



Listening for Change

A look into how Community Foundation for Northern Ireland is changing conflict dynamics from the bottom up

In a region where political and social divides run deep, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) has occupied neutral territory, devoting time and resources to supporting grassroots reconciliation work with a social justice focus.

Northern Ireland's history is complex, with tensions between Protestant Unionist Loyalists and the Catholic Nationalist Republicans stretching back for centuries. The Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, effectively ended the Troubles—the most recent period of violent conflict—yet separation and division

between these two groups remain. It is in this environment that CFNI seeks to bridge differences in order to strengthen communities across Northern Ireland and contribute to lasting peace. The foundation began as the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust in 1979 and since then has given out thousands of grants to local community groups and spearheaded programs of its own that foster dialogue and relationship building among all people. Its approach is community oriented and places community voices, trust building, and neutral spaces for dialogue at the forefront of its practices.

CFNI is deeply committed to engaging all voices. Andrew McCracken, chief executive of the foundation, says that CFNI is dedicated to “making sure everyone’s voice is heard around the table when we are deciding how money should be given out—even people whose voices are unpopular or who society wants to keep on the outside.” These voices, he says, are important, because “no matter what others may think, they are leaders in their community, and there should be a way for their voices to be heard.” And, as leaders, they have a unique understanding of what their community needs—information critical to the success of CFNI’s programs and grantmaking.

“It wasn’t easy to convince people that combatants needed to be included,” recalled Monica McWilliams, a Good Friday Agreement signatory and former Human Rights Commissioner and Legislative Assembly member in Northern Ireland. “It was a process on which we worked quite hard on and I was impressed at how hard the [CFNI program] worked to include the ex-combatants,” she said.

To ensure that truly each person’s needs are being voiced, CFNI first gathers information on the communities it thinks need support, then travels to those places to better understand what the needs of the community are from residents themselves. “We don’t provide answers, we provide facilities and resources so that people can come up with their own answers,” says Ciaran de Baroid, a former member of CFNI’s staff. This mentality has been present since the outset of the foundation. Avila Kilmurray, former president of CFNI, says that the foundation strives to “look at how you could actually root the peace process within those communities rather than have them at

the macro-political level.” Relying solely on the information that community organizations provide can lead to misinformation, as not all organizations are representative of the lived needs of a community. So CFNI digs deep: “We just don’t accept what people tell us, and we’re brave enough to challenge that,” says Michael Hughes, coordinator of the foundation’s Space and Place Program.

“Challenge what’s out there. It may be right, but don’t assume that it is right.”

– MICHAEL HUGHES, THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The staff at CFNI openly discusses problems, expresses concerns, and works closely with the engaged community so as to best understand which organizations should be grant recipients. CFNI acknowledges that given Northern Ireland’s history, the trust needed for these kinds of conversations is difficult to establish, so it prioritizes the trust-building aspect of its

WHAT’S NORTHERN IRELAND GOT TO DO WITH PITTSBURGH, USA?

Sharing learnings across cultures and borders is critical to ensuring that grantmaking is the most effective it can be. Inspired by a talk that Avila Kilmurray, previous director of CFNI, gave at the University of Pittsburgh in 2012, this case study presents knowledge that applies globally. In reading about the practices of CFNI, consider how these might be translated to your own community to more effectively address the issues it faces.

work. As Andrew says, “building relationships and trust gives you permission to challenge and to say difficult things so that the grantmaking work can be collaborative and benefit the most people possible.” This partnership doesn’t end once they have the needed information—it often continues through the grantmaking process. CFNI thinks that “expensive grantmaking”—grantmaking that requires foundation investment of time, energy, and resources—is crucial in some cases, because without it, says Andrew, “you’ll end up making really efficient grants that won’t get to the most difficult issues.” In the case of the village of Stoneyford, tensions were high and community leadership felt they hadn’t been heard by other partnerships. CFNI spent “quite a bit of time just focusing on building relationships,” remembers Orla Black, grants and donor care manager. She says that being authentic and listening to the village’s needs were critical components to moving forward and fostering a partnership.

Establishing trust with and an understanding of different communities starts for CFNI with its staff, whose skillsets and variety of personal experiences reflect those in the community. “From the beginning, the staff had similar backgrounds to the people that they were working with on the ground, so they could personally relate to the struggles that a community was facing,” shares Orla. This type of connection, along with the ability of the staff to “set aside their own religious and political differences, and to be honest brokers,” adds Michael, has been crucial to the success of CFNI’s work in the divided religious and political climate of Northern Ireland. “We were inside enough to know who to talk to, but outside enough to keep the lines of communication open,” remembers Avila.

