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ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

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ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

Active citizenship and community relations in Northern Ireland

Foreword

A Shared Future (2005) – the Government's policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland – pointed to the role of the voluntary and community sector in helping create a less divided society. Indeed, in Northern Ireland, the sector is often cited as being at the vanguard of creating an environment within which the old divisions can be tackled and resolved.

This booklet aims to examine the progress made so far, and what more is possible – including whether civil society is sufficiently aware, resourced and, indeed, willing to meet expectations.

It is based on presentations at a series of special seminars entitled *Active citizenship and community relations in Northern Ireland*, which took place in Belfast in early 2008.

Organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), these events enabled experts based in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK to share their insights with practitioners, academics and policymakers.

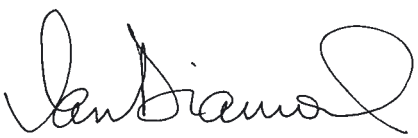
Public participation in Northern Ireland was the topic for Dr Nicholas Acheson, of the University of Ulster, with Edward Andersson, of the London-based organisation, INVOLVE, giving a UK-wide perspective.

Dr David Herbert, of the Open University, and Dr Steven Howlett, of Roehampton, examined some unintended, positive consequences claimed for volunteering.

And while Professor Joanne Hughes, of Queen's University, Belfast, explored some controversial but important issues around the true impact of civil society on community relations, Professor Irene Hardill, of Nottingham Trent University, drew on her research in England to focus on volunteering as self-help in communities divided by class and material well-being.

Active citizenship and community relations in Northern Ireland is just the latest topic in the ESRC's Public Policy Seminar Series, in which we present independent research in key policy areas to potential users in Government, politics, the media, and the private and voluntary sectors.

We see such events as an opportunity to establish further dialogue with the users of our research, and we welcome any subsequent contact.



Professor Ian Diamond AcSS
Chief Executive
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The researchers

NICHOLAS ACHESON BA (Hons), MSc, PhD is currently a Research Lecturer at the Social and Policy Research Institute of the University of Ulster, whose staff he joined in 1997 after a career of 25 years working in the social welfare field, both in statutory and voluntary organisations. At the same university, he has been also a research associate and fellow at the Centre for Voluntary Action Studies, developing a comparative research programme in the area of voluntary action and welfare.

EDWARD ANDERSSON BSc, MA, MSc is a Project Manager at Involve – a London-based not for profit organisation specialising in understanding and promoting public participation. Responsible for researching and delivering *peopleandparticipation.net*, one of the UK's most comprehensive participation sites, he spends much of his time mentoring civil servants around engagement practice. A member of, among other bodies, the International Association for Public Participation, he has delivered participatory processes with the BBC, the Power Inquiry, the States of Jersey and numerous other organisations.

IRENE HARDILL BA, MA, PhD, AcSS is Professor of Economic Geography at Nottingham Trent University, where her interests include the contribution to family and community of formal and informal unpaid work by volunteers. Her recent ESRC-funded projects include – with Dr Sue Baines, of Manchester Metropolitan University – an in-depth case study of work connected with community-building and support in a deprived area of England's East Midlands, and a project which helped inform policy on how to broaden the base of those who volunteer.

DAVID HERBERT BA, PG Dip, PhD is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the Open University. His areas of research are religion, social cohesion, community relations, and the social implications of new communications technologies. Special interests for him are: cross-community relations in Northern Ireland; Muslim minorities in Western Europe; and BBC World Service interactive forums. Recent publications include *Religion and Civil Society* (Ashgate, 2003) and *Islam in the West* (Open University, 2007).

STEVEN HOWLETT BA, PhD is Director of the Centre for the Study of Voluntary and Community Activity, launched in 2007 at Roehampton University. Previously he was with the Institute for Volunteering Research – an initiative of Volunteering England with the University of East London – as Research Fellow. Now specialising in voluntary action management, he has researched a wide range of volunteering and community-related topics and worked on regeneration of the East Durham coal field area.

JOANNE HUGHES BA, PhD is Professor of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. Her main interests are inter-group relations, education and community development in divided societies. Recent projects include analysis of direct and indirect cross-community contact and tolerance in mixed and segregated areas of Belfast, and identity dynamics in Protestant and Catholic rural and urban communities. An adviser to Government and civil society groups in Northern Ireland, she is on a UN-funded Belfast/Jerusalem project promoting peace-building through academic and community-based partnerships.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This booklet examines the connections between a strong and vibrant civil society and the development of better relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Collective action has had a negative image, through being taken over by partisan elements from both communities in the form of rallying calls and expressions of defiance. However, the 'Peace People' campaign in the late 1970s and, more recently, 'Make Poverty History', are effective examples of widespread civil society co-operation in collective non-violent protests.

But are there deep-seated cultural or historical differences in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the UK as regards individuals becoming active and engaged citizens? And how much of the apathy displayed manifests itself in a wider malaise in terms of collective non-political action?

Benefits to individuals from voluntary activity are well documented, but the wider, often less tangible impacts, are not so clear. A recent study in Northern Ireland found that volunteers' circles of friends and engagement with people from the opposite community demonstrably increased as compared with non-volunteers. However, might this suggest that, as a group of individuals, volunteers are simply more tolerant and open to change?

But does civil society still have legitimate claim on having a key role to play in community relations? Indeed, can it be confidently claimed that the voluntary and community sector, and wider civil society, is doing all that it can to end intolerance and division?

Significant investments of time and money have gone into community capacity-building programmes. But has this made an impact in terms of reconciling differences, or does it strengthen and make individual groups more confident to the exclusion of others?

Key Insights and Implications

- **Edward Andersson** argues that while violence and the lack of democratic accountability at the local level in the past has hindered and discouraged public participation, it does not follow that the removal of these factors through the peace process will lead to more active citizenship.
- There are many barriers to engagement prevalent throughout the UK, which are likely to grow in importance in Northern Ireland.
- Interplay between barriers and motivations for participation is complex. Perceptions can be as important as reality in terms of persuading or dissuading people to become active.
- Government Departments all over the UK are carrying out activities to encourage participation, however these often fail to engage with citizens who are increasingly 'time starved' and individualistic in outlook.
- Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998 has brought with it benefits in terms of a duty to involve, and has in some cases led to the organisation of minority interests. However, it leaves a lot to be desired in terms of flexibility, and places large requirements on civil society.
- Key challenges are to create more adaptable pathways to involvement, to link representative and participative democracy, to create more meaningful involvement (beyond mere consultation), and to place more power in the hands of civil society and the public.
- According to **Nicholas Acheson**, evidence that participation is low in Northern Ireland, compared with the rest of the UK, is contradictory, and to a large extent depends on where you look.

- Over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion in the numbers and density of voluntary groups that touch the lives of many thousands of people. But where collective action has developed most strongly has been firmly in the private – rather than the public – sphere.
- A tentative conclusion is that the level of non-party political collective action is closer to that of the Republic of Ireland, where it is higher than in Great Britain, though mostly due to membership of sports and leisure associations and religious bodies.
- Only some of the conditions for an effective public sphere exist. There is rule of law, with certain freedoms guaranteed – particularly those of speech and assembly, subject to regulation. But there is no agreement about the legitimacy of the state as the guarantor of those freedoms – or a sense of a shared political community.
- This is reflected within civil society itself, where membership of management committees and boards is divided more strictly on sectarian lines than are general friendship networks.
- Public administration has become extremely unresponsive to external pressure. As yet, devolution has had no impact on habits and systems developed to keep 'the show on the road' during the 'troubles'.
- **David Herbert**, reviewing studies into unintended consequences of voluntary work, says the most robust findings are that volunteering benefits physical and mental health, especially for elderly people, and anti-social behaviour amongst the young. Some studies also show a positive influence on civic attitudes, tolerance and social trust, though the latter may be temporary, and associated with group formation.

- Concerns have been raised about volunteers viewing their work 'instrumentally', (eg to enhance CVs), and that Government engagement with the sector may compromise its independence. However, Herbert's own Northern Ireland-based telephone survey found people far more likely to volunteer for the satisfaction of seeing results or for enjoyment than to network or gain professional development.
- His survey found that formal volunteering is positively related to reduced fear of crime. Informal volunteering – involving regularly helping someone from the other major community, visiting the sick or elderly, and babysitting – are positively related to cross-community forgiveness, as is volunteering for 'mainly Catholic' and 'mainly Protestant' organisations.
- Voluntary organisations can be confident about the positive benefits of voluntary work on health and social participation when promoting themselves to funders and to existing and potential volunteers.
- In Northern Ireland, volunteering provides a significant social arena for co-operative interaction between communities, which research shows can reduce prejudice. These effects can be increased by developing organisational cultures which encourage volunteer participation in decision-making and which actively challenge prejudice
- **Steven Howlett**, examining research evidence, believes that volunteering can play a role in strengthening communities, though this conclusion must be somewhat tentative. We feel instinctively that voluntary activity should help over-coming divisions, but the research needs interpretation.
- A study found volunteers saying that they had a different attitude towards people they would not normally meet or work with – but not all volunteering may have this effect. There is evidence that some voluntary work will have greater impact than others, and that age is linked to this. To encourage maximum impact, we should therefore be selective about which types of volunteering to back.
- Research has shown that membership of churches does not increase trust – the reason being that people who join, do so with others of similar outlook. The same is said for organisations based around socialising. This suggests that simply getting more volunteers might not help overcome divisions, unless they work in organisations with a diverse base of individuals.

