Northern Ireland's approaches to Social Cohesion: A case study of social capital in victim support groups

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After four decades of conflict in Northern Ireland, the country is mourning the loss of around 3,700 lives[1] and has been left with an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 physically and psychologically affected surviving victims[2]. While these numbers may seem small to countries with large populations, one should observe that in Northern Ireland, a country whose population stands around 1.7 million, these casualties have had a major impact upon society, leading some in Northern Ireland to proclaim that nearly everyone living there during the Troubles was in some way affected by the violence, and many could be said to be victims.[3] The devastating human impact of the Troubles resulted in the social isolation and exclusion of victims, which created the platform for victim support groups to become the springboard for the social support needs of victims.

In recent years, victim support groups have developed a niche for social support that has progressed beyond the social inclusion aim of victims' support towards the development of social capital through a combination of single-identity and cross-community engagement. In short, there is evidence that victims' groups have been building social inclusion and cohesion through bonding and bridging social capital. Victims' policy and funding strategies have undoubtedly assisted this progression in victims' groups by providing resources for single-identity and cross-community work, but the lack of an agreed social inclusion and cohesion strategy means that something else must be contributing to this accrual of social capital in victim support groups.

Drawing on the findings of the *Compromise After Conflict*[4] study, I will argue that despite disappointing policy attempts at enacting a social inclusion and cohesion strategy in Northern Ireland, victim support group leaders have found a way to utilise social capital as an instrument to bond and bridge victims with wider elements of society, thus contributing to social inclusion and cohesion. In doing so, I will present the origins of Northern Ireland's social

inclusion and cohesion agenda, followed by an elucidation on the significance of social capital in victim support groups and the levels of bonding and bridging in Northern Ireland's victims' groups, ending with a conclusion as to why the social capital of victims' groups matters and why policymakers should be listening to victims' leaders.

The evolution of Northern Ireland's social inclusion and cohesion agenda

Northern Ireland's social inclusion and cohesion agenda is inherent in three key strategies, the SEUPB PEACE programmes, *A Shared Future* and *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI)*. This policy synopsis explores the origins of the most recent social inclusion and cohesion agenda, which sets the background for the social capital development found in victim support groups.

Following the ceasefires in the mid 1990s, the European Union[5] allocated €500 million for peacebuilding projects that promoted the strategic aim "to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation." Now known as PEACE I, the programme focused on four key areas: *social inclusion*, cross-border cooperation, economic development and employment, and urban and rural regeneration.[6] In total, PEACE I funded over 13,000 projects in Northern Ireland through the work of community and voluntary groups, most of which fell under the theme of social inclusion, with victims forming one of the target groups. By most accounts, PEACE I was successful in achieving the social inclusion aims of the programme.[7]

One problem with the policy, however, is that the EU did not provide any guidance on how civil society could progress beyond social inclusion towards social cohesion, nor how government could monitor and evaluate it. Some have even claimed that PEACE I was a "plan for reinvestment [...] but without a vision as to how this might contribute to peace and reconciliation."[8] This is evidenced by the fact that many of Northern Ireland's civic organisations, especially victims' groups, maintained a single-identity focus. Consequently, PEACE I did not have a discernable effect on the relationships between Northern Ireland's two communities.[9] Although the SEUPB saw single-identity work as a legitimate contribution to the overall peace objectives, it was clear from the evaluations of PEACE I that a less exclusive approach to community engagement was necessary to meet the strategic aims of social inclusion and cohesion.[10] Thus, the aims of PEACE II were broadened with a focus on developing social cohesion through cooperation.