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– ANDREW MCCRACKEN, THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Many of the foundation’s initiatives center around providing a neutral space for dialogue and connection across conflict lines, while acting as an objective facilitator between participants. In the past, CFNI’s Women in Peacebuilding Program hosted discussion sessions for women from varying party affiliations across Northern Ireland to meet and share their lived experiences. These sessions led to an increased understanding of similarities and connections between women of all backgrounds resulted from this experience. This form of peacebuilding is not only a tactic that has proven effective in Northern Ireland, but is also an important element of community strengthening globally. However, there are challenges to a conversation-based approach, too—most visibly the backlash participants can receive from members of their own communities simply for engaging. CFNI’s reputation as a community leader and



Political graffiti in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) are a loyalist paramilitary group.

neutral party helps mitigate this challenge. “There’s a need for organizations who can create private safe spaces where people can come together and have that conversation. A lot of what we do now is about choreographing those conversations,” says Andrew. In one case, two organizations located just two kilometers away were performing similar roles in the community, but as Michael explains, “because of the conflict hadn’t shared anything for over 50 years.” CFNI noticed this and “took the opportunity to bring them into a space to have a conversation about how they could move forward,” Michael recalls. This facilitated dialogue allowed for collaboration to blossom between the two groups, who now jointly participate in a program worth over one million pounds.

Funding the programs a community deems most critical to peacebuilding means that sometimes CFNI takes risks with their grantmaking. Not all of the organizations it funds are fully established and stable ones, but the foundation believes these organizations are doing good work in the community. Andrew mentions that CFNI embraces this mindset and lets grantees know, “we trust you, we expect you to take risks, we expect that sometimes not to work and that’s all in the benefit of having greater impact.” Risk has always been important to the foundation: Avila would bring food across the barricades during the Troubles and as director encouraged the staff to “take risks for peace,” as Michael describes it. As a result, the foundation has taken on daring projects, in some cases bringing cross-conflict paramilitaries into the same room to discuss solutions, hand out grants and see the humanity of each other. This integration of risk has empowered CFNI staff to consider and

DIVERSIFICATION OF PHILANTHROPY

Diversity of funding input can be critical to the sustainability of a philanthropic project. In Northern Ireland, “We are a very public sector-dependent economy; there isn’t a strong tradition of private philanthropy and so most community and volunteer organizations are dependent on the government for funding,” explains Andrew McCracken, chief executive of CFNI. Given the complex political history of the area, navigating government funding can be tricky. And in any circumstance, having one funding champion for any philanthropic pursuit is risky, because if that actor withdraws, the future of the project could be at stake. While this particular ratio of government funding to private philanthropy is specific to Northern Ireland, the takeaway of funding diversity is a global one. Having a dialogue amongst international philanthropic voices about how they diversify their funding is something Andrew believes could strengthen his own organization and organizations globally, and could deepen support for interventions that have proven to work.

fund creative, out-of-the-box, and community generated solutions. Backed by the director of

the organization, sensible risk taking is part of the foundation’s philosophy, and if something does happen “that wasn’t meant to happen” Michael explains, then the response is “‘why’ and ‘how do we learn’ rather than ‘why did you do that?’”

The network of trust between each link in the grantmaking process, from director to staff to grantee and community member, allows for more effective solutions. “Supportive grantmaking,” as Orla calls CFNI’s practices, “is crucial to the success of a social justice grantmaking approach, where the community needs are at the forefront of the decision making process.”

CFNI works in a specific place with a specific context, but its approach to changing the conflict resolution paradigm offers valuable insight more universally. Trust between parties,

inclusion of all voices, risk taking, “expensive grantmaking”—these are what allow for the underlying causes of conflict to rise to the surface and for CFNI to be able to address them head on.



Monica McWilliams (far right) and colleagues, pictured with a copy of the Women and Peacebuilding Toolkit, a product of CFNI programs.



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This case study was written by Maya Pace. Photos provided courtesy of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland.

This case study was developed as one of five companion pieces to stories shared through the Pittsburgh Philanthropy Project. The Pittsburgh Philanthropy Project, in association with the University of Pittsburgh, showcases the rich and varied narratives of giving in the region through comprehensive storytelling techniques, giving insight to the philanthropy landscape and approach for residents, researchers, and practitioners. Please visit storyline.gspia.pitt.edu to explore further.