

WHAT NOW?

REFLECTIONS REPORT ON

A Political Education Project

with Young Adults in the

Rural Loyalist Community

By Peter McGuire & Karin Eyben

Supported by the

International Voluntary Service – Northern Ireland

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In
Memory of
John Horner, author, former General Secretary
Of the Fire Brigades Union
And former Labour M.P. for Didbury and Halesowen.

CONTENTS

	Page No.
Preamble	p. 5
Section 1 - Introduction	
Outline of the Project	pp. 6 – 10
Context	pp. 11 – 19
Loyalist Involvement in Community Relations Work	p. 19
Partners	pp. 20– 23
Critical Dialogue Model	pp. 24 – 25
Section 2 - What did we do?	
Phase 1 - ‘Forming’	pp. 26 – 38
Phase 2 – ‘Storming’	pp. 39 – 46
Phase 3 – ‘Norming’	pp. 47 – 49
Section 3 – What did we learn?	
Themes and Ways of Working	pp. 50 – 59
Section 4 – What did we achieve?	pp. 60 – 64
Appendix A	
Evaluation Questions	pp. 65 - 66

PREAMBLE

This is a report commissioned by the International Voluntary Service [IVS] reflecting on the first two years of a three-year project [2000-2002] working with young, mainly male, rural Loyalists on the fringes of paramilitary structures. The purpose of the project was to offer these young men different choices about the roles they could play within their communities and within wider society. The project was developed and delivered through a partnership between three different organisations: Counteract, International Voluntary Service [IVS] and the local paramilitary structure through the local Progressive Unionist Party [PUP].

The project was based on a dialogue model that critically engaged with the participants' understanding of:

- Past and current events;
- The networks and relationships within which they live and work;
- The structures and institutions they take reference from;
- Their understanding of their place in relation to 'others'.

Using the current jargon, this was a 'single-identity' project in that all participants identified themselves as Loyalists, Unionists and Protestants. However, it was not a 'separate' identity project in that the process involved a critical examination of place in relation to 'others'; in particular the broad Catholic, Nationalist and Republican communities.

Neither was this project about 'conversion' in terms of making 'bad' men 'good'. It was about helping people reflect and understand the choices they have made and consider the choices they could make in the future. The final decision is theirs.

The purpose of this report is to tell the story about what happened and what people learned from the perspective of both the participants and the different partners. It is a report that seeks to share the mistakes, the dilemmas and the challenges faced by all in a changing political context.

We ask you to read the report not as a 'model' but as a contribution to discussions about 'single identity' work within the Protestant community and the vital need to grow leadership capacity that is capable of embracing new political realities. This report seeks to reflect the reality of some young people's lives living and working in rural, loyalist communities.

A final point. There were risks for all those who agreed to participate, support and facilitate this project. We ask you to be sensitive to this and to read this report in this spirit.

INTRODUCTION

OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

Background

Around 1999, elements within the leadership of Progressive Unionist Party's [PUP] North Ulster executive were increasingly becoming concerned about the growing 'anti-Agreement' feelings within the rural Loyalist community in general and their supporters in particular. Through recommendations, they approached the International Voluntary Service [IVS] and Counteract to explore the possibilities of running a basic political education programme with an international dimension.

Following discussions, it was agreed to develop a pilot programme beginning in January 2000 for a group of around 16 participants based in Ballymoney. Three year funding was sought by IVS from the International Fund for Ireland's Community Bridges Programme with Joe Law and Stevie Nolan from Counteract as facilitators of the project. A development worker, Steward Law, was employed for a year by IVS to manage the day-to-day running of the project.

Following the success of the pilot programme, a further group was formed in Armagh to participate in a similar kind of programme.

There were subsequently four further groups over the next year and a half. A trip to France through the IVS connections was organised for a number of participants in September 2000.

Some of the participants participated in a number of the groups reflecting their commitment to continuing with the project. Others dropped out for different reasons including employment changes, lack of interest, and peer pressure.

In total there were six groups with four distinct phases to the project. The first three phases can be characterized using the *forming, storming, norming* process. The fourth *performing* phase is the outcome of this project, which is discussed in Section 4 through the development of the Duncrun Cultural Initiative Project.

Phase 1 was about 'forming' the first two groups with the facilitators and development worker establishing their credibility with the participants and building trust.

Phase 2 was a difficult 'storming' phase in that problems emerged due to initial structural weaknesses in the project design as well relationships moving beyond initial politeness to addressing hard issues.

Phase 3 was about 'norming' the process, coming through Phase 2 and learning from past mistakes. Relationships were based on a greater degree of trust and realism about what was possible.

Phase 4 is about the process beginning to 'perform' in the sense that there is now an opportunity for the work to grow within the rural loyalist community.

Outline of the Groups

Phase 1 - *Forming* [Jan. – July 2000]
2 groups [Ballymoney 1, Armagh]

Phase 2 [France Trip] – *Storming* [August – December 2000]
3 groups [Ballymoney 2 & Armagh, Randalstown]

Phase 3 – *Norming* [Jan. - April 2001]
1 group [North Antrim]

Participants

Overall 75 people participated on this project with all attending at least five 2-hour sessions.

Participants were selected by the local PUP leadership on the basis of potential interest and development in attending such a programme. It would be fair to say that some participants were told to participate rather than invited. However, people were also free to withdraw following participation if they failed to show any interest or commitment.

Four women participated in the first pilot group. One of these women also participated in a second group. Subsequent groups were all male. Each of the four women had different reasons for leaving the project but a common theme was their distance from the subject of the legitimacy of active violence that formed discussions during many of the sessions.

The majority of participants were under 25 years of age, coming from the North and South Antrim and Armagh.

Funding

A seeding grant was sought from the Youth Council's Community Relations Youth Support Scheme [CRYSS] in 1998/1999. This led to a larger funding proposal for a three-year project from the Community Bridges Programme of the International Fund for Ireland [IFI].

The IFI's purpose was to support a process that would explore the possibilities of change from within a paramilitary structure rather than on the fringes.

“We were interested in what such a process might look like. How could such a structure be brought into a more contemporary political context and be supported in moving beyond its role of defending, controlling and containing communities. It was about investigating how much could be disturbed from within.” [Joe Hinds, Community Bridges, IFI]

CRYSS continues to support the project through the funding of reporting and monitoring.

Project Structures

An advisory group made up of the funder, partner organisations and participants should have been established from the outset. Unfortunately, this didn't happen until much later in the project. This was partly down to the reluctance of the local paramilitary structure to initially participate in such a group. They needed time to build trust with the facilitators and within their own organisation before participating in any formal project structures. There would have been, and still is, a great deal of suspicion in working with 'outsiders'. The facilitators were reluctant to press the issue in the fear that the local paramilitary structure might withdraw from the project.

An additional dimension was that in the early days, this project was a partnership between individuals, not organisations, and a formal project structure might have caused difficulties for particularly IVS and Counteract, some members of both groups expressing reluctance in being associated with paramilitary groups. These issues would surface during the 'storming' phase.

Report Purpose and Structure

Purpose

This report was commissioned by IVS as a record of a process with a group of young adults from the rural loyalist community. It is aimed at practitioners, policy makers and funders who are working with or supporting community relations work. Karin Eyben is a member of the IVS committee and Peter McGuire is a member of the Duncrun Cultural Initiative. Both authors were involved to a greater or lesser extent in this project, which was vital in terms of having the trust of the participants when writing this report.

The report is therefore the result of a critical dialogue amongst the participants, the facilitators and partner organisations about 'what worked and didn't work'. The criteria used to measure the project were around 'what was possible' rather than absolute criteria formed in advance of the project even beginning. The process was outside anyone's known experience and outcomes could not be predicted.

The criteria that were used to judge whether the process was working were not based on how many 'extremists' now vote for the Alliance Party or support the Good Friday Agreement but about measuring real growth and learning in the context of what actually happened.

"At the end of the day, if there were as many or more No voters by the end of the project then so be it. As long as they were able to articulate and justify why there were No voters and make sense, instead of just spouting propaganda." [Local Paramilitary Leadership]

Success must be judged in terms of people choosing to think, do or say things that previously were unimaginable or unthinkable; people beginning to think beyond the limitations placed by history, community or previous experiences. This might not become apparent until months later when suddenly things 'click into place'.

Success must also be judged against all those concerned having the capacity to name what went wrong and being open about this learning with others. Evaluation should not be about protecting the original financial investment in order to access more monies but about the capacity to be honest about what really happened and sharing that with others. Too much energy is spent on denying that the 'king has no clothes on', creating fig leaves to cover up the real experience.

Structure

The report is organised into four main sections:

- Section 1 Introduction
- Section 2 What did we do?
- Section 3 What did we learn?
- Section 4 What did we achieve?

The questions used to structure the reflective conversations between the authors and the participants and partner organisations are outlined in Appendix A; they were developed in conversations with the participants as the key questions that needed to be asked. The material gathered by Stephen Bloomer [Counteract] in his evaluation reports [2000] to the funders has provided essential material for this report.

CONTEXT

Loyalism Since The Cease-Fires

This section is written from the perspective of the project participants as Loyalists with the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ attempting to capture the feelings and issues within that community over the last seven years. As such it will inevitably read as a very partisan view of events but seeking to understand this position does not equate seeking to justify it.

The 1994 Cease-Fires

The vast majority of the Loyalist community entered the cease-fires and the whole peace process somewhat reluctantly. In fact it would be fair to say that events outside of their control carried them along. Many rural Loyalists believed that a deal which was perceived as being made behind their backs had delivered the cease-fires. Loyalists had believed that the IRA could be defeated militarily within the next two/three years. And then almost overnight two cease-fires were in place. Events seemed to have happened faster than changes in attitudes and beliefs. Many doubted the IRA’s commitment to peace and looked forward to a full return to the conflict.

The ‘Highs’

However, for the first few years after the cease-fires, morale within the Loyalist community was at an all time high for both military and political reasons. This was possibly the first time since the Ulster Workers’ Council strike of 1974.

1. At the time of the cease-fires, Loyalist paramilitary groups had been successfully targeting Republicans¹ and many believed that they had Republican groups on the run. High profile paramilitary leaders such as Billy Wright were becoming ‘heroes’ to hundreds of young Loyalists.
2. The development of the Progressive Unionist Party [PUP] and the Ulster Democratic Party [UDP] brought forward Loyalist spokespersons who appeared articulate and reasonable in front of the media.
3. The Drumcree issue was becoming a rallying call for Loyalists with the media playing a significant role in profiling individuals and events. Loyalist street protests, rallies and parades brought large areas of Northern Ireland to a standstill and in the face of serious civil disorder and possible loss of life, the British Government and the police backed down and let the marchers through.

Working class Loyalism seemed on the move with high profile meetings with the British and Irish governments and regular trips to the United States. For a while Loyalists leaders were the ‘darlings of the media’ with public opinion clearly supportive.

¹ This was taking place in the context of horrific atrocities such as Greysteel and Loughinisland.

4. Membership of Loyalist paramilitary groups increased following the cease-fires with this extra available manpower allowing the paramilitary groups to mount very public 'shows of strength', most notably the rallies held at Belfast City Hall to mark the C.L.M.C. cease-fire, U.V.F. Remembrance Day parades and the recent U.D.A. organised rallies held in North and West Belfast. Large numbers of Loyalist paramilitary members took part in protests throughout the country linked to the Drumcree parades issue. Loyalist flute bands also further developed a distinctly paramilitary appearance. All of this served to increase the profile of the various Loyalist paramilitary groups as well as increase the sense of threat and attacks on the broad Catholic, Nationalist and Republican communities.

The 'Lows'

However from that high of the period 1994-1997, morale within the Loyalist community began to decline. The turning point was probably during the summer of 1998 with the murder of the three Quinn children in Ballymoney and the subsequent failure of the Orange Order to walk down the Garvaghy Road.

1. Loyalist paramilitary 'heroes' have been linked to drugs and racketeering with internal splits and the feud between the UDA and UVF continuing to distance community support.

2. The political parties have also fared badly. Riven by internal disputes the UDP has become less relevant with the PUP, after initial successes at the polls, remaining a Belfast party with its support also declining. It is increasingly apparent that the initial successes of both parties were down to a few capable individuals rather than a ground swell of grass-roots support.