From 2000 to 2004, another €531 million was allocated to projects in Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland under PEACE II,[11]

extending the themes from PEACE I in the areas of *social inclusion*, economic renewal, cross-border cooperation and regeneration.[12] Significantly, over 5,300 projects were supported by PEACE II funding, with the majority of funding being allocated to projects addressing social inclusion and cohesion. To that end, a significant component of PEACE II was its emphasis on building cross-community relationships through civil society organisations (e.g. victim support groups). Drawing from the criticisms on the heavy focus of single-identity work under PEACE I, the SEUPB tried to encourage civil society to build bridging forms of social capital through cross-community engagement. In particular, PEACE II focused on developing social capital through targeting support for victims and other marginalised groups. However, the aims of increasing social inclusion and cohesion through promoting social capital development in civil society was stymied by an overly bureaucratic and finance-driven sector[13] and a lack of clarity around key conceptual outputs of the programme such as "reconciliation."[14] Moreover, the leadership over the PEACE programs had shifted from Brussels to Belfast, falling victim to political divisions at Stormont.[15] These problems led the SEUPB to revise some of its criteria for grants and in 2005 the EU announced an extension of funding for the PEACE II programme to add an additional €144 million for projects through the end of 2006,[16] providing more focused funding to civic organisations to promote the aforementioned policy aims.

The EU allocated an additional €333 million for PEACE III to run from 2007-2013, to accommodate projects that promote the strategic aims of the PEACE programs.[17] PEACE III is divided into two main priorities: 1) Reconciling Communities and 2) Contributing to a Shared Society – delivering these priorities through four themes: to build positive relations at the local level; to acknowledge the past; to create shared public spaces; and to develop key institutional capacity for a shared society.[18] These themes, which require a significant combination of single-identity and cross-community work, draw from the theoretical underpinnings of social capital. While maintaining the original strategic aims of the PEACE programs, PEACE III enhanced the themes of building social capital through promoting better community relations and social inclusion.

In addition to the PEACE programs that have had a clear impact on the social inclusion and cohesion of victim support groups in Northern Ireland, two other policy documents are important in this discussion. The first strategy, *A Shared Future*,[19] was developed by the Labour Government from 2003 to 2005 while the devolved parliament at Stormont was suspended. Published in 2005 under direct-rule, the document sets out a strategy to establish "a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society, in which all

individuals are considered equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all individuals are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependency."[20]   The strategy sets forth a number of policy objectives, which may be summarised as: reducing/eliminating sectarianism; building shared spaces where people live, work, play and learn together; reducing conflict in interface areas; building trust, tolerance and mutual understanding of the communities of Northern Ireland, including minority communities; increasing civic participation and engagement in governance processes; encouraging dialogue and communication between the two communities; promoting reconciliation; and enabling victims to take part in these processes by giving them a platform for their views to be expressed.[21]   In order to encourage these objectives, the document notes that investment in Northern Ireland's social capital is fundamental to achieving the policy aims of *A Shared Future*.[22]

Despite civil society's approval of the strategy, when Stormont reconvened in 2007, the strategy was disregarded by the OFMDFM who argued that a community relations strategy needed to be developed and agreed upon by policymakers in Northern Ireland rather than Westminster.[23]   Nolan suggests that the failure of the power-sharing government to agree to a community relations strategy was "a demonstration of the problem they were trying to solve."[24]   Hence, Ministers at Stormont took the community relations strategy back to the drawing board, and in 2010 produced a watered down version of *A Shared Future*, entitled *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*.[25]

The *CSI* document was not a strategy, but a programme for action and consultation document, which expressed the aim to "build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect."[26]   The document also sets forth a series of aims for social inclusion and cohesion with respect to political leadership, civic engagement, people, places, youth, developing respect for different cultures and working towards building a shared community.   One of the key differences between *CSI* and *A Shared Future* in relation to social capital, is that *CSI* is framed around the need to bond social capital through much single-identity work as a precursor to bridging social capital and building a shared society, whereas *A Shared Future* identifies the need to engage in cross-community work to promote social cohesion.   Therefore, *CSI* is actually a regression from both *A Shared Future* and the PEACE programs that have progressively aimed to bridge social capital through cross-community engagement.   Another difference between *A Shared Future* and *CSI* is that while

the former clearly sets out a role for victims in building a shared society, the latter is noticeably silent with respect to victims, leading the CVSNI to criticise this oversight.[27]

