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Seán Byrne, Brett Mallon, Mehmet Yavuz

Civil Society Organizations, the Good Friday Agreement, and the Northern Ireland Peace Process

A qualitative methodology was used to interview 120 participants from 2010 and 29 participants from 2020 who shared their experiences and perceptions about the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and their peacebuilding work. Longitudinal findings reveal that the participants were critical of the Agreement and the disconnect between politicians and the grassroots as well as recognizing that the Agreement has brought about relative peace in Northern Ireland. While the participants attest to the relative success of the GFA, they also note several criticisms including sectarian politics, new paramilitaries, Brexit, legacy of the past, continuing divisions in Northern Ireland, and the disconnect between politicians and local community peacebuilders. The participants' criticisms are significant as they attest that while the social peace at the grassroots level is moving forward the political peace is not as evidenced by the recent Unionist backlash against Brexit.

Keywords: economic aid, civil society organizations, peacebuilding, Good Friday Agreement.

Organizacije civilne družbe, Velikonočni sporazum in severnoirski mirovni proces

Avtorji so na podlagi kvalitativne metodologije opravili intervjuje s 120 udeleženci raziskave iz leta 2010 in 29 udeleženci raziskave iz leta 2020, ki so predstavili svoje izkušnje in stališča glede Velikonočnega sporazuma ter svoje delovanje na področju vzpostavljanja miru. Ugotovitve kažejo, da so intervjuvanci kritični tako do samega sporazuma kot tudi do razkoraka med politiko in javnostjo, obenem pa se zavedajo, da je sporazum Severni Irski vendarle prinesel določeno stopnjo miru. Intervjuvanci sicer priznavajo relativni uspeh Velikonočnega sporazuma, težave pa vidijo v sektaški politiki, oblikovanju novih paravojaških enot, brexitu, dediščini preteklosti, nadaljnjih delitvah ter razkoraku med politiki in lokalnimi akterji, ki si prizadevajo za mir. Njihovi odgovori so pomembni, saj potrjujejo, da družbeni mir sicer napreduje, politični pa ne, kar dokazuje tudi nedavno nasprotovanje unionistov proti brexitu.

Ključne besede: *gospodarska pomoč, organizacije civilne družbe, vzpostavitev miru, Velikonočni sporazum.*

Correspondence address: Seán Byrne, Arthur Mauro Institute for Peace and Justice, St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba, 70 Dysart Road, Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2 Canada, e-mail: sean.byrne@umanitoba.ca; Brett Mallon, Department of Applied Human Sciences, College of Health and Human Sciences, Kansas State University, 119 Justin Hall, 1324 Lovers Ln, Manhattan, KS 66506, e-mail: bmallon@ksu.edu; Mehmet Yavuz, Arthur Mauro Institute for Peace and Justice, St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba, 70 Dysart Road, Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2 Canada, e-mail: yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca.

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1. Introduction

Besides international actors, local people also influence the peacebuilding process through their practices (Marijan 2017). Everyday activities through which average citizens exercise their agency include "place-making, symbolic practices, and the production of competing narratives and performances" (Marijan 2017, 69). Therefore, this article explores how the leaders of Northern Ireland's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), funded by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the European Union (E.U.) Peace Fund, understand and experience the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the larger peace process. The 1998 GFA, a multi-party agreement brokered by the British and Irish governments, and the United States (U.S.) and the E.U., ended the Northern Ireland Troubles creating a powersharing executive at Stormont and a raft of institutions to broker politics that are viewed negatively and positively across both communities. Today, there remain competing perspectives among the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) working class communities regarding the peacebuilding process (Marijan 2017). Segregation also persists within communities, where invisible boundaries remain across streets in Belfast which people know to avoid (Marijan 2017).

Considering local people's agency in peacebuilding and the persistent social problems in Northern Ireland, it is important to examine how CSO peacebuilders in Belfast, Derry, and the Border Area of the Irish Republic perceive the GFA. Two samples of CSO leaders from 2010 and 2020 discuss how the GFA has impacted Northern Ireland's peace dividend. Following the context is the findings section, which discusses continuing divisions in Northern Ireland like Brexit, legacy of the past, new paramilitaries, and sectarian politics as well as the disconnect between politicians and local community peacebuilders. The methodology and the findings sections are then outlined. Collectively, these findings lead us to the conclusion that politics in Northern Ireland are in flux while grassroots peacebuilding has been relatively successful.