3. Wide-spread Unionist support for Drumcree declined after the death of the Quinn children. With no plan B, the Orange Order ruled out any negotiations with the residents' groups. The Order was in a cul-de-sac with no way out other than retreat.

This situation was compounded by anti-Agreement Unionists/Loyalists successfully transforming the Drumcree protests into a focus for anti-Agreement politics. Pro-Agreement Loyalists felt that they could no longer support the Drumcree protests and indeed many were made to feel unwelcome. A ritual that had served to unite all strands of Unionism and Loyalism suddenly became a symbol of its internal divisions and fears. It became clear that the wider Unionist, Protestant and Loyalist community would not support a sustained protest or campaign that placed them in direct conflict with the British State.

4. Membership and support among working class Loyalism for paramilitary organisations continues to grow. This increase in numbers has now led to an increase in rivalries and several major feuds² have broken out resulting in serious loss of life, injury and the displacement of large numbers of families. Clashes between rival Loyalist paramilitaries at parades and bonfires have led to many ordinary people and families staying away from such traditional events. As flute bands take on a more overt paramilitary appearance, concern is growing within the Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order to being publicly linked to such groups.

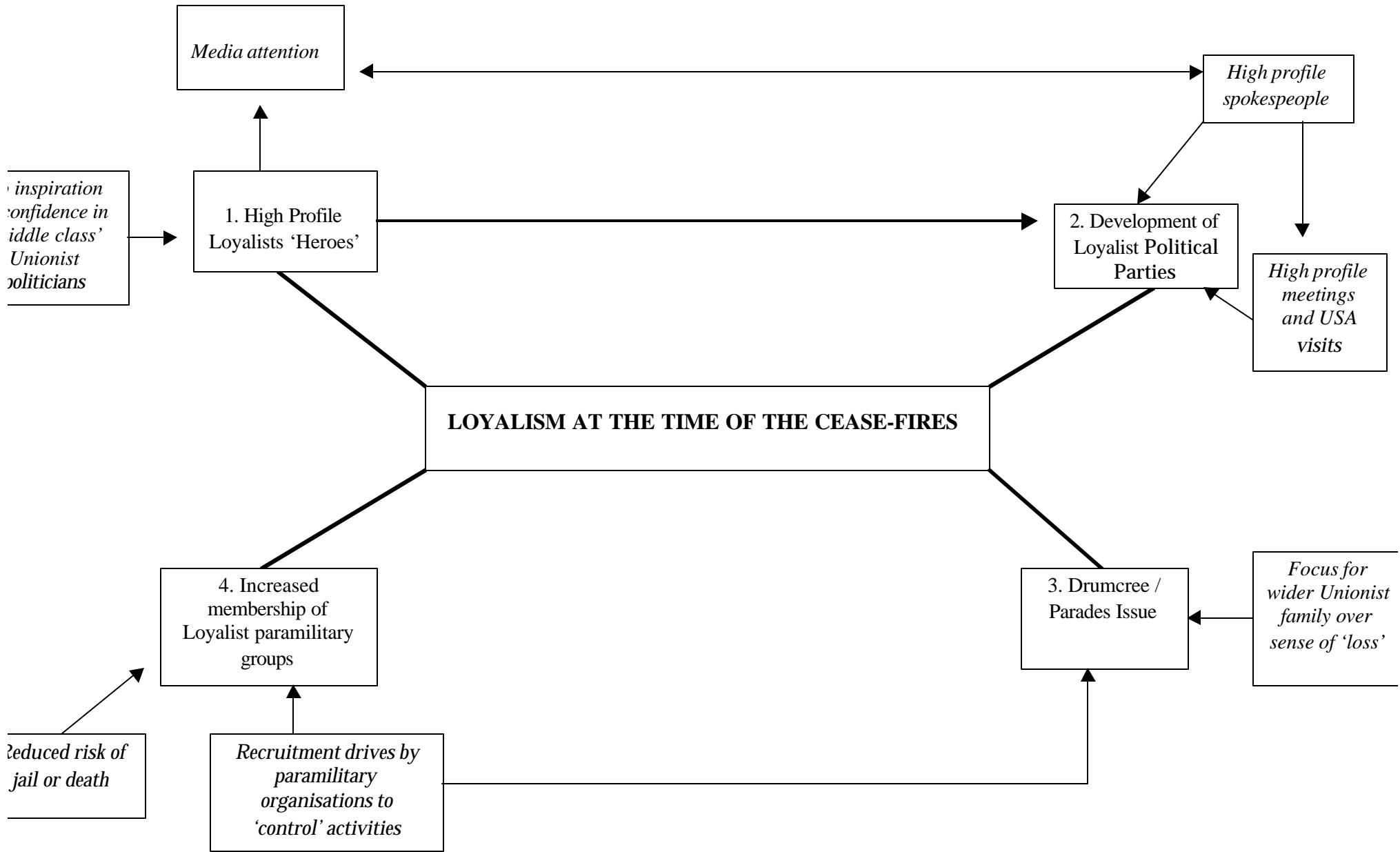
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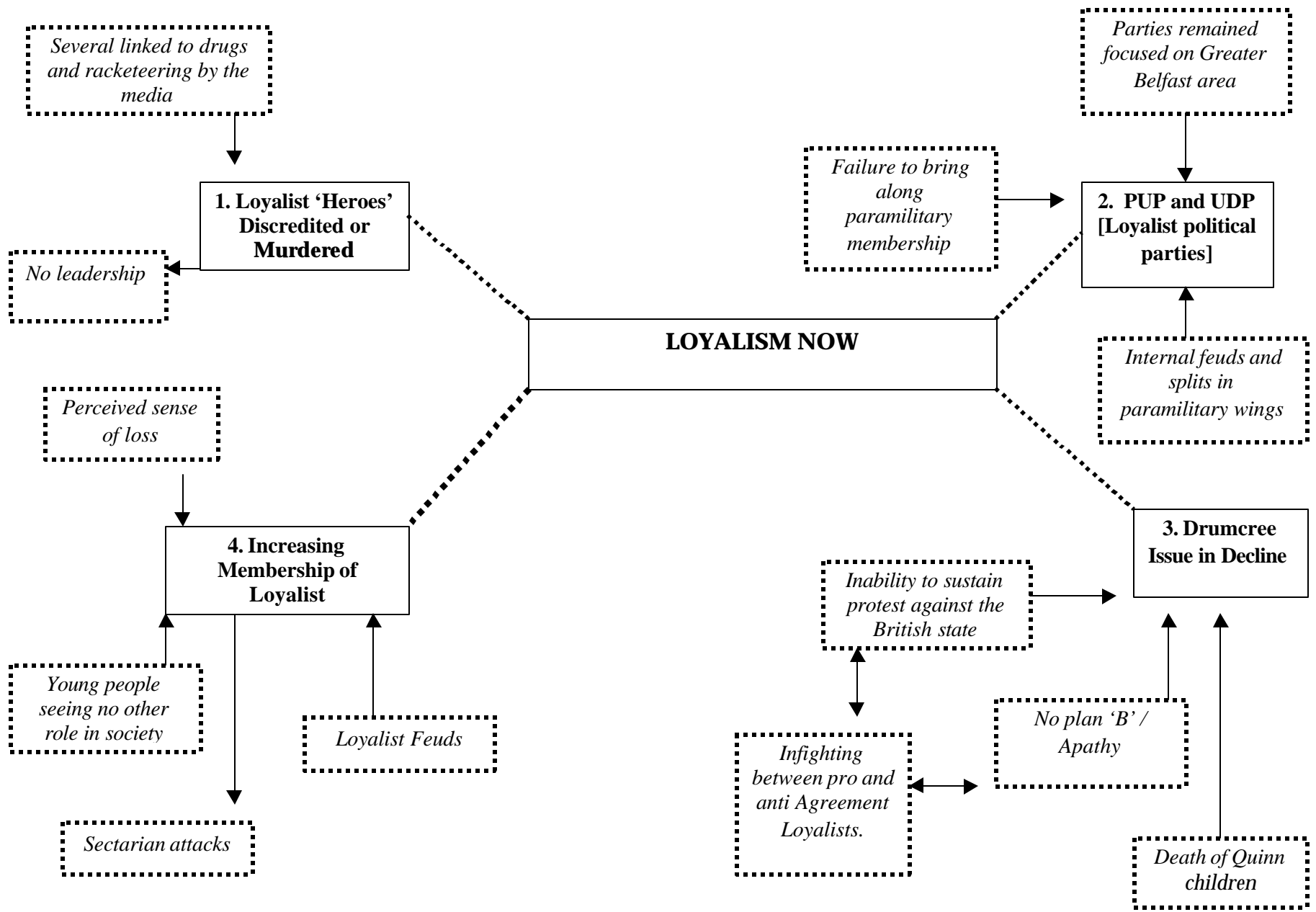
Generally speaking Loyalists looked for ‘winners and losers’ out of the peace-process. With anti-Agreement Unionists using the emotive language of ‘sell-outs’, with Sinn Fein gains at the polls and with no one from the pro-Agreement Unionist camp highlighting the benefits of the Agreement, many Loyalists believe that they have ‘lost’. The ambivalence amongst pro-Agreement Unionist politicians since the cease-fires regarding the benefits of the political process has had a demoralising impact within working class Loyalist communities.

“Ulster Loyalists will only believe the worst. They are always looking for a dark lining in a silver cloud. If Unionist politicians, Protestant church leaders and the British Prime Minister say the ‘Union is safe’, Loyalists don’t believe them. But if Gerry Adams says a ‘United Ireland’, we check the Larne to Stranraer ferry times.”
[Loyalist Activist, Londonderry]

There is uncertainty over the final outcome of the peace-process and a belief that Republicans have already somehow won. As a result there is a great sense of loss within the wider Unionist community compounded by the lack of visionary leadership. For young people growing up in working class areas of Northern Ireland, many see no other role for themselves in society other than as a member of a Loyalist paramilitary group.

² Callie Persic, Stephen Bloomer, *The Feud and the Fury*, SICDP [2001]





Geographical Context

The North Ulster area encompasses North Tyrone, all of County Londonderry and North Antrim. When the negotiations began in the summer of 1994 to bring about a Loyalist ceasefire, Loyalists from this area, which was then dominated by the UDA / UFF, were among the most vocal in opposing the declaration of a cease-fire. There were a number of reasons for this.

1. Loyalist paramilitaries and former Loyalist prisoners living in this area were not generally speaking involved in community development initiatives and therefore had no alternative processes that could give them a place and a role. In addition, involvement in community development does tend to bring people into a wider set of issues and concerns and a wider agenda.

2. Apart from some at a leadership level, very few were consulted about the ongoing political process. Loyalist paramilitaries operating in this area had been rearmed and reorganised in the late 1980s and had been involved in a terrorist campaign, which saw the murder of a number of Republicans and Sinn Fein councillors. This period also saw horrific attacks aimed at ordinary Catholic citizens including the Greysteel massacre. Loyalists believed they were gaining the upper hand and were not looking for a political solution.

When the IRA called its ceasefire in August 1994, North Ulster Loyalists felt 'cheated'. When the Combined Loyalist Military Command [CLMC] responded, many felt betrayed and under pressure from the leadership in Belfast. Loyalists in North Ulster reluctantly agreed to 'toe the line' but many have remained highly critical of the entire process. This has resulted in a steady growth in support for the Loyalist Volunteer Force [LVF] and other anti-Agreement Loyalist splinter groups.

The wider Unionist community in this area has also remained opposed or at best sceptical concerning the peace process, the ceasefires and the Belfast Agreement. Prominent Unionist leaders have tended to be anti-Agreement in this area and the Democratic Unionist Party has made significant gains at local elections. Those leaders who have been pro-Agreement have been less vocal and failed to 'sell' the benefits of the Agreement to the wider Unionist community.