Altogether, the *CSI* consultation document received wide criticism from civil society for its regressive stance on community relations and social cohesion. Wallace Consulting noted in their evaluation of the consultation responses that the document had been universally rejected: "There is a strong view that the draft programme does not contain the right ingredients to bring the necessary transformation required, and in its current form may even harden attitudes, behaviours and boundaries associated with our troubled past. Mutual accommodation of our divided community is not acceptable – we need to learn, live, work and play together – that is what the vast majority of people want."[28] Thus, the *CSI* document was seen as a second policy disappointment on the part of Stormont with respect to promoting social inclusion and cohesion. Consequently, the OFMDFM responded to criticism of *CSI* by putting together a five-party working group whose aim was to agree a strategy based on the consultation process that could be used to make a cohesive community relations policy. At the time of writing, political disagreements have stalled this process,[29] leaving Northern Ireland without a government strategy for promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

Since Northern Ireland's social inclusion and cohesion strategies have had mixed success, the levels of bonding and bridging social capital in victim support groups cannot be solely attributed to the achievements of policy. Therefore, the evidence that victims' groups were contributing to the social inclusion and cohesion of victims and wider society must owe to some other factor. Before exploring the findings of the *Compromise* study, however, an explanation of the connection between social capital and social inclusion and cohesion must be addressed.

What is the connection between social capital and social inclusion and cohesion?

Social exclusion is believed to be one of the underlying causes of the conflict in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to perceptions of the world as consisting of *us* and *them*. Therefore, since social exclusion is seen as part of the problem, then social inclusion and cohesion should be seen as part of the solution to societal division. This is why a number of salient government policies have promoted social inclusion and cohesion as mechanisms for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Social isolation, exclusion and marginalisation have been shown by social scientists to contribute ill-health, shortened life expectancy, a lack of trust, economic deprivation, a decline in civic engagement and participative democracy, and the possibility to contribute to conflict, amongst other problems.[30] Conversely, social inclusion and cohesion, strong social networks and high levels of social capital have been correlated to improved health and well-being, a decrease in the risk of dying from all causes, improved socio-economic conditions, and increase in cooperation, civic engagement and greater participative democracy, and in some instances, conflict resolution.[31] Therefore, if policy aims to overcome social isolation and exclusion, then it would seem appropriate to promote policies that aim to increase, amongst other things, levels of social capital within society.

The idea behind social capital as a strategy for building social inclusion and cohesion is that a combination of single-identity bonding work, aimed at increasing levels of trust, confidence and well-being, will complement cross-community bridging work, aimed at building better community relations and a shared society. Taken together, these two forms of social capital contribute to social inclusion, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and a vibrant civil society that is engaged in building a shared society. In theory, at least, high levels of social capital should correlate to the aforementioned outcomes. In reality, however, Northern Ireland is struggling to capitalise on the high levels of social capital within victim support groups, and possibly wider elements of civil society.

It is the author's contention that although Northern Ireland has high levels of social capital, as evident in victim support groups, there is a gap between social inclusion and cohesion policies and the levels of bonding and bridging in victims' groups. The remainder of this article will explore the reasons why the social capital of victim support groups matters, the reasons for the disparity between levels of bonding and bridging in victims' groups, and some conclusions on the implications of social capital in victims' groups.

Why look at the social capital of victim support groups?

There are three reasons why the social capital of victim support groups should be taken seriously. First, social scientists have shown that the correlations between social capital and a socially inclusive and cohesive society are strongly linked.[32] Moreover, studies on civic leadership in Northern Ireland have shown that the application of social capital as a mechanism for social inclusion and cohesion is popular amongst both policymakers and civil society's leaders.[33] Finally, the demographic makeup of victim support groups is broadly

indicative of other civic associations. Indeed, Acheson and Williamson found around three-quarters of civil society groups to be wholly or mainly single-identity, with the other quarter of groups being mixed or cross-community.[34] This finding is consistent with the *Compromise* study's ethnography of victim support groups. Therefore, the levels of bonding and bridging social capital in victim support groups may be indicative of levels of bonding and bridging social capital across Northern Ireland's civil society. With these points in mind, let us turn to the findings of the *Compromise* study that reveal the social capital potential of victims' groups and its impact on social inclusion and cohesion.