2. Context

We begin our analysis of the GFA with a discussion of the nature of the external funding, the flag controversy, and the border issue because it illuminates the participants' reflections on its effectiveness and assists in appreciating the significance of its failures. Northern Ireland offers a long record of economic and political initiatives aimed at de-escalating the conflict. In 1985, the British and Irish governments established the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) after signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The IFI provided $895 million in support of close to 6,000 CSO projects over a 25-year period (Skarlato et al. 2013). In 1996, the E.U. created the Peace and Reconciliation Fund to support local cross-community engagement, inclusivity, and reconciliation (Fissuh et al. 2012).

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From 1995–1999, PEACE I provided €500 million with the British and Irish governments adding an additional €167 million (Byrne & Ayulo 1998). PEACE II (2000–2006) allotted €531 million with both governments allocating an extra €304 million (Buchanan 2014). PEACE III (2007–2013) set aside €225 million and the E.U. structural funds earmarked €108 million to peacebuilding (Byrne et al. 2009). PEACE IV (2014–2020) allocated €270 million and both governments providing €41 million, and the E.U. Regional Development Fund including an additional €229 million (Hyde & Byrne 2015). The total external resources from both funds committed to peacebuilding on the island is over €3.3 billion.

Despite the decades-long financial investment in the Northern Irish peace process, there have been occasional flare ups in tensions, such as the union flag controversy. The ruling in Belfast City Council on December 3, 2012, restricted the flag flying policy and reduced the time the flag would be flown. Immediately following there were PUL protests outside Belfast City Hall that escalated into violence, that lasted into 2013, happening every Saturday as public spaces became more divisive, and more shared at the same time (Bryan 2015).

The PUL community perceived the challenge as a continuation of the larger scale threat to their British identity, and throughout the process PUL leaders and political parties played roles in provoking and organizing protests, and online through social media (Goldie & Murphy 2015). PUL youth felt in a culture war perceiving that everything was being taken from them, such as parades and bonfires, and the flag was another step in that direction (Halliday & Ferguson 2016). The banning of the union flag was interpreted as Sinn Féin (SF) attempting to erode the Britishness of Northern Ireland, and fears arose that shared and neutral spaces would soon become CNR spaces as a siege mentality took over (Hearty 2015). Thus, the idea of siege can be applied to the flag protests as Britishness and Unionist identity is seen as diminishing and under threat (Guelke 2014).

That said, the union flag controversary was also exacerbated by communities disproportionately affected by poverty during the Troubles continuing to face marginalization and exclusion and failing to benefit from the economic dividend and the "transformational promises" of a post-GFA Northern Ireland (Holland 2022). Another lingering issue in Northern Ireland besides the union flag culture war that the GFA also hasn't eradicated is the inequality and poverty that exist in post-peace-accord Northern Ireland in the poorest segregated working-class communities as young men especially from the PUL community continue to be left behind by the peace dividend (Holland 2022). These young men are reengaging and reinvesting in their ethnocultural identities and some are attracted to new Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. Thus, Brexit and the border, culture wars, dysfunctional politics, and sectarian violence continue to challenge cross community peacebuilding and the peace process especially among those from deprived, underprivileged, and underserved working-class communities (Holland 2022).

