The Struggle for Peace:
The Role of Civil Society During the Troubles, 1968-1998

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Abstract

The Troubles was a conflict in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998 between the nationalist Irish Republican Army and the Unionist/British forces. It was split largely due to religious and political views. Unionists were more likely to be protestant Christians, while Republicans were more likely to be Catholic. Non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, and grassroots movements which make up civil society played an indirect, yet important role in the Troubles peace process. Other historians have explored the Troubles, but they tend to focus on the political and social issues as they seem more prevalent to the issue. Some works have covered these civil societies, with some saying that they are beneficial and contributed to the peace process indirectly, while other historians state that these NGOs and other groups are irrelevant towards the political process. This paper uses a range of sources such as newspapers, NGO statements, personal accounts, and government documents. The subject matter is important because when historians examine the Troubles academics tend to first look towards the political and social leaders. The goal of this paper is to examine civil society in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, which fosters a broader view of the conflict and the deeply divided society. Civil society in Northern Ireland played an important, yet indirect political and social role during the Troubles.
Introduction

The Troubles in Northern Ireland began on October 5, 1968, after a Catholic civil rights march in Derry was violently broken up by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Tension had been building up in Northern Ireland, as Catholics had multiple civil rights marches arguing that they were being discriminated against when it came to voting, housing, and employment by the Unionist government. The British Army was called in after a three-day riot in Derry in 1969, and while at first seen as a neutral party, the army eventually was seen as an ally of the Unionists following Bloody Sunday in 1972 by the Irish Catholics. Bloody Sunay had begun as an outlawed protest; however, the protest broke down after the British Army opened fire, killing 13, and injuring 15. The two sides of the conflict can best be explained as Irish Catholics and the Unionist Protestants. The conflict itself was secular and fought over political and cultural reasons rather than religious reasons. Irish Republicans (Pro Independence) wanted a unified Ireland, while the Unionists sought to keep Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. The main paramilitaries that fought for each side were the Provisional Irish Republican Army, and the Ulster Defense Association. The conflict lasted 30 years and had its ebbs and flows in terms of the intensity of violence. The Troubles would end on May 22, 1998, after the IRA and Governments agreed to the Good Friday Agreement.

This paper seeks to analyze the importance and role that civil society had during the Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1969-1998. Civil Society is composed of multiple groups and organizations that are not directly a part of national governments. It is sometimes regarded as the third sector of society, with government and business being the other two. Some examples

include non-governmental organizations, schools, churches, labor unions, social movements, and other separate sections of society. Each of these groups worked towards creating a healthier community where the violence could end. Civil society played an integral part of the Troubles as groups worked towards peace by bringing opposing groups together for talks and supporting the community in healing. The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of civil society during the Troubles and how what they did helped bring about the peace process by working alongside the political process. Civil society played an important, yet indirect political and social role during the Troubles by assisting leaders, lessening political tension, and trying to heal a deeply divided society.

Many of the secondary sources for this paper are written by political scientists, but there are some historians that focus on the subject, while not explicitly talking about civil society and its important purpose. The primary sources for this paper come from the official NGO websites, newspapers, sources from CAIN, and firsthand accounts from prominent figures during the Troubles. Secondary sources allude to important events, however, due to them being personal interviews or uncited it is a struggle to find the primary sources to back up some of the claims. This topic is important because civil society is not as discussed among historians who specialize in the Troubles. One argument that will be presented in the literature review it was civil society even important or had any impact at all or was it important to the peace process? The organization of this paper will progress from here to a literature review of historians and political scientists, followed by the main body of the paper which will focus on the role of civil society, the impacts that civil society had on the conflict, and how they were integral in ending the Troubles.
Figure 1, Political Map of Ireland, digital image, Nations Online Project, Accessed on April 22, 2022, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/ireland-map.htm.
Literature Review