- Howlett warns that we should not assume that we can grasp volunteering and shape it to policy ends. There are those who would argue that volunteering exists as a part of civil society and therefore it should not be the subject of external shaping forces.
- One clear message from research is that whether there are unintended consequences or not, volunteers are a precious commodity that should be treated well
- **Irene Hardill**, focusing on her recent ESRC-funded project with Sue Baines, based in an East Midlands community affected by worklessness, reveals how volunteers there had very different ways of thinking about what they do.
- Using the 'Grid and Group' heuristic device, four sets of explanations as to why people volunteer are identified: 'Give to each other' (helping those within their own community); 'Give alms' (people from outside the community acting from a sense of altruism); 'Get by' (a form of self-help resulting from a personal need or life event); and 'Get on' (developing new skills and experiences for career development).
- While there is much policy emphasis today on the benefits to individuals from formal voluntary work, Hardill points out that many volunteers are 'beyond' the labour market for reasons of age, disability or care responsibilities. A policy focus on volunteering as training for the labour market risks excluding those for whom this is a minor concern.
- Volunteering, her study shows, enhances the levels of active citizenship and community spirit in an area, and helps people build up a sense of belonging to a place. On a personal level, it develops individuals' self-confidence, and provides a structure for their lives – getting them out of the house and interacting within the community.
- While driven by different motivations, volunteering provides the sense of meaning and identity that many people find in a satisfying job.
- **Joanne Hughes** criticises the decision by the administration in Northern Ireland to drop any reference to the British Government's 2005 policy, *A Shared Future*, from its *Programme for Government*, released in October, 2007. Rather, the emphasis is on the economy, with wealth creation and infrastructural investment prioritised.
- Not only is this approach counter-intuitive, but it also flies in the face of growing evidence that social cohesion is a critical pre-condition of economic success, she suggests.
- Some – politicians in particular – might argue that power-sharing, constitutional compromise and the associated ameliorating effect on violence, obviates the need for relationship-building between Protestants and Catholics and the myriad of minority ethnic groups that now call Northern Ireland home. But there is little empirical evidence, says Hughes, to support the osmosis argument.
- For those who equate reduction in violence with peaceful co-existence and good relations, a cursory review of recent evidence offers a reality check, she argues.
- If good community relations are associated with economic vibrancy and the corollary is also true, it follows that the *Programme for Government* as it stands, is unlikely to achieve its vision of a better future for all unless some attention is given to relationship-building and the type of 'soft' activity that offers a platform for economic progress.

Public participation

Encouraging participation in Northern Ireland

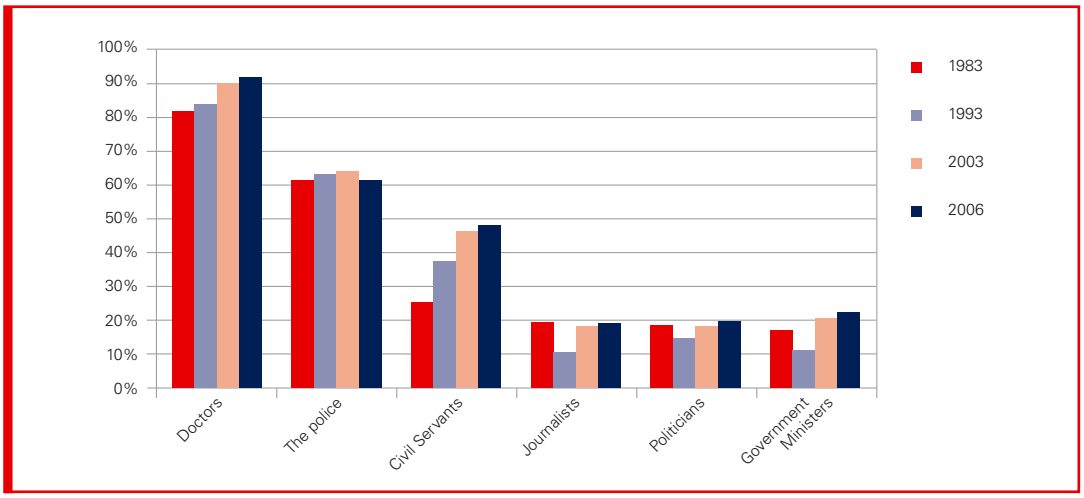
Re-assessing the evidence

Encouraging participation in Northern Ireland

Edward Andersson of Involve – a not for profit organisation for understanding and promoting public participation – asks whether 'less violence and more democracy' is enough

The low turnout for the 2001 General Election in many ways acted as a wake-up call for policymakers across the UK, and since then public participation, or the lack thereof has risen to the forefront of current debates. However there doesn't seem to have been a sudden or dramatic drop in public participation or trust in the democratic system in the past years. Longitudinal surveys carried out by Ipsos-MORI show that trust levels for politicians have been low over the past 25 years – if anything, they have risen slightly. Increased policy focus on public participation is more a result of a change in how we value trust, rather than changes in absolute levels.

Figure 1. Public levels of trust



Source: Ipsos-MORI 2007

How is Northern Ireland different?

Two factors stand out in particular compared with the rest of the UK: the violence and divisions, and the weakness of local government. Studies show that both have a negative impact on the ability and willingness of people to become active citizens. It can therefore be presumed that they have played a similar role throughout the last decades of Northern Irish history.

Where perpetrators of conflict are clearly linked to those in party politics, this can have a negative impact on trust in Government institutions and elected representatives. Conversely, participation in civil society has been shown to be a powerful mechanism for reducing conflict and bringing violence under control.

Northern Ireland's local government structures are weak, even compared with those in the rest of the UK (which are considered to be amongst the weakest in Europe).

Northern Irish local government has had a miniscule role in providing public services – with no responsibility for education, road building or housing – and many key decision-making roles taken over by unelected quangos and boards.

ESRC-funded research by Vivien Lowndes and others argues that decisions around political participation are "shaped by locally distinctive 'rules-in-use'"

In other words, lack of local power or accountability has a noticeable impact on willingness to take part.

Q Has history played a part in low levels of non-party political collective action in Northern Ireland?

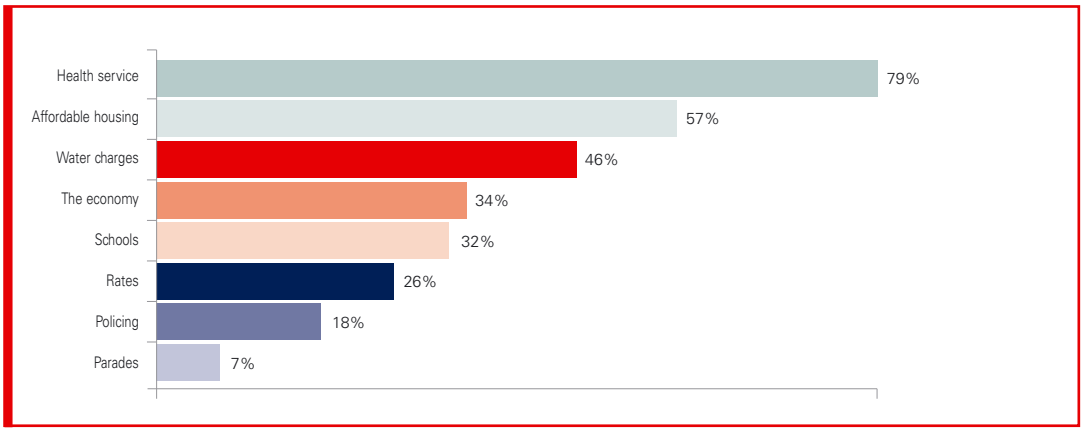
A Yes, most definitely – both in terms of the threat of violence, and the lack of meaningful accountable decision-making bodies at local level. These factors will both have created barriers, as well as decreasing motivations and rewards for taking part.

Q Will the history of conflict continue to contribute to lack of participation?

A In my opinion – no. The development of Northern Ireland in recent years has been towards less violence and a revival of local democracy, so it is likely to become more like elsewhere in the UK.

In fact, an Ipsos-MORI poll for the *Belfast Telegraph* shows that this transition may be happening faster than would have been imagined a few years ago. The public of Northern Ireland seem to have very similar concerns to the rest of the UK – health, housing and the economy – while some traditionally divisive issues, such as parades and policing, received little attention.

