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**Understanding Peace Building Process in Plural Societies, And Lessons
Learnt from Post Conflict Northern Ireland**

By

***MOHAMMED IBRAHIM**
Centre for Democracy and Development CDD
Lagos-Nigeria
mibrahim@cddnig.org

Visiting Commonwealth Professional Fellow
Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU)
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
University of London
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Abstract

This article was in part motivated by my short study visit as a Commonwealth Professional Fellow at the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit to experience the efforts at peace building process by stakeholders in post-conflict Northern Ireland¹. The paper examines the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland and also attempts to outline related efforts at peace building by stakeholders in post-conflict Northern Ireland. I have come to this from a background of experience in Nigeria and West Africa with a view to learning what lessons and challenges the peace process experience can offer other plural societies.

1. Introduction:

Following the end of the 20th century and the ushering in of the new millennium, there were high hopes that things would change for better in terms of peace, human security and development for diverse societies as a result of the new waves of democratic government across the globe. Contrary to this notion, hardly a day passes without newspaper or TV headlines reporting violent conflict encounters in which one or both contestants identify themselves and are identified by others as ethnic communities or religious groups. However, this underscores an underlying truism - that the associated deep social divisions and political differences are major causes of instability and breakdown in transformational societies (Young, 1979; Ahmad, 1999). Where the conflict involves a self determination claim by ethno-national groups, as in Northern Ireland, peace processes and peace agreements also typically attempt to redefine state structures and access to power.

These high hopes, while noble, need to be measured against the political realities that are currently observed in plural societies such as Northern Ireland. The challenge therefore for policy-makers and academics is how to transform the politics of identity along more

¹ At the time of writing this paper, I was a visiting Commonwealth Professional Fellow at the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit in London and this afforded me the opportunity of making a two week study visit to Northern Ireland in March 2005.

benign routes, from violence and exclusion to peaceful co-operation and accommodation. This paper aims to give some insights into this transformation process by firstly, examining what could be done within states and second, how other stakeholders can assist in constructively intervening in the search for sustainable peace. The paper premises that peace and human security at a broad level need an appropriate institutional arrangement, for political accommodation of social diversity in a democratic setting; and Northern Ireland shares in this need.

1:2 Conceptual Background

In any discussion such as this it is imperative to clearly define one's concepts. In this paper, the peace-building process involves creation or strengthening of national institutions, monitoring elections, promoting human rights, providing for reintegration and rehabilitation programs, and creating conditions for resumed development². Under this definition, the key question to ask of a society in the aftermath of or on the verge of conflict is not "what basket of activities can be undertaken to build peace," but "what self-sustaining process can be initiated for the pre-emptive management of disputes."

'Pluralism' is an inevitable aspect of socio-political existence. Whether as a social reality or analytical framework, it is a 'doctrine of diversity' (Vermani, 1996). The concept of pluralism has, at least, three different usages in social science discourse (Lee, et. al., 1984). The third usage, which is the point of departure of this paper, simply recognizes the existence of socio-cultural segmentation and differentiation in society, with ethnicity as an essential ingredient of cultural differentiation. The situation of cultural heterogeneity is often referred to as 'cultural pluralism' (Young, 1979). Yet, as a concept, cultural pluralism emphasizes the peaceful and sometimes even amicable coexistence of *diverse* communities and cultures, which are legally recognized and accommodated. As such, it does not interrogate the conditions of that coexistence (Mahajan, 2002).

² See Kofi Annan's report to the United Nations Security Council, "The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa".

Northern Ireland has had varied experiences of creating a working polity out of a deeply divided society by trying to redefine state structures and the access of these groups to power. It is confronted with socio-political imperatives and political pressures just like other plural societies experiencing instability, inter-religious disharmony. This is then coupled with a typical peace blueprint involving a central deal on democratic access to power (including minority rights where relevant), with a human rights framework. This framework includes measures such as bills of rights, constitutional courts, human rights commissions, security sector reform and criminal justice, and mechanisms to address past human rights violations.