The Troubles has had its share of academic literature written about it covering multiple aspects of the conflict. The Troubles was caused by growing tension between Irish Catholics and the Unionist Protestants. Academics have covered multiple aspects of the conflict, however, the focus for most academics and even the public is on the political side of the conflict and the violence that arose from that. Civil society and other topics related to the conflict in Northern Ireland sometimes seem to take the backburner in most academic writings. The British government and the politicians of Northern Ireland had a heavy hand in the peace process, they were the ones that agreed to the multiple ceasefires and had discussions toward ending the conflict. Regarding the impacts of civil society however, there seems a growing divide over their actual contributions to ending the conflict and their impact. There are two camps in this regard, the first camp claims that civil society had an impact on the Troubles and assisted in bringing peace. The second camp claims that civil society had little to no impact in ending the conflict or ignored civil society completely. The main question is then, was civil society an important factor during the Troubles?

Among those who argue that civil society did have an impact on the Troubles and the peace process is Feargal Cochrane. Cochrane is a political scientist who focuses on peace, and conflict in Northern Ireland. Cochrane writes mostly about NGOs and if they had an influence on the peace process. Through the journal article he analyzes the context, the NGOs themselves, the diverse attitudes and opinions of the groups, and the impact that they had. The title of his work is called “Unsung Heroes or Muddle-Headed Peaceniks.” This shows some of the thoughts that some academics hold as the debate revolves around if these NGOs had an impact or if they just
call for peace but with no actual way of pushing it.² Cochrane excellently explains that the NGO sector of civil society helped influence major political parties and how community action helped lead to the Good Friday Agreement.³ The central argument of his paper is that NGOs played an indirect role in the political process and helped bring peace to the region.⁴ Cochrane discusses how the Good Friday agreement created the Civic Forum due to lobbying from NGOs and helped bring about long term peace building.⁵ The Civic Forum ceased meeting a year after this article was published. This is all important to the general discussion though, and much of what he says is reinforced by the work of Adrian Guelke as they agree that civil society had a key role. From what he writes, he thinks that civil society played an important role. This source sports this paper's argument as it shows the civil society had an impact in some form while also discussing what the groups did to bring people together.

Adrian Guelke analyzes the role of civil society during the peace process and the contributions that groups and people made in finding peace. Guelke is also a political scientist, with a focus on comparative politics. In his paper, he has a similar argument to Cochrane who said that civil society played an important but indirect role in the peace process by supporting the political agreements and the influence that the sector had on some of the political decisions.⁶ So

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while Cochrane and Guelke agrees that civil society had some degree of impact; they disagree over if the Good Friday Agreement actually allows civil society to have an input and do its work. This is the same argument that Cochrane has presented that civil society played an indirect yet influential role in bringing political groups together and for using their grassroots power to call for peace. One interesting thing about this source however is the discussion of the “Yes” campaign which sought to bring out the vote and vote yes on the referendum to end the conflict. While he argues that civil society played a role, he states that civil society was excluded from the peace process and that it has become difficult to argue for input from civil society due to the consociationalism nature of the Good Friday Agreement. This is an interesting point, but the main theme from the article seems to be that civil society at least played a role but that the top-down heavy negotiations as civil society gained funding and programs. This paper also supports this paper's argument and answers to the debate over the actual importance of civil society.

Landon E. Hancock discusses the arguments relating to the topic and are heavy as he analyzes the diverse ways that academics view the peace process. Hancock is a political scientist and focuses primarily on conflict resolution and Northern Ireland. Hancock analyzes the Troubles by examining two opposing arguments that explain the Troubles which is from either the top-down or the bottom-up perspective. He also includes a segment about a middle out section, which argues that both civil society and political elites need each other. The top-down process is where most of the weight is placed on analyzing the political parties and the political actors in generating peace. The bottom-up perspective places an emphasis on focusing on

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community action and civil society and their impacts on driving the peace process. Hancock 
discourages this and says that reality is often much more complex than the two forms of 
analysis.\textsuperscript{10} His central argument is difficult to pick out, but it can best be summarized that the 
top-down analysis is correct but that it could not succeed without civil society initiatives. The 
source does not directly discuss the Troubles and the peace process as much as it looks at how 
peace is made at various levels. How these different levels mix to create an environment that is 
prepared for peace. In a way he argues that the political process and the grassroots level are 
reliant on each other.