Figure 2. Top concerns in Northern Ireland



(Source Ipsos-MORI survey for Belfast Telegraph, August 10, 2007)

It would be wrong to infer that less violence and a more powerful local government will automatically lead to more public participation, as the rest of the UK suffers from similar low levels of active citizenship but without violence as a significant contributing factor.

As Northern Ireland becomes more like the rest of the UK, we are likely to see a corresponding rise in the factors that place barriers in the way of active citizenship in England, Scotland and Wales.

Barriers and motivations

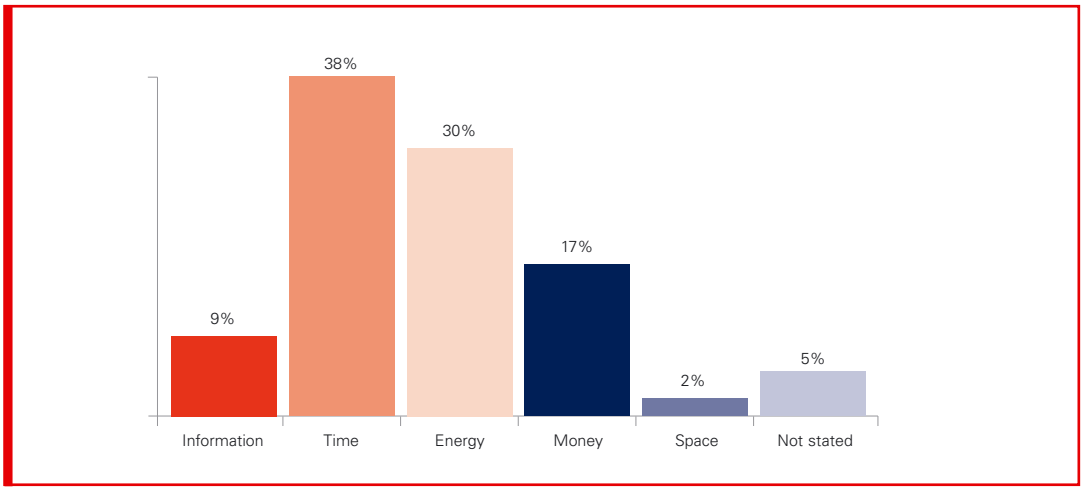
Among the main barriers identified by various studies are:

Skills: As measured by education, previous experience and training, skills are closely linked to the likelihood of getting involved, and how much. Richard Simmons and Johnston Birchall, of Stirling, showed that while education is often linked to social background, training provides one way of reducing barriers to seldom heard groups.

Perceptions: In her study of perceptions of involvement amongst residents in North East London, Stella Creasy, of Involve, found that it is not just what opportunities exist, but how they are understood that determines whether or not people attend. Creating new pathways to participation may not be worthwhile if people still view opportunities as 'not for them'.

Time: A key shift in the past decade is that many in the UK value time over money, as shown in this graph from the Henley Centre. Ironically, we have never felt more time-starved, in a period when the State is requesting more and more input from everyone.

Figure 3. UK residents' responses to the question: 'Which resource is most valuable to you in everyday life?'



Source: Planning for Consumer Change research programme, Henley Centre 2007

What could be done better?

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998 places a statutory equality duty on public authorities to consult with all sectors of Northern Irish society – setting Northern Ireland apart from elsewhere in the UK in this respect.

Tahnya Barnett Donaghy, of the University of South Australia, found the legislation to have created a 'new culture and understanding of multiple equality considerations that need to be incorporated into policy and decision-making'. And Julie Harrison, in research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, says that it has encouraged development of new entities to represent specific communities of interest that would not have been formed otherwise.

However, Harrison and others also talk of a 'proliferation of partnerships', and there are questions as to the actual impact that consultations are having. Could the time and effort of the voluntary and community sector be better spent?

Work by Involve for the Sustainable Development Commission uncovered some key principles for good practice for encouraging participation, including:

- The importance of managing expectations and providing clarity when it comes to the purpose of engaging with the public and what participants will get out of it
- The importance of looking beyond consultation to levels of participation which provide more of a say
- The need to ensure that systems of representative and participative democracy work together rather than in conflict
- The need to ensure that there is real culture change within Government and to overcome perceived threats to professional identities.

It seems clear that current Government initiatives to encourage increased public participation between elections leave much to be desired, both in Northern Ireland and across the UK more generally.

Re-assessing the evidence

Nick Acheson on whether there really is a lack of collective action – or it just isn't focused on public issues

Evidence that participation is low in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the UK is contradictory, and to a large extent depends on where you look.

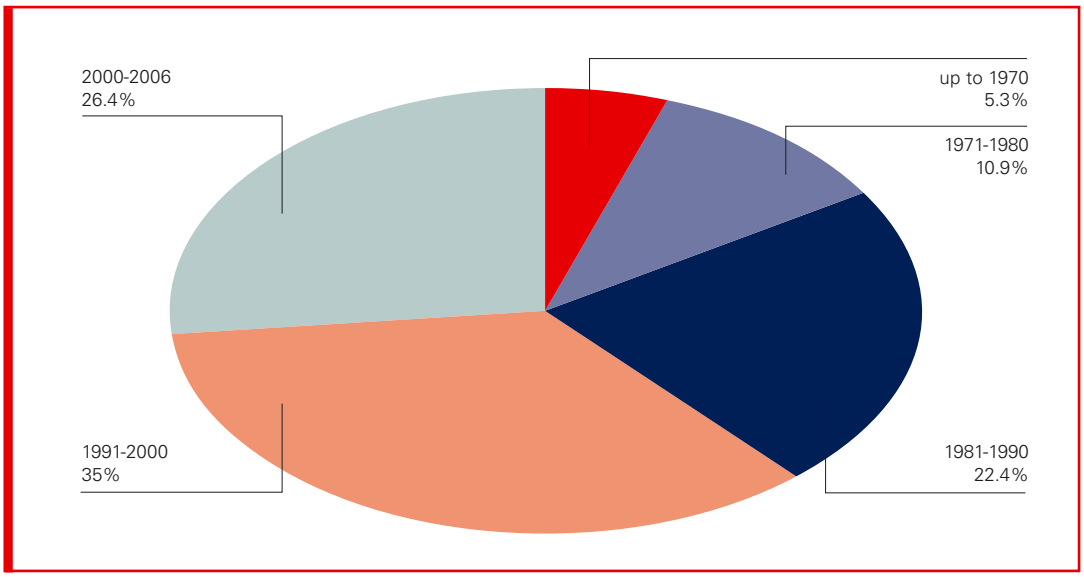
Over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion in the numbers and density of voluntary groups that touch the lives of many thousands of people. For example, the number of pensioners' groups has exploded since 1990, and the organisational age profile of this part of the voluntary sector mirrors closely that of the sector as a whole in Northern Ireland (NICVA, 2005).

Figure 4 shows that the rate of start-ups has increased cumulatively, particularly in the last 20 years. Of the organisations around in autumn, 2006, no less than 61.4 per cent were founded since 1990, of which 35 per cent began before 2000.

The pace of new arrivals has, if anything speeded up since then, with a further 24.1 per cent appearing in the five and a half years from 2001 to the survey date towards the end of 2006. In contrast, only just over five per cent date from 1970 or earlier.

To summarise, 38.6 per cent of these organisations began before 1990, and 61.4 per cent afterwards. Equally surprising, based on their own estimates of membership, it can be calculated that up to 70,000 older people are to some degree participants in the activities of these groups – almost 25 per cent of the elderly population.

Figure 4. Percentage of new voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland concerned with older people before 1970, and by decade since



Source: Acheson, N., Harvey, B. (2008 forthcoming)

This pattern is repeated in other areas with an emphasis on self-help and socialising, particularly health, therapeutic and sports and recreational groups – reflecting, according to data from the World Values Survey, a trend across the globe, in all types of society.

Against this, at individual level, research shows an overall decline in the extent to which people have engaged in either formal or informal voluntary activity since 2001, following a period of growth.

Data from the Volunteer Development Agency (VDA) shows that both informal and formal volunteering in Northern Ireland increased between 1995 and 2001. It has fallen back since then, although not – yet – to the level of 1995 in the case of formal volunteering. The rate of decline in informal activities has been greater and is now lower than it was in 1995.

Other data, based on individual responses, demonstrates a rather similar story. In 2001 – the time of peak engagement, according to VDA research - a Northern Ireland Life & Times (NILT) survey asked about the various groups or associations people belonged to, and whether they had taken part in activities in the past 12 months.

Table 1. Reported membership of, and activity in, Northern Ireland voluntary associations

Type of association	Been involved in activities more than twice in past 12 months (%)	Belong to such a group (%)
A political party, club, or association	4	17
A trade union or professional association	6	25
A church or other religious organisation	29	53
A sports group, hobby or leisure club	23	61
A charitable organisation or group	12	30
A neighbourhood association or group	3	17
Other association	7	21

Source: NILT survey, 2001

Apart from churches and sports, hobby and leisure groups, membership is low, and there is a gigantic gap between being a member and actually participating.