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Allied to inequality, poverty, and the flag controversary, the border also became a central issue in post-Brexit negotiations, as Britain and Northern Ireland were concerned with negotiating a similar deal and ensuring similar conditions, and Republicans, the Republic of Ireland, and the E.U. were concerned with preventing hard borders and maintaining the peace process (Doyle & Connolly 2019). In early January 2021 goods from the rest of the U.K. to Northern Ireland had to clear customs so that they could then be transported anywhere on the island. A border was effectively made on the Irish sea to prevent the land border from being closed. The Northern Ireland Protocol places emphasis on preserving the GFA and a commitment to the human rights and equality frameworks of the E.U., as well as maintaining funding under future funding programs from both the U.K. and E.U. and the continuation of the Common Travel Area, avoiding a hard border (Harvey 2020). However, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) resistance and Boris Johnson's attempt to shore up the support of his base led the British government to renege on its international commitment and scrap portions of the post-Brexit trade deal with the E.U. in the Northern Ireland Protocol. The DUP's continual refusal to sit in Stormont and rejection of the February 27, 2023, Windsor Framework compromise between Britain and the E.U. does not bode well for Northern Ireland's political future. We now turn to the research methods engaged to generate data for the study.

3. Methods

Qualitative data was generated through semi-structured interviews in 2010 in Derry and the Border Area, and in 2020 in Belfast and Derry. The interviews focused on the participants experiences and perceptions of how the economic aid contributed to community development, reconciliation, trust building, and peacebuilding. The first data set from 2010 includes interviews with 120 CSO leaders, IFI and PEACE III development officers and civil servants located in Derry and the Border Counties of Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone. The second data set includes highly in-depth interviews with 29 civil society leaders based in Belfast and Derry. Pseudnyoms are used to protect the respondents identities.These participants engage directly with the Northern Ireland peace process in varying ways including, grassroots leaders, peacebuilding organization leaders, project leaders, and community developers. Themes of negative and positive peace views of the GFA emerged inductively from the data.

4. 2010 Study

The respondents have different experiences and perceptions of the GFA, and the following are their viewpoints of their negative and positive views of the GFA and the peace process.

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4.1 Negative View of GFA and the Peace Process

The politicians and locals were locked in conflict. Local communities were initially way ahead of the politicians that were now beginning to catch up and become more engaged in the peacebuilding process. The politicians' political will was necessary to sustain grassroots sustainable peacebuilding in the long term, yet, as per our interview with Odhran, partisanship and the divergent vested interests of Assembly men and women prevented them from making the necessary compromise.

In other words, politicians had to toe the party line while political tensions spilled down into local communities as people became frustrated with the intransigence of their political representatives. Politicians seeking re-election canvassed constituents and were vocal and visual within their local communities. They went back into their constituencies seeking community support regarding making hard decisions about budget cuts in health care and education.

At the same time, however, Members of the Legislative Assembly's (MLAs) divisive politics severely hindered local peacebuilding activities as the middle ground disintegrated and people moved back into their sectarian enclaves. Local MLAs were part of the party whip and had to follow their party colleagues. As Fionnuala relayed, when MLAs squabbled like children, everyday people decoded the wrong messages, which predisposed the community to further tensions. Young people especially are impacted as they mobilize in reaction to political crises because they are socialized by and have ready access to print and social media (Alaminos & Penalva 2012).

Thus, conflict politics had a serious negative impact on local communities and seriously disrupted grassroots peacebuilding efforts. Tensions escalated especially during the marching season as the media highlighted certain events like the parades through the Garvaghy Road in Portadown and the Ormeau Road in Belfast.

In other words, there was a fracturing between the macro and the micro levels as well as fragmentation within the PUL community. These relationships were disjointed as a political vacuum existed as politicians failed to listen to local communities' concerns. There was some work, therefore, that needed to be done to MLAs to dialogue with local people working across both communities about reconciliation, remembering the past, and the disempowerment of the PUL community. As a participant, Eleanor, notes,

> ELEANOR: The grassroots level feel that the politicians aren't listening to them […]. There are those who are obviously happy with the GFA and there are those at the extremes that are very unhappy because of the prison release. They felt that the past hadn't been dealt with effectively and that the reconciliation isn't there […]. It's very important that the voices of both sides of the community are listened to especially the victims […]. I think building capacity within the Protestant community […] because

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> from their perspective they see the money going to the Catholics. So, they have lost the power. They have lost their voice.

The depravation, changing power differential, and the monies coming into CNR areas meant that the PUL community was really frustrated and felt that their political representatives weren't voicing their concerns.