Loyalists have only heard an 'anti-peace process' voice, which fed the fears and uncertainties that shape that community. A recent poll carried out by Ulster Marketing Services for the Belfast Telegraph regarding attitudes to Loyalist decommissioning confirms that those most reluctant about Loyalist decommissioning "*seem to be young, male Protestants who are unskilled members of the working class.*" The survey concludes:

*"A quarter of Protestant men are opposed to Loyalist decommissioning - making them twice as likely as the general population to be against a Loyalist move. Interestingly, northern areas of Northern Ireland showed the lowest regional support."*³

³ Belfast Telegraph Survey, Tuesday 30th October 2001

Involvement With Loyalist Paramilitaries

“If you don’t behave yourself the nuns will get you.” [Participant]

This was said by one of the participants on the project remembering how his mother used to discipline him. The explicit and subtler messages people received in the home, at school and at church coupled with the emotive language used by fundamental Protestantism created an environment in which all Catholics became the enemy.

All of the participants who outlined their reasons for participating with Loyalist paramilitaries linked their involvement to a particular incident, which they perceived as an attack on their community by Republicans. This could have been an attack on local members of the security forces or on ordinary Protestant civilians.

“After the Enniskillen bombing, I made a conscious decision that we had to try and do something.” [Participant]

A number of the participants, viewed the IRA almost like the ‘military wing’ of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, and that the GAA is the ‘IRA at play’. Most believed that the Catholic population supported and aided the IRA in their community. Even voting for Sinn Fein was seen within the Loyalist community as support for the IRA’s campaign. These beliefs shaped their understanding of Loyalist paramilitary activities.

“The Taigs were taking over, they were wrecking the State. We couldn’t be expected to just sit back and take it.” [Participant]

The wider Catholic community was held responsible by Loyalists both for the IRA campaign and any change to the status quo. The Loyalists intentionally embarked on a campaign to terrorise the wider Catholic community. The rationale was *you may want a United Ireland, but you’ll pay a price and is it worth it?* The demands for equal rights and citizenship from the wider Catholic, Nationalist and Republican families were seen as the demands from ‘disloyal’ citizens whose aim was to undermine the State. This was seen as ‘justifying’ attacks on Catholics as well as Republicans.

“It’s like a game of chess, if you can get a Republican that’s excellent. If not, a Taig will do. It was the difference between a Bishop and a Pawn.”
[Participant]

Participants also spoke about a wider context of violence, which shaped their view of, and role in society. This included domestic violence, violence at school, and in the pub where patterns are learnt and established regarding how to respond to perceived threats and how to resolve conflict.

Loyalist Involvement in Community Relations Work

Within the broader community relations field in Northern Ireland, the term 'community relations' and 'anti-sectarianism' has presented greater fears and threat for Protestant /Unionist / Loyalists communities than Catholic / Nationalist / Republican communities. There are a number of complex reasons for this.

1. A historical majority unwilling and fearful to recognise the rightful place of Catholics, Nationalists and Republicans within their midst.
2. Traditional community relations being seen as about Catholics meeting Protestants excluding the issue of relationships with the state within the United Kingdom. Within this definition, community relations becomes a more fearful experience for Protestants and an irrelevance for Republicans.
3. The perception that 'community relations' seeks the conversion of 'extremes' to middle of the road politics: that having a political opinion is considered sectarian with 'community relations' focusing on becoming apolitical.
4. Community relations associated with guilt and shame of identity rather than acknowledging responsibility in relationship.
5. The perception that the Protestants who are involved in 'community relations' work are middle class thinking they are 'OK' seeking the 'conversion' of the working class 'who are not OK'.
6. The lack of confidence to engage in processes that are about meeting the 'other' and believing that 'we will always come off the worst; they are always smarter than us.'
7. The experiences of 'being bought off' through community relations monies that are more about containment than dealing with the real issues.

The lack of involvement of the wider Protestant family in community relations work has been increasingly recognised over the last five years. An unfortunate response has been the increase in 'single identity' work that has in many instances rewarded separation rather than seeking the possibilities of new relationships. This has been the easiest option for both funders and groups as nothing is 'disturbed' but in the long term is the least sustainable.

The vision of all three partners in this project was to move participants beyond the simple 'truths' that lead to the demonisation of the 'Other' bringing them into the complex interdependencies that have shaped relationships on the island of Ireland.

Partners

Three Partners

This was a project developed out of a partnership between three different organisations: International Voluntary Service, Counteract, leadership elements within what was then the PUP's North Ulster executive who acted as a broker between IVS and Counteract and the paramilitary structures.

The challenges of establishing and maintaining this partnership emerged during the 'storming' phase with the interface between the voluntary world of IVS, Counteract and the paramilitary world surfacing the unease each 'world' felt in not wanting to directly challenge the other's organisational structures. Both 'worlds' were entering foreign territory with a great deal of assumptions but with very few familiar points of reference.

It would be fair to say that the partnership was initiated by individuals rather than the organisations they represented; although both IVS and Counteract had formally agreed to the project. Due to the sensitivity of the work, neither IVS nor Counteract were present in this partnership as organisations. Stevie Nolan and Joe Law, as members of IVS as well as being Counteract staff, represented both organisations with limited information and engagement of the wider staff body or management committees of either IVS or Counteract. There was a similar situation with the third partner where committed individuals were treading a fine line between pushing out the boundaries without being overtly noticed by the wider leadership.

The partnership therefore involved a number of individuals who had to bring their organisation along whilst maintaining the confidential nature of the project. This inevitably created difficulties further down the line with members of each of the three organisations seeking greater involvement and information.

International Voluntary Service [IVS] – Northern Ireland

IVS-NI is a voluntary member-led organisation, which promotes international understanding by providing opportunities for voluntary work that seeks to develop a society based on equality and justice. IVS-NI is one of the twenty-nine branches of the Service Civil Internationale [SCI]. It was established in Belfast in 1964.

SCI emerged in 1920 as a response to the destruction and violence of World War 1. A group of international volunteers came together to work on the rebuilding of a village, near Verdun, France. They showed that it was possible to bring together people divided by conflict and violence to work on the common project of rebuilding a new society. In this project, IVS-NI returned to SCI's roots through creating the space for dialogue in a society emerging from conflict.

The objectives of IVS-NI are:

- To work for non violent social change, in solidarity with local and international partners;
- To pro-actively engage in projects and programmes which promote social justice, political awareness and mutual understanding;
- To pro-actively engaged in projects and programmes which challenge inequality, injustice and discrimination;
- To further develop the work and aims of SCI;
- To make new contacts and develop existing one primarily as a sign of international solidarity.
- To provide information for SCI groups and branches on the socio-political dimensions within conflict areas.

Counteract

Counteract was formed in 1990 with the sponsorship and support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Its purpose is to develop actions, policies and strategies that alleviate the incidence of sectarianism and intimidation in the workplace and the wider community. It also undertakes research into workplace intimidation and trade union and employer responses to it.

Counteract developed from an adult education ethos within the trade union movement in Northern Ireland with a political analysis shaped by direct experience of the destruction caused by institutional and community sectarianism in Northern Ireland. This knowledge created a sense of urgency and distinctiveness to their work, initially in dealing with crises in the workplace to broadening out to wider community change processes.

UVF's North Ulster Brigade

The North Ulster Brigade is made up of several separate UVF units referred to internally as battalions. These are based in Londonderry/Derry City and in and around the towns of Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena. Around a hundred UVF members from or based in the area served prison sentences during the Troubles and a number lost their lives 'killed in action' or were murdered by both Loyalists and Republicans.

In 1999, key figures in the then UVF North Ulster brigade leadership, who were supporters of the Good Friday Agreement, explored a number of options to address issues within the Loyalist community concerning attitudes towards the political process and sectarianism. This included supporting the development of the Progressive Unionist Party and Loyalist cultural and community groups.

Different Motivations

Each of the partners had different reasons for entering into the partnership. What each had in common was a commitment and drive to changing the nature of how politics are conducted within working class Loyalism.

Counteract & IVS

I was involved in the initial debate within IVS to pro-actively work within specifically working class Loyalist communities with a view to:

- *Expand our volunteer base, move away from middle class student profile;*
- *To actively engage in grass-roots peace building work as a primary agency outside the traditional method of providing international volunteers to work on behalf of community development projects.*

My hopes were:

- *To develop IVS' credibility as a 'peace and social justice movement' in Northern Ireland.*
- *To develop IVS' capacity to engage in grass roots peace building work.*
- *To raise IVS' profile as an organisation that could offer training/facilitation in peace building activities.*
- *To feel as though we were 'doing more' in achieving our mission statement.*

[Stevie Nolan, Facilitator]

I agreed to participate in this project because I believed that Loyalist working class communities needed to develop from reaction to participation in the political process. I had met Billy Mitchell shortly after starting work in Counteract and had talked to him about the transformation from violence to community activity. So when the chance came, I was very keen to get involved.

My hopes were that I could be of some assistance to the participants, coming from a Loyalist working class background I knew the fears and the lack of knowledge that we have of history and how the working class have been manipulated throughout the years to rely on what they are told from the Unionist ruling class. My fears were and still are that I could do more harm than good, that my politics have taken me too far from my community.

[Joe Law, Facilitator]

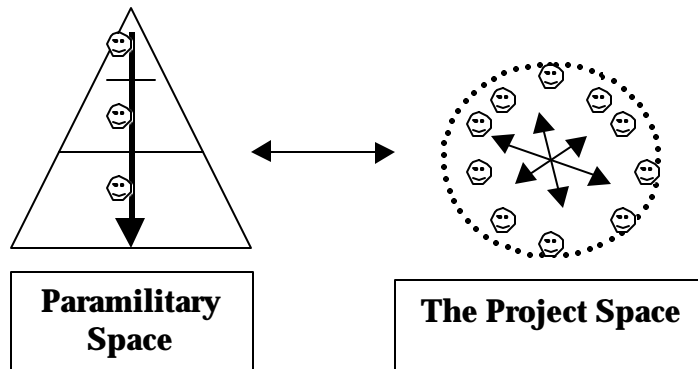
UVF's North Ulster Brigade

At the time, we were concerned about the growing anti-Agreement sentiments within the Loyalist community in general and within our own supporters/members in particular. After reviewing the programme content, and holding several exploratory meetings with the proposed facilitators and IVS personnel, we hoped that this project could become a vehicle to dispel the belief within the Loyalist community that the 'peace process' automatically equals surrender, a sell-out process.

We were also concerned about a growing number of our supporters/members who at that time had begun to push for a role in what could be described as the military side of things.

We the leadership had begun to limit and scale down that particular function. We saw this project as a chance to redirect people's energies. [Local Organiser]

CRITICAL DIALOGUE MODEL⁴



The 'project space' was envisioned as an alternative space for the participants to meet outside organisational hierarchies with an opportunity to experience the possibility of new relationships and a wider world. A critical dialogue developed between the participants, the facilitators and other invited groups to:

- Engage with the participants' complete opposition of hearing criticism of the 'Loyalist / Unionist / Protestant' beliefs and of the British state;
- Question the legitimacy of violence as a method of resolving differences;
- Examine the simplification of 'identities' which allows the demonisation of the 'Other';

This critical dialogue meant that:

- ❖ The process was first and foremost about the capacity to deal with opposite ideas and beliefs to one's own.
- ❖ The dialogue was about locating the conversations within a wider framework of building a cohesive, stable and sustainable society.
- ❖ The voice of the excluded or minority perspectives are given space and voice.

⁴ Developed from a model used by Future Ways.

The role of the external facilitators in the critical dialogue process was:

- ❑ To be a contrast to existing beliefs and assumptions within the group;
- ❑ To share their own experiences and stories, connecting at a human level with the group;
- ❑ To act as citizens concerned with growing communities and a society rooted in a common mutuality, fairness and pluralism;
- ❑ To protect the informal space, culture and relationships and help mediate difficult conversations;
- ❑ To be primarily concerned with and sensitive to the needs and outcomes of the group;
- ❑ To move between different roles as citizens, political/community activists, and trainers.

It would have been impossible to include participants perceived to be from Catholic, Nationalist or Republican communities. However, what was possible and indeed essential was to ensure that the participants were always brought into realities different from their own; that they left workshop sessions at least carrying an awareness of a contradiction between their own beliefs and those held by others.

