The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

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Much has been written about the peace settlement in Northern Ireland. Many of those writing have focussed on describing the events leading up to the agreement, the roles of various actors and the level of emphasis that should be placed on them; others have focussed on drawing conclusions about the extent to which the lessons of the peace settlement can be transferred to other settings. The literature reveals many conflicting conclusions about the underlying determinants of successful peace processes. In this context, the textual ambiguity of the Good Friday Agreement is applauded by some for the extent to which careful drafting has allowed the peace process to be maintained whilst, or even because, it defers difficult issues. Others have criticised it for leaving a legacy of stalemate in implementation post agreement. The notion of 'post agreement' may be problematic, since 'agreement' is both a fixed moment in time (the Good Friday *Agreement*) and also a dynamic process of institutionalising values and perspectives in an open-ended but uncertain framework for sustaining peace. As Boutros-Ghali observed "The Peace-building that begins after the accord is signed is every bit as important as the peace-making that led up to it".[1]

In February 2012, with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Community Relations Council published the first Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report. The report's author, Dr. Paul Nolan, wrote:

> "The NI Peace Monitoring Report will provide independent monitoring of Northern Ireland's journey out of violence, and of the efforts to create a society in which all can live free from fear, and in relationships of trust and safety with their fellow citizens. An indicator framework will be created to allow measurement of change towards the goals of equality, social cohesion, sharing, and the ability to deal with political difference through open dialogue and accommodation".[2]

The idea of systematically monitoring peace had emerged much earlier for the Community Relations Council when it began to notice contradictory signs in Northern Ireland's journey to peace. Others were also noticing

the contradictions. In an article written in 2010 Professor Jennifer Todd highlighted the conflicting messages emerging in the peace process and voiced the concern of many when she wondered about the extent to which we were in a process of re-thinking ourselves or simply reaffirming the old perspectives:

> "There are radically opposing views among experts on whether, ten years on, the settlement has reduced or increased sectarianism, as to whether it has crystallised or softened opposing views, and as to whether it has solidified or moderated opposing blocs, or perhaps even begun to transform them".[3]

Todd's observations fitted within a body of thinking in political science that has concluded that the structures in peace accords, initially offering security, over time can create sufficient frustrations that may lead to the resurgence of violence. In his introduction to the first Peace Monitoring report in 2012 Nolan drew on this body of work also noting the findings of the political scientist Barbara Walters (2002) that mechanisms such as mutual vetoes that are often part of consociational settlements may need to be allowed to evolve in the emerging political structures. Peace-building is an iterative process that goes on beyond any formal political agreement. The necessary modifications in structures, and the nuances of the responses of those involved in them, need room to grow and mature. They also need sufficient good will, trust and confidence building in each other to allow that to happen. It follows that without a level of conscious attention and direction to these processes, the journey to peace can go backwards as well as forwards.   In this context, gathering evidence and monitoring progress towards or away from peace may be seen as essential to post agreement arrangements if one is modestly mindful of the challenge ahead and concerned enough to be vigilant.

Even if one has become convinced of the need to monitor peace, as can be seen in the examples that have emerged across the world, there are issues to be resolved about the nature and scope of the exercise, beginning with the fundamental question: what is "peace"?

In the first NI Peace Monitoring Report, the author observed that if peace were simply the absence of violence, then it would be possible to plot the journey using the statistics for deaths and injuries, bombings and shootings, riots, arrests and convictions. Unfortunately for those tasked with monitoring it, peace as a super-ordinate category, is multidimensional. It must therefore somehow be disaggregated into distinct dimensions, even when they prove to be overlapping and interacting in the end.

For the Community Relations Council and all those involved in the NI Peace Monitor, the question of what to measure still remains open and iterative. Following the lengthy preliminary discussions that preceded the first report between the author, the Advisory Group and experts here and around the world about the nature and measurement of peace, all involved agreed that it was necessary to go beyond monitoring "negative peace"[4], and to locate the task of monitoring in a broader notion that included safety and also drew on evidence of justice, fairness, and reconciliation. This accepts the argument made by Ignatieff in 2003 about South Africa

> "When we fail to distinguish clearly between coexistence and reconciliation, we end up sentimentalising and depoliticising the processes we are trying to understand." [5]

The issues to be monitored are often abstract generalisations: peace, cohesion, sharing and progress. To conduct the monitoring exercise these abstracts had to be dispassionately translated into something more observable, specific and measurable.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEACE INDICATORS

The NI Peace Monitoring Report recognised from the start that a published index might have the appearance of objectivity, but judgements have always been applied. It was accepted to some extent that values and facts are always mixed together in the creation of a monitoring system. What can more easily be evaluated is the rigour and quality of the methodologies and the analysis.