As a CSO member, Liam, recognizes, there is an apparent disconnect between the Unionists who viewed the political system as working during the Troubles and the Nationalist community who had to create a new system. Yet, there is possibly a third category who might consider the system as efficient but in need of enhanced human effort and commitment.

People also had mixed feelings with regards to the overall impact of the GFA that was evidenced by the low electoral turnout because people mistrusted politicians. Local people had a poor choice in terms of the progressive politicians that they could vote for. Although the GFA has procured relative peace, people are generally disappointed by the polarizing figures running for office and its failure to deliver a Civic Forum, where people could be freely expressive. Oonagh succinctly depicts this disappointment, noting that:

> OONAGH: There was a euphoria about yes, the Troubles have stopped, yes, we have found a sort of peace, and yes, we must sit people down and learn to live together, and what are we going to do today […]. But there seems to be a ground swell of deception and a ground swell of disillusionment, and a ground swell of being disenfranchised and isolated.

Local people had lost confidence in the politicians' ability to translate and deliver the benefits of the GFA like the Civic Forum to their local constituents. The grassroots pushed these politicians to sign an agreement and when it arrived, they weren't ready for it. Many groups were benefiting from the GFA while other disadvantaged and marginalized groups were not.

There was also a clear lack of trust and understanding between the PUL and CNR political parties, and an unwillingness among some extremist politicians to take small incremental steps to move forward as it was important for the people to see that the working political structures were providing beacons of hope and light for the people like Prime Minister David Cameron's apology over Bloody Sunday and the shooting of innocent civilians by the army that articulated a different vision of politics. Annmarie reported on the significance of the event in the following manner:

> ANNMARIE: I mean all the years they were denied the legitimacy of their stories. So, when the state is involved in that […] [it] is very, very powerful and the hurt of that must be huge […]. Those people now have an opportunity to tell their story and to tell it in different formats.

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Yet she recognized that there continued to be a gap between the politicians and the grassroots in terms of having an overall mainstream peacebuilding strategy. Both governments weren't really embracing grassroots peacebuilding efforts, and what they were doing on the ground. She also articulated that the funding process was competitive and some CSOs were replicating peacebuilding work on the ground.

4.2 Positive View of GFA and the Peace Process

The 1998 GFA is out of sync with grassroots peacebuilding as one could probably realistically expect given the difficulties of getting the political system in Stormont to function stably. For example, Ian Paisley's DUP and Martin McGuinness' SF coming out of a 30-year war situation made good progress in addressing difficult issues such as policing.

For example, Tadhg noticed that there was a sea of political change as Northern Ireland became more stable, yet he also recognized that threats by Loyalist and Republican fringe paramilitary groups will necessitate future external intervention to keep the peace. There continues to be ongoing security problems with the Loyalist Communities Council representing the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Red Hand Commandos and a resurgent Real IRA and New IRA. Yet, he also recognized that children lived in safety in local communities and didn't have to go through British army checkpoints anymore.

Local everyday people needed to build peace with each other and get back to their relationships that existed before the Troubles broke out in the late 1960s. Hence, local disputes were dealt with through local grassroots community conflict resolution, and they weren't addressed through policy. In contrast, Harry acknowledged that the PUL community agreed to support the GFA so that both communities could peacefully coexist together but that didn't mean surrendering their culture and history. He accepted that both communities must be tolerant and accept each other and work together to build an inclusive society that includes creating a bill of rights to be fully implemented by the government.

According to Hannah, local citizens had input into the development of the 1998 GFA that was written in ambiguous language so both communities could interpret it differently. The DUP and the SDLP signed the 1998 GFA yet the 1998 election brought SF and the DUP into powersharing government that reduced the violence and empowered grassroots peacebuilders to be more effective. She believed that the PUL community came on board with the current peace process, yet many DUP supporters weren't ready for Ian Paisley changing his political position from opposition to supporter of the GFA. She notes that it was important for Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to constructively lead at the political level "because the breaking of the trust at that level very quickly ripples down to the breaking of the trust at the local level."

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Consequently, the synergy between politicians and the grassroots depended on people's own direct experiences and possibly where they lived and who represented them at Stormont. For example, Aisling reported that local CSOs had travelled up to Stormont to engage with the powersharing Assembly and that was something that didn't occur under direct rule. She notes that there were still major gaps that need to be addressed like involving the youth that didn't experience the violence of the Troubles and are disenchanted with politics.