There is clearly a problem here that might be reflected among all older people in pensioners' groups. How many are actually active participants rather than passive beneficiaries?

But let's look at comparisons with Great Britain. Figures from the British Social Attitudes Survey are not equivalent, but in 2000 they included a rather narrower question about membership of different groups, and we can use the responses cautiously for illustrative comparisons.

Table 2. Reported membership of voluntary associations in Great Britain

Type of group or association	Percentage answering 'yes'
Residents/tenants' association	5.1
Political party	2.6
Local voluntary or community group	5.4
Voluntary group helping vulnerable group	1.8
Sports club	16.8
Cultural group	4.8
No group listed	83

Source: Social Attitudes Survey, 2000

These statistics need careful interpretation, but the general picture is of a great deal more group membership in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain. Apart from sports clubs, the biggest difference is in charitable activity, which is very low in Great Britain.

These data do not include church and other religious groups, but evidence suggests that membership and participation in these are also much higher in Northern Ireland.

Brendan Murtagh, of the University of Ulster, analysing NILT data for 2000, concluded that the 'stock of social capital in the region is widely distributed, and in some sectors intensely developed'.

And Mary Daly, of Queen's, Belfast, using data from NILT 2001, found people 'significantly more likely to be in frequent contact with members of their families as compared with those in the rest of the UK; 'that friendship networks are stronger'; 'nearly half of people are members of a church organisation'; and 'feelings of distrust [of fellow citizens] appear to be less entrenched'.

At the very least, I'd wish to qualify any idea that the level of non-party political collective action is very low in Northern Ireland compared with Great Britain. Both appear below the average across all OECD member countries – Britain in particular, which appears lower than other countries including the Republic of Ireland. Only Portugal, Hungary and Turkey are below the UK participation rates.

Table 3. OECD European member countries by participation rates in voluntary associations (Extract)

	Sports or cultural	Other groups	Political or Unions	Churches or religious
Netherlands	69.6	65.7	40.5	34.7
Sweden	52.3	53.1	73.0	71.4
Belgium	37.2	42.1	29.7	11.9
Ireland	**31.7**	**25.0**	**20.7**	**16.2**
France	21.5	17.7	9.5	4.4
Italy	18.5	18.3	16.7	10.3
United Kingdom	**12.0**	**21.0**	**13.2**	**5.0**
Hungary	6.5	7.3	11.5	12.1
Turkey	0.4	0.7	1.5	0.6
OECD average	**31.6**	**29.5**	**28.4**	**23.3**

Source: OECD (2005) Society at a Glance and the World Values Survey 1999-2002, Inglehart and others (2004)'

My tentative conclusion is that civic participation of this kind in Northern Ireland is closer to that of Ireland than Great Britain, although the difference is made up mostly by sports and leisure associations and religious bodies.

Political participation

Daly, in 2004, concluded that despite evidence of greater stocks of social capital, people in Northern Ireland are more likely to feel a sense of disempowerment from politics and Government than those in Great Britain.

The puzzle here is the combination of relatively high levels of social capital and low levels of political trust. What seems to be missing is evidence of collective action that directly engages with the task of enlarging and enhancing democratic practice.

American political scientist Iris Marion Young divides civil society activities into three types:

- Private associations, which may range from hobby clubs to spiritual renewal and, more often than not, concern enjoyment and suffering
- Civic associations, primarily serving not only their members but a wider community, though the focus is not on public issues
- Associations in the public sphere, debating what ought to be done, what principles and priorities should guide social life, what policies should be adopted, how the powerful should be held accountable, and what responsibility citizenship carries.

Collective action in Northern Ireland has developed most strongly in the private sphere.

Here, only some of the conditions for an effective public sphere exist. We have a rule of law with certain freedoms guaranteed – particularly those of speech and assembly, subject to regulation. But there is no agreement about the legitimacy of the state as the guarantor of those freedoms – or a sense of a shared political community.

This is reflected within civil society itself, where membership of management committees and boards is divided more strictly on sectarian lines than are general friendship networks.

Mass public participation in political life has never really been the problem. The problem is that, almost without exception, it has been focused either on the perceived legitimacy or otherwise of the state, or the defence of territory or space, and has often been accompanied by the threat of – or actual – open violence.

Public administration has become extremely unresponsive to external pressure. Habits and systems developed to keep the show on the road during the 'troubles' have as yet had no impact from devolution.

My guess is that the two dominant political parties will want to preserve, as far as possible, their unique position as being the main channels of influence.

Are there particular challenges in Northern Ireland? My answer has to be 'yes'. We've a long way to go here before we get to a fully-operational public sphere.

Volunteering

Volunteering and its unintended consequences

Can volunteering unite divided communities?

Volunteering and its unintended consequences

David Herbert assesses the benefits of voluntary work, and shares results from his own telephone survey

Most assessments of voluntary work rightly focus on help given or work done by volunteers, but it is also widely believed that there are wider benefits, both for the volunteer and for society. These unintended consequences have increasingly been researched in recent years, and some key findings are summarised here. There are also results from my recent survey of volunteers in Northern Ireland, into whether they had less fear of crime and more positive attitudes to cross-community forgiveness, and the possible significance of the contact opportunities volunteering provides.

The UK Government has come to see the voluntary sector as a key player in its drive to address community or social cohesion issues, especially post 9/11, but also because numbers involved in trade unions, political parties and other organisations associated with forming social capital have been in decline in many Western societies for some time.

However, some have expressed concern that too much Government interference could damage the sector by introducing an 'instrumentalist' approach – making it more about individual recognition, networking and professional development, and associated too closely with a particular political agenda.

Physical and mental health

There is evidence that volunteering increases activity levels, which is good for physical health. It also improves social networks, which studies such as those by Wilson and Musick suggest also aids mental well-being.

Effects seem strongest amongst elderly volunteers, where the impact on reducing isolation, increasing activity and compensating for loss of self-esteem previously derived from paid employment is likely to be greatest.

Studies which support these claims are robust. They tend to be 'longitudinal'– that is, following people over time – which enables inferences to be drawn, such as that volunteering promotes good health, not vice-versa. And the large data sets used enable factors such as social class to be controlled for.

Examples include Moen and others, who found that women doing regular voluntary work between 1956 and 1986 were less likely to have suffered the onset of serious illness or disability during that period, and Wilson and Musick, who noted strong positive effects on the depression scores of over 65s. These effects increased, the greater the number of organisations volunteered for, hours worked per annum, and period of time involved.

Anti-social and 'problem' behaviour

Volunteering has long been seen as 'keeping kids off the streets' and 'character building', and there is some evidence to support this. In 1994, Allen and others found that young people involved in a teenage outreach programme had considerably reduced risk of pregnancy, failing a course or being suspended from school during the year they participated. And according to Uggen and Janikula in 1999, volunteers had lower levels of arrest than non-volunteers over a four-year follow-up period.

Social capital, civic attitudes and political engagement

Many studies attempting to measure the effects of voluntary work on civic attitudes and participation use the concept of 'social capital', which Putnam describes as the mobilising potential of networks of social relationships.

Such studies have variously explored the relationship between volunteering and generalised trust; trust in political institutions; political activity; and social responsibility. Findings have been mixed.

Methods may be important here: studies which measure participation in activities rather than membership alone tend to produce more positive results, suggesting that active participation in voluntary work is necessary to impact on civic attitudes and behaviour.

Stolle found that generalised trust increased after joining a voluntary organisation, but reduced over time as the group bonded. This suggests that the work done in group formation requires individuals to develop and maintain a trusting attitude, but that once bonded, such effects disappear. To sustain generalised trust, the activity would need to involve volunteers in continually meeting new people or facing new challenges.

Generalised trust corresponds to 'bridging' social capital, which consists of links between unlike groups and individuals. This type of trust/social capital is particularly important in post-conflict societies.

But what do concepts such as 'generalised trust' mean where strong, collective identities cut across a society, so that the public is seen, at least in some contexts and for some purposes, as divided into 'us' and 'them'?

There is much research evidence that contact can reduce prejudice. But there is disagreement over whether it needs overtly to challenge prejudice to be effective.

This argument over 'active challenge' vs 'incidental contact' is relevant to the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland's possible role in building good relations. As Kearney and Osborne observed, volunteering, being largely organised on a cross-community basis, provides significant opportunities for contact in a context in which many 'still live in single identity communities', even if this is not the intended outcome.

However, it is less clear that 'active challenge' is present in most organisations, which may rather reflect Northern Irish society in general.

The telephone survey

Our telephone survey of 1,500 volunteers, between December, 2005 and February, 2006, investigated the relationship between various formal and informal voluntary work and contact between the communities.

Cross-community forgiveness arguably links into current debates in Northern Ireland – for example, whether there should be some kind of Truth and Reconciliation Commission, similar to South Africa. An aspect of this is under what conditions people are prepared to forgive those from other communities who have harmed their own.