From the outset those involved in the report agreed that the index should not be the end result. The purpose of the index was to act as a tool to aid analysis, and therefore for the NI Peace Monitoring Survey the challenge was at least as much in the quality and independence of that analysis. Existing sources of information were to be employed to produce a composite picture of the cumulative effects of social forces; linked to this was a rigorous and dispassionate analysis of all the evidence, one that was inclusive and integrated to allow the deeper long-term trends to emerge. Given the expansive nature of the concepts under review, the danger was that too much information would be gathered with a consequent loss in ability to distinguish the bigger picture. The composite indicators or 'domains' needed to be comprehensive and robust enough to allow all the multi-layered dimensions of peace and progress to be examined and yet succinct enough to allow an accessible and coherent ordering of information.

The Peace Monitor that emerged from the discussions was unique, but it built on the learning of others involved in the monitoring of peace and conflict across the world. The recent developments in peace and conflict monitoring reflect the emerging diversity of interests in this area. International development agencies, military intelligence, global capital investors and peace institutes have all taken an interest in monitoring peace.   With this has come an ever increasing variation in approaches and methodologies.   Following an extensive review of peace monitoring in other places, it was clear to the author of the NI Peace Monitor that the sort of annual survey that was needed was not going to be able to simply link into the existing domains and indicators of an international league table.   Reviewing the attempts throughout the world to develop indicators of peace it was apparent to Nolan that they were most often employed in order to rank countries according to high level indexes developed externally. It was hard to find examples of comprehensive self-reflective methodologies developed from within conflicted societies. This may have been for obvious reasons. If we accept that in any circumstance it is hard to generate an independent analysis of peace, then a project that attempts to do so from within the politically charged context of a post conflict settlement is certainly off on a challenge.   In structuring the NI Peace Monitor the issue of independence was addressed in three ways – the use of a wide variety of open source data, an independent advisory Board and independent funding.

Those of us that were involved in developing the first Peace Monitor also realised that the intervention would be more than just an academic challenge. Social indicators have moved from being an academic pursuit to the mainstream of so-called evidence based policy making. In so doing, they are now involved in the public policy snark hunt for evidence of elusive concepts such as well-being and happiness. Difficult or not, peace has therefore had to find a place as a commodity in the market of public policy.   The Peace Monitor was therefore going to be more than a passive observation on peace; by its nature it would also play a part in the dymamics.

Nolan and the advisory group that worked with him were therefore very conscious of the implications of getting the underpinning components of peace wrong or insufficiently right. Conscious of the treacherous and nebulous nature of peace as a concept, related terms like coexistence and reconciliation were challenged as porous, value laden, to some extent unreliable notions on which to base measurement. Even if an agreement could be reached on a model of monitoring that was good enough to make a start on the project, yet to come was the challenge of measuring the components, analysing them in relation to each other in a rounded attempt at sense-making, and finally promulgating the findings.

Members of the advisory group were conscious that statistics could be used simply because they were available rather than because they could be relied on as evidence of cause and effect. It was vital to try to understand and unravel the causal relationships that underpin them, and the balance between them, if monitoring peace could hope to be anything other than the measurement of convenient statistics and ideological prejudice.

Everyone recognised that so-called hard facts and statistics mask an underpinning exchange of values and sense-making in the world.   In that respect, the proxies for peace are often conveniently valued or discarded by the degree to which they support or challenge someone's world view. For this reason when questions are asked about the nature of peace and progress towards it, there may be as much to gain from understanding who has asked the question as there is in evaluating the intellectual rigour of the answer. Therefore it was clear that while the NI Peace Monitor would have an author, it would be the sum of many voices.

If agreement could be reached on what was to be measured, the next question concerned *how* to measure. The key purpose of the NI Peace Monitor is to measure developments year-on-year, which means making comparisons between one year and another and sometimes between one place and another. It was important to understand this work not as a checklist of discrete activities to be ticked off mechanically with a positive or negative score, but as a mobile and dynamic set of relationships where changes in each part of the system may influence other parts. The complex dynamics arising from the interaction of political, economic, societal and sometimes military forces make it difficult to reach an exact assessment of the impact of any one discrete activity. The consequential changes in the external environment of an intervention in one situation may suggest there had been a helpful or benign influence. The opposite could possibly be inferred from the same intervention in another situation where, for example, political relations are poor. Conclusions must therefore be tentative rather than definitive, and always context specific.