> AISLING: With that growth of an Assembly things are going to change [...] and people will begin to see changes and politics will become less Nationalist, Loyalist or Republican [...] and more centered on bread-and-butter issues [...]. There is a whole piece of work to engage young people and [...] to get them interested in the communities [...] for changing the attitude [...]. At the community level [...] we must influence the government.

Aisling remembered that much of the community development work accomplished over the last 35 years grappled with addressing the challenges of the past, and the government didn't seem to agree with the CSOs peacebuilding efforts to meet those challenges head on rather than storing them up to be addressed in the future.

Five findings emerged from these narratives. First, the key political issue was sovereignty and how some PUL community members believe that the British government wanted to abandon them and create a united Ireland by the back door. The PUL community perceives that it has to have a voice in deciding whether Northern Ireland would join a future united Ireland or remain within Britain. Their voices were important, and they need to be heard. The PUL and CNR communities must be confident in their own identities if they are going to build trusting relationships and take a risk and be clear that their motives are to work together for the greater good. As part of that paradigm shift, local communities are learning to follow a different path about how to solve problems through learning by doing.

Connected to the sovereignty issue, the PUL community interprets decommissioning as getting rid of paramilitary weapons while the CNR community reads it as doing away with paramilitary and security forces arms. Initially, PUL politicians refused to enter negotiation with SF to weaken its position on decommissioning weapons. SF disbanded its armed wing, the Provisional IRA, so that the decommissioning process could begin while DUP politicians refused to negotiate with SF because they perceived that the PIRA was still carrying out punishment beatings.

In addition, the U.S., and the British and Irish governments ensured that SF's political position wasn't weakened any further by putting pressure on the DUP to enter the powersharing Assembly otherwise joint authority by the British and Irish governments would have been introduced into Northern Ireland, and Ian Paisley wouldn't have been able to sell joint authority to the DUP grassroots.

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Second, there was a disassociation and in some sense a parting of the way with local community groups when Stormont began to function as the politicians began making the decisions. Disadvantaged communities felt neglected and abandoned by the politicians while the PUL community felt deceived and disillusioned by the GFA. The GFA has lost steam and an escalation of some violent acts in the future could reignite the conflict. There is also a certain level of bitterness remaining in local communities that needed to be worked on through the social peace process to keep bigotry at bay especially when poverty and exclusion are a problem and there is someone else to blame for the social dimension.

Third, the picture is mixed as the macro and micro levels often run parallel and are separate. The political peace is about protecting the GFA to change the political circumstances of how people live their everyday lives. Political structures were put in place to ensure political representation based on equality so that government delivers to all the people that it represents. There is also tremendous change with the democratic process working through the first and deputy first minister representing the polarized SF and DUP parties that provides some hope and confidence to local people.

Sometimes there is also a positive cooperative interaction between CSO projects and initiatives, and the Stormont executive. CSOs are more concerned with doing things without thinking about where they fit in at the political level. They take the lead in terms of building trusting relationships that encourage the political parties to move forward constructively. Alternatively, MLAs and ministers often go directly into their districts to explore issues that need to be resolved so that the results benefit those communities.

Fourth, the work been done at the grassroots level is also limited because the CSOs can't force people into reconciliation. Peacebuilding must be done on a voluntary basis, and some critics contend that the people involved in reconciliation aren't the people who really need reconciliation. Survivors from the Troubles era also feel alienated from the peace process because there is no tangible reconciliation process built into it. The conflict has also impacted people living in highly marginalized areas that are damaged by inequality and poverty so that the external funding must target the very poor's social and economic needs.

Fifth, in some contexts, the macro and the micro levels aren't working well together because the GFA and the political arrangements being played out in Stormont aren't built into the refusal to discuss, engage with, and take responsibility for the past. Some politicians pay lip service and aren't willing to go digging it up because they can't agree on a shared narrative of what it is so that it has become a recipe for sectarian division. Rather than cooperating on addressing the past, the political parties often pull so far in the opposite direction that problems magnify and become cumbersome when they are weaponized by different community groups.

