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Community development: origins and hybridization in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article will study the emergence of community development (CD) as a peacebuilding strategy in the 1970s in Northern Ireland. It will demonstrate that CD went through a successful *hybridization* process in the early 1970s. *Hybridization* refers to the process of cross-fertilization between international peacebuilding activities and local practices. It takes place when peace activists locally reshape international models through everyday practices (Richmond & Mitchell 2011). In Northern Ireland, CD stands as a case in point as the initial model, which was conceived by the Colonial Office in order to empower local communities and elites in the colonies, was adapted to local circumstances by the members of the NICRC (1969-1974) and was then readily adopted by community activists on the ground. This article will also demonstrate that CD was conceived as a peacebuilding strategy which tried to prevent the occurrence of violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its promoters believed that CD could represent an alternative to violence as it was based on the needs of the community and sought to develop organisational skills.

Keywords: community development – Northern Ireland – peacebuilding – history of the 1970s

Résumé

Cet article propose d'étudier l'émergence de *community development* (CD) en tant que stratégie de construction de la paix dans les années 1970 en Irlande du Nord. Il démontre que CD a subi une étape *d'hybridation* au début des années 1970. *L'hybridation* fait référence au croisement entre les activités internationales de construction de la paix et les pratiques locales quotidiennes. Il a lieu lorsque des praticiens de la paix remodelent des pratiques internationales en les adaptant à leurs défis et pratiques quotidiens (Richmond et Mitchell 2011). Le modèle original, conçu par le Colonial Office britannique en vue d'émanciper les élites locales dans les colonies, fut adapté en Irlande du Nord aux circonstances locales par les membres de la NICRC (1969-74) puis repris avec enthousiasme par les militants associatifs sur

le terrain. L'un des objectifs de la stratégie de CD consistait à prévenir le recours à la violence localement en développant les compétences organisationnelles permettant in fine de répondre aux besoins des populations.

Mots-clés : *Community development* – Irlande du Nord – construction de la paix – histoire des années 1970

The origins of CD: from the colonies to Northern Ireland

Community development was developed in the 1970s in Northern Ireland. Although community activism was already prevalent, the name (CD) and the theoretical approach came from outside influences. In a context of deep political and social turmoil in 1968 and 1969, the Northern Ireland government in Stormont agreed to create a Community Relations Commission (CRC) and a Ministry of Community Relations. The president of the Commission Hywel Griffiths¹ and its chairman Maurice Hayes² transferred the theories and practices of CD into Northern Ireland. The influences were diverse, including the Irish example of *Muintir na Tíre* who promoted and supported the concept of active community participation and championed the idea of community development in rural Ireland since 1937 (Tierney 2004). The core principles were self-help and self-reliance. But, surprisingly, CD mainly originated in the colonial experience. This article will examine what this initial model was and assess why it successfully hybridized into local practices in Northern Ireland.

The colonial experience

The practice of CD emerged in the 1940s and 1950s in British African colonies such as Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Kenya and Nigeria but also in Malaya (now Malaysia) and India. CD was introduced by the colonial administration in the 1940s and 50s. In a way, it represented a transition from colonial administration to self-government and showed an intention to withdraw from the countries. The link between CD in the colonies and CD in Northern Ireland is literally embodied by the president of the CRC, who worked in both situations. In fact, his past experience had remained untold until an interview I conducted in 2005 as part of my doctoral thesis project. This shows that the policy developments of the early period of the Troubles have been little studied, in spite of their importance in shaping path dependencies for future policy frameworks³.

¹ Hywel Griffiths (Wales) worked for the Department of Integrated Rural Development in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) for six years. Griffiths then worked for the British Council in Africa for two years. He then taught community development courses at the University of Manchester before being recruited as president of the CRC in Northern Ireland in 1970.

² Maurice Hayes (Co Down) was a town clerk in Downpatrick when he was appointed Chairman of the CRC.

³ This idea of path dependency – also developed by McGrattan (2010) – will be developed in a forthcoming publication on the origins of community relations/community development policies in Northern Ireland (1969–1988).

In the 1960s, Hywel Griffiths worked for six years for the Department of Integrated Rural Development which was in fact administered by the Colonial Office (CO)⁴. In 2005, Griffiths confirmed that CD emerged in the context of decolonisation:

The idea of community development originated during the Second World War. A group of highly placed government officials and academics were asked to come together and think about what would happen after the war with regard to the colonial empire and what should be done about it. They forecasted the end of empire and anticipated the emergence of independent democratic states (Griffiths 2005).