With these cautions in mind and following a robust examination by the author and the advisory group of methods, data sources, reliability of indicators and interpretation, the first version of the Peace Monitor emerged with the following data collection and analysis methodologies:

1. **Quantitative Data:** The survey collates the statistical data emanating from government departments, public bodies such as the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, and from academic studies. These form part of the triangulation with the qualitative methods.

2. **Attitudinal Surveys:** The main sources are the *Life and Times Survey* and the Belfast Telegraph opinion polls, but account is also taken of data collected in the General Household Survey and as part of discrete research projects.

3. **Content Analysis:** This involves surveying comment and opinion on political progress, drawing upon newspaper, television, radio and internet commentary, as all of these help to shape public perceptions. Academic analysis is also monitored in order to track both convergence and divergence in the assessment of political progress.

4. **Expert opinions:** The views of individuals and groups working in relevant fields are used as a barometer to gauge opinion on changes in society. The Advisory Board also provided expert opinion, weighing all the evidence as dispassionately as possible and without conflict of interest or personal benefit from the outcome. They did, however, each bring an individual view on where the emphasis of the report should lie. Resolving these differences in emphasis took a considerable amount of time. This was an important part of the process and the outcome was the final design of the report.

The Monitor draws on open source data including government and police statistics, opinion polls, expert opinion, newspaper accounts, media punditry, blogs, health and wellbeing reports, the perceptions of community groups, political parties and various civil society actors in order to achieve a rounded picture of the overall direction of Northern Ireland society. It uses a mixed methods approach, drawing heavily upon data that is both quantitative and qualitative to complete the research.   It is focused on four interlocking dimensions each with its own indicators using qualitative and quantitative data – security, equality, political progress and cohesion and sharing.

Security

Levels of violence are key indicators of the absence of security, and the decline in the levels of violence since the ceasefires has provided evidence of the journey out of conflict. The Monitor therefore collates data on the numbers for bombings, shootings, beatings, hijacking, arson attacks, and other forms of violence which reflect injury to person or property. These have been the statistics most frequently used to measure the intensity of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Beyond this however another measure of a peaceful society is the sense of security experienced by each individual citizen, assessed in

a number of different contexts: in the home, in the neighbourhood, in the workplace, and in the wider public space. In this dimension attention was also paid to the geographical differences that emerge and the differences between groups of people. If a peaceful society is one in which citizens feel free from fear of attack because of their religion or skin colour or place of origin, evidence was also sought in these areas.

In this dimension, data was also gathered on other sources of threat, such as aggressive displays of paramilitary flags and insignia, and indicators of physical fear such as interface walls. The movement towards increased trust and security was also examined. Attention was also paid to perceptions of safety; indicators which show growing confidence in shared participation in public spaces.

An account based simply on crime statistics would have failed to capture the reality of experience lived under the shadow of potential violence. The narrative account filled in some of the gaps left by the statistical account, drawing upon a range of qualitative data from security sources, academic papers, media reports and community organisations to help draw meaning, from many points of view, out of the figures. Attitudinal surveys, research conducted by academics and occasionally by newspapers like the Belfast Telegraph also provided information. As well as considering data on behaviours, account was taken of qualitative data that explores the subjective experience of community life, and attitudes towards the 'other'. By bringing attitudes and behaviours into one frame of analysis the Monitor hoped to produce a composite index of security.

Equality

From the beginning of the discussions about monitoring peace, equality was viewed as an essential element. This was for two reasons: firstly, the conflict had erupted against a backdrop of structural inequality, particularly in relation to housing and employment; and, secondly, the 1998 Agreement had placed great emphasis upon equality as the essential ingredient of the peace settlement; the subsequent Northern Ireland Act 1998 established the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

In this dimension the NI Peace Monitor examined inequalities across a range of categories that influence life chances: wealth, age related differentials in poverty, educational inequality, the impact of poverty on immigrant communities, and inequalities in health, including post traumatic stress and other mental health issues. Particular attention was paid to the compound effects of multiple deprivations and the way in which the differentials need to be understood in

interaction with each other. In so doing the author also attempted to establish the extent to which experiences of social inequality were broadly in line with other regions or were reflective of features that were uniquely related to the conflict.