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5. 2020 Study

The following are the viewpoints of participants with regards to their negative and positive views of the GFA and the peace process, generated in 2020.

5.1 Negative View of GFA and the Peace Process

While much has changed in Northern Ireland over the last decade, many grievances with the political atmosphere remained as familiar as ever from the chorus of CSO leaders. Despite a decade's worth of time passing, concerns of local voices being ignored by politicians remain. For example, David notes that the delivery and ownership of GFA institutions and polices was contested between the political parties and the people even though the powers codified in the Agreement remain limited, they are embedded within the political binary of Nationalist and Unionist. Moreover, he believes that "twenty years later, the institution has, probably by most people's reasonable measurements, failed."

This was a searing indictment of a peace agreement that was often lauded as the "golden example" among peace scholars (Fenton 2018). The fact that these same sentiments were echoed in CSO leadership, a decade apart, indicates the GFA continued to be found wanting. The lack of genuine engagement and participation from outside of the political sphere kept Northern Ireland trapped in a liminal peace.

In many ways, it was the direct out workings of the GFA, the institutions themselves, that continued to be a source of frustration and exasperation for Northern Ireland's leaders. Coupled with those frustrations was a recognition that many issues were still left unresolved, or even unaddressed in the decades following the signing of the GFA. For example, Calum articulates that people suffer from the upheaval resulting from Brexit as well as continuing trauma from the Troubles "which still goes on and you can still touch it and feel it".

The issue of remembrance and trauma were an area of the Troubles that the GFA left largely unattended. Remembering and addressing the past was ignored in favor of focusing on reforming institutions and policing. Yet, two decades later, the issue had magnified, and its burden had evolved to be closer to an anchor, weighing the peace process down. Thus, Northern Ireland was left with faulty institutions and a quagmire of unresolved trauma swirling in the political and grassroots spheres. As Calum noted, these challenges have amplified in recent years with the introduction of Brexit.

As tensions have continued to rise following the 2016 Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland has been thrust into the spotlight as a particularly thorny issue in the Brexit equation. Being pulled between Europe and Britain is certainly not a new experience for Northern Ireland, yet the recent Brexit debate and process has enflamed many of those lingering embers that are centuries old. This is even

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more the reason that strong, local institutions are critical, so decisions for Northern Ireland can be made in Belfast, rather than London, Brussels, or Dublin. Frustratingly though, that was a reality that simply didn't exist in Northern Ireland. Saorise notes that disenfranchised, disgruntled, and marginalized people squeezed by those in power in politics, the media, and local communities means there is no incentive for them to change the self-sustaining political system that isn't "reflective of representative democracy".

> SAOIRSE: Everybody is complicit in maintaining [the system], as long as political leaders and community leaders and the media, or social media, continue to actively reinforce the underlying ignorance-based fears of the other, through the promotion of stereotypes, misinformation, and downright overt lies, that ensure that I remain constrained to vote one way, and one way only.

The reinforcing of societal divisions was very much antithetical to the intended goals of the GFA. As the post-agreement years continue to pile up, the lack of significant movement when it comes to reducing societal divisions and sectarianism, continues to paint a less than rosy picture of the true verdict of the GFA's effectiveness. James feels that the peace process isn't a panacea as Northern Ireland is "a very frustrating place to live […] in terms of the politics [and peace]".

The GFA was seen as an opportunity to change the narrative in Northern Ireland and tell a new story, divergent from the divisive and sectarian rhetoric of the past. And while the level of direct violence had markedly declined, 2020 still, in many ways, echoed the same story of 1998 or 2010 as divisions, leadership vacuums, the lack of local voices, and the conflict itself most certainly remained. The GFA was effective in its time, but it had also proved to be ineffective for all-time. Thus, Northern Ireland found itself adrift at sea, lacking a captain. Aisling reports, for example, that she doesn't have the same expectations that she held 15 years ago.