The focus was on developing organisational skills at a local level in the colonies. As stated by the CO, the aim was to seek: “[...] active participation, and if possible on the initiative of the community, but if this initiative is not forthcoming spontaneously, by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it” (Colonial Office 1958: 2). As Griffiths explains:

The problem was that most of the countries concerned were still largely ruled according to traditional customs which were anything but democratic. A policy was therefore required to develop the skills of democracy from the base up. That is how ‘community development’ came into existence. It was intended as a programme for political development to create a critical mass of democratic activities and skills at community level from which a viable structure of national politics could emerge in due course (Griffiths 2005).

However, the practices of CD as defined by the Colonial Office were not clearly stated. Griffiths said in 2005 that: “the concept of CD was being talked about very much at that time and it came into Northern Rhodesia [now Zambia] and the Department of Integrated Rural Development and became part of that and I became part of that” (Griffiths 2005). Besides, independence was granted sooner than expected and did not allow CD to bear its fruit. Although administrative skills were developed in the fields of health, social services, education and agricultural methods, political skills were not, as they required long term engagement (Central Office of Information 1966). The context of decolonisation in the 1960s prohibited such an engagement.

⁴ The CO had been the British Department in charge of colonial issues since 1854. It was later transformed and integrated into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1968.

Despite this relative failure, the United Nations promoted CD in a European context in the 1970s (United Nations 1971). This, in the United Kingdom, was taken over by certain groups of social workers who were seeking to develop a more radical approach based on self-help (Biddle 1965). In that context, Hywel Griffiths was teaching CD courses at the University of Manchester in the late 1960s when he was appointed president of the newly-created NICRC in 1970. But what was this new form of social work and why was it perceived as a relevant approach for Northern Ireland?

CD as a new form of social work in the United Kingdom

At the end of the 1960s there was a desire among social workers to see radical changes. In the United Kingdom, CD was taken over by social workers from 1957 on (Batten 1957). The following proverb was often quoted: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for life”. This implied that the people decided what their needs were, and they developed their decision-making and organisational skills. The question that was raised by the new generation of social workers was: who is best capable of conducting the necessary reforms, the State or civil society? Supposedly, collective work was placed at the core of the strategy. This was a process of empowerment and eventually self-government. But this new approach remained vague as stated by Griffiths in 1972:

[...] it is still difficult to find in British literature any agreed statement concerning the aims and objectives of community development. There is to be found a good deal of information and assessment of methods, techniques, participants [sic] settings and, which might be called, process values. But on this one question concerning what the business is all about there is generally very little (Griffiths 1972: 88).

Arguably, this evasive definition led community groups to embrace the notion in Northern Ireland. Jackie Hewitt, a community worker from Ainsworth in Belfast, contended that “it was fortunate that it happened that way, that we didn’t have any preconceived notion of the rules of CD” (Hewitt 2005). This, he argued, meant that CD was a flexible, inclusive strategy.

Besides, the fact that CD stimulated participation from below is another reason why it appealed to community workers and activists in Northern Ireland. How did it do that? Essentially, the NICRC employed Community Development Officers (CDOs) who, contrary to traditional social work approaches, provided ‘guidance’ (Biddle 1965: 90–91). ‘Guidance’ is a non-invasive approach. The following episode illustrates what that is. It was narrated in a 2005 interview by community worker Jackie Hewitt, who attended a residents meeting with CDO Joe Camplisson in the early 1970s:

I said ‘Look I know somebody who has got a hall, I’ll go and see them and I’ll get you that hall’. And then they [residents] said ‘What we’ll need then is to notify people’, ‘Leave that with me, I’ll get that printed for you’. And that’s the way the whole thing went on and after the meeting we came out, and I said to Joe ‘That was a good meeting’, and Joe says ‘Do you know what you have to do?’ and I said ‘To get a hall, to get the leaflets printed, to get them circulating’. And he said ‘Do you know what they have to do: nothing!’ So, lesson learned. That definitely wasn’t CD (Hewitt 2005).

‘Guidance’ methods enhanced leadership and organisational skills at the micro-level. This libertarian approach was well-received by community activists in Northern Ireland, who developed several initiatives accordingly.

How was it adapted in Northern Ireland?

CD became a central part of the strategy of the CRC, as explained by Griffiths in 1974: “the Commission decided to allow the community to determine the pace of development by adopting a community development programme as an alternative and more realistic strategy” (Griffiths 1974a: 6). CD offered new possibilities in the field of problem management, which, in the context of the early 1970s, appealed to the leaders of the CRC. There was a strong level of involvement in community activism even before the CRC was created in 1969, so the new strategy of CD rapidly gained support among activists in Northern Ireland.