The backgrounds of both facilitators in themselves created contradictions for the participants. Joe Law born as a Shankill working class Loyalist espousing socialist views and Stevie Nolan with a distinctly London accent and yet from a family background that was deeply rooted in Irish Nationalism.

“The group’s relationship with the facilitators was, at first, one of confusion. They knew what they should be thinking about the lead trainer who was perceived as a Catholic, but they weren’t sure exactly how to react to the facilitator who claimed to be Protestant yet constantly challenged the groups’ views on issues.” [Evaluation Report 2000 – Stephen Bloomer]

2. WHAT DID WE DO?

PHASE 1 – *Forming* [Jan. – July 2000]

Initial Discussions

Initial discussions were held between IVS, Counteract and committed individuals from the PUP and the North Ulster brigade of the UVF. Stewart Law, at that point employed by IVS as a consultant to help run the project, was also present.

The purpose was to ‘test each other out’, to seek assurances and name concerns.

“When this project was proposed to us, we were very concerned that it was another ‘community relations’ exercise – participants would be asked to fill in questionnaires and tick boxes such as on a scale of 1-10 ‘how much do you hate Catholics’. That type of rubbish.

In our experience these C.R. experts tend to have no real politics themselves, they have no real concerns for the people they are meant to be helping, often they view themselves as normal and people such as us as abnormal, and they always have a model plan to train us to be normal. This approach is a waste of time and money. It is designed to keep community relations groups well funded and C.R. experts in jobs. We only agreed to take part in this project after receiving certain assurances.” [North Ulster brigade of the UVF]

The facilitators had other concerns and fears.

“I spoke about the project with some family and friends, initially there were some very negative reactions, from surprise to disgust. Some of my family have no idea what I’m doing and that’s the way it has to stay for the moment.”
[Facilitator]

“I did discuss the project with a number of close friends who were all very supportive as was my partner, who although a bit apprehensive, encouraged and supported me all the way. I did get one reaction from someone I used to admire, which was disappointing – when I told them what I was doing they said that Loyalists had no culture and then tried to laugh it off. That conversation made me more determined to give this project my best.”
[Facilitator]

Following these exploratory conversations it was agreed to form and run two groups: one from the Ballymoney area and the other from Mid Ulster. The rationale being that there were elements within the UVF leadership in both areas that would be open to such an initiative.

It was agreed that the Ballymoney group should begin first and an initial meeting was organised to present a menu of possible themes and agree on a programme of work for the next six months.

First Meetings

The purpose of these initial meetings was to plan the programme and establish the levels of knowledge and understanding within the group.

“As would be expected, the first meetings with the group were characterised by the facilitators doing all the talking and being met with blank faces. The initial problem was that most of the participants had limited experience of a teaching environment and what experience they did have was usually a case of them sitting in a room while somebody talked at them rather than engaging them in a dialogue.” [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

An additional challenge to past experiences of education was the external power structure that was shaping relationships within the group and the freedom to speak and criticise.

“Outside of their teaching experience, the members of the group were all involved in a group structure which was strictly hierarchical and that hierarchy was reflected in the activities. It must be noted however that the group leader fulfilled a training function as his knowledge of local history and pre-history was essential to the success of the programme. The group leader however also realised that his presence may have restricted debate and after several weeks withdrew from the training environment to a more peripheral role.” [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

Participants

There were sixteen participants in the Ballymoney Group [1] and fourteen from the Armagh Group. Four of the participants from the Ballymoney group were women. The majority was in their early 20s.

People were invited or recruited through the existing paramilitary structures.

“Of the sixteen selected for the Ballymoney group thirteen were waiting to join the U.V.F. They were told the project was about looking at Irish/Ulster history and politics and the history of the Troubles. They were told the sessions would be held in the PUP offices in Ballymoney, that they would have ownership of the project and that representatives of our leadership would be involved. This was vital in securing their consent.” [North Ulster brigade of the UVF]

‘Selling’ this project required allaying people’s fears. This meant assuring participants that this was not about returning to school, would not involve any exams and would certainly not be about making people feel stupid and incompetent. Arguments were needed that were relevant and made sense in terms of where people were at. In a sense this meant that the project was sold in terms of *‘If you are a Loyalist, or a Unionist, you might as well know why.’*

“We were trying to give the participants a level of information which would enable them to make decisions regarding the peace process for themselves. We were trying to give the participants a level of confidence regarding local politics that would encourage them to play a proactive and progressive role within the Loyalist community. We were also trying to change the image of the stereotypical working class male Loyalist. We were also trying to readdress the lack of knowledge of, or in interest in, Irish/Ulster history within the Loyalist community.”[North Ulster brigade of the UVF]

Reasons for joining from participants were varied.

“I was told to take part and that there was a chance to get away on trips. I did not know what to expect.” [Participant]

“I was hoping to be able to get more involved in Loyalism and to help my community. I was looking forward to learning more about Ulster history and the UVF.” [Participant]

“I’m in the YCV⁵ and I was asked by a friend also in the YCV did I want to take part. And as I knew all the rest of the boys taking part I said yes.” [Participant]

“I was told the project was about Irish history and politics here. I just thought it was going to be like, you know what the IRA do, teaching their members about history and Irish. I agree with that.” [Participant]

“I was asked to take part by people I respected. However, I thought it might be one of those nice ‘cross-community’ things.” [Participant]

None of them knew anything about either Counteract or IVS but they trusted the organisers.

⁵ YCV is the Young Citizens Volunteers. This is the youth wing of the UVF.

What Did We Do?

There were three different strands to Phase 1 consisting of workshops, over-night residentials and invited speakers. The overall theme was politics, history and education. It was felt that these themes would be the most attractive to participants although the issues they are facing around identity and relationships would eventually require a wider approach including issues around health, gender, and wider issues of violence.

Workshop Sessions

The workshop sessions engaged with different historical periods.

1. **Pre-history and the Celts** – Brief introduction to the early history of these islands moving into earliest known ethnic groups that inhabited these isles. Also spent time de-mythologising some spurious pseudo-scientific claims to ownership of Northern Ireland based on ‘who was here first’ theories.
2. **Christianity** – Brief look at the early Celtic Church and the Age of Saints and Scholars. Highlighted the fact that the modern nations we recognise today did not exist then.
3. **The Vikings and the Normans** – Investigation of two major influences of peoples from the 13th Century and their impact on the islands as a whole. Emphasis once again on how they shaped the emergence of modern ‘nations’.
4. **The Reformation** – Investigation of the birth of Protestantism from Luther to Knox. Highlighting the movement from radicalism to a reactionary position within the new churches. Looked at the impact of the reformation on these islands and its effect on the ethnic make up of the different groups.
5. **The Plantations** – Introduction to this key period in history and its relevance to Northern Ireland today regarding the settler versus native dynamic.
6. **The Wars of the Three Kingdoms** – Brief overview of the various wars that make up what is incorrectly known as the ‘English Civil War’. Highlighted the changing nature of allegiances during the period and the creation for the first time of a ‘united kingdom’ under Oliver Cromwell.
7. **Williamite Wars** – Investigation of local and European context.
8. **18th Century** – Concentrated on the famines of 1720s, Scots-Irish emigrants, the Protestant Ascendancy and the 1798 Rebellion
9. **19th Century** - The birth of modern Unionism, anti-home rule movement, growth in Irish Nationalism and the Famine.
10. **WWI**– Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising.
11. **The Recent Troubles.**

“Sometimes I felt a bit threatened as a Protestant as I did not know a lot about Protestant history- although I did know a bit about the UVF history and the Troubles.” [Participant]

“I enjoyed it. Learning about history, politics, the 1st World War. I can’t remember anything about history at school and I only left four years ago. I can tell you about the Orange Order and the Troubles but I don’t have a clue about Stone Age man or the Normans and all that. I don’t have a clue about local politics, it’s as simple as that. I want to know more.” [Participant]

“I felt I had to attend, like it was my duty as a member to be there. Also I really wanted to learn more about the war here, and not just this one. I wanted to know where it all started. Also about the peace process – I don’t understand it. Everybody I know is against it, but nobody has told me why. I mean why it’s a sell-out. Nobody has told me why it should be regarded as a good thing either.” [Participant]

The vast majority of participants recognised their limited knowledge of history in part due to the failure of the education system they had been through. There was a genuine thirst to learn more. However, the sessions also raised difficulties.

“Some things were said I don’t agree with. Like all this anti-violence and anti-troubles stuff. People have a right to defend themselves no matter what. If your community is being attacked you hit back. Also some people were anti Orange Order – you don’t just say that in Mid Ulster.” [Participant]

There was a marked difference between the North Antrim and Armagh groups in that participants from the Armagh group were much more overtly sectarian emerging out of direct violent experiences. The North Antrim participants had little or no personal experiences of a violent interface with Catholics, Nationalists or Republicans. Living in the midst of a comfortable majoritarian culture they were able to take a more relaxed stance. This resulted in greater freedom to take risks and less emphasis on having to defend Loyalism. On the other hand, this more subtle sectarianism was as deep or even deeper.

Residential Sessions

There were three residential sessions held, two in North Antrim and one in the Republic of Ireland. These residential sessions were vital in growing trust between the participants and facilitators with people 'getting to know each other' as ordinary human beings.

North Antrim

The North Antrim residential sessions combined workshop sessions with site visits bringing history to life.

"Part of the visits included study of old Irish names such as Drum and Rath; we would explain the significance and give a translation of each name we mentioned. It was of interest to the participants that ancient sites that were considered holy to the pre-Celts were still considered holy places today as one of the monuments we visited was within the grounds of a Church of Ireland graveyard." [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

These residential sessions gave more space to participants to engage with the complex movements of people on the island of Ireland over thousands of years, challenging the 'origin myths' that promote the concept of a genetically pure people.

A problem that emerged early on was the culture of late-night drinking that on the one hand bonded participants but on the other left people incapable of doing any work the next day!

"Drink was a problem on the early residential sessions but this was I believe part of the process of trust-building through an activity we could all equally participate in." [Facilitator]

Republic of Ireland

The purpose of this trip was to visit New Grange and the site of the Battle of the Boyne, drawing parallels with the sites visited in North Antrim. A meeting had also been arranged with the Mayor of Drogheda, Sean Collins, who has done a lot of research on Oliver Cromwell.

"One of the first questions the mayor asked the group was if they wanted to hear the 'Protestant' version of events, the 'Catholic' version of events or the truth. Whilst all the time spent with the Mayor was friendly and informative, it should also be noted that some members of the group had a disagreement with the Mayor when he challenged those members of the Orange Order in the group as to why the Order decided not to cooperate with the building of a heritage site to commemorate the battle. Sean Collins also spent some time debunking the myth of the 'massacre of Drogheda', which in the Nationalist historical paradigm states that the entire town was put to the sword by Cromwell, whereas in fact it was the garrison that was massacred. It is difficult to say whether the group was pleased or displeased to learn that this event hadn't actually happened." [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

This was the first trip down South for the majority of participants and there was a certain level of apprehension. This nervousness was reflected in tensions in the group and petty remarks.

“It would be fair to say that the facilitators found it frustrating that just when they thought they had made some headway in breaking down inherent prejudices in one group member, another member would come along, make one stupid comment and the barriers would go up again. The group dynamics were heavily influenced by both the hierarchical structures and peer group pressure which made it difficult for some people to make comments that would challenge the established thinking of the group.” [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

However, the fact that participants had agreed to go, that they met a politician from the South and faced the debunking of certain myths they had dearly held was an achievement.

“I thought the trip down South was really good – New Grange was brilliant. When we visited the gaol in Dublin I was not happy as we were expected to go into a chapel.” [Participant]

The visit to Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin surfaced divisions within the group. Part of the tour involved watching a short film housed in the old chapel. Three participants refused to go in and were led by the guide to the front entrance to wait for the rest of the group. This incident highlighted different attitudes within the group with those who had watched the film ashamed that ‘the others had made a scene’. The three who stood waiting at the front entrance were also surprised by how accommodating the guide had been in responding to their wishes.

The visit to the Boyne was a great let down for most people with the almost audible deflation of myths as they stared at the vast expanse of mud.