Bonding, bridging and constriction in Northern Ireland's victim support groups

The *Compromise* study revealed a gap between social capital theory,[35] Northern Ireland's social policy and the practice within victims' groups caused by two main factors: the incoherence of social policy and the leadership in victims' groups. The incoherence of policy, especially with respect to the most recent social cohesion strategy, *CSI*, has been widely criticised by academics and practitioners. Moreover, Northern Ireland's social policy and funding strategies have contributed to high levels of bonding, but low levels of bridging social capital in victims' groups because too much emphasis is placed on single-identity work, despite peacemakers' attempts to move from single-identity to cross-community relationship building. Policymakers interviewed in the *Compromise* study recognised the policy incoherence: "I don't think we have a very well thought out policy,"[36] and noted the challenge that a single-identity focus places on peacebuilding and moving towards a shared, cohesive future.

Despite the lack of an agreed social inclusion and cohesion strategy, however, victims' leaders interviewed in the *Compromise* study found creative ways to bond and bridge social capital amongst their groups. While there was strong evidence that victims' groups contributed to social inclusion and cohesion, there was also a tendency amongst leaders to encourage too much bonding and not enough bridging social capital. Indeed, around eighty percent of victims' leaders in the *Compromise* study encouraged mainly bonding social capital through single-identity activities, whereas only twenty percent of leaders encouraged bridging through cross-community relationship building.

The high levels of bonding social capital was a direct result of group leaders who either refused to engage in cross-community relationship building or who felt that their groups were not ready to move beyond single-identity work. Leaders who felt their groups were not ready for cross-community work noted high levels of bonding social capital and the benefits that accompany it – e.g.

improved self-confidence and well-being – and these group leaders provided evidence that the bonding forms of social capital created in their groups contributed to the social inclusion of victims, helping them become part of a strong social network. One victims' leader observed that bonding activities led members in her group to "feel better about themselves [and] that makes them [a] happier and better person […] I mean the difference I see in my members from the beginning until now is fantastic."[37] Another leader noted, "You can see the development they make in themselves here is then felt by their immediate family and friends, and then when that's brought back to their communities, you can see there's a ripple effect there."[38]

Alternatively, leaders who refused to introduce their members to cross-community work exhibited evidence of constriction, whereby group members not only trusted members of the *other* community less – they also had less trust in members of *their own* community. One leader suggested: "There is a trust that has been broken down not only with the other side of the community but also within our own community. A lot of our people don't even trust their own family members, never mind the other side of the community."[39] This finding lends support to Putnam's constrict theory.[40] Although only one in six groups were found to be constricting, this is significant because it is equal to the number of groups who were genuinely engaging in cross-community relationship building and bridging social capital. This matters because where bonding forms of social capital are not linked with bridging, social capital acts as an impediment to peacebuilding, rather than encouraging peace.[41]

However, despite the low levels of bridging social capital found in victims' groups, there was evidence that the impact of this form of social capital had tremendous benefits for the health, well-being and social inclusion of victims, as well as wider aims of peacebuilding, social cohesion and building a shared future based on improved trust and cooperation amongst the two communities in Northern Ireland.[42] Yet, when looking for the causes of bonding and bridging social capital in victim support groups, the author found little evidence that social inclusion and cohesion policies had contributed to this phenomenon, except where the PEACE programs had contributed funding for projects aimed at increasing social inclusion and cohesion. The main cause of high levels of bonding social capital and low levels of bridging in victim support groups was found in the styles of leadership in these groups. Therefore, the leadership in victims' groups matters, as it has a direct effect upon the social inclusion and cohesion aims of Northern Ireland's social policy.

Conclusion: Why the social capital of victim support groups matters

The social capital potential of victim support groups is important for several reasons. First, and most importantly, there is evidence that a wealth of social capital can contribute to the health and well-being of those inside the social network, in addition to improved self-confidence, increased trust in others and a willingness to cooperate with others outside the social network.[43] From the perspective of the individual, this is important because it contributes to the healing journeys of victims – ultimately transforming victims' groups into "healing groups".[44] From the policy perspective, improving victims' quality of life through social capital means that less government support is essential and some peacebuilding aims may even be achieved through increased social capital.