The importance of direct practice and the key role played by CDOs

There was a team of ten CDOs in 1970 in Londonderry/Derry, the Dungannon/Armagh/Newry/Lurgan area and Belfast. The *direct* practice identified as working with people directly was a key aspect of their policy. In a 2004 interview, Maurice Hayes explained how the CRC members got in touch with community activists: “You looked for who was there. I had a sort of background in sports through which a lot of people knew me. At least you had a face that people recognised. And I think it has to be personalised in a little way” (Hayes 2004).

Thanks to the CDOs’ guidance work, each community group pondered on the most adequate means of reaching its goals. The people involved in community work were given the opportunity to define the problems and to analyse them by themselves. This type of discussions could lead to choosing non-violent modes of action. Hayes confirmed in 2004:

you were creating a civic culture of discussion and of organisation which would enable them to deal with the problems without having recourse to violence and then hopefully they would see under new circumstances that violence was counterproductive and then hopefully they would see after a bit that they did actually have common interests with Protestant groups on the other side of the wall and that they would tackle those common interests together (Hayes 2004).

CD was seen as a method that could enhance peace and good community relations and was in accordance with its general mission aiming “to encourage the establishment of, and assist others to take steps to secure the establishment of, harmonious community relations” (Community Relations Act 1969). For example the CRC supported bodies involved in community relations work, such as Corrymeela (NI Community Relations Commission 1971: 13), but they also focused on emerging initiatives seeking to establish community centres or to organise residents associations (Fortnight 1974: 1). They also developed a series of more audacious initiatives with the aim of tackling paramilitary activism. These ‘facilitation’ activities implied cross-community exchanges between paramilitary activists from both sides.

Facilitation activities

It must be noted that very little has been written on the NICRC’s facilitation activities. My doctoral research project has uncovered some examples, which will be described in this part. They will shed light on some crucial questions related to the nature of paramilitary activism and its complex relation to peacebuilding policies.

The facilitation approach of the NICRC was described in 1976 by former CDO Boyle:

[...] the idea was to use the strength of the community association movement, and to invite a range of people including representatives of, and persons proposed by, the main paramilitary groups, under the ‘community’ ticket. This would help to prevent any direct confrontation, make it easy for paramilitary representatives to attend, and expose representatives to the experience of a community conference (Boyle 1976: 41).

For example, members from Loyalist and Republican groups were invited to attend a conference in Port Saloon, Donegal, in 1974. The idea was to “to test their perceptions of each other and to explore what ‘common ground’ if any existed between them.” (Community Conference Council ‘74 1974: 2). Jim Fitzpatrick, a

lawyer who helped organise this event, recalled in a 2005 interview that “they were trying to stop the feuding between the different groups. [...] The Port Salon type of conference opened up the thinking of the paramilitaries to a much broader outlook of what they should be doing.” (Fitzpatrick 2005)

This was a rather audacious strategy. In 2005, Hywel Griffiths explained that he met Loyalist paramilitary activists in 1974 as he felt he had to “do something”:

I certainly felt that after 1974 when there was a collapse of government and the Ulster Workers’ Strike and so on and I went down there because I thought ‘I have to do something’ and I went down and I talked to some of these people, some of the ones I knew, and they were telling me how they were creating some kind of free state. They were taking over the facilities; they were ready to go to war (Griffiths 2005).

Griffiths believed that he could deter these militants from organising violent actions by helping them develop alternative forms of activism such as CD. Members of the CRC believed that CD could enable marginalised communities to develop non-violent means of addressing their needs. CDO Joe Camplisson confirms that he saw “dramatic changes in attitudes taking place” (Camplisson 1974: 31). On some occasions, the guidance work provided by the CDO enhanced problem-solving techniques based on self-help. This, in turn, might have deterred activists from using violence. A link was established between the development of organisational skills and preventive work in the field of peace. In hindsight, this corresponds to the general definition of peacebuilding which, according to the United Nations (UN), “is aimed at preventing the outbreak, the recurrence or continuation of armed conflict” (UN 2001). In that sense, CD had a great potential as a peacebuilding strategy, even though that sort of phrasing was not used at the time. But how successful was this strategy?