We asked: *As a general principle, do you think members of your community who have suffered, in whatever way, should forgive members of other communities who have hurt them?*

The sense of personal security is another indicator of how far society has 'normalised'. In Northern Ireland, moving through an area predominantly of the other community can be an uncomfortable, or even occasionally dangerous, experience. On the other hand, intimidation within communities is also a significant factor. So we sought to measure people's sense of personal security, partly by locality.

But to start with, we look at benefits perceived by volunteers themselves.

Table 4. Reasons for doing voluntary work

- 57% satisfaction of seeing results
- 55% really enjoy it
- 34% meet people and make new friends
- 26% broadens my experience of life
- 19% keeps me healthy and active
- 19% to learn new skills
- 19% to do things I'm good at
- 13% upholds or defends my moral, religious or political views
- 11% increases knowledge/develops skills
- 6% gives me recognition/position in the community
- 6% network opportunities
- 4% professional support, development or training

It is easy to see how volunteering increases volunteers' sense of self-efficacy and esteem, and strengthens social contact – hence improving mental health. 'Benefits for physical health' and 'skills gained' also score quite highly. Interestingly, considering concerns about 'instrumentalisation', reasons such as community recognition, networking and professional development do not score highly.

As a one-off snapshot, the study could not eliminate the possibility that those with certain attitudes tend to become volunteers in the first place. Nonetheless, results were intriguing.

Table 5. Volunteering, cross-community forgiveness, and security

Forgive? %	Yes if apology	Yes regardless	Depends	No	Don't know	Sample size	Direction of association
All	41.7	12.3	38.4	5.1	2.5	1500	N/a
Often/sometimes help member of other community (informal)	46.3	15.6	34.2	3.2	0.01	365	+
Visit elderly person (informal vol. work)	44.8	16.1	34.7	2.6	1.8	299	+
Babysat/childcare	49.4	17.4	31.2	1.5	0.5	259	+
Women (all)	43.5	13.1	38.6	3.1	3	797	+
Men (all)	39.6	11.5	38.1	7.3	2	703	-
Voluntary work formal (any)	43.3	14.8	37.2	3.1	1.7	358	+
Voluntary org. X community	42.7	12	38.5	4.1	2.4	241	None
Voluntary org. Mainly Protestant	55.4	21.4	23.2	0	0	56	+
Voluntary org. Mainly Catholic	44.7	23.7	31.6	0	0	38	+
Protestant (All)	40	9.7	42.4	6.4	1.4	755	-
Catholic (All)	43.9	15.1	33.7	3.7	3.6	700	+

People who **did** formal voluntary work scored higher than those who **did not** on both 'Yes' categories, and lower on 'No' and 'Depends', but these differences were not statistically significant. However, some informal forms of voluntary work, including 'visiting an elderly person' and 'baby-sitting or caring for children' related significantly to responses on forgiveness.

Cross-community contact

Where people volunteered for organisations organised on a cross-community basis (about two-thirds were) there was no evidence of more forgiveness. This could mean that being formally organised this way does not necessarily lead to much community contact.

However, informal volunteering involving 'frequently' or 'sometimes' helping a member of another community was positively associated with forgiveness.

An unexpected result came from comparing volunteers for cross-community organisations with those for 'mainly Catholic' and 'mainly Protestant' ones. The latter groups were significantly more likely to have forgiving attitudes. This is particularly striking in the case of volunteers for 'mainly Protestant' organisations, because being nominally Protestant was associated negatively with cross-community forgiveness. This may relate to the 'curved line' relationship between religiosity and prejudice first observed by Allport, in which the actively religious and avowedly secular both have lower levels of prejudice than nominal believers.

Security/Fear of Crime

A strong association was found between formal volunteering and some measures of perception of security, but none for informal volunteering. Formal volunteers scored significantly lower than others on a range of crime and security concerns including fear of physical assault (7.5 per cent very concerned vs 12.8 per cent of others), theft of belongings (seven per cent very concerned vs 13.1 per cent of others), intimidation (3.9 per cent very concerned vs 8.8 per cent of others), and drunk drivers (8.5 per cent very concerned vs 15.8 per cent of others).

Policy implications

- Research findings on benefits to mental and physical health and anti-social behaviour are robust, and voluntary organisations can be confidently positive about these unintended consequences when promoting themselves to existing and potential volunteers and funders.
- These organisations can maximise their impact on good relations by: enabling people to interact in a helping or mutually supportive way; developing organisational cultures which actively challenge prejudice; and creating an environment which continually challenges settled groups to accommodate newcomers and negotiate differences.

Can volunteering unite divided communities?

Steven Howlett reviews the evidence, and offers words of caution

Is being a volunteer a viable pathway towards reconciliation, greater forgiveness and understanding, with a role to play in addressing community divisions. Are there, indeed, examples in post conflict societies to back this notion?

The answer, I think, is yes – volunteering can play a role in strengthening communities, though this response must be somewhat tentative.

Instinctively we believe volunteering should perform a role in over-coming divisions, but the research needs interpretation.

It's not that I think the role played by volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations is insignificant – but we need to be aware of limitations before we sound the trumpet for this activity as the answer to problems.

'Liberal' views?

Another critical question we are examining is whether those who volunteer are basically more liberal and rational than those who choose not to.

Again, the answer is also probably yes, and there is research evidence for this. However, in the context of gauging the impact of volunteering and informing policy, it may well be the wrong thing to ask, or at least only half the question that needs answering.

It has long been known that volunteers are disproportionately those with higher educational achievements (see Davis Smith and Wilson and Musick). And while this does not necessarily make them more liberal, recent research by Bekkers suggests that volunteers are more likely to have more social and human capital available to them, be interested in politics ('left leaning' at that), and show more empathy for others.

But we also need to know under what circumstances 'liberal' volunteers volunteer. Also, crucially, do views and attitudes towards communities change as a result?

Some studies do find that volunteers have a different attitude to community, but the difficult question of cause and effect often remains unanswered. That is, do volunteers become more accepting through volunteering, or do some people have traits that make them more likely to volunteer?

The answer is important: one implies that only those who are already liberal and accepting will volunteer; the other, that persuading greater numbers to volunteer will create a more harmonious community outlook.

An aid to reconciliation?

Few studies answer questions about reconciliation directly.

A special edition of *Voluntary Action*, the journal of the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) in 2003, included papers outlining the role volunteers play in post conflict societies. Not many, however, were based on solid empirical studies. Nonetheless, authors noted how youth service helped after conflicts in Nigeria (Eberly) and Bosnia (Huzejrovic). And in another article, Kearney and Osborne argued that volunteers have had a role in inter-communal reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Each showed how volunteering can bring people together and promote trust and empathy within volunteers and the communities where they work.

Without specific data, we can work at a more theoretical level by conceptualising volunteering in relation to social capital and civil society, about which there are more studies.

Over the past few years, many have linked volunteering with social capital, arguing that communities are bound by trust, mutual values and norms.

A nursery for citizenship?

Would we expect a similar outcome for volunteers who perform administrative tasks as those engaged in some form of community work, advocacy or campaigning? Probably not, and yet there may be something in the idea that people from different communities will gain from working together, whatever the task.

Pateman quoted by Davis Smith, argues that 'we learn to participate through participation'. As Davis Smith says, this theory sees volunteering as 'a nursery for citizenship'.

That view is, of course, devoid of judgements about the content of citizenship. Nevertheless, there are examples of how this might work.

In a small study by Kinds and others for a European project into volunteering as a way of overcoming social exclusion, volunteers said they had a different attitude towards people they would not normally meet or work with.

However, not all volunteering may have this effect. Uslander, sceptical of the role of participation in producing trust, makes an exception for '…more demanding types of civic engagement, activities that involve you with people who may be different from yourself, both depend upon trust and lead to more faith in others in turn. They include giving to charity and volunteering time'.

Scepticism is repeated when we turn from the task to the organisation in which it takes place. Central to social capital is the distinction between the bonding and bridging varieties – that is, where people work with others largely the same as, or different from, themselves. I would suggest that this is key to the idea of reconciliation.

The Uslander study found that membership of churches does *not* increase trust, arguing that this is because people who join do so with others of similar outlook. The same is said for organisations based around socialising.

This has important implications for how we view encouraging volunteering. It suggests that simply getting more volunteers might not address the questions we are asking here, unless they work in organisations with a diverse base of individuals.

Challenging assumptions

Where volunteers are deliberately encouraged to work with people and in environments that challenge assumptions, research points to success. For example, Eley shows that volunteering can impact on how young people view and engage with their communities. Narushima, in Canada, suggests potential 'transformational learning' by older people through volunteers, including altering how people relate to their community. Schneider's work attempts to categorise organisations as places to create social capital through looking at examples in two US cities. She suggests that there are several types, including those based on civic engagement or social capital. Her findings argue that social capital organisations do not necessarily lead to volunteers becoming better acquainted with the wider community.

Volunteering and attitude

It is interesting that studies reporting positive impacts are more likely to be qualitative, whereas findings from quantitative research is more guarded.

