in the amount of intentional contact and cooperation work between the communities. In 1969, a Ministry for Community Relations and a Community Relations Commission was established. This was abolished by the power-sharing Assembly set up in Northern Ireland in 1974, with the argument that the politicians themselves would be responsible for community development and community relations issues. That Assembly only lasted five months. However, the process of community development remained an important method of facilitating communication within communities, and between government and communities, and this process has continued to underpin many programmes subsequently initiated and funded over the last two

decades. In 1985, a report issued by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights detailed the under-resourced, underdeveloped and unstrategic nature of much contact and cooperation work (Frazer and Fitzduff, 1986). The result of the report was the creation in 1987 of the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU) which was located within government, and in 1990 the setting up of the Community Relations Council (CRC) as an independent body to address issues of policy, training and the funding of community relations work.

Through the creation of such organizations, there has been a subsequent and significant expansion in the numbers of groups working at peace-building, much of whose growth was facilitated by an increased financial investment in such work. By 1998 the number of civic groups engaging in contact work, and developing programmes and training to address human rights, equality, cultural diversity, cooperation on social and economic issues, single identity work, neutral venue work, and political dialogue had increased significantly, i.e. from 40 in 1986 to 160 in 1999.

### **Civil society and peace-building**

Without an integrated approach to such work, it was recognized that positive civil society initiatives, particularly on contentious issues such as equality, policing and political options for Northern Ireland, were much less likely to be sustainable and effective. Throughout the 1990s, therefore, there was an increasing effort made to work at multiple levels, and engage in a complementary approach to the management of diversity and division. This involved various groups working with the top power brokers, i.e. the governments, politicians, and in some cases paramilitaries. At the same time others worked with the middle level power holders to ensure the engagement of the major institutions involved in public life, in security work in education, in the churches, in business, and in trade unions. At a local level, where hostilities most often took place on the streets, local community groups worked at developing new paradigms of dialogue and cooperation and community leaders able to transcend their particular community perspectives

in order to develop new possibilities of understanding each other (Bloomfield, 1997; Eybin, 1997).

The experience of Northern Ireland suggests that it is vital to adopt what John Paul Lederach would call an organic approach to the management of diversity and division (Lederach, 1997). He suggests that there are three levels of diversity work that are necessary for a comprehensive approach to issues of difference and suggests that it is necessary, where possible, to develop top, middle and grassroots work simultaneously.

Examples of top, middle and grassroots work, which has been noted for promoting dialogue in Northern Ireland, dispelling the myths, rumours and alien perceptions of the 'other' and bringing the communities together are many. A number of inexhaustive examples include the following:

- Within the business community, one of the most important interventions has been through the creation of the Group of Seven (G7), which is a group of leading businesses/semi-state bodies. They came together as a pro-peace lobby and made strategic interventions at key moments during the peace process. They encouraged talks, and, at moments of tension, called for stability and pointed to the economic damage which violence inflicted on the community. They were careful not to appear as being pro-nationalist or unionist. They were broadly supportive of the approach of the British and Irish governments but were careful to be seen as independent. They outlined the economic advantages of peace and of the development of North-South cooperation.
- The Trade Unions intervened when the political crises coincided with a number of murders in the work place. They launched a series of campaigns including 'Work Against Sectarianism' and held a number of lunch time rallies in support of a peace agreement, and against all violence. The Trade Union rallies were seen as non-partisan and provided a forum for Catholics and Protestants to come together to express their dissatisfaction at the way the process was moving. Businesses and employers have generally been very supportive of allowing employees the time to attend such mass rallies.
- The Churches and the Church leaders have on

many occasions released joint statements in support of a peaceful settlement to the situation in Northern Ireland. In times of deadlock they have often commented as a collective body, regardless of their independent religious beliefs. In addition, several very important dialogue processes were initiated in the 1990s by small groups of clerics who undertook to open dialogue with both loyalists and republicans, in order to break the political impasses. These dialogues were then developed at a more formal level through the British and Irish governments.

- The Media in the form of the *Irish News* and the *Newsletter*, the main nationalist and unionist daily morning newspaper publications in Northern Ireland, adopted a policy of releasing joint editorials during times of political tensions, which meant that the 'other' was reading the same calls for peace, and from the same perspective. In a sense they created a peace paradigm by suggesting that the peace was to be neither a nationalist peace, nor a unionist peace, just a shared peace. They also organized a series of phone-in referendums to give people the chance to air their voices, and make their vote count. They put the power into the people's hands.
- The basic idea behind the EU Initiatives and the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, which was offered after the ceasefires of 1994, was to see if ordinary people could be persuaded to work together at grassroots level in order to secure the peace. The tools were £400 million of European money over five years, and a new democratic means of delivering it via intermediary funding bodies drawn from the NGOs, and local district partnerships. By making much of the money conditional on cross-community partnerships and by pumping cash into non-governmental sectors, the EU hoped to foster a climate which would support a peace process conducted at many different levels. Funding requests for 11,000 were approved, involving the engagement of some 250,000 people in projects aimed at reconciliation. With a population of only 1.5 million in Northern Ireland, this level of engagement represents a significant development. Through these programmes, many of which were conducted on a cross-community

basis, the communities have been given a chance to work together to help create a more peaceful and shared future. Such programmes have also empowered civil society in using their voices to put pressure on the politicians to move towards the talks table, and achieve an agreement.

- The efforts made by Educators and parents meant that there was a significant rise in the number of integrated schools, from zero to 40, and stands as testament to the fact that most parents want their children to get to know one another. They want to alleviate this sense of alienation of the 'other' and see no better way to do this than to start at an early age and through the medium of education. For all children, including those who cannot attend integrated schools for reasons of demography or through choice, a number of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) projects have been developed over the years, and are now obligatory in all schools. These have served to illustrate how children are willing to communicate with each other and engage in dialogues even when the adults are not. Already evaluative results are showing that such programmes do make a significant difference in how children see the 'other' and undoubtedly increase positive relationships between the communities.

As each of these examples highlights, it has been a multitude of groups and organizations which have been responsible as the driving forces in changing perceptions of the other in Northern Ireland. And the financial investment in such initiatives by the government, the EU, and by many independent trusts shows the power of allocating resources constructively. The EU initiative in Northern Ireland in particular has shown that giving the people the chance to build upon their

own community initiatives in collaboration with other communities is successful, and can contribute significantly when undertaken alongside the more formal political dialogue process. Giving people the chance to experience a taste of what cooperation is like, and the gains that can be accrued by the development of peace, is often enough to hold them in the process. The process becomes *their* process, which they help to control, and which they want to succeed. And hopefully, they will be sufficiently committed to the process to continue it even after EU funding has ceased.

### Empowering civil society

Northern Ireland has put an enormous amount of resources into the development of civil society. This was particularly vital for good governance during the 25 years in which normal democracy was suspended, and local politicians had no formal power. Such a development has contributed significantly to contact and communication processes throughout society. And it had provided an increasingly fertile context for people to talk to one another. This empowerment of civic society has been further enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement with the decision to open a Northern Ireland Civic Forum, based on input from the community, voluntary and business sector, to be run alongside the Assembly. It will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues.

The engagement of civil society in the new order of political frameworks is a testimony to, and a recognition of, the responsibility undertaken by the many sectors of civil society in gradually changing the perception of the 'other' and contributing to the development of a political agreement. It is also a recognition of the continuing responsibility they will bear in consolidating the peace in the years ahead.

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