Assessment

Interestingly, the impact of the work of the Commission could be felt on Loyalist groups. For example, CD was adopted by activists who assembled under the umbrella group UCAG – Ulster Community Action Group – linked with the Ulster Defence Association (Woods 1989, McCready 2001). The UDA were trying to develop a more coherent political and social strategy, in the aftermath of what they considered to be the successful 1974 strike – successful in the sense that it led them to be better organised. Loyalists wanted to develop their skills in order to mark a difference with traditional Unionist elites. They now focused on their working-class identity and were willing to develop ‘political’ and ‘community’ roles, as opposed to paramilitary ones only. One of the founders of the UCAG said in 1995:

The people that I was dealing with were under threat and they didn’t have any sort of clear-cut political objectives but they were reactive. So in an attempt to politicise their role and to set some objectives of a positive nature that could be attained politically, UCAG became the community oriented aspect of the UDA (Lovett, Gillespie, Gunn 1995: 25).

The intention of distancing themselves from violence echoes the NICRC’s philosophy. Clearly, the UCAG founder explained that they were trying to “give an alternative expression to the paramilitary voice – an alternative to violence” (Lovett, Gillespie, Gunn 1995: 25). This suggests a connection with Griffiths’ intention to ‘do something’ to deter violent activities, as stated earlier.

However, the involvement of paramilitary leaders in community activism might have represented a calculated attempt to fortify their leadership in the community. In other words, community groups were a channel through which they might develop paramilitary activities particularly as the links between paramilitary combatants and community activists were tenuous. Griffiths acknowledged that they represented “two different species of the same phenomenon” (Griffiths 1975: 196).

Moreover, it is difficult to assess the impact of the CD strategy given that the NICRC was disbanded abruptly in 1974 and its policies abandoned thereafter. Gradually, the substantial CD strategies as encouraged by the NICRC ceased to exist after 1979 for different reasons⁵. Mainly, both military/security and paramilitary activities increased to unprecedented heights in the 1970s. As the conflict intensified, the need to encourage peaceful forms of activism was no longer perceived as a priority, let alone a possibility. Besides, as a result of political upheavals between 1972 and 1975, decision-making shifted from the councils and Stormont to central departments and regional bodies. Under such circumstances, as local means of action were neutralised, CD was gradually abandoned. Generally, CD did not get the necessary support to grow and become a durable practice. As it became slowly marginalised by more conventional approaches under direct rule, policy makers tended to disregard peacebuilding mechanisms devised locally⁶.

⁵ A more comprehensive account of community relations/community development policies (1969–1998) in Northern Ireland will be published by the author in 2016.

⁶ See forthcoming publication on community relations/community development policies (1969–1998).

Concluding remarks on the history and legacy of CD

Most initiatives described in this article were abandoned in the late 1970s; CD remained dormant in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the 1986 founding text for new community relations policies mentioned the relevance of CD as a strategy to improve community relations (Fitzduff & Frazer 1986: 132–133), this approach was revitalised under a consensual form. For instance, CD has now become the remit of the Department for Social Development (DSD) who promotes CD activities in order to “meet needs and build better relationships within and between communities” (DSD Website). The radical, political intentions of the 1970s have given way to wider ‘good relations’ objectives and, generally speaking, the practices encouraged through the DSD do not put the emphasis on empowering local communities, nor on working with people directly.

According to Frazer, this has happened because CD work implied working with local community groups which were seen as suspicious because of their possible links with Republicanism and, to a lesser extent, Loyalism. In that sense, Frazer argues that it was “a political issue” (Frazer 2006). This hints at an underlying yet pervasive feeling of mistrust between public bodies and local community groups during the Troubles, as a result of the possibly close links binding paramilitary and community activism. Yet policy makers did not take this element into consideration when they developed peacebuilding programmes in the 1990s and 2000s.

More generally, the example of the origins and transformation of CD during the Troubles shows that there is little knowledge of, and little interest in, the history of the policies devised in Northern Ireland. The decisions that were made and the paths that were favoured in the mid-1970s affected policy-making durably. More importantly, it is the paths that were discarded that defined the scope of possible policies, such as when CD was considered superfluous as a potential mechanism to prevent the escalation of violence at the local level. From then on, such initiatives were perceived as either unnecessary or impossible to organise. This, I argue, has remained a feature of peacebuilding initiatives since 1998 as, during the peace process, policy-making has tended to favour macro-level approaches at the expense of micro-level initiatives. Examples can be found in the 2000s showing that policy-makers were reluctant to support facilitation initiatives developed locally (Etchart 2011). The assumption is that a more diversified approach combining both macro and micro-level projects could strengthen peace efforts.

Incidentally, local government will be reinforced from April 2015 under the Local Government Act 2014 and a number of powers that were previously the responsibility of central government will be transferred to local councils. One of them is ‘community development’. This might represent a good opportunity to learn from past experiences and encourage the creation of consistent peacebuilding initiatives at the local level.

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