Analysis of large scale attitude surveys, such as by Uslander and Janoski and others, suggests that we are more likely to find people with the 'right' attitudes volunteering, than we are people who have had their attitudes changed after being encouraged to volunteer.

This is not to say volunteering does not have an impact, but that the greatest effect is pro-social people volunteering, not volunteers becoming more pro-social.

So, are we saying that pro-social attitudes cannot be learnt? Again we must be careful.

First, the authors quoted above recognise the impact of volunteering, but are keen to emphasise the causal direction. Second, there seems to be a different impact according to age.

Greatest impact, according to Hooghe and Stolle, will be on the young. And Janoski and others found that if pro-social attitudes have not made an impact by early adulthood, they are unlikely to do so.

Even so, key findings elsewhere suggest we still need better understanding of the processes at work.

The Citizenship Survey for England and Wales shows a link between formal volunteering and perception that people in the neighbourhood could be trusted. And Kitchen and others argue that a sense of belonging and volunteering go together.

In a sense, this doesn't alter what I have said – there will be debate over the causal effect in these relationships. And we can speculate whether a 'close knit' community is always a good thing.

We must also ask whether we want to give more weight to data from large scale panel surveys that question causality and degree of impact. Rather, we should use this to inform how we approach small-scale local studies which often do show the difference volunteering makes.

After all, volunteering is often small scale and local.

We need to take account of the IVR studies which show that Millennium Volunteers has an impact. There is also the late Jimmy Kearney's review of the potential and actual impact of volunteering in Northern Ireland.

So where does that leave us?

We can draw from research that the unintended impacts of volunteering might be greatest among young people. But it affects other age groups, too. There is a lot more to learn.

If we choose volunteering as a tool for reconciliation, the points above are some we must consider. Happily, much of what we must do comes under the label of good practice.

There is a lot of thinking about diversity within volunteer-involving organisations, as well as consideration of what good management of volunteers should be.

It is worth noting a telling phrase from work by Janoski and others, mentioned above, which argued that organisations are more likely to see pro-social people volunteering, rather than volunteering being the crucible of citizenship.

Nonetheless, the authors argue that to maximise the reciprocal effect, 'one way of encouraging a civic-minded population is to get them into volunteering and enjoying it'.

This message is at least clear: whether there are unintended consequences or not, volunteers are a precious commodity that should be treated well.

So, is volunteering an instrument through which trust can be built within communities? Evidence suggests that on balance it is. It also shows that some volunteering will have greater impact than others, and that age is linked to impact. To encourage maximum impact, we should therefore be selective about which types of volunteering to back.

Lastly, a word of warning.

Let us not assume that we can grasp volunteering and shape it to policy ends. There are those who would argue that volunteering exists as a part of civil society and therefore it should not be the subject of external shaping forces. Here, I have outlined some of the known research findings, what we should or should not do with them is another debate.

Community relations

Volunteering in a deprived community

Community relations and the voluntary and community sector

Volunteering in a deprived community

Irene Hardill draws lessons from her research, with Sue Baines, in England's East Midlands

In recent years, policy statements in England have highlighted the rewards that can be enjoyed by volunteers themselves – as much as, or more than, the contribution they can make to the well-being of others. Emphasis is placed on the benefits individuals gain from formal voluntary work (through an organisation) which help them 'get on' in terms of paid employment.

But many volunteers are 'beyond' the labour market, for reasons of age, disability or care responsibilities.

So in this section of our booklet, I wish to focus on a recent ESRC-funded project[1], based in an East Midlands community affected by worklessness, where, with Dr Sue Baines of Manchester Metropolitan University, I investigated volunteering – and found very different ways of thinking about it.

Volunteering undertaken formally through an organisation is usually distinguished by its context from informal 'neighbouring' and 'time-giving' on a one-to-one basis, which is sometimes referred to as the 'fourth sector'.

It is situated at, and builds bridges between, three levels: the community, the voluntary organisation and the individual. Volunteers, their efforts and many voluntary organisations are embedded in a community context.

Historical accounts of volunteering in England identify two main impulses – philanthropy and mutual aid (Davis Smith). In terms of volunteering, these can be interpreted as concepts of care – because care as an ethic or moral orientation emphasises the welfare of the 'collectivity' as much as that of individuals (Williams). So care is a public as well as a private matter.

Voluntary sector organisations operate on a not-for-profit basis, and are independent of the structures of local and central Government. But they are increasingly mainstreamed into public policy.

Mainstreaming has resulted in a broadening of the activities of voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, and more being expected of their paid staff and volunteers[2].

In addition to achieving goals related to their underlying values and mission – often to do with relieving hardship – VCS organisations have become:

- labour market intermediaries, facilitating re-entry of the socially excluded into employment
- an agent for public service delivery, with help traditionally provided by the Welfare State now contracted out to VCS organisations, thereby reducing costs for the public purse
- a policymaking partnership, working to achieve civil renewal and community regeneration and/or participation in governance.

To give an idea of the scale of engagement with public policy – according to Wilding and others, more than one third of the sector's funding now comes from statutory sources.

1. *Doing one's duty: a case study of volunteering in a deprived community.* www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

2. This is the subject of our current ESRC investment *Delivering public services in the mixed economy of welfare: Putting research into practice* (with Dr Sue Baines, Manchester Metropolitan University and Mr Rob Wilson, Newcastle University) www.socialwelfareservicedelivery.org.uk

Understanding 'community'

'Community', in English Government parlance, is generally used to discuss poor or disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Community offers resources, social 'glue', alternative ideas and knowledge, which are now seen as essential to society.

Some voluntary organisations grow out of attempts to change aspects of a community. And community development efforts often rely heavily on the actions of volunteers, while voluntary work can provide individuals with important social contact and networks.

Volunteering in England, as an expression of citizenship and civic participation, is linked into current policy debates about communities, both nationally and regionally.

Our research sought to understand more about the actual experience of volunteering for formal organisations, especially the various motives and meanings attached to it – and how people negotiate the constraints and opportunities in their daily lives, and manage to create the necessary space.

To help, we used 'Cultural Theory' – often called 'Grid and Group' – which arose out of the work of Mary Douglas, and aims to understand how different people and social groups respond to threats and opportunities.

'Grid' refers to how much individuals' choices are circumscribed by their position in society. 'Group' refers to the degree of solidarity among members of the society. We used Grid and Group to understand the complex meanings and motives for undertaking voluntary work.

Brightville

Our fieldwork took place in an English East Midlands community which we call Brightville. This industrial village developed in the 19th Century, and had a diverse industrial base spanning coal mining and textiles. It coalesced with a nearby industrial town – 'Irontown' – but to this day Brightville's residents retain a strong sense of separate identity. In common with so many smaller industrial towns, those industries and services which were once the cornerstone of urban living have been depleted, and local residents have borne the brunt of social deprivation and unemployment. It remains a white working class community.

Figure 5. Brightville: Perceptions of the community

'The bad address is [in] the mind of outsiders … [there is] an invisible line by the church' (*Lucy, 40s, born and still lives in Brightville, paid worker and former volunteer at local community centre).*

'Don't put down that you live in Brightville else you'll never get a job. Leave Brightville off your address' (*Marie, stakeholder interviewee, former Brightville resident, community activist through local church).*

'When you make it you leave Brightville' (*Chief Executive, Economic Development Partnership).*

Figure 6. Brightville: Community spirit

'Rough diamonds, but hearts of gold' *(Miranda, late 40s, volunteers in Brightville).*

'It's a bad point, like everyone knows everybody else's business. But everybody else looks for each other'. *(Pippa, late 30s, lives in Brightville).*

'Stick together, they help each other' *(Lily, 60s, lives in Brightville).*

'Its got a really rough name, but its like 40 years back here' *(Heather, mid 30s, lives in Brightville).*

We adopted a case-study approach to help us understand the processes underlying the intertwining of voluntary work, participation in the labour market, and other unpaid work such as informal neighbouring and caring within the family and community. Taking advice from local stakeholders, we selected four volunteer-involving organisations. Each has a prominent presence in the community, and all four deliver social welfare services, employ paid workers, and use volunteers. A summary of the goals, main client groups and use of volunteers is given in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of the study organisations