2. Understanding the Context of the Conflict in Northern Ireland

The history of the conflict in Northern Ireland reaches back to the colonial military conquest of Ireland by England in 1169 and its subsequent plantation in the early 1600s, during which hundreds of thousands of (Protestant) settlers were offered land to move from England and lowland Scotland to Ireland, where they displaced native Irish (Catholics) predominantly in the north-east of the country.

The conflict in Northern Island has taken on a sectarian nature; this is because the conflict has been between the Protestant Unionist majority in this part of Ireland and the Nationalist Catholic minority. To this day, Unionists and Loyalists perceive themselves as British while Nationalists and Republicans view themselves as Irish. The populist policies of the Unionist government escalated the rivalry and tensions between two competing national identities (Bew, Patterson & Teague, 1997). The failure of the Northern Ireland state to provide equally for Protestants and Catholics culminated in 1967 in the establishment of the Northern Ireland Civil Right Association, which pushed for reform of state structures, using the model of the civil rights campaign in the United States. Responses by the then Northern Ireland Parliament, to reform state institutions such as local elections, policing, and local government, proved too little for much of the Catholic/Nationalist population and a bridge too far for much of the Protestant/Unionist one.

The non-violent challenge in the 1960s by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) to end the Unionist government's discriminatory practices in housing, education, and employment provoked local Unionist sentiment to react against what it perceived as Republican agitation. As inter-communal violence escalated and the state neared collapse, resulting to sectarian pogroms, the British government deployed its troops on the streets of Belfast and Derry on August 1969 to quell the ensuing violence, and to protect the Catholic Nationalist community. By 1970, the Irish Republican Army, reconstructed as the Provisional IRA began to carry out attacks against the British army, which then became the enemy of the Nationalist people (Irvin, 1999).

In 1972 when the direct rule system was introduced from London by the British government suspected members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army were forcefully arrested and detained without trial and this led to a continuous indiscriminate bombing campaign by the militant PIRA against innocent civilians and the security forces (Dixon, 2000). By 1974, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and no-jury Diplock Courts were introduced by the British government in order to contain the conflict within Northern Ireland. During the 1970s, British policy was marked by efforts to "criminalize" the PIRA, and this failed to address the deep structural inequality between Protestants and Catholics (Bew, Patterson, and Teague, 1997).

In 1998 there was the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a constitutional agreement between all of the political parties and paramilitary organisations as well as both governments in an inclusive process. Then there was a sudden political shift by the British government, which began promoting policies to enhance contact between both ethnoreligious traditions. There were new programmes to enhance and nurture grassroots efforts in cross-community development, and to improve community relations (Fitzduff 1996; Hughes, 1998; Hume, 1996). In the early 1990s, the policy of "talking to terrorists" resulted in reciprocal Loyalist and Republican cease-fires in 1994 (Byrne, 1995). Good Friday fell on 10 April 1998, a day of significance to both Christian traditions in Northern Ireland. On the same day, leaders of the Irish and British

governments, the representatives of all the Nationalist parties and the representatives of all the major Unionist parties signed a historic agreement in Belfast.

The agreement received overwhelming support in both parts of the Ireland through a referendum. Certainly there was a degree of war-weariness, but there was also a view that the compromises contained in the agreement gave both sides enough reassurance on the issues that mattered. However, it is pertinent to mention that the referendum was not about voting for a political party, it was about all the parties involved in the conflict supporting an agreement constructed on principles.

3. Peace Building Process in Post Conflict Northern Ireland:

This paper tries to explain the peace building process in Northern Ireland based on a sketch of analytical framework derived from field observation. The peace building process in Northern Ireland was solemnly built round: 1) promoting the spirit of reconciliation, 2) empowerment through education, 3) political transformation, 4) engaging young people, groups and other stakeholders in community relations activities.