The next source that is important to analyze is \textit{Ireland in Conflict: 1922-1998} written by 
the historian T. G. Fraser and it stands in the middle of the two camps. He writes and focuses 
mostly on conflict research. Frasers work covers most of 20th century Ireland from the Irish civil 
war following the war for independence until the Good Friday agreement which finally signified 
peace. This source stands as a holistic history of the Troubles as he discusses the important 
political movements throughout the troubles, but also recognizes the important work made by 
some members of civil society in setting up meetings for talks and peace movements.\textsuperscript{11} The book 
covers a large swath of time, but the chapters dedicated to the Troubles are in good detail and 
include the important events and political actions taken. The main theme of the book is that it 
focuses on analyzing the conflict from the top-down perspective. While there are specific 
mentions of civil society groups such as the NGO Peace People, he focuses instead mainly on the 
political course. When he writes about the peace process he writes about discussions between 
Hume and Adams, and he discusses the importance of outside pressure such as from President

Clinton and the Republic of Ireland. He does not necessarily disagree with many on the first camp, but he does not argue that civil society was important either and that is why he is placed somewhat in the neutral field. This source is important because it provides a well general history, and it shows the differing focuses those academics have when analyzing conflict.

This is where there is a transition into the second camp, which argues that civil society had insignificant impact on the Troubles or omits their work. Thomas Hennessy omits civil society entirely, and instead decides to focus exclusively on the top-down approach when examining the peace process in Northern Ireland. The only reference to civil society is towards the Ulster Workers Council strike, however he explains that the strike arose from political causes. Hennessey’s main research focus is on both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the 20th century. In his book *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Ending the Troubles*, he covers the peace process from a governmental viewpoint, discussing inter-party talks, the negotiations, and the Good Friday Agreement. It is possible to infer from his approach then that civil society served no purpose and was unimportant to the Troubles or the peace process. Hennessy remarks that the peace process was accomplished only because both sides were ready to. This may be true, but by omitting any mention of community-based action or covering it with a political explanation, he rejects the arguments made by Cochrane and Guelke. This argument presents a challenge which this paper hopes to prove, was civil society an important contributor or was it failing?

The final source analyzes the history of the Irish Republican Army, but it covers the Troubles as a whole. It is written by historian Richard English, who studies conflicts in Ireland.

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In his book *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, he goes over many topics related to the Troubles and the peace process. Much like Hennessey, English does not talk about civil society much. In the instances that he does reference civil society he either blames them for starting the conflict or gives them little credit. For English it may make more sense that his book does not necessarily touch on civil society. This is because it is written about the history of the Irish Republican Army, while Hennessy wrote about the entire peace process. Richard English follows the history of the IRA, and writes mostly about the group’s ideology, its terrorist attacks, and the political implications. He discusses that the Irish population itself was so deeply divided that peace seemed hard to see. This makes some sense, as civil society groups themselves were sometimes split by their religious and sectarian views. While English does not discuss civil society, he argues that in a deeply divided society things need to be handled from the top-down. This source is important in showing how some historians focus heavily on the political groups in the conflict.

All these sources together help build up one argument that continues today. The sad fact is that there are limited primary sources when it comes to documenting the work of civil society and NGOs. Much of the scholarly work is written looking at the conflict from the top-down perspective. Many of the sources interact with each other in some form as Fraser, Hennessy, and English seem to focus on the political side, ignoring civil society and its impacts. Cochrane, Guelke, and Hancock recognized that civil society played an indirect role in the peace process with their influence and action. They add to the discourse over the Troubles itself in all its complexity and factions. While the political side of the conflict is complicated and chiefly

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important, the role of civil society has also had a growing impact. NGOs and grassroots organizations have proven to be effective in creating local change, perhaps when analyzing civil society in Northern Ireland more evidence of their impacts can be found on the local level rather than the regional level. Do the authors necessarily answer the debate, however? Not exactly, the argument can still be made over the importance of civil society and if what they do has an impact on deeply divided societies in conflict.