Second, victims' groups that are engaging in positive forms of bonding social capital contribute to the policy aims of social inclusion and groups that bridge social capital contribute to policy aims of social cohesion and building a shared society. Though much of government policy can be described as "unsophisticated,"[45] it is clear that government policy is steadily progressing towards mechanisms that aim for peacebuilding, increasing trust and respect for others, improving community relations with the goal that one day Northern Ireland could be called a shared, peaceful society. Social capital, therefore, is an instrument that can be utilised to produce positive results in post-conflict settings. The victims' groups in the *Compromise* study provide evidence that there is leadership in civil society that knows how to employ social capital as a tool to help victims overcome social isolation, improve their self-confidence and trust in others, as well as engage in cross-community relationship building that can have a tremendous impact on improving community relations.

Finally, victim support groups are emblematic of Northern Ireland's civil society. If victim support groups are capable of accruing beneficial forms of social capital, this not only has positive implications for the social inclusion of victims, it also has implications for the well-being and social cohesion of civil society. To that end, policymakers could learn from victims' leaders who know how to bond and bridge social capital. The *Compromise* study demonstrates that there is a wealth of knowledge and talent within the victims' sector with respect to social capital development that could be tapped to inform Northern Ireland's social inclusion and cohesion strategy, but policymakers must be willing to listen to victims' leaders' experiences.

Thus, as policymakers continue to discuss a social cohesion strategy for Northern Ireland, they should consider looking to victim support groups as an

example of the social capital potential of civil society to promote the social inclusion and cohesion aims of policy. As a caveat, though, one must be careful not to overstate the power of social capital as an instrument for social inclusion and cohesion. Though evidence supports the finding that it can be used as a catalyst for benefits such as increased trust and cooperation amongst different communities, without adequate guidelines and monitoring, it can lead to negative consequences, such as constriction. Therefore, although social capital provides policymakers with one apparatus from which to stimulate social inclusion and cohesion, it is but one of many tools with which to contribute to social policy objectives.

Notes

1   McKittrick, *et al*., 2007:13; Fay, et al., 1997.

2   McDowell, 2007.

3   Bloomfield, 1998.

4   The *Compromise After Conflict* study is a project based at the University of Aberdeen and funded by the Leverhulme Trust, consisting of three current case studies in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka, as well as several historical case studies, which are evaluating how victims' needs have been addressed in these societies. Details about the project and the research team can be accessed at: www.abdn.ac.uk/compromise-conflict/.

5   SEUPB, 1994.

6   Ibid.

7   Acheson and Milofsky, 2008; Buchanan, 2008.

8   Harvey, 1997.

9   PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2003.

10 Ibid.

11 SEUPB, 2006.

12 Ibid.

13 Buchanan, 2008.

14 Hamber and Kelly, 2009.

15 Acheson and Milofsky, 2008; Buchanan, 2008.

16 SEUPB, 2006.

17 SEUPB, 2007.

18 Ibid.

19 OFMDFM, 2005.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Belfast Telegraph, 2 November 2011.

24 Nolan, 2012.

25 OFMDFM, 2010.

26 Ibid.

27 Wallace Consulting, 2011.

28 Ibid.

29 In May 2012, the Alliance Party concluded that they could not continue working with other members of the five-party working group because of disagreements between the two main parties and their goal of settling for the "lowest common denominator" approach to community relations (David Ford, 31 May 2012, Alliance Party website accessed at:
http://allianceparty.org/article/2012/006512/belfast-telegraph-article-by-david-ford-on-a-shared-future).

30 Berkman and Glass, 2000; Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Seeman, 2000; Wilkinson and Marmot, 2003.

31 Aldridge, *et al*., 2002; Herreros, 2004; Nan, 2009; Putnam, 1993; 2000; 2007; Varshney, 2001.

32 Ibid.

33 Brewer, Higgins and Teeney, 2011; Fowler Graham, 2012.

34 Acheson and Williamson, 2007.

35 Putnam, 2000.

36 Personal communication, 19 July 2011.

37 Personal communication, 13 March 2011.

38 Personal communication, 14 February 2011.

39 Personal communication, 4 April 2011.

40 Putnam, 2007.

41 Leonard, 2004.

42 Fowler Graham, 2012.

43 Aldridge, *et al*., 2002; Herreros, 2004; Nan, 2009; Putnam, 1993; 2000; 2007; Varshney, 2001.

44 Brewer, 2010.

45 Personal communication, 19 July 2011.

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