“I thought it was a bit of a waste of time visiting the Boyne as there was nothing to see but a couple of fields and a big river – it was not how I had imagined it and was a bit of a let down.” [Participant]

Invited Speakers

There were three events where the groups engaged with external organisations. These were important events in bringing participants into very different worlds and developing their own confidence to engage with others outside of their own environment. The three organisations were the Ultach Trust, the Bloody Sunday Trust and the Ulster People's College who facilitated a morning on history and politics.

The Ultach Trust facilitated a session on the Irish language for the Ballymoney group. Once the group assured themselves that the speaker was not a Republican and even better was a Protestant, there was no hostility either to the speaker or to the subject. In fact, certain members of the group were so enthusiastic that preliminary discussions were held regarding the possibility of establishing Irish language classes in the Ballymoney area. This never came about.

The meeting with the Bloody Sunday Trust was part of a day visit to Derry/Londonderry. The purpose was to bring the participants of both the Ballymoney and Armagh groups into conversations with Nationalist and Republican communities. The day included:

- A visit to the Tower Museum regarding the history of the city;
- A visit to the Bloody Sunday Exhibition to help participants the impact of Bloody Sunday on the Nationalist community in the early 1970s and how this pushed many young people to join the IRA;
- A debate with members of the Bloody Sunday Trust;
- A meeting with local Republicans.

This was quite a difficult day for participants.

The meetings with local Republicans provoked different reactions ranging from a sense of 'holding one's own' to fear.

"The thing in Londonderry with the Republicans was the highlight for me. It was the best by far. Face to face and we held our own. I thought they would wipe the floor with us, it was brilliant!" [Participant]

"If I had to do it again I would not meet with Republicans as it made things hard for me and my husband. Some of our friends were not very happy about the idea of meeting up with people who had been murdering Protestants for the past thirty years." [Participant]

There was a certain mismatch between a group of articulate community activists and a group of young, unconfident Loyalists. In addition, there was a mismatch in terms of fears. For the Loyalists, meeting Republicans was like suddenly meeting the ‘unseen enemy’ whereas for the Republicans the enemy was the state, not Loyalists.

“I think the Londonderry visit would have been better if instead of meeting Republicans who were very articulate and polished it would have been better to meet a group who were more of our age as the panel we met tended to talk to us as if we were ‘stupid misguided Pro-planters’.” [Participant]

In general there was a feeling of ‘having stood up to them’ and a sense of increased confidence as a result.

The engagement with members of the Bloody Sunday Trust was more personally challenging in that group members were being asked to accept that the British state was at fault. For many Loyalists, Bloody Sunday is perceived as having been used to ‘beat’ the British army and state. To acknowledge that the British state was at fault would have been seen as buying into this.

“Of all the events that day this was the most difficult for several reasons. It had been the intention that we would get the group to look at the whole area of state violence and the issue of the use of British troops to further the political will of the establishment rather than protect the people. In all truthfulness we simply could not get any of the group to accept that the State they hold allegiance to could be at fault. It is telling that the young Loyalists are able to see themselves to have been wrong on several occasions over the last thirty years but they could not accept this for the government they support.”
[Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

Another dimension is the feeling amongst the broad Unionist community that the Agreement ‘was a line in the sand’. *“If there was amnesty for terrorist offences what need is there for any enquiries into British state activities.”* [Participant]

The day opened up a number of very important issues around meeting ‘demonised Others’, the challenges of remembering the past and the differences or not between State violence and terrorism. Unfortunately, the weaknesses in the project structures that were emerging at that point meant that none of these themes were pursued at any depth. It was seen as a one-off. However, even as such it remains a memorable experience for the participants in that despite expectations *“we got out of the Bogside alive!”*

What Did We Learn From Phase 1

Participants' Voice

There was a great enthusiasm and interest from some participants in learning new things about what had been familiar icons, symbols and stories in their own history.

“Yes it benefited me, just because it made me think about things like the old UVF. I always had looked on them with pride defending Britain but in reality they died a horrible death in France and no one in England really cares any more. It makes you think. Now I have an interest in things like old Celtic forts and standing stones. I drive my girlfriend mad dragging her around sites like Navan Fort.” [Participant]

They were also all confronted with and heard things that deeply disturbed assumed beliefs.

“As I say I felt uneasy about all the left wing stuff and also the anti Christian views of the facilitators. That made me very angry. But when I thought about it, what made me mad was these two were meant to be Prods, they were letting us down, like selling out our community. But it made me think about just how complicated the whole thing is, not just two camps, us and them, you know.” [Participant]

“It forced me to think about the whole situation in Northern Ireland. You know I never thought there could be Prod Republicans, that type of thing. I want to know more about the conflict here, about Irish politics and history and the peace process. Everything. I’m fed up standing up on the hill at Drumcree, our people need a better plan than that. No one is going to take any notice of that or pipe bombs. Even if there is no chance of another project in Mid Ulster I’m going to find out more.” [Participant]

For others, the project grew confidence not to remain separate but to enter into dialogue.

“I felt the project benefited me as I now have a better understanding of how Republicans think and feel more confident about my own heritage and being able to enter into a debate with Nationalists and not being mowed down for not having a culture. I would sell it to others by saying if you really want to know more about why you are a Protestant/Loyalist then should go on this project.” [Participant]

However, the space created by this course seemed for some so small and fragile in comparison with the ‘real world’ where peer pressure, existing institutions and inadequate leadership reward sectarianism.

“I always knew that holding these views wasn’t right – but I never really wanted to think about it. Being part of this group had made me think about it. But when I leave here I will still hold these views – it’s hard not to.” [Participant]

More seriously in some respects, a number of participants in the North Antrim group began expressing deep reservations regarding the purpose and direction of the project. This became particularly apparent following the Derry/Londonderry day.

“Five of the participants started expressing concerns that the project was really about brainwashing Loyalists into accepting a sell out peace process, and two stated that meeting Republicans was a step too far. We believed that those involved were being influenced by outsiders opposed to the peace process in general, and projects such as this in particular. When the North Antrim group ended these people expressed no interest in taking part in another such group. However, one year later two of those have since contacted ourselves to say that they possibly made a mistake.” [Participant]

The impact of the tensions between pro and anti Agreement Loyalists on the project would become more evident during Phase 2 as wider Loyalist feuding erupted again.

Facilitators’ Voice

All the facilitators are clear that there was learning both ways during this first phase. It was vital to establish enough trust for participants to listen to views that might totally differ their own. Without this trust, the facilitators’ voice would have been rejected and different views treated with contempt.

“Initially I was apprehensive of the participants and knew they viewed us with suspicion. That did change and mostly we became comfortable with each other and much friendlier.” [Facilitator]

“I felt continually challenged in the early days of the project. I never felt threatened though I did feel uncomfortable on the first two residential as the only person perceived to come from a Nationalist background – this was a constant point of reference for the group. As new people came onto the group I often made the mistake of being too informal and going too far with throw away comments.” [Facilitator]

“My initial view of the organisers and participants were based on pre-conceptions as my contact had been limited. I expected to be dealing with the outer reaches of the Protestant ‘lumpen proletariat’. My views changed when I met the organisers who impressed me a great deal in a number of ways. Similarly meeting participants was very encouraging; most of the people I met and worked with were much more capable than I had expected. All were good company.” [Facilitator]

There were real difficulties in the project design and support structures. This was down to:

- The absence of any clear line management and support structures for the development worker, Stewart Law;
- The lack of real ownership of the project by the two partner organisations, IVS and Counteract;
- The lack of preparation by the Development Worker for workshops and residential due to the absence of line management support;
- Communication difficulties between the participants and the facilitators leading to last minute cancellations and occasional low numbers;
- Difficulties in organizing venues and evenings that were suitable for all participants in light of different work shifts.

“One residential was a waste of time because so few turned up that the training became impossible. This was bad for us and bad for the participants. Sometimes the site visits seemed not to be working, but they then ended up enjoying themselves. Sometimes the sessions we felt weren’t going too well because of the silences or maybe just a couple speaking but a lot of the time those who are the quietest come back when they get a chance to talk to you on their own and tell you how much they are enjoying the programme.”

[Facilitator]

Despite these problems, that would come to a head in Phase 2, the facilitators’ commitment to the work and concern for the participants came through and was appreciated.

“I thought the facilitators and organisers were great and took us seriously and listened to what we had to say. I think they are good people.” [Participant]

PHASE 2 [France Trip] – *Storming* [Aug. – Dec. 2000]

Initial Discussions

The project with the first Ballymoney group had come to an end. Work was still continuing with the Armagh group. Two further groups were formed, a second Ballymoney group and one based in Randalstown. This was due to demand for places on the project from young Loyalists who had heard about the project and placed on a ‘waiting list’.

This demand highlighted the thirst within the Loyalist community for this kind of work; however, it would be fair to say that existing project structures could not handle these increased demands.

This phase is dominated by the trip to the Somme and the ‘fallout’ following the trip. This was all taking place within the context of wider Loyalist feuding that was causing tensions amongst participants. In all aspects, this was a ‘storming’ phase, which tested the trust established during Phase 1.

Participants

Ballymoney 2 Group

This second group was made up of sixteen participants, including one woman. There were thirteen new members and three members from Ballymoney 1 group.

Participants represented ‘middle management’ positions within the organisation at a local level. This reflected the growth of interest and commitment from the local structures.

“In the first group, it was clear that the organisation was still wary of the programme and was ‘sounding us out’. But when we came to the second group, we had the impression that we had gained a reputation with the organisation as people who could be trusted.” [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

People joined through the recommendations and ‘hear-say’ from members of the first group. Trusting those who are ‘selling’ the project to you remained a key factor.

“I was asked by a friend did I want to take part and it sounded interesting. I trusted him. I had never done this type of thing before, I just wanted to learn more about this history of Ulster.” [Participant]

The greater level of assertiveness and confidence in this second Ballymoney group led to a more equal partnership between facilitators and participants.

“Whereas the first group were willing to take part in the programme from a position of ‘followers’ it was clear that the second group wanted to have much more of an input as far as the direction of the programme went and there was healthy disagreement from the very start about the content and the form of the training... there has been a marked increase in the willingness of the participants to disagree and criticise the conclusions of the facilitators’ view of various historical events.” [Evaluation Report – Stephen Bloomer]

Armagh Group

This group continued from Phase 1 having participated in the L’Derry Day. This became the main group involved in the France trip. From the facilitators’ perspective, this had also become the most difficult group in that the tensions and issues were so stark in Mid Ulster.

“Building trust with this group was made more difficult by virtue of the fact that they were so uncompromising in their view of the troubles. That is to say you were either on their side or on the side of the enemy. The most innocuous remark could have been misinterpreted as showing allegiance for the ‘other side’. Sessions would take place in local orange halls or houses belonging to members of the group. This had the effect of ensuring that facilitators were constantly reminded of extreme elements of Loyalism, be it through the presence of a Lambeg drum or a wall mural showing armed men.” [Facilitator]

Randalstown Group

This group was formed as a ‘spill-over’ from the Ballymoney 2 group. There were twelve participants, all men. Three members participated in the France trip.

“I agreed to take part in the project mainly because it was suggested to me that this type of project is good for Loyalism and that we ought to be more aware of our history and culture. I suppose at the start, I agreed to take part because I thought I owed it to the PUP leadership to take part in their project. Thinking about it now, I didn’t know enough about the project to make an informed decision, but I am please that I did agree to take part in it.” [Participant]

“When I was asked to take part in the project, I agreed because I had heard about the work done by the Ballymoney group and wanted to get involved myself. I wanted to find out about our history and culture.” [Participant]

What Did We Do?

Workshop Sessions

Fifteen workshop sessions were held in total, seven with the Armagh group and eight with the Ballymoney 2 and Randalstown groups. The programme was based on the one used during Phase 1 with a particular focus building up to the Somme trip in November 2000.

“The content of the sessions was very good. Starting with the earliest settlers in these parts right up to the present. I have always told people I know a lot about the Northern Ireland conflict over the last thirty years, but I realise now that it’s no use knowing about the last thirty years without knowing something about the last few thousand years!” [Participant]

For others, the focus on early history became a bit too much.