> AISLING: I thought, to come through that conflict and move into this and there was a lot of energy and a lot of pride and a lot of engagement going on, which kind of ground to a halt right around 2010 and 2011, before the flag protests, but it was stable. Then the flag protests was a negative and since then it's just been a ship with no rudder or anything. It's been drifting.

The disconnect between political leaders and the grassroots remained, just as it existed a decade ago. And in turn, the frustrations have continued to grow as CSO leaders faced the brick wall of engagement and communication that towered over the peacebuilding sector, much like the peace walls continue to physically divide and prevent progress in local communities.

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5.2 Positive View of GFA and the Peace Process

As we near the quarter century mark in the GFA's lifespan, it is important to note areas where growth has indeed occurred in Northern Ireland. Reflections of the agreement shouldn't happen in isolation of the present but must also include an honest comparison to the realities of Northern Ireland before the signing of the agreement in 1998. Niamh notes that "even what we have now is still beyond better than what we've had before" as the present generation doesn't realize how bad the violence was pre-GFA, and they have a sense of failure when they don't witness a normal functioning government.

An entire generation in Northern Ireland has now grown up removed from the height of the direct violence experienced during the Troubles. The challenges faced by Northern Ireland's youth when it came to ineffective institutions or political leadership, paled in comparison to the challenges of active warfare that dominated the headlines. This was an important realization of where the GFA did make a significant and positive impact at a societal level.

Inadvertently, the GFA also provided a catalyst for the strengthening of civil society. Faced with decades of inept political leadership and failing national institutions (inside and outside of Stormont), CSO leaders faced an immediate sink or swim conundrum in the years following the signing of the GFA. This led to a subtle thread of optimism shared by numerous CSO leaders. Even though the society is in a constitutional flux, Finn is optimistic that peacebuilders "have navigated over the last 10 years, all of the cumbersome obstacles and difficulties that manifest in post-conflict societies to get to [meaningful] change, with [...] communities".

This strength and optimism in the face of GFA failings was a common theme in both CNR and PUL communities and CSO leadership. Despite what is happening at the political level, Grainne is also optimistic that CSOs using a kinder peacebuilding practice with people "can start creating a different story within our own work. Within our own organizations, within our own family units, within our own communities".

As communities were left to pick up the pieces from the Troubles and fill in the gaps left by the GFA, a recognition of capability and self-sufficiency was born. Recognizing they couldn't turn to a trusted political sector, CSO leaders turned inward to their own communities to find the strength to seek out progress in the face of a litany of challenges. This also drew communities together, even across PUL and CNR lines, as grassroots peace work took on a life of its own in the years following the GFA.

Another reality is that progress simply takes time. Constitutional and identity issues in Northern Ireland have existed for centuries, and no agreement could possibly untangle those issues with any consistent haste. As Oisin reported, the key was that progress was still being made, however slowly that might be, in the peacebuilding endeavor.

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> OISIN: I think if, politics here moves forward, you will see a more proactive civil society that's saying, we're not going to go back there. It takes time to bring about fundamental change. Somebody like me who lived through the civil rights movement and the conflict, I thought we would have been further on at this stage, but I'm still not disillusioned, I still think we're moving in that direction.

It is this dedication towards progress which protected the tenuous optimism that ran through many CSO leaders. The GFA managed to carve out explicit appreciation for inclusivity which led to a more cohesive atmosphere in the post-agreement period. This was most certainly a victory of the GFA and something that had led to significant successes at the grassroots level of peace work. Patrick also notes that CSOs are aware of the GFA and the outreach they're doing in communities.

> PATRICK: [...] in terms of impacting on the ordinary person across Northern Ireland, and their psyche. That explicit legal provision for inclusivity of all those diversities is something that, whether people agree with it or not, their awareness and understanding of it was never greater than was achieved through the [GFA].

This progress shouldn't be overlooked amid the numerous GFA shortcomings. Peacebuilding was a process without end and thus it required unwavering support for inclusivity, trust, and recognition. The GFA set Northern Ireland on this path and emboldened the civil society leaders to take up the mantle of peace and progress.