Some of these sources strengthen this paper's argument by providing context for how and why civil society was important to ending the Troubles. Hancock’s article provides context for how other academics may examine the Troubles and the peace process. Some academics challenge this though, instead electing to focus on the governmental side. They do have a point however, as it was the governments and the paramilitaries that finally agreed to stand down. Civil society however helped build an environment of peace and then helped keep the peace following the Good Friday Agreement. While the scholars are correct that primary documents related to civil society are scarce, there is enough to be able to infer that they played an indirect role even if sometimes shut out from the political peace negotiation. NGOs and these community groups do not publish much of their work, and it can be difficult to find sources that document their work in such detail as the political documents do. In a way, this literature review has shown a battle and a difference of perspective between political scientists and historians. Political scientists put a greater focus on the peace process itself and those that contributed to it. Historians focus on the events in question and those that were the most important in decision making. Therefore, this paper is important, it will contribute to the discussion and try to differentiate what kind of role civil society played throughout the Troubles and how effective these groups were in bringing people together.
The Beginning of The Troubles and The End of The Civil Rights Movement, 1968-1972

The Troubles began due to disputes between the Unionist government of Northern Ireland and elements of civil society which were leading a civil rights movement calling for equality and the end to discrimination. A civil rights march occurred in Derry on October 5, 1968, and the events that transpired that day would mark the beginning of the Troubles. Officially, the protest was outlawed by the Unionist government as they sought to quell the movement. The march was highly publicized as television cameras and British members of parliament were there to observe the movement. When the march began it was mostly peaceful and the crowd marched down the street. The Royal Ulster Constabulary quickly formed a line to block the protest from progressing, then violently shut the protest down by swinging batons and using water cannons to disperse the crowd. The civil rights movement was shocked. The movement would announce more marches and increasing their activity while bringing in more members.

The civil rights movement was an important aspect of the Troubles, as it marched for reform against Irish Catholic discrimination on both a governmental and societal level. The movement gained increased traction and recognition following the birth of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association which helped coordinate the marches. NICRA was founded in 1967 and it was comprised of trade unionists, communists, Republicans, and the Northern Ireland Labour party. The civil rights movement helped bring people of different beliefs and backgrounds

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together for one common cause which was the push for equal rights and a fairer system of government. The main goals of the civil rights movement can best be described as a campaign against discrimination in housing, voting power, and equal rights. These were pressing issues as the Catholic minority felt they were being systematically oppressed by the Unionist government in power.

Considerable gains were made by civil society as the protesting and calling for governmental action was successful as limited reforms were passed by the Stormont government. On November 22, 1968, the prime minister of Northern Ireland Terrence O’Neill announced new reform measures which would go into place. Housing was now to be given out on a need bases rather than preference for Protestants and instituting the calls for one-man-one-vote. The conflict in Northern Ireland continued to worsen however as sectarian violence continued to grow and the Irish Republican Army had decided to begin its attacks against the government. The situation eventually became so out of hand that the British army was sent to Northern Ireland to help the RUC put down riots and protests and maintain order in the country. Some would argue that the reforms from the government was little too late to appease the protestors. This is because these reforms no longer satisfied the protestors who felt slighted, and the British Army was incriminated by association with the discrimination in the eyes of the Republicans. There was both a success and a failure in this sense as killings and attack were on the rise even though changes were being pushed through.

Although tension was rising quickly, it is possible to see the important impacts that civil society had both politically and socially. Many groups sprouted up in the wake of the violence between 1969 and 1971, these groups served local bastions, helping their communities with local issues and problems. With the government slowly falling apart and some services no longer being accessible, some communities created grassroots movements to fill the voids. These local organizations helped keep their communities together and served in whatever role was required of them during this time. This was an important development as civil society would remain in this capacity for the rest of the Troubles, mostly based in local communities and helping others. Some groups would rise to increased importance over time as they focused on larger issues facing the country.