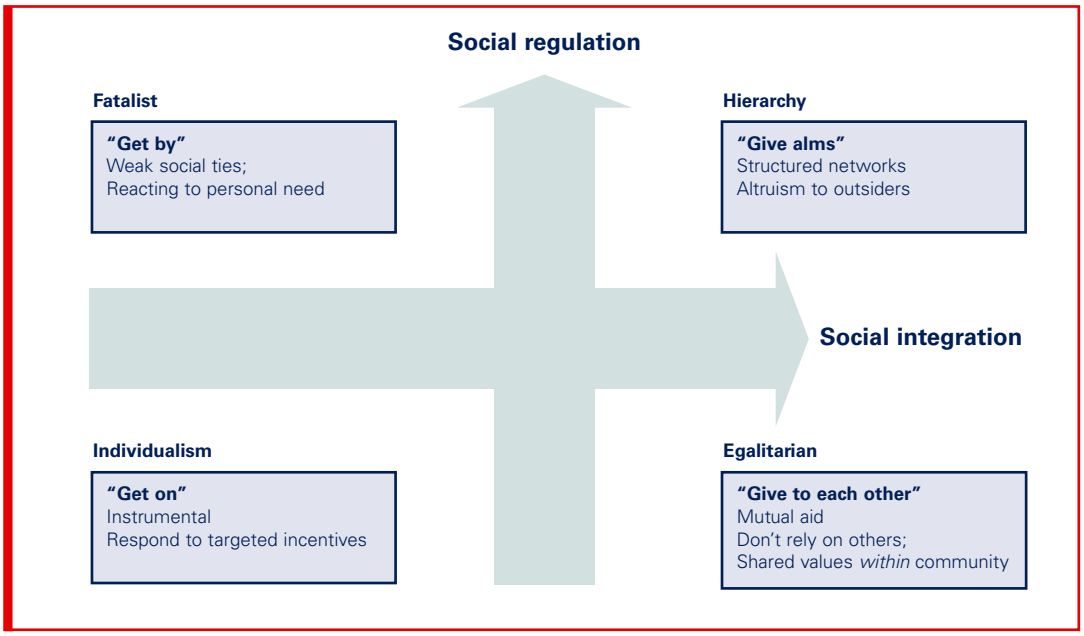
Name	Client Group	Volunteers	Goals
Family Support Charity (FSC)	Families with a child under 5	Volunteers: 63	Support families under stress
Community Project (CP)	All residents	Volunteers: 103	Provide services to support the community
National Government Project (NGP)	Families with a child under 5	Volunteers: 27	Parenting support and education, and training for employability
Local Community Centre (LCC)	All residents	Volunteers: a pool of 3-4	Raise skills and employability in the community

Volunteering, as research mentioned above suggests, usually combines elements both of self-interest and giving to others.

Using the Grid and Group heuristic device, four sets of explanations for volunteering can be identified – two with strong group components and two with more individualised motives:

1. 'Give to each other' (mutual aid) – people volunteered to help those within their own community. They want to put something back
2. 'Give alms' (Philanthropy) – people from outside the community volunteered out of a sense of altruism. They felt fortunate and wanted to make a difference
3. 'Get by' – people volunteered in reaction to a personal need or as a result of an individual life event like retirement or bereavement. This is volunteering as a form of self-help
4. 'Get on' – people who volunteer as a way of developing new skills and experiences that are valued in the labour market to help them get a job or change career. This is volunteering for career development.

Figure 7. Typology of explanations for volunteering



When the people we interviewed emphasised the value of their activity to others, there were two distinct themes:

- Giving to people they perceived as different (and less fortunate) from outside Brightville, which we label 'giving alms'
- Supporting Brightville neighbours with shared experiences and thereby responding to a community need, which we refer to as 'giving to each other'.

Both stances can be described as forms of altruism, but altruism is too general a term to capture the variety and context. The two historical stances towards volunteering – philanthropy and mutual aid – resonate strongly with the Brightville volunteers' accounts of their attitudes and personal histories (Davis Smith).

We found that the first three motivations were much more common and powerful than the last one.

While many volunteers may describe what they do as work, there are some key distinctions – not least that many volunteers are beyond the labour market – for reasons of age, disability or care responsibilities. A policy focus on volunteering as training for the labour market risks excluding those for whom this is a minor concern.

Our study found that volunteering plays a valuable role in developing social capital within communities. It enhances the levels of active citizenship and community spirit in an area, and helps people build up a sense of belonging to a place.

On a personal level, volunteering also develops an individual's self-confidence, and provides a structure for their lives – getting them out of the house and interacting within the community. While being driven by different motivations, volunteering provides the sense of meaning and identity that many people find in a satisfying job.

Community relations and the voluntary and community sector

Joanne Hughes discusses some controversial but important issues, and has a message for politicians

The British Government, in the late 1980s, announced a community relations policy agenda aimed primarily at increasing cross-community contact in an increasingly divided society.

A community relations infrastructure was established, including what is now called the Community Relations Unit (CRU). Reporting directly to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, its main objectives were:

- to ensure that everyone received equality of opportunity and equity of treatment
- to promote increased cross-community contact
- to foster mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

Major initiatives that followed were:

- the semi-autonomous Community Relations Council – aiming, *inter alia*, to encourage groups which, for political reasons, might resist accepting funding from a Central Government unit
- a Community Relations Programme for the 26 district councils – reflecting a view that they were best placed to identify need at local level and respond accordingly.

During the same period, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland established a cross-community contact scheme for segregated schools, and offered financial support for new, planned integrated schools that would educate, together, Protestant and Catholic children.

A Shared Future

Following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a major review of community relations policy was undertaken. After lengthy consultation, a new Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations, entitled *A Shared Future*, was issued in March, 2005.

Key policy priorities included:

- Achievement of a shared society, where people can live, work and play together
- Elimination of sectarianism, racism and other forms of prejudice to enable people to live and work together without fear of intimidation
- Shaping of policies, practices and institutions that will enable trust and good relations to grow.

Juxtaposed with national initiatives, and consistent with developments at the macro-political level to find a constitutional settlement to the imbroglio, the past two decades have also seen considerable investment by the European Union.

Three tranches of Peace funding have been made available through a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

A wide range of local and regional community relations projects has been supported, which have, among other things, focused on community capacity building, cultural diversity; political awareness/education; anti-sectarianism/racism; trauma counselling; trust-building and personal/community development. Central has been the aim of improving relations between Protestants and Catholics.

Participants have included Church and community-based organisations, women's, victims/survivors and interface groups – and others for former prisoners, paramilitaries and young people – along with institutions such as the Orange Order and the Gaelic Athletics Association.

Monitoring and evaluation has in general been positive about the contribution to relations, and there is evidence that peace and reconciliation activity has improved enormously. However, this agenda has not been without detractors.

Early on, Republicans expressed concern that Government commitment to promoting mixed religion encounters masked a more insidious agenda aimed at assimilating the minority Catholic community into a majority Protestant/Unionist culture. They were also critical of the problem in Northern Ireland being analysed as one of poor relations between two communities. This, Republicans asserted, exonerates the British Government from its own role.

Some Unionists saw community relations as a waste of public resources, and accused Government of engaging in 'political gimmickry' when funds could be better spent pursuing terrorists.

More fundamentally, community relations policy has been criticised for attending only to the symptoms of division (segregation) rather than its root causes (structural, political, social disadvantage and inequality).

Programme for Government

In an apparent manifestation of the dismissive attitude adopted by the more extremist political parties, the recently-installed administration in Northern Ireland dropped any reference to *A Shared Future* from its *Programme for Government* released in October 2007. Rather, the emphasis is on the economy, with wealth creation and infrastructural investment prioritised.

The word tolerance appears, but there is no policy agenda attached, and the lexicon of *A Shared Future* has been replaced by references to a 'better' future for all.

Some – politicians in particular – might argue that power-sharing, constitutional compromise and the associated ameliorating effect on violence, obviates the need for relationship-building between Protestants and Catholics and the myriad of minority ethnic groups that now call Northern Ireland home.

However, there is little empirical evidence (based on observation or experience) to support the osmosis argument. And for those who equate reduction in violence with peaceful co-existence and good relations, a cursory review of recent evidence offers a reality check.

In many rural areas, members of minority communities, often through fear and self protection, are denied cultural and religious expression. In some urban areas, paramilitary groups continue to dominate, proscribing the extent of cross-community association and tolerance.

Low-level violence – sectarian and racist attacks and abuse – continues. And across Northern Ireland, employment, housing, recreation and educational opportunities are circumscribed for many by safety concerns and mental maps and physical markers of no-go areas.

Add the psychological and physical traumas suffered by many during the conflict years, and the legacy of hatred, bitterness, anger and hurt that continue to fuel hostile relations, and it becomes almost incomprehensible that a local executive has produced a programme for its Government that offers inward investment and improved infrastructure and services as a panacea for a better future for everyone, with little reference to how it will be achieved in the context of a deeply divided society.

Not only is this approach counter-intuitive, but it also flies in the face of growing evidence that social cohesion is a critical pre-condition of economic success.

The message for Northern Ireland is that layering investment and infrastructure policies onto fractured relationships is likely to pave the way for a continuation of the past, where sectarian interest and a zero sum gain mentality characterises both how economic and social decisions are made, and their impact.

Set against the weight of evidence, it is worth considering the intrinsic value of community relations work and its potential contribution to economic success and wealth creation – aims in the *Programme for Government*.

A recent meta-analysis of 515 contact studies dating from the 1940s to 2000, involving 250,089 people from 38 nations, found a consistent and significant relationship between extent of contact and reduction of prejudice.