- **Reconciliation:** Is a multi-faceted idea built on truth, mercy, justice, and peace (Lederach, 1997, 1999). It was observed that many local community groups in Belfast and Derry promote reconciliation by bringing together Unionists and Nationalists to pray for peace, to get to know each other, and to facilitate spiritual renewal, peace and justice groups. This has helped to foster relationships built on trust and forgiveness to challenge sectarianism, violence and injustice in society. It has aimed to promote a more just and peaceful set of values and norms within Northern Ireland.
- **Education:** In Northern Ireland, people have been empowered through education, and by building upon their cultural resources. This has helped to encourage generative themes that awaken a critical consciousness in people, and promote a radical self-awareness of local events (Freire, 1999). The involvement of local voluntary community development groups and Non-Governmental Organisations, to teach non-violence and conflict resolution, has helped to bridge both geographic,

political, and religious divisions in Derry and Belfast. This has helped to rebuild confidence and understanding, and to reduce of fear and tension at both the personal and the community level.

- **Politics:** It was observed that politics in Northern Ireland has been transformed, to extend flexibility and diversity in terms of inclusive participation. Transformational politics in this realm help to sustain and promote participatory democracy (Wolpert, Slaton, and Schwerin, 1998). The Northern Ireland Assembly has included political representatives of the people across the sectarian divide, in a power-sharing cabinet within a devolved parliament in Belfast (Dixon, 2000). The aim, however, is clear. Contact, plus confidence building, educates participants and changes negative attitudes. The object is increased mutual understanding and respect at all level.
- **Youth:** Are tomorrow's leaders, and 41 percent of Northern Ireland's 1.6 million people are under the age of 25 (Ruane and Todd, 1998, p. 70). Young people are getting involved in local community programs and drawing on their experience and resources to promote cooperation among youth and community organisations. They are also learning a variety of political and organising skills, as they participate in the process of tackling institutionalised sectarianism and structural violence, inherited from previous generations. Similarly, education for mutual understanding among young people is helping tomorrow's leaders to understand both communities' versions of history and culture. For example, the St. Columb's Park House in Derry is fostering peace education and leadership training skills among young people throughout Northern Ireland. In addition, the integrated school movement in Northern Ireland is promoting contact that transcends religion, class and gender. Students learn about each other's culture, history, religion and sports. They can empirically challenge stereotypes on a daily basis and in the process build a "shared identity" (Byrne, 1997).
- **Women:** The role of women in the peace-building process can never be overemphasised. The Northern Ireland women have played an enormous role in the

peace process. For example, the Northern Ireland Women Coalition (NIWC) brought together women from a variety of political and socio-economic backgrounds cross-communally to explore alternatives that transcend rigid political positions and static ethno-cultural understandings (Dixon, 2000). This has helped to promote equality, inclusion, and respect for human rights within civic society.

- Other stakeholders, such as Non Governmental Organisations, Community Base Organisations, and Civil Liberty Organisations as well as the media have all helped people in the communities in Northern Ireland. They are trying to persuade them that the Good Friday Agreement secures civil society, through the design and management of institutions to promote peace. Mediation centres have also continued to train people and provide collaborative problem-solving techniques, skills, and conflict resolution processes across the communities to change attitudes and sectarian values.

4. Lessons Learned:

Despite the continuing difficulties of the April 1998 Good Friday Agreement--which for the first time allowed all the involved constituencies a voice and a role in the future of Northern Ireland--there is still a degree of optimism in the province. The absence of serious intercommunity violence, the sight of local politicians trying to be constructive, the apparent marginalisation of perpetual dissidents and the sense of an economic and cultural revival are all strongly felt. There is also evidence of a determination that the horrors of the past will not recur, and that the will of the people--as expressed in the referendum and in the subsequent elections--will be obeyed. However, this paper seeks to examine the lessons learned from field experience of the continued peace process in the post conflict Northern Ireland.

- **Sense of Injustice and Discrimination:**

It is interesting to note that the long conflict emerged as much from social and cultural differences between the two communities as from politics. Many of the people we interviewed during the study visit have argued consistently that peace has to be

accompanied by justice. There is a consistent argument that the resulting violence had its origins, at least in part, in the local government's inability or unwillingness to deal with that perception: violence continued for so long because of an absence of trust on all sides that justice could be guaranteed. The consequence of this view can be detected not only in much of the debate preceding the Good Friday Agreement--especially in the demand for confidence-building measures--but also in much of the content of the agreement itself. The emphasis on human rights, restructuring the security sector and police, and the rehabilitation of prisoners are all examples of measures intended to build confidence.