The rise of political and sectarian violence culminated on January 30, 1972, when NICRA organized a march through Derry again, this time in protest of a new internment camp being opened for paramilitaries. The march was deemed illegal by the British government and sent British paratroopers to disperse the protest. By the end of the day however, 13 civilians were dead, and 14 others were wounded after the British army opened fire on the marchers. To many at the march this rise of violence from the British government was seen as a crime and called upon the international community to levy scrutiny. Bloody Sunday brought both a growth for civil society groups, but the Irish Republican Army also began a recruitment drive and retaliated. The Northern Ireland was frantically trying to maintain order and stability, but with constant violence local systems were beginning to deteriorate. This loss of order and international

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pressure lead the United Kingdom to disband the government of Northern Ireland and it would institute direct rule from Westminster until the end of the conflict.\textsuperscript{24} This is where the role of civil society would rise as these community groups would rise and take over the role of local government in some forms.

\textit{Bridging The Divide, 1973-1993}

Following Bloody Sunday, the devolvement of the Stormont government, and the institution of direct rule from Westminster, the Troubles had changed in a way. It had deepened the divide between the Irish Catholics and the British Unionists, as the Republicans increased its violence in retaliation and at the prospect of direct British rule. Civil Society was impacted by this as NICRA had been stunned that their protests for civil rights, mirrored after those in the United States, had been met with gunfire from the British Army. The civil rights movement in Northern Ireland had ended and sectarian violence grew at an exponential rate. With the fall of the civil rights movement civil society would focus primarily on their local communities and bettering their local situation as paramilitaries fight across the country. Civil society took a more active part and their numbers surged following 1972 to new heights.\textsuperscript{25} Civil society would sometimes help the local governments even though some of the local politicians saw civil society and NGOs as usurping their power.

Civil Society during this period was focused much more on bringing people together, trying to lessen the cultural and political divide between people while also calling on government actors to bring peace. Civil society both flourished and hit a stand still as new groups were

\textsuperscript{24} T.G. Fraser, \textit{Ireland in Conflict 1922-1998}, (New York: Rutledge), 54-55.

created but had failed to achieve their intended effects. Many of these new groups experienced political disillusionment and many of the groups that did not support sectarian politics may have found their sphere of influence but had little impact on the overall political situation. This presents just one of the many issues that groups endured during the Troubles. A deeply divided society also means a deeply divided civil society and it had proven difficult for groups in Northern Ireland to navigate around that issue as groups struggled not over what to focus on but how to solve the issues. It is possible to see this divide throughout all areas of civil society during this time as there were groups created on a local level. Many of these local neighborhoods were segregated, so this arose to certain groups that identified as Catholic or Protestant.

There were attempts to bring people together and form a new government based on equal power sharing in 1973 known as the Sunningdale agreement. The agreement came to life following meeting between the Irish and British governments as well as the parties involved in the Northern Ireland executive. In summary, the Sunningdale agreement was agreed by all parties that a council of Ireland would be creating, a new government split on the premise of power sharing, with representative from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with safeguards to protect British interests in Northern Ireland. This was seen as a compromise to the current situation and was seen as a way to lessen the power that the IRA held and discredit their arguments. The assembly in Northern Ireland was elected and it was mostly in favor of the Council of Ireland and the power sharing. This is where civil society comes to play, in response to the thought of a united Irish council the Ulster Workers Council declared a general strike across the country and declared that all work would halt until the government backed out of the

27 Sunningdale Agreement. https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/sunningdale/agreement.htm.
agreement. The strikes were not relatively popular at the beginning of the strike, but over time more people joined the strike. In an interview with Glen Barr, a member of the trade union, he stated he has no objection to sharing power with the Catholics, only the Republicans. The strikes ended after the executive Brian Faulkner resigned followed by his colleagues, effectively ending the Northern Ireland executive and the end to the agreement as Catholics protested and Protestants celebrated.