In Northern Ireland, several large-scale quantitative studies undertaken in recent years endorse this finding, and predict a correlation between contact and more positive responses to the 'other' community, such as willingness to trust; positive emotional predisposition; willingness to forgive; and reduced anxiety generated by the prospect of inter-group encounter.

Qualitative studies, too, consistently find that inter-group mixing over a sustained period can help develop ties that lead, ultimately, to more positive views about each other, and being more receptive to further contact.

Underscoring the pluralist approach of *A Shared Future,* they find contact most effective when individuals are aware of each other's group memberships, and when those from the 'other' community are seen as somewhat typical. Interestingly, a positive effect is found even when contact is only via 'friends of friends'.

It is ironic that politicians who have themselves seemingly engaged in 'meaningful' contact (through the lengthy process of multi-party talks and on-going working relationships), and demonstrate, in public at least, benefits accrued from it (more trusting relationships and more positive emotional responses to each other) are seemingly willing to deny those experiences and potential for gain to their electorates.

This is not an endorsement for forced integration – rather a rationale for delivering opportunities in education, housing, employment and leisure that challenge segregation in all its negative forms and provide a forum for enhanced inter-group relations.

It is also an acknowledgement of valuable work undertaken by the community and voluntary sector, who have, often in the most adverse circumstances, led the way in facilitating and promoting activity shown to generate relationships that can challenge 'them and us' mentalities.

Why it is incumbent on Government to continue to support such activity, and indeed prioritise it, is found in research which indicates that many people deliberately avoid out-group contact for fear of repercussion. Undermining social cohesion, this leads to:

- reduced likelihood of future contact
- a strengthened sense of dissimilarity
- maintenance of inter-group anxiety
- reinforcement of group boundaries.

If good relations are associated with economic vibrancy and the corollary is also true, it follows that the 'Programme for Government' as it stands, is unlikely to achieve its vision of a better future for all unless some attention is given to relationship-building and the type of 'soft' activity that offers a platform for economic progress.

Related research and activities

Third sector actors in public governance

With the shift from Government to governance, the possibility of increased involvement for third sector organisations is greater, and the potential for different roles also grows.

Third sector actors can adopt, for example, an advocacy and campaigning role – or work in partnership.

In a paper responding to one from Adam Habib on civil society and public governance, Freda Donoghue, of the Centre for Nonprofit Management (CNM), Trinity College, Dublin, examines the public governance roles played by the third sector in Ireland.

Focusing on the concept of substantive uncertainty, data on the roles and values of Irish civil society organisations are examined to tease out and analyse that concept in an Irish context.

Donoghue argues that policy on the third sector needs to acknowledge the multiplicity of roles played by those involved, so that their full potential is recognised.

Donoghue,F., (2007) 'The Negotiation of Public Governance Spaces in Ireland – Whither the Third Sector?'; Habib, A. (2007) 'Civil Society and Public Governance – Conflict and Consensus', Second Annual Summer School, Centre for Nonprofit Management, Trinity College Dublin.

County identity and social capital

In Ireland, the county has been traditionally an important badge of identity and, despite enormous social changes over the past decade or so, still has currency in this respect. There remain strong associations between counties and family names, and accents can still be quite local or peculiar to them.

According to the literature, social capital involves networks and relationships based on trust, shared norms and values. As such, it includes some sense of belonging to an 'imagined community', as Anderson (1991) described nationalism.

In a study, funded under the Royal Irish Academy's Third Sector Research Programme, Freda Donoghue and Andrew O'Regan, of CNM, Trinity College Dublin, explore the concept of county identity as one route to belonging to an 'imagined community'.

They take as their focus voluntary organisations, which are 'resource-dependent' – needing to generate social capital and build strong relationships within their immediate environments to secure financial and human resources.

Papers have been presented on research in County Cavan, and currently Donoghue and O'Regan are analysing data from fieldwork in County Clare.

Their research shows how voluntary organisations have facilitated volunteering on the basis of an over-arching sense of 'sameness', and examines some of the challenges faced in the context of enormous changes to the social fabric.

Donoghue, F., Hughes, E., O'Regan, A:
(2005) 'County Identity and Social Capital – the View from Cavan', presented at Volunteering and Philanthropy – Research from Ireland, North and South, Royal Irish Academy Third Sector Research Programme, Belfast.
(2006) 'Social Capital and County Identity in Ireland', International Society for Third Sector Research Seventh Biennial Conference, Bangkok.

CNM Trinity College Dublin

www.cnm.tcd.ie

New centre for third sector research

The Government-run Office for the Third Sector, the ESRC and The Barrow Cadbury Trust announced recently a call for proposals to establish a new, independent, multidisciplinary research centre for the third sector.

Bringing together a critical mass of expertise, resources and intellectual leadership, the centre will support research of the highest international standing, provide top quality analysis, and strengthen the evidence base on the sector and its impact, to underpin policy and practice. Developing partnerships between researchers and research users will be at the heart of the new centre, in order to increase knowledge and expertise about, with and for the voluntary and community sectors as well as social enterprise.

The initiative, which sees a total joint investment of £10.25million over five years, will establish a single research centre, focused on key third sector issues including its scale, dynamics, and effectiveness. The centre will address the need for longitudinal and trend analysis data, make the evidence base more accessible, and assess the impact of third sector policies.
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

What is CAP?

Changing Ageing Partnership (CAP) was established in 2005 to improve the quality of life for older people in Northern Ireland. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies for five years, it brings together:

- Age Concern Northern Ireland
- Help the Aged in Northern Ireland
- Workers' Educational Association (WEA)
- Queen's University Belfast, (School of Law)

CAP aims to empower older people to transform how they are viewed by sections within our society, and each partner has defined areas of responsibility:

- Leadership and lobbying training, to build advocacy skills among older people and groups (WEA)
- Capacity building, co-ordination and communication with older people and age sector organisations (Help the Aged)
- Equality policy development with older people and public bodies (Age Concern)
- Research and policy evidence which will support the work of age sector organisations and inform politicians, Government and the wider policy family (Queen's).

Cap at Queen's is based in the University's School of Law in the Institute of Governance. Interest in research related to the needs of older people across the university has been stimulated through a Cap Research Seed Grant and PhD studentships.

Currently, there are 12 Cap-funded studies at Queen's – in a range of disciplines including anthropology, architecture, law, politics, medicine and sociology. Six Cap-related PhD studies are underway, with joint supervision between the Institute of Governance and the Schools of Law, Politics and Sociology and Architecture.

The Cap seminar series focuses on dissemination of findings from existing research, and creation of collaborative networks amongst key stakeholders, including: policymakers, academics, practitioners and older people.

For details of all the above, visit: www.changingageing.org

Further information

This booklet is based on presentations made at a series of three seminars held in Belfast, entitled *Active Citizenship and Community Relations in Northern Ireland.*

1) *Public Participation* – January 15, 2008

Edward Andersson
edward@involve.org.uk
www.involve.org.uk/home
www.peopleandparticipation.net

Dr Nicholas Acheson
n.acheson@ulster.ac.uk
www.ulster.ac.uk/cvas

2) *Volunteering and its unintended consequences* – February 13, 2008

Dr David Herbert
d.e.j.herbert@open.ac.uk
www.open.ac.uk/Arts/relstud

Dr Steven Howlett
s.howlett@roehampton.ac.uk
www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/csvca

3) *Community relations and the voluntary and community sector* – March 6, 2008

Professor Irene Hardill
irene.hardill@ntu.ac.uk
www.ntu.ac.uk/research/school_research/social

Professor Joanne Hughes
joanne.hughes@qub.ac.uk
www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation

The complete papers presented at these events, including full details of academic references, are available on the ESRC Society Today website at:
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

Grant Tracker

Grant Tracker is Northern Ireland's very own one stop resource for fundraising. It is used by voluntary and community organisations, charities, clubs, societies and individuals active in improving their community.
www.grant-tracker.org

www.communityni.org
your gateway to the voluntary and community sector in NI

Community NI is the central resource for information, news and discussion on the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It has been developed by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, with one core aim – the promotion of the voluntary and community sector.
www.communityni.org

Office of the Third Sector
For the latest news and policy updates from the Office of the Third Sector – part of the Cabinet Office
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector

Engaging citizens

The seminars in Northern Ireland followed a successful, wide-ranging series on civil renewal, organised in London by the ESRC in conjunction with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). *Engaging Citizens* (2006-2007) examined why individuals get involved over time; the effects of institutional and technological change; faith-based voluntary action; whether community participation in local governance has improved public services; and the impacts of globalisation and the Human Rights Act on all this. Accompanying booklets and papers are available at: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

nicva
PROMOTING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) is an umbrella organisation, seeking to represent the interests of voluntary and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland. In its role as a voluntary sector development agency, it acts as a catalyst to promote innovation and new approaches to the challenge of social need.

NICVA works for justice, equality and dignity throughout society, by promoting opportunities for community participation in the essential decisions that affect the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

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The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns. It aims to provide high-quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and Government. The issues considered include economic competitiveness, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and our quality of life.

The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government.

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