

Peace-building and Participation in Northern Ireland: Marginal Social Movements and the Policy Process Since the ‘Good Friday’ Agreement

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This paper considers the relationship between social movements among marginal social groups and a policy process in Northern Ireland that is largely focused on peace building and community relations underpinned by the intense sectarian conflict over national identity. Formal arrangements whereby government and voluntary nonprofit organizations work jointly on policy and programme innovation have been welcomed as being a more participative and inclusive form of public administration and have been an important aspect of reforms since the signing of the ‘Good Friday’ agreement in 1998. But how inclusive these structures can be will depend on the ways in which both the policy frames within which they work and their structures address the needs and circumstances of those groups in society that they are supposed to be reaching out to.

There is an uncertainty in public policy in Northern Ireland about the extent to which voluntary nonprofit organizations reproduce and reflect sectarian divisions or are a seedbed for a diversification around other identities in Northern Irish society offering a hope of a new type of inclusive politics. Commentators remain undecided on the issue. Some for example Couto (1999) and Guelke (2003) offer guarded optimism. Others are more positive (Morrison, 2002). Yet others are quite gloomy (McGarry, 2001). As a consequence differing areas of public policy reform seek to engage with voluntary and community interests in differing and sometimes contradictory ways that may favour different interests.

We will draw on empirical research that is looking at the experiences of two groups in particular, ethnic minorities and new immigrants (including asylum seekers) and identity-based social movement organisations such as older people and disability rights groups. Such groups of people may find that their interests are not readily assimilated into new governance structures. We look at two contrasting governance structures. The local area-based partnerships established under the current European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation operates in a policy frame that contains an explicit reference to both peace building and community relations. There are 26 of these local strategic partnerships that bring local elected representatives and other public bodies into partnership with voluntary and business interests. These partnerships are disbursing grant aid under the EU scheme in the short term, but in the longer term have been charged with developing more inclusive strategies for the economic and social development of their areas. We want to know how its peace and reconciliation policy frame impacts on such interests.

In contrast the consultation mechanisms operated by the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland appear more inclusive, actively encouraging minority group representation and influence. Thus Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act requires all public bodies to put in place equality impact schemes addressing the needs of a diverse range of categories of people thought to be potentially subject to discrimination. The Equality Commission is in turn required to consult with the affected groups themselves. This has had the effect of bringing these groups into the heart of policy making and implementation on a statutory basis and is driving substantial long-term restructuring and development of voluntary nonprofit agencies in this area, encouraging the formation of new identity organizations around the categories listed in the legislation.

We will argue that the Northern Ireland experience offers illuminating case material informing current debates on the global restructuring of governance where everywhere Governments are creating new relationships with the market and with civil society to address problems of social development and social inclusion. Our paper will develop a conceptual framework to help understand some of the dimensions of the limits to inclusive forms of public administration on the one hand and the role of voluntary nonprofit organizations in addressing problems of division in deeply divided societies on the other. Drawing on social movement literature that emphasises the relationship between processes of problem framing within the background communities from which social movement organisations emerge and opportunity structures in their operational environment, we will suggest a theoretical framework that will help predict the types of issues and structures that will best develop inclusive government.