“I wanted to do more on the Troubles and local politics. I got bored with all that Stone Age crap, who gives a fuck about it. What is it going to do for me.” [Participant]

A session was held with Jane Leonard from the Ulster Museum on the Somme and the role of the UVF. This stood out as a memorable experience for those involved.

“The slide show in Ballymena about the old UVF and the Troubles was great. I honestly never thought about Irish Catholics fighting for the British Army.” [Participant]

During that time, the feud between the UVF and UDA broke out on the Shankill. Participants and facilitators were concerned regarding their security during sessions, several participants were arrested by the police in connection with the feud and three were remanded in custody. The project was scaled down with many sessions arranged as far away as possible from the usual venues. Protecting the ‘project space’ became vitally important.

“We received an assurance from our organisation that those involved within the projects would not be involved in any paramilitary activities. At the time, for some of the participants this was a defining moment where they had to make a choice of continuing with the project or taking an active role in the feud.” [Senior UVF figure]

France Trip

At one level, the France Trip was conceived as an opportunity to take young Loyalists to the Somme using the IVS model of a 'work-camp' and their networks in Northern France. In a gentle way, this was about helping the participants explore new territory with the safety of a familiar theme.

At another level, the purpose of the trip was to recapture some of the early enthusiasm and commitment for the project, which had been dwindling away as last minute cancellations, lack of preparation and repetition of workshops was turning participants away.

“There had been problems with the Armagh group earlier on in the year and we had a few problems with transport and availability of trainers to attend and facilitate sessions with the Armagh group. This had left us with problems of credibility and I had felt that the leader of the Armagh group was feeling let down by the project. Given that we had problems with the Armagh group it was felt that we could make amends.” [Development Worker]

In effect, the France Trip served to make matters worse rather than resolve any problems.

For a number of reasons, the group that ended up participating on the France trip was the Armagh group with a couple of members from the Randalstown group. This already presented a difficulty in that relationships between the facilitators and the group had not developed to the extent that they had with the Ballymoney groups.

The organisation and coordination of the France Trip was left up to the Development Worker who had very little experience of either working with young people or of organizing trips. Although the IVS model of a 'work-camp' was used in theory, in practice none of the good practice guidelines were followed regarding preparation, selection of participants and clarity of responsibilities. This was as a result of the absence of any line management and support from either IVS or Counteract for the Development Worker who was increasingly floundering in what was becoming a difficult situation for him personally.

Nevertheless, the trip went on with a group of ten young men. This included the local leader from Armagh who was increasingly becoming nervous about the project challenging his leadership position. As a result there were a number of altercations between the facilitators and this individual drawing the participants into different camps during the trip. The facilitators for the first time during this project felt out of their depth with little control over the situation. Their own authority and leadership was under threat from what they perceived as a much more powerful and violent structure.

Whilst all this was going on, the participants were nevertheless also experiencing something that was quite moving.

“For me, the trip to France was the best part of the whole project. I knew quite a lot about the First World War, and about the Somme, because of the 1st July parades, but to see the site of the battle where so many died was a very moving experience for me. It really brought home to me how courageous the men of the Ulster Volunteer Force were to fight in such appalling conditions.”
[Participant]

There was also a flip side.

“The only bad point about the France trip was the lack of organisation. We were led to believe that money was no object on the trip, so we were really disappointed with the accommodation. I suppose if we had known we were on a tight budget, we would have expected less.” [Participant]

“There were some problems on the French trip which seemed to have been caused by lack of preparation and planning but these did not affect the trip too much.” [Participant]

The ‘Fall Out’ from the France Trip

It was clear when the group returned that they had been through a difficult experience with allegations of bullying and threats. It was also clear that the conflict had more to do with the structures or lack of them of the project than individuals concerned. However, no one quite knew how to handle what had happened or what structures to use to resolve the situation.

The local paramilitary structures could not be used, as it would have turned the conflict into an internal disciplinary matter with the possibility of internal discipline.

“There was an expectation from all concerned that the responsibility for resolving this conflict should be left to our own organisational structures – this left the facilitators feeling disempowered and not having full control over the group in France. What they didn’t know was that if we dealt with it internally this could have led to the leadership pulling the plug on the whole project.” [local UVF leadership]

Neither IVS nor Counteract formal structures could be used as neither organisation had as such been structurally involved in the project.

The project structures could not be used, as they didn’t exist. In fact, what became clear is that the project had been initiated and had developed on the basis of trust and friendships rather than agreed responsibilities and working practices.

This whole crisis took the project onto a different level based on a greater honesty and equal partnership. The key learnings that emerged:

- The unwillingness of the facilitators and the Development Worker to challenge the power structures of the local paramilitary organisation which partly led to the absence of any project structures; these might have been seen as competing with the existing organisation;
- The primacy placed on ‘good relations’ sometimes to the detriment of challenging things that were going wrong. The enthusiasm of the participants ensured that the project would continue in spite of its short-comings at the time;
- The risks involved in establishing and sustaining this project for elements of the local paramilitary leadership meant that they couldn’t afford for the project to fail;

“Having endorsed and then fully participated in the project, if it was seen to fail it would have been seen as an indictment of our leadership. We were then determined to take even more risks to make sure that this project would not fail.” [Local PUP]

“Because of the enthusiasm of the participants and their positive feedback, we didn’t want to make a big issue of our concerns about the role of the Development Worker because we didn’t want to put the project at risk. People had taken a risk in participating and we didn’t want to rock the boat.” [Local PUP]

- The absence of self-criticism within the project due to the fear of provoking conflict - this was equally true of participants and facilitators;
- The majority of participants had nothing to compare the experience with and hence felt incapable of voicing any criticism;

“We were surprised and indeed shocked to discover the ‘community relations’ world was every bit as fucked up as the paramilitary world.” [Participant]

“It was all new to me so I thought it was all great!” [Participant]

- Due to the fact that the partnership was based on individual commitment rather than organisational, none of those individuals felt that they could seek advice and support from within their own structures.

The outcome from this crisis was that IVS staff and management committee became involved for the first time and a project steering group was established to co-manage the project between all the partners concerned.

Another significant outcome was a realisation there was a dearth of people within the rural Loyalist community that were capable of engaging in this work and that the project needed to focus on growing capacity amongst participants.

What Did We Learn From Phase 2?

Participants Voice

Despite initial reservations, the project met its goals in that participants did not feel that the purpose was to change ‘who we are’ but to give them enough information to ‘choose who we might want to be’.

“I see now that it was designed to challenge my views and my perceptions of Irish history. The way in which the content was presented challenged me in a way that made me re-assess my beliefs and made me think ‘what am I as a Protestant living in Northern Ireland, and what does it mean to me to be a Loyalist?’ Before the programme, I’d just accept without question that as Protestants we were protecting our territory and had an absolute right to fight against Republicanism. Joe and Stevie made me look at the conflict and its causes from many different angles, and made me realise the complexity of the troubles.” [Participant]

“They made me think about the politics here you know. You know I never voted in my life; I am not even on the register. I don’t know the difference between the different Unionist parties. Just them and us, “Prods and Taigs”. So they made me think about how these politicians were leading us by the nose. Also I never really made any distinction between Nationalists and Republicans.” [Participant]

“I was told the content would be about Irish history from the year dot up to the present day and that’s what I wanted to study. I don’t agree with all this left wing stuff but I admit I don’t know much about it. And I know that I am influenced by what I hear other people saying, and you always think other people know more than yourself.” [Participant]

People felt respected and given a place as equals by the facilitators.

“I got to like Joe and Stevie as ordinary fellas. They knew what they were talking about and had the right balance of professionalism and down to earth approach.” [Participant]

“I can’t say this project changed me or what I am, but it did change the way I think about the problems here, the whole question of ownership of this part of Ireland. I remember going to the first meeting thinking this is going to challenge my position and I’ll have to defend my identity as a Loyalist and that this would make me a better Loyalist. That didn’t happen, what the project did was to wake me up to the reality of our situation. Loyalists are always going to be Loyalists and Republicans are always going to be Republicans. They’re not going away and neither are we, so we have to come to some kind of agreement.” [Participant]

“This project gave me a real sense of belonging to Ireland, it gave me an Irish heritage I never had before.” [Participant]

“I discussed this project with lots of people. I did get some negative reactions, mostly from people who voted against the Agreement. You can’t change these people, they see everything as a sell-out. I think the way forward is for as many of these people, especially young people, as possible to get involved in these projects. They might still be just as bigoted after the course but at least they’ll know why.” [Participant]

Some of the project weaknesses that surfaced during Phase 2 were inevitable in that people needed to trust one another, working on an informal basis prior to the establishment of any formal agreements. To rush immediately into formal partnership structures would have created a great deal of suspicion from the perspective of the local paramilitary organisation. Time was needed to ‘get to know each other’.

In addition, formal project structures would have needed maintenance from all the partners. At that time the local leadership could not have been given this as much priority as internal affairs. They made it quite clear that they were content to leave the administration and delivery of the project to the facilitators.

The project became a victim of its own success during Phase 2 as the demands for training exceeded the capacity of the informal arrangements that did exist. The crisis surfaced the need for a different kind of relationship, which included the need for the local leadership to become more involved and active in the management of the project. This contributed to some extent to those elements of the leadership eventually leaving the local paramilitary structures.

A final point. The project came through this crisis due to the trust that had developed between the individuals concerned who despite everything knew that this kind of work continued to be vital.

PHASE 3 - Norming [Jan. - April 2001]

Initial Discussions

Following the fall out from the France trip, it was agreed that there would be no more work carried out in the Armagh area in the immediate future. It was agreed to focus energies on one group in the North Antrim – North West axis bringing together previous participants who had expressed an interest in continuing with the work.

A steering group was established made up of the local paramilitary leadership, the facilitators and IVS. This was the first time that IVS was involved at an organisational level. The France trip had caused great unease and concern regarding the project within the IVS committee, a number of whom expressing concern that they had been kept in the dark. Their involvement on the steering group was one way of improving communications.

The purpose of Phase 3 was to:

- Explore particular periods of history in more detail; for example, the Home Rule crisis, the First World War, 1912 UVF and the Battle of the Somme;
- Look at the use of symbols within different traditions and the links with community identity;
- Explore the issue of policing and parades;
- Debate the issues surrounding Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist culture.

The project was becoming ‘normalised’ with relationships based on a clearer understanding of what was possible with agreed roles and responsibilities.

However, there were still uncertainties in the wider political environment including continuing Loyalist feuding and the local elections in May 2001. The foot and mouth crisis also led to the cancellation of a residential.

Participants

Eleven young men joined the group, all having participated in previous groups. They were all in a general sense ‘pro-Agreement’ although, if pushed, a number of them would have expressed deep concerns.

A common reason for participating was the wish to take discussions further than had been possible in previous groups due to different educational abilities.

What Did We Do?

Once again, there was a mixture of workshop sessions and residentials. A number of external speakers were also invited to participate such as Jane Leonard [Ulster Museum], Roelf Meyer [Previous member of the South African Nationalist Party] and Cheyanne Church [Incore].

'Policing'

One of the most heated debates that took place was the session on policing. About half of the group declared that they could never give their allegiance to the new police service as it had been stripped of its 'Britishness'. One participant dismissed the new police force as a 'multi-national peace keeping force' due to the alleged impending membership of Garda officers.

"We don't want some hybrid police force – a cross between the RUC and the Garda under the control of the English." [Participant]

There was resentment that core symbols were being 'stripped away'.

The other half of the group argued that symbols were just 'cosmetic' and what was required was a police service that was acceptable to the majority of both communities.

"If the majority of the Nationalist community supported the police, this would be a victory for us in that it would help to stabilise the community and as Unionists this should be what we're working towards." [Participant]

The irony of the situation was that the whole group admitted that they had suffered at the hands of the then RUC and all alleged that the police had used levels of force that were unacceptable during the parades issue. What emerged was an acknowledgement that there was a deep division within Unionism and Loyalism between discussions on improving the quality of 'policing', and the sense of loss of the 'police' as another institution to the 'other side'; this is despite the fact that some also had reason to distrust the existing police service.