One aspect of this divide was in education and schools, as schooling in Northern Ireland was segregated among Catholic and Protestant children. Segregated schooling was not new to the Troubles, it had been this way before and still is to this day. However, since education and schools are a part of civil society it is important to highlight the work that some groups took to integrate schools and build trust among one another. Many Catholic and Protestant children did not have a friend of the other religion, creating a kind of echo chamber as communities were split by the peace lines. There were only a few peace lines, and they were set up in 1969 in small numbers to segregate Catholic communities and protestant communities. An NGO that worked towards this goal of integrated schools was the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). Their mission statement as a charitable organization is to work towards funding and integrating schools in Northern Ireland and increasing community integration. The role that NICIE has played was an important one as they helped fund and supported the integration of schools starting in 1989. When it comes to healing a deeply divided society, Nolan McAdam discusses Logan college, one of the first integrated schools and how it helps

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29 “Glenn Barr’s Tough Stance,” Sunday Independent (Dublin), May 26, 1974.
community healing and improves communication. Lagan College opened in 1981 as the first integrated school in Northern Ireland. It was begun by All Children Together, an NGO which sought to create integrated schools and lobbied for laws which legally allowed integration. This aspect of education takes time, but it is an important element of civil society in lessening the gap in a deeply divided society.

NGOs were ever more prevalent at this time as the number of groups increased even more with the introduction of internationally funded groups. These groups helped solve housing issues, economic issues, worked towards reconciliation, or other purposes. One grassroots movement that became well known was the Peace People founded by Mairead Maguire, Betty Williams, and Ciaran McKeown as an NGO. The movement was founded following a tragic incident when Mairead’s sister’s children were hit and killed by the careening car of an IRA fugitive who was killed by British soldiers while he was trying to escape. The community came together and like many other local communities they were fed up with the constant political violence and needless death. The Peace People was formed brought people together in the call to peace, both Catholics and Protestants from across Ireland came together and marched together calling for the end of the conflict. This was an astounding moment and became one of the largest peace movements in Northern Ireland during the height of the conflict. They effectively help protests and marches across the British Isles, even marching down the streets of London calling for the end of the conflict and for international support. The work of the peace people

garnered them, international notoriety and they were awarded the Nobel peace prize for their efforts in 1986.

The Peace people mobilized thousands of people towards the call for peace, however the international fame and the call for peace did not bring any actual peace as the conflict continued. The Peace People had mobilized a mass amount of people, and while they did not end the conflict, they did prepare people for peace and help bring people together over time. This worked more so on the social side of influencing ways of thinking rather than the political impacts. No other group was able to amass such a large group of protestors calling for peace and the end of the conflict, which is the importance of an NGO like them. The Peace People were one of the largest NGOs at its time, and their role in trying to build peace earned them the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. As Ciaran McKeown explains, he believes that peace in Northern Ireland can only come from the bottom up, explaining that first society must be prepared for peace, then the political actors can build off of it. This can be seen as the building up theory of peace, compared to the top-down approach which argues peace is made by political elites. McKeown was an important member of the group, and he marched for peace and worked to bring communities together alongside Maguire and Williams. The group would fall during the hunger strikes of 1980 however, due to policy disagreements regarding the strike.

Churches and religion had grown to be seen as a very influential and important aspect of the conflict due to their power and sway within the communities they were based in regardless of if they were Catholic or Protestant. Among the protestants an influential pastor Ian Paisley rose to fame, and eventually transferred into political life by founding the DUP. An influential Catholic priest would be Bishop Edward Daly who was active in calling for peace following

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Bloody Sunday. Even though the churches did have some weaknesses, they still contributed to both the political and the social aspect of civil society. One way that they contributed socially was by hosting events and helping members of the local community build relationships with one another. Politically it is important to note that some churches during this time helped mediate discussion between political parties and the British government. They were important in bringing social groups together as well, trying to keep violence low and inspiring peace.

However, there were some critics of the church who claimed that they were not doing enough to end the conflict. Mary Kelley explains how churches are not doing enough to break down sectarian views or breaking down walls created by the community. While this may be true, it is hard to judge how all churches are doing when each one operates independently in some form, some churches may host events while others will not.

All these movements helped create a possibility for peace which political leaders took advantage of. The political and social contributions of civil society in this area is sometime difficult to spot throughout the violence and political tension. However, the community sector has provided new opportunities for new forms of policy and governance due to the political and civil unrest combined with the disillusionment of local governance. Civil society had filled the void left by the dissolution of government by helping their local communities, but also unafraid to continue the demands for change and peace. Working in their local communities and bringing demographics together. Civil society was playing a support role in this conflict and bridging the

divides between politics and societal issues. They supported and built a foundation safe to build upon.