Political Progress

The NI Peace Monitor aims to measure 'the ability to deal with political difference through open dialogue and accommodation'. In the context of measuring peace this is based on the premise that society as a whole feels most coherent when the political elites show the capacity to negotiate and pursue shared agendas. To reflect the various elements of the Agreement, the Assembly and the relations between the Assembly and the British and Irish governments have been monitored. In addition to this, indicators were also examined at district council level, bearing in mind that in the past politicians from all political parties have generally maintained functioning relations at this level before the Assembly existed and when it was suspended. To take account of the way in which elements of wider society wield power, authority and influence and enact policies and decisions concerning public life and social progress, this dimension moved beyond government to consider wider aspects of *governance.*

In this dimension another hugely important indicator of the potential to work together, and therefore an area that had to be monitored, was the ability of Northern Ireland, as a post-conflict society, to deal with the legacy of the past.

Cohesion and Sharing

Discussions on this dimension reflected the wider public policy struggle in Northern Ireland with the concepts of cohesion and social capital. The OFMdFM draft policy, *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration 2010* offered no definition of cohesion. In drafting the first report, the author Paul Nolan drew on the Canadian social theorist Jane Jenson who describes a socially cohesive society as one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy[6]. Fragmentation, with social groups operating at a distance from each other, set the low end of the cohesion spectrum with commonality of experience and a sense of the mutuality of ties and obligations being at the high end of cohesion. Nolan also drew on a survey of projects administered by the Council of Europe, in which Spoonley *et al* [7] concluded that the key indicators usually fall into the following domains: demography, inclusion in the labour market, employment /training, social benefits, housing and participation in social, cultural and political life. The report noted that when racism or xenophobia are included in the frame of reference then attention is also paid to data sets on racist attitudes and discriminatory practices.

Bearing in mind the overlaps in these indicators and the conclusion of Spoonley *et al* that 'social cohesion is both a consequence and a cause'[8], evidence was sought for patterns of correlation that might have a causative explanation. No simple model of causation was assumed. As with the other dimensions the quantitative data sets provided the starting point for analysis and not the analysis itself.

Having concluded that peace was more than the absence of violence, it was crucial to the success of the Monitor that it considered the quality of the peace that has been evolving since the Agreement. The policy document *A Shared Future* published in 2005 noted:

> Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically...[9]

The Monitor therefore looked for indicators providing evidence of whether sharing was replacing separation, or whether the sectarian divide was simply taking new forms. This was viewed as central and evidence was drawn from housing, schooling, the labour market and social situations in which behaviours could be observed. At the same time, attitudinal studies and other qualitative data was examined to measure the change in attitudes to the 'other'.

This was an area where the measurement of progress became problematic because there was not a consensus on where the balance was to be struck. When *A Shared Future* was put out to consultation the overall recommendation was to privilege sharing over separation, but a sizeable minority of approximately 40% reported themselves happy with the existing level of separation. During the preparation of the first report, Nolan found evidence of this type of tension in other parts of the world. In Canada, for example, a monitoring survey of immigrant communities used support for minority ethnic languages as an indicator of respect for incoming communities and therefore *diversity* while also including participation by immigrants in English and French language programmes as an indicator of *integration*.

To strike a dispassionate and evidence based balance, the trends towards sharing and separation are both examined in the Monitor.

Conclusion

It was agreed that, where possible, the Peace Monitoring Report was to focus its concern on outcomes.   Outputs in relation to peace were being monitored and evaluated by many others including government and the European Union (in its

Peace Programme). The task of the Monitor was not necessarily to measure how far we had moved in any one year (although evidence of that might also be present in the report) but whether the movement represented a shift towards or away from peace.

Lastly, it was acknowledged that the four dimensions were not separate; they overlap, provide depth and influence each other. In total they provide a framework for a year-on-year empirical examination of whether the abstract and multi dimensional concept of peace is being realised in practice. Making sense of the complex relationship between the dimensions relied on the broad range of perspectives in the advisory group, soundings taken from all levels of society, including expert opinions and feedback from the many audiences that the author met in relation to the findings over the last three years.

The specific indicators may vary over time as new areas of information become available. The processes of post agreement peace-building are iterative. We are working with the knowledge that is available to us at this particular time. That is why monitoring peace is so important. We need to keep a close eye on it if we are humble enough to recognise the frailty of peace and resolute enough to make it safe in our hands.

Notes

[1] Boutros-Ghali, 1995
[2] Nolan, 2012
[3] Todd, 2010, p.88
[4] Galtung, 1968
[5] Ignatieff, 2003, p.325
[6] Jenson, 1998
[7] Spoonley, 2005, p.102
[8] ibid.
[9] OFMDFM, 2005, p.15

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