'South African Peace Process'

The session with Roelf Meyer focused on the story of his involvement within the South African peace process. His key message to the group was that the National Party government realised that the present system of government within South Africa wasn't sustainable and that they had to make some sort of deal from a position of power before it was too late. He stated quite clearly that the Unionist community in Northern Ireland was going through a similar process and that Unionism had to make a deal before the decision was taken out of its hands.

There was resistance from the group in making comparisons between white South Africans and Ulster Loyalists.

"We told him that the fundamental difference is that we are a majority in this country and you were not." [Participant]

One participant also stated that the only sympathy that Ulster Loyalists would have had with white South Africans would have been in reaction to the high profile relationship between the ANC and the Republican movement.

The discussion started off as ‘point scoring’ based on pre-conceptions. There was a degree of resentment in the group to “*somebody lecturing us on how to build peace. It was pointed out to Roelf Meyer on several occasions that the South African peace process was not over.*” This feeling is part of the wider Loyalist attitude towards outsiders, which treats them as “*interfering know-alls*” rather than people to engage with either for a ‘public relations’ or ‘learning’ motive.

What Did We Learn From Phase 3

It was easier to discuss subjects at a more in-depth level with participants coming from the same level of education and commitment. All the participants had actively chosen to be there rather than being asked or told.

“Some of the topics I was personally uncomfortable with. Like having to admit at times my community was wrong or that I was personally sectarian and the worst, admitting that at times Loyalists were completely sectarian in their outlook.” [Participant]

“You know these things in your heart of hearts – that we were often to blame for what happened here. But you don’t admit them to yourself never mind to outsiders. Some of the anti-Christian views really got to me. I don’t go to church myself, but I hate people rubbishing the idea of God. But I also had to realise that I have to accept people with these views have a right to express them.” [Participant]

“I still have not worked through it all in my own head yet. But it benefited me in many ways. It started me thinking again. To be honest I have not done that since I left school. You seem to stop thinking or questioning your beliefs and motives when you join up [paramilitaries]. It forced me to address my own sectarianism, also my racism and sexism. When we started to debate these things, I could not believe I held such views, nor how little grounds there was for such beliefs. I now make time to read a lot more. Since I left school, I think the only thing I have read has been the Sun newspaper. Now I would still be very much anti-Republican but not so much anti-Catholic.” [Participant]

A major outcome following this phase was the decision by a number of previous participants who wanted to continue developing the work but felt that they couldn’t do this within existing paramilitary structures. This would eventually lead to the formation of the Duncrun Cultural Initiative.

3. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

THEMES AND WAYS OF WORKING

This section focuses on the key issues that surfaced during the three phases of the project and the questions that they raise for community relations work. This section is divided into:

- Key Themes;
- Ways of Working.

3.1 KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

3.11 Conflict and Violence

There is a difference between conflict and violence. Conflict can often be non-violent whereas violence is by its very nature about a level of force that is ‘excessive, unrestrained or unjustifiable.’

For many of the participants, violence was an acceptable way of resolving conflicts ranging from disputes in the pub, to conflict in the home, punishment beatings against ‘petty criminals’, to resolving issues around nationality and sense of place.

“ If we beat the Nazis, and were fighting the Communists why can’t we get stuck into these rebels.” [Participant]

It was not uncommon for people to have stories of friends and relatives that have used violence or had violence inflicted on them. This method of resolving disputes was often learned at school and in the home with both teachers and parents using violence to restore order. This established pattern of behaviour, learned at an early age, continued through involvement in local paramilitaries.

Breaking out of those habits required ‘unlearning’ ways of relating to others in conflict situation not only at a political level but also within the family and community. For a number of the participants this became very difficult as wider cultural norms continued to dominate their lives. The new space created by the group seemed fragile in comparison with established spaces at home, in the pub and at work.

As human beings, we are all to a greater or lesser extent fascinated by violence and its outcomes. In a conflict, those who are working for ‘peace’ can sometimes become victims of this fascination when working on the fringes of violence. This fascination becomes dangerous when working with paramilitary structures as those involved in violence can interpret this fascination, as ‘violence is acceptable’ and that ‘it impresses people’.

There were several occasions during this project when comments made by community relations practitioners were interpreted by the participants and the facilitators as implicit support for violence. This led to key debates exposing a wider reality within Northern Ireland that we all carry ambivalence towards violence, including those working within the community relations field.

3.12 Education

“In my school, teachers were scared or reluctant to touch politics. We weren’t allowed to talk about the Troubles. We were taught English history. Even in art you weren’t allowed to touch those things. In RE you learnt about Judaism but there was no forum for debate and discussion regarding the situation in Northern Ireland. You took your lead from watching Ian Paisley on the news to make sense of what was happening.” [Participant]

As a result of the lack of discussion at school, many of the participants became adults knowing nothing about the Catholic or Nationalist community, knowing nothing about sectarianism or racism. They left school without having the experience of engaging with difference, leaving them without the skills or understanding to question the system in which they had been brought up. As a result, people were conditioned ‘to toe the establishment line’ and discouraged from developing their own thinking and ideas. This left them open to the influences of charismatic political and religious leaders such as Dr. Ian Paisley.

“We did get taught history – about 1066 and so – but couldn’t see that history was being used to support political positions and different truths.”
[Participant]

Some of the participants expressed regret about never been taught Irish history at school. However, underlying this regret was the worry that such *“Christian Brother type of history might turn us into Catholics and Republicans.”*

3.13 Identities

Bringing young Loyalists into the complex movements of people across the British Isles allowed them to begin accepting more complex identities for themselves. Traditional dualities around being either British or Irish were blurred as people were brought into a history where there are no ‘pure-breed of men’ but instead a history of immigration and encounters. To be Irish was about having a sense of place and feeling secure, not about surrender to the ‘other’ side.

3.14 Single Identity work

Single identity work has increasingly become an accepted model within community relations, in the main responding to the Protestant community’s perceived reluctance to engage in community relations initiatives in comparison with Catholics.

This reluctance is an outcome of historical assumptions underlying community relations that such work is about ‘Protestants meeting Catholics’ rather than, for example, ‘police officers meeting Nationalists and Republicans’. Within the former definition, the fears will be higher for Protestants; within the latter definition, Nationalists and Republicans will tend to be the more reluctant partner.

This requires a reframing of community relations practice that addresses the fears of all rather than just those within the Protestant community. Single identity work, within this understanding of community relations, can be a useful way of helping different communities engage with their fears and issues concerning the 'other side', whoever that might be, prior to any direct engagement.

However, there are significant dangers attached to single identity work.

- The more groups spend time imagining and talking about the 'other' the more that 'other' becomes demonised.
- Single identity groups often develop sophisticated arguments about why they should never engage with the 'other' side.
- A simplification of 'community identities' with a focus on the political / religious dimension above all others.
- The aim of single identity work must be about increasing confidence to engage with 'fearful others'; in reality, this aim has often become distorted towards increasing internal confidence in opposition *to* rather than *with* those 'others'. In many cases, this has led to reaffirming and re-entrenchment of existing positions and beliefs.
- Funders under pressure to meet their community relations targets often reward what are 'separate development' projects masquerading under the legitimate cloak of a 'single identity' initiative. This could lead to a number of single identity projects being used to secure jobs and funding rather than building a more interdependent community.
- The lack of Protestant involvement in community relations work means that those who are or seem willing to engage are sometimes treated with 'kid-gloves' with sectarian attitudes remaining unchallenged.

3.15 Gender

There were a small number of women involved in this project, representing the percentages directly involved in Loyalist paramilitary groups. Whilst women are prepared to support and encourage Loyalist groups, active involvement is traditionally seen as a male role.

Overwhelmingly it is men who are seen to make war with women perceived as the victims and survivors of conflict. These different roles and responsibilities ascribed to men and women in conflict are accepted as 'normal', often explained away as women are more inherently 'peaceful' than men.

In reality, the roles of women and men as ‘victims, perpetrators and actors’⁶ in conflict is much more complex with the roles of women as perpetrators and actors often much more invisible.

This project was responding to the needs of men as actors and as perpetrators in the conflict and not to the needs of women. This meant that the approach and issues discussed was more relevant to men.

The absence of women on the project arose out of the:

- Assumptions which shaped the programme;
- The discomfort of the male participants in talking about the realities of violence in the presence of women rather than the ‘macho’ dimension of violence;
- The lack of experience in engaging as men and women outside of any sexual relationship.

Both the partners of the male participants and the partners of the four female participants in Ballymoney Group 1, concerned that the project could be an opportunity for casual sex, raised this last issue as a matter of concern. It was easier in the long run for the women to leave but as a result nothing was really challenged regarding gender relations.

There was discussion about the possibilities of an all female group to address the absence of women on the project but this never materialised. As a result, the only involvement of women on this project was as wives and partners of the participants. This raised a question within the project about how to engage with rural Loyalist women.

3.16 Racism

As with gender, the issue of race is also linked to that of identity and a sense of place. Amongst the participants there were different levels of awareness and fear with regards to those with a black or brown skin colour and/or speaking a ‘strange’ language.

For some, race was linked at some deep level with sense of place within the British Empire and feeling part of a wider family with an internal hierarchy based on colour. For others, racism was not an issue because “*we are all white here*”. The majority of participants were proud of the British Commonwealth and proud that the Orange Order had lodges in Africa. The issue of ‘race’ was subsumed under the more pressing issue of religion and supporting Protestant identity. This is of course in a context of Northern Ireland being an overwhelmingly white society where the pressures of multiculturalism experienced in the South have yet to emerge to the same extent.

⁶ *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors – Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* ed. by Moser, C., Clark F.C., Zed Books Ltd [2001]

Participants tended to interpret most international conflicts through a Protestant lens. For example, the majority supported the Serbian people in South-Eastern Europe because Croatia was seen as Catholic. In Israel, the Jewish cause was supported due to Biblical connections with Muslims being equated with Catholics.

Overall, participants had very little experience of engaging with other cultures and little desire to travel, with Scotland and holiday resorts in Spain representing in the main the totality of international experience. This was partly due to financial restrictions but more fundamentally arising out of an inward looking culture that has no sense of connections with a wider world.

3.17 Leadership

“He who controls the present, controls the past. And he who controls the past controls the future.” [George Orwell]

The kind of rural political leadership that the project participants tended to take reference from was more concerned with ‘holding the line’ and defending past glories rather than imagining new futures.

Direct rule allowed complacency to take root within Unionism in that it offered all the benefits of being part of the Union without elected representatives having to take any significant risks. Within such a culture, the cease-fires took the ordinary Unionist people by surprise in that they were suddenly pushed into have to face new political realities. In contrast, Loyalism at that time was at a high due to the ‘success’ of their terrorist campaign. This led to the emergence of a more confident leadership that was strong enough to take the risks needed to address these new political realities. In addition, the desire to develop a voice independent from ‘middle-class’ Unionism was a further incentive.

However, the imaginative and progressive leadership that has developed over the last six years within Loyalism has emerged in Greater Belfast and therefore far removed from the world of rural based Loyalists.

“If urban Loyalists are still living in 1912, then rural Loyalists are living in 1641.” [Participant]

In addition, the speed of political developments forced the political leadership within Loyalism to develop their parties from the top down rather than from the bottom up. This created a gap between the leadership and grass roots enthusiastic about the increasing high profile of their new political parties. This gap increased as political leaders such as David Ervine, Gary McMichael and David Adams were placed under immense pressure to maintain that high profile. In the absence of any effective ‘middle-management’, the gap between the political leadership and ordinary rural Loyalists widened to such a degree that people returned to seeking old certainties, taking reference from political leaders who seemed solely concerned with defending the past.

This project was designed to provide young rural Loyalists with the confidence not only to examine the past but also to begin addressing the challenges of the future. This required critically engaging with models of leadership that have shaped their lives including the ‘command and control’ leadership that exists within paramilitary structures. As one participant commented:

“A number of young people espouse sectarianism less out of personal conviction but in the belief that the ‘the leadership want us to hate Taigs’
[Participant]

We all need to examine long held views and habits that ingrain ways of behaving and believing that embed separation rather than promote interdependence.

3.2 WAYS OF WORKING

3.21 Critical Dialogue Partnership

This project was based on a critical dialogue between two very different worlds representing opposite sides of the same coin: the community relations sector and the paramilitary sector. Both emerged in response to the divisions and conflict in Northern Ireland but then followed different paths based on different understandings of the use of violence.