This is not to discourage any of the political work that political leaders in Northern Ireland as Gerry Adams and Hohn Hume discussed politics constantly while trying to reach out to other parties. Gerry Adams was the leader of the Sinn Fein political party, often described to be the political wing of the Irish Republican Army. Earlier it was discussed how church leaders help mediate discussion among one another, however when Gerry Adams writes the churches, they ignores his letters which insinuated that the churches as a part of civil society have built up a sense of self preservation.39 While the political sector works and comes closer to the peace process and negotiations civil society begins to move less towards calling for outright change and instead goes on the back burner and plays supportive roles.


The Downing Street Declaration in late 1993 showed a change in tone from the governments as the peace process was explored. This chance proved to be more likely than past attempts as the Irish Republican Army had agreed to yet another ceasefire in 1994 and would halt attacks, instead turning its sights towards the negotiating table.40 This is important as it marked a possible end to sectarian violence and the end of the Troubles that civil society and political leaders had been working towards for decades at this point. The Downing Street Declaration in summary announced that peace negotiations would begin and would establish a devolved government in Northern Ireland and guaranteed the rights of the people of Ireland.41 This is important as it helps present the positions of the British and Irish government, and it

41 Downing Street Declaration. [https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm).
guarantees that Northern Ireland would be a free nation, outlining many of the demands from the early civil rights movement and including a clause allowing Northern Ireland to join the republic of Ireland should they vote for it.⁴² This document will begin the process of bringing the political parties together while demobilizing the paramilitary groups and restoring to some sense of normalcy.

Different groups participated politically by urging their political leaders to act in the interest of peace building and reach a form of compromise. As stated by Adrian Guelke, “it is that at multiple junctions leading up to the Northern Ireland peace process, civil society, centered on the third sector, has played a prominent role in the provinces politics.”⁴³ While it can be observed that civil society played an important political role, he also states that most writers only give it an afterthought or argues that civil society failed socially as Northern Ireland is still divided today.⁴⁴ Throughout the peace process however civil society showed to be a supportive actor and helped guide the political process just as the political process led the peace. The two sectors of society worked together to find peace in a long and bloody conflict.

During this period, church leaders took on the role of a mediators and watched closely as government and political leaders led the discussions. While civil society had helped set the foundation in which to build the new peace, it was not highly active in the peace process itself. If the IRA or a political party would back out or seem to be moving away from the peace talks then there would be protests in order to keep them in line but not during the actual negotiations.⁴⁵ It is clear throughout the conflict and the peace process that civil society has played a more indirect

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⁴² Downing Street Declaration. [https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm).


role following the end of the civil rights movement by pushing political leaders in their
directions.\textsuperscript{46} Civil society does not always work parallel with the political movements, as
possible to see from the evidence provided civil society works both alongside but also with the
political process.\textsuperscript{47} Civil society in Northern Ireland was also process-driven, it took actual work
and discussions and had to build itself from the bottom up in a void of valid political discussion
forums.\textsuperscript{48} Throughout the conflict civil society changed and adapted to what was needed.

During the peace process there was a lot of international support coming into civil society
as the European Union and outside powers helped fund support groups. The United Kingdom
had set up an independent commission known as the Community Relations Council which also
helped heal relations within society and assisted in peace and reconstruction.\textsuperscript{49} Civil society did
more than just call for peace and protests however, the international fund for Ireland also
provided international funds to help rebuild and advance economically.\textsuperscript{50} Many of the local
community groups happened to work economically and many of the funds that the International
Fund for Ireland provided helped keep these NGOs going throughout the conflict. During the
peace process the international community helped Northern Ireland heal, rebuild, and
economically diversify.

