

**Social cohesion, welfare
and civil society**

**Some implications of the case
of Northern Ireland**

Nick Acheson

Purpose of Paper

- To assess policies that seek a greater role for voluntary agencies in welfare state reform
- To examine in the light of evidence of fractured civil societies the assumption that voluntary agencies can be institutions in civil society enforcing civic virtue, social cohesion and participation.

**The paper examines three
assumptions**

- Voluntary agencies are independent sources of social cohesion through their capacity to generate social capital.
- Inter-personal trust gained in small group settings provided by voluntary agencies can generalize to greater levels of trust among people in general (the socialization hypothesis).
- The potential of welfare states as a source of social cohesion can be enhanced by investing in the capacity of voluntary agencies.

Civil society, social capital and welfare states: some problems

- Evidence of a link between the density of associations and levels of generalized trust does not prove the socialization hypothesis as correct
- The relationship between the elements of social capital – networks, norms and trust – is not straightforward.
- The role of intervening variables such as class and the legitimacy of the political system tends to empty social capital of its explanatory power

The case of Northern Ireland – an ethnically divided society integrated into the UK Welfare State

- NI remains a deeply divided society in which two rival ethno-religious blocks compete for resources and power.
- Spatial separation and patterns of avoidance are key features of N Irish life.
- Historically, the institutions and practices of the welfare state have had little impact on the nature, intensity or duration of the conflict. Since 1972, they have been developed on a technical 'conflict blind' basis.

Welfare state accommodation to ethno-religious divisions

Policy arena	Response
Housing	A single unitary housing authority administers social housing on a largely segregated basis
Education	Single policy, delivered through two parallel school systems, one each for the two main ethnic groups. Further and higher education is institutionally integrated, although in practice many aspects remain segregated.
Health and Social Welfare	unitary policy and delivery that ignores ethnic divisions in its design and discourses, but nevertheless pragmatically adjusts to it, while at the same time denying its relevance.

The voluntary and community sector in NI.

- There are between 3,500 and 5,000 viable voluntary and community organizations in NI.
- They provide employment for over 29,000 people, 4.5% of the workforce, and have a combined asset base of over £750m
- Funding from regional government sources to voluntary and community organizations increased from just under £17m in 1988/89 to over £70m in 2001/02, an increase in over 400%

The Policy context: 'A Shared Future'

- Govt policy has abandoned the technical conflict blind approach to public administration;
- Policy now states that public bodies henceforth "set the pace on movement towards a shared society and should lead by example";

Voluntary Action and 'A Shared Future'

- "There is a clear recognition that the voluntary and community sector has made a powerful contribution to the achievement of better relations between communities. It is important that that role is underscored, especially in the most disadvantaged and interface areas... The development of, and investment in, social capital – particularly bridging social capital – through community development can help promote relationships within and between communities"

Research questions

- What is the contribution of the voluntary and community sector in modifying community divisions in Northern Ireland?
- What evidence is there of the sector's actual or potential contribution to building trust between people in the two main communities?
- What circumstances help and/or hinder them in doing this?

What we did

- Six scoping interviews were carried out;
- Postal questionnaire to a sample of 535 organizations (358 responses 67% response rate);
- Analysis of written comments supplied by 135 respondents;
- Six area case studies, 4 in urban areas of Belfast and Derry and 2 in district towns in which 38 interviews were completed.

The ethno-religious structure of the voluntary sector in NI

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Wholly Catholic	40	11.2	13.1
Mostly Catholic	69	19.4	22.5
Mixed	80	22.5	26.1
Mostly Protestant	75	21.1	24.5
Wholly Protestant	42	11.8	13.7
Missing	50	14.0	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>356</i>	<i>100</i>	

Organizations providing cross-community opportunities: Numbers answering 'yes'

	numbers	Valid percentage
Opportunities to do things together	325	96.2
Opportunities to cooperate on common task	304	93
Encouragement to work on cross-community issues	202	65

Proportion of organizations indicating a willingness to engage in cross-community discussion

	Catholics and Protestants working together: % saying 'yes'	Equal access to services for Catholics and Protestants: % saying 'yes'
All Catholic organizations	41.5	71.4
All Protestant organizations	25.4	49.1
All organizations	33.2	60.0

Some important caveats

- Only a third of respondents said that the question of Protestants and Catholics working together was addressed directly in discussions about organizations' work;
- 60.1% of respondents addressed equality of access to services, but Catholic organizations much more likely to than Protestant.
- whilst we found a great deal of mixing across communal divisions, this would appear to be done in such a way that explicit cross-community issues are not addressed

Strategies for addressing divisions

- denial
- Avoidance of the issue where possible based on a 'conflict blind' ideology of need
- In interface areas, organizations themselves were not in a position to establish the necessary trust for joint work to move forward;
- In all cases, cross-community trust depended on relatively stable local political accommodation

The nature of the 'civic space' enhanced by the sector

- people from widely differing political and religious backgrounds can and do meet and tackle issues they can agree on
- This is accompanied by strong norms that preclude addressing 'difficult' issues
- This enables a high level of cross-community mixing in organizational contexts accompanied by low levels of reported anxiety

The development of cross-community trust

- Strong norms of avoidance means that trust developed within organizations does not generalise;
- in interface communities where avoidance of the issue is not possible, cross-community trust, even to the extent of developing joint projects is hard won, easily undermined and often restricted to very few individuals.

The sector as an independent source of cross-community trust

- Stable local political settlements are needed for cross-community trust building;
- Without this, the sector lacks the power to generate trust that bridges ethno-religious divisions;
- Cross-community contact tends to be funding driven and limited to very few individuals with little noticeable impact on the wider population.

conclusions

- There are strong social norms that preclude the development of generalized trust;
- Cross-community trust is a by-product of political accommodation;
- third sector organizations cannot be treated as independent sources of bridging social capital.
- the creation of partnerships and other models of inter-agency working do not in themselves add to social solidarity across ethnic or other fundamental social cleavages