The cease-fires and the subsequent release of prisoners offered new opportunities for the community relations sector to engage with paramilitary structures. However, this created ethical dilemmas for many of those involved in community relations as it meant engaging directly with the actors and perpetrators of violence. The clear lines that had existed between those ‘opposed to violence’ and those ‘engaged in violence’ became blurred as people entered the grey area of responsibility for and attitudes to violence.

Within this project, the critical dialogue with regards to violence deepened and broadened as trust slowly grew between the individuals involved. Of critical importance was that despite different value bases and history, the dialogue was between individuals who respected each other as equal human beings. This feeling of being respected and given a place from both the participants’ and facilitators’ perspective was critical in holding the project together during times of crisis.

What worked?

- The trust that developed between participants and facilitators that allowed difficult things to be said and heard.
- The fact that the facilitators were not from the local area gave participants greater space to be open to those perceived to be ‘strangers’.
- A gatekeeper with well established Loyalist credentials who was trusted by both the facilitators and participants to negotiate these different worlds.
- The fact that the rank structure of the organisation was not mirrored within the project – this had to be modelled by the leadership.

- The facilitators being clear from the outset about their own political beliefs, their value bases and their own backgrounds alleviated suspicions regarding hidden agendas.
- Humour and banter that created a relaxed and informal atmosphere that encouraged people to be self-critical and have a laugh at themselves and their own community when appropriate.
- Bringing participants into other realities through asking them to imagine what it would have been like to be born in working class Catholic areas and the issues and pressures they might have faced as young Republicans, Catholics or Nationalists.
- The flexible nature of the programme that allowed participants to drop in and out depending on work shifts and family commitments.

What was difficult?

- Negotiating different power relationships where one partner was more powerful in terms of the physical threat associated with the paramilitary world and the other more powerful with regards to knowledge and articulation.
- The absence of a brokerage group to mediate between paramilitary structures and facilitators, which would have allowed facilitators to deal with conflict without feeling they were challenging the paramilitary structure.
- A partnership between two small, vulnerable voluntary agencies and a larger, powerful organisation with different ways of making decisions and resolving conflicts.
- Encouraging participants to move beyond their suspicion and fear of those outside their known world.
- Maintaining the balance between the need to keep the project private without feeding the culture of fascination about working with paramilitaries.
- The relationship between the individuals concerned and their own organisational structures and practices. This became particularly difficult for IVS which felt increasingly excluded and therefore fearful about the project.
- The lack of adequate support for the facilitators and development worker arising out of the 'exclusive' origins of the project, which kept wider organisations including the funder at a distance.

The critical dialogue partnership was based on modelling contrasts in the ways decisions were made between the partners, how resources are acquired and allocated, the running of organisations, different understandings of leadership, and ways of being with those who are different.

3.22 Training / Learning Approaches

The bait to bring participants into a 'training' programme was through the theme of history and politics, which was seen, as directly relevant to the participants.

Once they had bought into the programme, it was important that the style of training was not a rigid 'teacher-learner' approach. This would have created a power dynamics that would have simultaneously brought participants into past experiences of education as well as challenge existing power structures within the paramilitary organisation. In addition, it was clear that the facilitators had also much to learn.

The use of residentials was very important. The themes raised within the formal workshop sessions were usually discussed in greater depth and honesty during the conversations in the bar.

It became evident that there is a thirst within rural Loyalist communities for such work but that there is little capacity both within that community and within the wider community relations field to carry such work.

3.23 Measurement and Evaluation

Measuring the 'success' of this process must be against what was possible in a changing community and political context, and not against pre-determined criteria. For example, following the trip to Derry and the meeting with the Republicans a number of participants expressed concern regarding where the project was heading and subsequently left the project. This could have been read negatively. However, over a year later, two of that number returned and stated that they regretted leaving the process and would like to become involved again. It took a year for personal reflection and a changed community context for those two individuals to take a risk and rejoin the project.

This example highlights the difficulty of evaluation processes that assume there is a direct and immediate link between input and result.

There were discussions from the outset amongst the participants and facilitators about how to evaluate the process and who should be involved. Discussions focused on the following issues:

- Participants would not be asked to fill in questionnaires that were about placing people in boxes with an implicit right answer; for example, what were the implications of ticking the question 'Do you hate Catholics?'. Participants felt that 'ticking boxes' reduced complex issues into black and white answers.
- The concern of participants that information gathered as part of an evaluation process could fall into the hands of the security forces.
- The feeling that a lot of evaluations are focused on 'conversion' rather than 'choice'. There was a great deal of initial suspicion that this project was about brainwashing them into accepting the peace process. This was proved later not to be true.

- The fear that community relations projects such as this were about ‘depoliticising’ working class Loyalists and bringing them under the leadership of the middle classes.
- Previous experiences had created a suspicion that funders and the community relations field viewed paramilitaries and those involved in violence as ‘specimens to be studied’.

Externally imposed evaluation processes that had not been negotiated with the group would have only served to these fears and anxieties. At a general level it was therefore agreed that:

- Participants would be involved in an evaluation process that was meaningful and reflecting the reality of a process, ‘warts and all’.

This reflections document is the result of this agreement.

4. WHAT DID WE ACHIEVE?

4.1 What did we achieve?

The goal of this project was about giving people the space and information to make more informed choices about their place in relationship with others. The evidence regarding whether these goals were met may be determined at both at a personal and organisational level. The development of the Duncrun Cultural Initiative [DCI] moves the project into the ‘performing’ stage based on these learnings over the last two years.

4.11 Personal

Conversations with participants highlighted a number of different themes:

- A greater understanding of Republican and Nationalist thinking paralleled by the development of greater confidence in people’s own identity and sense of place;
- A rethinking of voting habits moving from decisions based on sectarian priorities to thinking more critically about new political realities;
- A desire to become involved in further education and learning;
- The capacity to question what had previously been accepted;
- Becoming connected to people and organisations that offered a sharp contrast to the values and working practices of a paramilitary organisation.

4.12 Organisational

In terms of organisational impact:

- There were a number of participants who were waiting to join the local paramilitary organisation who decided against it citing involvement in the project as a key reason;
- The project provided the space for a number of people, already questioning the validity of Loyalist violence post Good Friday Agreement, to leave paramilitary organisations.

4.13 Loyalist Community

As news of the project spread by word of mouth, it began to attract participants from the wider Loyalist community with no links to paramilitary structures. This became a defining moment in the existing partnership, highlighting the need for a brokerage group between the paramilitary world, the wider working class Loyalist community and the voluntary/community relations sector.

4.2 Duncrun Cultural Initiative

As work with each group came to an end, there remained a growing number of individuals, from both the paramilitary and wider Loyalist working class community, who wished to carry on with the process. Following a series of meetings and workshops, it was agreed to develop the Duncrun Cultural Initiative [DCI]. The name 'Duncrun' translates as 'fort of the Cruithin' reflecting the heritage and culture that many of the group share. The actual Duncrun site lies in the Magilligan area of Co Londonderry.

The purpose of DCI is to continue working with Loyalist, working class communities addressing perceptions of alienation from the political and peace processes and exploring ways of building understanding and relationships that cross the sectarian divide.

There was also broad agreement that people wanted to move away from labels and categories, including eventually the category of 'Loyalist'.

The group drew up a mission statement indicating the desire:

To build confidence within the Loyalist community outside the greater Belfast area so that we can play a greater role in creating a new pluralist society and a genuine accommodation between the different traditions on this island .

Four strategic objectives were identified:

1. To be a centre of support for those seeking to develop the skills, knowledge base and confidence to access learning and development opportunities.
2. To be a resource in developing the awareness and understanding of Loyalists about other communities and grow new relationships and networks.
3. To be a bridge between the Loyalist community and wider voluntary and statutory agencies.
4. To be a group modelling good practice.

During this process, there was a debate about whether those who held positions within paramilitary organisations should stay within those structures or whether they should leave. The issue was around influence and whether greater change might be achieved from within the organisation or from without. It was generally agreed that at this stage within the peace process, to stay within the organisation would maintain old structures and legitimise existing practices.

DCI has built into its own structures a critical dialogue model through the establishment of an advisory group that acts as a contrast to the existing membership.

As such, people who have been invited to participate on the Advisory Group are mainly from Nationalist, Republican and Catholic backgrounds. This represents a significant shift from the early days of the project whereby 'outsiders' and particularly those perceived to be from a Nationalist, Republican and Catholic background were treated with suspicion if not outright hostility.

The role of the Advisory Group is to participate in a dialogue with the group on issues of identity and culture as well as link members to wider networks and themes around racism, gender, the Irish language and men's health. For example, members of DCI attended both as participants and speakers, the Scoil Shliabh gCuillinn, the Annual Bi-Lingual Winter School held in Mullaghbane, South Armagh.

Connecting rural Loyalists to a wider world remains a key part of a process that is about those from a Loyalist background finding their place and participating in a new political context away from fear and violence. It is about becoming confident partners in building a more inclusive and pluralist society.

4.3 Conclusion

We hope that you have read the report in the spirit that it was meant, as a means of generating an open and honest debate around community relations and reconciliation work with young adults in the loyalist community.

A central theme within this report is that of ‘single identity’ work, which we strongly believe must always allow other voices and opinions to be heard. The goal of such work is to support people understand and find ways out of patterns of behaviour and ways of being with ‘others’ that sustain separation rather than promote greater interdependence.

This has been an immensely hopeful project for the participants, the facilitators and the partners. We hope you are also left with a sense of hope.

We would welcome any feedback and themes you would like to raise with regards to the project and this report.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS for PARTICIPANTS

1. BEFORE THE PROGRAMME

- 1.1 Why did you agree to take part in this project?
- 1.2 What were your expectations of the project?
- 1.3 Did you discuss your participation in this project with anyone before it began?
- 1.4 What did you know about the people organizing this project and those who were to facilitate the sessions?

2. DURING THE PROGRAMME

- 2.1 After the project started, what motivated you to continue to attend sessions?
- 2.2 Did you ever discuss the project, or its content with anyone? If so, what reactions did you get?
- 2.3 During your participation in the project, what were your views of the organisers and those working as facilitators? Did these views change over time?
- 2.4 A] What were your views regarding the content of the sessions?
B] Did the content and/or facilitators challenge or threaten your beliefs in any way?
C] Did any of the sessions, residentials, site visits or day trips stand out as being particularly interesting or a waste of time?
- 2.5 Did you feel that you, as part of the group, had ownership of the project?

3. AFTER THE PROGRAMME

- 3.1 Did you feel that the project benefited you in any way? If so, in what ways – give examples. Would you recommend it to others? How would you sell it to others?
- 3.2 After completing the course, did you discuss it with anyone? If so, what reactions did you get?
- 3.3 After the completion of the course, what are your views of the organisers and facilitators?
- 3.4 Is there anything you would change?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS for FACILITATORS

1. BEFORE THE PROGRAMME

- 1.5 Why did you agree to facilitate this project?
- 1.6 What were your hopes and fears in facilitating the project?
- 1.7 Did you discuss your participation in this project with anyone before it began? What was their reaction?
- 1.8 What did you know about the people participating in this project and the organisers?

2. DURING THE PROGRAMME

- 2.5 What were you trying to achieve or change?
- 2.6 After the project started, what motivated you to continue facilitating the sessions?
- 2.7 Did you ever discuss the project, or its content with anyone? If so, what reactions did you get?
- 2.8 During your facilitation of the project, what were your views of the organisers and the participants? Did these views change over time?
- 2.9 A] How did you decide on the programme content?
B] Did you feel challenged or threatened in any way by the views or beliefs of the participants?
C] Did any of the sessions, residentials, site visits or day trips stand out as being particularly worthwhile or a waste of time?
- 2.5 What were some of the problems that emerged and how did you deal with them?

3. AFTER THE PROGRAMME

- 3.5 Did the project benefit the participants? How do you know?
- 3.6 What have you learnt as a facilitator?
- 3.7 What would be your measurement of success for this project?
- 3.8 Where do you see the project going?