\textsuperscript{46} Feargal Cochrane, “Unsung Heroes or Muddle-Headed Peaceniks? A Profile and Assessment of NGO
Conflict Resolution Activity in the Northern Ireland Peace Process,” \textit{Irish Studies in International Affairs}
\textsuperscript{48} Feargal Cochrane, “Beyond the Political Elites: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles and Impacts of
Community-Based NGOs in Conflict Resolution Activity,” \textit{Civil wars} 3, no. 2 (2000): 19, \url{https://web-s-ebscohost-com.proxy.uwec.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=4b06d49a-a56b-4a6e-a542-3212c82d2a97%40redis}.
\textsuperscript{50} International Fund For Ireland, “Effective Peace Building,”
All the work that civil society and political actors finally came to fruition with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. It outlined the future for Northern Ireland and symbolically marks an end to the Troubles. The Good Friday Agreement was signed on April 10, 1998 and marks the date that the Troubles officially ended. The Good Friday Agreement details how Northern Ireland will be governed, stating that Northern Ireland will turn to democracy and how the government will be structured.\(^5\) It is in some way now a part of both the British and Irish constitutions, it presents Northern Ireland with shared powers, democracy, constitutional rights. Throughout the discussions civil society stood by, supporting, and watching when things were going well and protesting when political leaders or paramilitaries backed away from the talks. In a way civil society had continued what the Irish civil rights movement had begun and secured freedom and equal rights for all in Northern Ireland.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, throughout the conflict it is possible to see the important contributions that civil society made and the important political and social role in bringing peace to Northern Ireland. Be it at the beginning, marching for equal rights and calling for reforms and for change in Northern Ireland for a fairer system for all. NGOs working within their own local communities to help those in need with housing or neighborhood watches. NGO’s calling for peace and securing for bipartisan and international support such as Peace People did. Or as simple as working to help heal the social pains and scars that had been accrued over three decades of guerilla warfare and terrorism. One of the biggest issues that civil society experienced

is that Northern Ireland itself was a deeply divided society, which led to many NGO’s being split themselves. This paper has added to similar scholarship and contributes the arguments of Cochrane and Guelke that civil society did indeed have an impact on the troubles. This paper adds to the discussion as it works to show why civil society was important within the context of events occurring. Further research could be done on the small local communities as this paper focused on the larger groups that were noticed.

The political contributions are prevalent when put into context that there was a void in terms of governance as the parliament of Northern Ireland was nixed by England. That void left a gaping hole which civil society move to fill in. Civil society served as support groups for the system as government services were impacted by the conflict. Churches helped hold political discussion and assisted with the peace process by allowing off the record talks usually. The civil rights movement and NICRA impacted the political outcome greatly as it was their marches for civil rights that in a way helped add fuel to the beginning of the troubles, but they were marching for good reasons. The political response from the unionist government and their harsh actions was their downfall.

The social contributions during the Troubles are prevalent as the groups had worked towards bringing people together and decreasing sectarian issues. However, not all Civil Society was united, and as pointed out in the paper, much like the actual society of Northern Ireland Civil Society was also split among sectarian views at times. These groups worked towards building bridges and bringing people together united for one common cause which was it end the troubles following Bloody Sunday. While there were some sectors of society that disagreed such as the trade unions, the work continued within the NGO’s. Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society so sometimes it can be difficult to bring people together for one common cause. When it
came to the peace process civil society in Northern Ireland worked towards peace, but groups had different opinions on what that peace should look like. The importance of building intercommunity relations with education, churches, and Ngo’s became an important factor.

The work of these groups was important to the developing of modern Northern Ireland as many of these groups are still active today, trying to increase tolerance and bring people together while also holding and advocating for keeping the peace together. This has gotten slightly more difficult recently as the United Kingdom had voted to leave the European Union with their Brexit vote. This has created an issue between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland as the sea of Ireland is technically EU waters and a border would have to develop between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland unless the United Kingdom does something different. This has given rise to violence from Unionist groups as they risk being isolated from the rest of the United Kingdom and having to travel through the EU just to get to another part of the UK. Therefore, this research is relevant because it has shown the importance of civil society during the conflict and its important political and social role. It shows that civil society can also help mediate the issues ongoing today.
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