Five key findings were revealed from a reflection of the CSO leaders' perceptions that were generated in 2020. In many ways, these findings follow closely to the themes and key findings identified from the 2010 data. First, as with the previous three plus centuries, the constitutionality question of Northern Ireland was still on many minds. One key change over the last ten years was the introduction of Brexit into the already complicated equation. Many CSO leaders expressed concern at the complexities coming into reality with the U.K.'s decision to withdraw from the E.U. This also renewed conversations around the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, as Brexit fans with fires of those same border poll murmurings also highlighted with the 2010 data.

Second, like ten years ago, CSO leaders revealed deep schisms between the political sphere and the grassroots level. Distrust and skepticism continued to dominate many CSO leaders' minds as they commented on the politicians and political sphere. In some communities, trust had entirely broken down as CSO leaders took the reins of community progress from the politicians that they saw as out of touch and inept. The gulf between those at Stormont (when it is a functioning institution) and those in communities were seen deteriorating over the last decade as leadership continued to falter.

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Third, many challenges continued to plague the peace process as the GFA institutions clashed with vision and opportunity at the grassroots peacebuilding level. Though necessary for the goals of 1998, the rigidity of the GFA-spawned institutional changes left many CSO leaders fighting continual uphill battles to break down barriers within their communities. A plurality of CSO leaders argued the GFA set up inherently divided institutions and processes that stubbornly kept the peacebuilding endeavor fractured and hampered. With two plus decades in the rearview mirror, for many, as the warning notes, the sight of the 1998 starting line was, distressingly, closer than expected in their journey along the peacebuilding pathway.

Fourth, the deep divisions within Northern Ireland created a plethora of community peacebuilding efforts, exasperated by the GFA's ineffective relics and failures of implementation, even over two decades into the GFAs life span. This became particularly true in funding efforts within the peacebuilding sector as well. Many groups working with marginalized communities (e.g., ex-combatants) were constantly wrapped up in bureaucratic red tape as they attempted to access key peacebuilding monies from sources such as the E.U. PEACE IV and the PEACE PLUS program. And, frustratingly across the entire scope of civil society, many opportunities were tantalizingly close (like the Civic Forum), but just out of reach due to failures of full GFA implementation.

Fifth, the GFA proved useful for its time, but its usefulness for all time, was far less obvious. While momentum still existed in peacebuilding efforts from CSO leaders, the structure of the GFA continued to provide roadblocks in critical ways. Whether from a lack of implementation or rigidity in those institutions that were realized, little wiggle room was left for CSO leaders pursuing the peacebuilding path. Optimism certainly still existed, perhaps holding on now simply through the collective willpower of CSO leaders, but times were tough in the shadows cast by the two plus decades of the distinguished GFA.

6. Conclusion

This article used two qualitative datasets from 2010 and 2020 to explore CSO leaders' understandings and experiences of the GFA. It highlighted how these peacebuilders perceive how the GFA is buttressing the peace process. The respondents noted six key issues in their stories. First, the bureaucratic and competitive nature of the funding process limited CSO peacebuilding activities. Second, sovereignty over the border accentuated by Brexit has reignited protests by the PUL community against their perceived marginalization by the British government and the E.U. Third, while paramilitary weapons were decommissioned as part of the GFA, new paramilitaries threaten the security situation. Fourth, disadvantaged communities feel abandoned by politicians and GFA institutions that are not in sync with CSOs peacebuilding vision and activities. Fifth, CSOs

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can't force some individuals into reconciliation if they chose to opt out of cross community peacebuilding. Sixth, it is painful and controversial to remember the past as the wounds remain raw.

Consequently, Northern Ireland remains frozen in a liminal stasis that is complexified by Brexit, the Northern Ireland Protocol, and COVID-19. Identity issues, inequality, segregation, siege mentality, and the national question continue to drive a wedge between both communities. Yet as Senator George Mitchell mediator of the GFA process speaking at a peace conference at Queen's University Belfast on April 17, 2023 to mark the GFA's 25th anniversary reminded those in attendance, the GFA was a compromise that wouldn't resolve all the issues and now people needed their political leaders to have the courage, desire, grace, and wisdom to again step up and "root peace down deep in the soil where it can, once again, grow" (Mitchell 2023).

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