- **Suspicious and Fears**

During the study visit, it was observed that continuing anxieties, suspicions and fears are still deep-rooted on both sides. Some of the people talked to have argued that politics alone would not provide a final resolution to mutual distrust between the Unionist and Nationalist communities, their mutual sense of injustice, and their concern that only vigilance will ensure justice in the future. It is important to mention at this point that some of those talked to agreed that the peace process had delivered changes almost unimaginable in 1994, but since 2003 the strength of the underlying sectarian suspicions and fears seemed as stark as ever.

- **Human Rights:**

Against the background of the past history of communal conflict, it was observed that the parties are now willing to affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. The following institutions and structures have been put in place to confirm this commitment:

- 1) The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) intends to consult and to advise on the scope for defining rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, drawing as appropriate on international instruments and experience; and to provide information and promote awareness of human rights.

2) The Equality Commission has also been established as a unified commission that will advise on, validate and monitor the statutory obligation and also investigate complaints of default. This will build respect for the judiciary and the system of justice and policing.

- **Remembrance of Victims:**

The communities believe that it is essential to acknowledge and remember the suffering of the victims of violence, as a necessary element of reconciliation. This is particularly demonstrated by the erection of memorial murals within the cities of Belfast and Derry in Northern Ireland. It is recognised that victims have a right to be remembered, as well as to contribute to a changed society. The achievement of a peaceful and just society would be the true memorial to those victims of violence. For many, the long years of pitiless violence and warfare, and the many dead and wounded, are difficult to forget.

- **Economic, Social and Cultural Issues:**

Many of those interviewed believe that the government should intensify its effort in the pursuance of broad policies for sustained economic growth and stability in Northern Ireland and for promoting social inclusion. In particular they wish to see community development and the advancement of women in public life. This would tackle the problems of a divided society and social cohesion in urban, rural and border areas. It would protect and enhance the environment and produce new approaches to transport issues. It could strengthen the physical infrastructure, develop the advantages and resources of rural areas and rejuvenate major urban centres.

- **Security:**

Most of those interviewed in Belfast and Derry note that the development of a peaceful environment on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement should mean a normalisation of security arrangements and practices. They believe that a large number of illegally held arms, in the possession of paramilitary groups, are still in the community. The act of disarmament in Northern Ireland is stubbornly referred to, as a matter of principle, and so giving up arms is a problem for both sides. The most widely used argument was that the

two sides-Republican and Unionist paramilitaries--lose respect if they turned in their arms in an unbalanced way.

It was not surprising however to note that the communities recognise that policing is a central issue in any society. They emphasised that Northern Ireland's history of deep divisions has made the status of the police highly emotive, with great hurt suffered and sacrifices made by many individuals and their families. The transformation of the former Royal Ulster Constabulary into today's Northern Ireland Police Service has yet to remove fears, or to win total confidence. Interviewees believe that it is essential that policing structures and arrangements are such that the police service is professional, effective and efficient, fair and impartial, free from partisan political control; that it is accountable, both under the law for its actions and to the community it serves; that it is fully representative of the society it polices, and operates within a coherent and co-operative criminal justice system, which conforms to human rights norms. They also believe that those structures and arrangements must be capable of maintaining law and order, including responding effectively to crime and to any terrorist threat, and to public order problems.

5. Conclusion:

The discussion of peace-building process in a post conflict Northern Ireland leads us to conclude that transformational conflict resolution in plural societies is an all-inclusive, participatory, non-violent and evolutionary process. It has to acknowledge and respect differences, encouraging cooperation amongst groups engaged in protracted inter-communal conflict. This paper has also argued in essence that inter-communal, inter-religious reconciliation in a plural society can be sustained by promoting new cultural norms of peace and fairness, sustainable development practice, and progressive and inclusive socio-economic and political policies. Furthermore, it is believed that the discussion of peace-building process in post conflict Northern Ireland could serve as an important model of success, stagnation or failure for other societies in the process of state building, or healing from the collective trauma of inter-communal violence.

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