

# Transforming Divided Societies into Welcoming Communities

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## **\*Executive Summary\***

Research into vulnerable communities, underpinned by findings from the ESRC funded project Exclusion Amid Inclusion, has outlined that extractive research can possibly contribute to the misunderstandings of communities while also stripping them of the opportunity to tell their own stories.<sup>1</sup> This project chose a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that sought to not only learn more about the experience of newcomers in NI, but also identify the chief barriers to their inclusion and develop tangible benefits that will service grassroots organisations - those newcomers they work with - now and in future.

The first step in this project was to bring together NI-based partner and community-based organisations (CBOs) and our international contacts from within the academic and non-governmental organisation communities, especially those with significant experience of female migrant integration. With our partners from South Tyrol, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, we developed approaches that would seek to address newcomer women's marginalisation and offset the social and economic pressures that they face. We made use of the data collected in the first research phase to be more sensitive of the issues around newcomers to ensure the approach was appropriate, both culturally and linguistically. As a result, the PAR project was framed as means of understanding group perceptions, working together through facilitated and peer-to-peer learning to identify the common problems, and then foster empowerment through participation.

To implement the PAR approach effectively we conducted a mapping exercise of CBOs across the province to identify stakeholders who were nascent organisations who would benefit the most from the project, operating within different communities and as diverse geographically as possible. We held an open call for invitations for organisations to participate, which included a video submission, and then chose the CBOs to collaborate. Following the selection of CBOs, we held a series of collaborative workshops where we identified several issues that require interventions, including:

- Deficits in organisations' capacity: what was missing in terms of their ability to conduct their roles.
- The funding landscape and the increase in competitiveness rather than cooperation.
- Lack of networking, resulting in organisations being disconnected from funders and policymakers.

The goal of this collaboration was to create an operational group of participants as co-owners of this project, developing tools and running them in the affected communities through their own organisational development and with group assistance. The final stage of the project resulted in the award of funds in response to each community based organisation presenting a funding proposal, developed through member collaboration, that tackled key areas of marginalisation, particularly of women, that were previously identified and prioritised during the sessions.

## **Findings**

The project resulted in several important takeaways for policymakers and interested stakeholders, including other CBOs, funders, civil service, and researchers, and provided a framework that outlines how to discuss issues around newcomers in Northern Ireland:

- Issue: *How we talk about minority communities matters.* Owed to Northern Ireland's post-conflict political and social context, there is a common approach to frame all matters of public policy in 'green or orange' terms.<sup>ii</sup> This means those who do not identify with the dominant traditions in the province do not feel any ownership of the space itself. For newcomers who might not be aware of the context this brings danger when living in either unionist or nationalist communities, where integration into one community means being absorbed into the wider socio-political question. Newcomers have as much right to claim NI and the policies that govern it; however, little invitation is given to them to do so by neither political parties, nor public institutions.

Solution: Increasing non-tokenistic representative bodies in existing public structures like policing boards is one step. Public figures should respond to public issues that concern newcomers as a matter of rights, rather than an afterthought. Terms such as 'integration' are problematic in other migration contexts<sup>iii</sup>, but doubly so in NI, where integration requires socio-political acceptance into either one of the two dominant communities; this is a lose-lose as it increases the existent polarisation and reduces the chance of newcomer communities positively contributing to new means of social organising.<sup>iv</sup>

- Issue: *Newcomer civil society organisations are starved of space.* The dominance of the socio-political arena by the main two communities has resulted in civil society largely governed by organisations catering to those identities<sup>v</sup>, leaving little funding room for emergent organisations serving new communities. These organisations are normally lacking in human resource capital, experience and a general operating environment that caters to maintaining peace between the antagonistic communities. As a result, resources to cater for newcomers is sparse and increases competition between organisations that exist, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of advocacy work on behalf of newcomers as it dilutes their voices, making them less likely to collaborate.<sup>vi</sup>

Solution: Political and public bodies should seek to promote NI, through policies emphasizing a space that belongs to all. Failed attempts to bring in a refugee integration policy underline that policy makers are more likely to legislatively sacrifice newcomer concerns.<sup>vii</sup> To be able to turn this all around, stakeholders must underline the concerns of newcomers and promote their needs to support economic/labour programmes, language course and assistance to service provision.<sup>viii</sup> To create a society of equals before the law requires a seriousness to the public conversation, one that emerged briefly after the Black Lives Matter protest and the disparity of response in issuing fines by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

### **Next Steps: Mapping & Collaboration**

Throughout the project several important suggestions emerged that would be vital in ensuring work for newcomers continues to progress:

- *The creation of a multi-stakeholder policy-practice outreach group (PPOG).* This group will be housed at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and made up of human rights advocates in society, political experts, public servants, and key representatives of newcomer

communities. This group will create a strategy for engaging local influential policymakers and conducting expert lectures to local ministers, political parties, and civil servants at different levels of governance. QUB will host a series of workshops with the direct input of newcomers to draw a full policy proposal as well as a policy engagement approach for political parties in NI.

- *The creation of a newcomer engagement tool kit for public and political stakeholders in NI.* One of the key omissions from public documentation is a clear and concise outlining of issues that newcomers encounter when arriving in the province. The PPOG would be tasked with creating a tool kit that seeks to create guidelines for public and civil bodies to engage with newcomers more readily.
- *Mapping the organisations who work with newcomers by the PPOG.* NI's civil society has significant representation from those representing the interests of dominant communities, but the newcomer NGOs are less known. Often these organisations replicate responsibilities and duties, but without accurate accounting, public bodies will find it more difficult to respond to needs of newcomers as the voices of organisations that could represent their interests are lost.

To ensure sustainable positive impact of the project the PPOG will convene in two further sessions to draw together their collective experience, knowledge and understanding of issues facing newcomers in NI. The PPOG will also serve to develop important contributions in the short term; like the rest of the UK, NI is continuing to receive more refugees from Ukraine, and so must set the table now to create better inclusion policies, both in practice and in principle. This project will use the contacts it has fostered to convene interested policymakers to outline key lessons, including:

- The importance of newcomer communities as a thriving and growing demographic in NI.
- The need to create better outreach to newcomer communities.
- The specifics of language when committing outreach.
- Policies to aid inclusion in the short term.
- Policies over the long-term that will make NI more inclusive.

### **Reflection on the project**

Beyond the knowledge generated there are some clear reflections for those wishing to work on newcomers in Northern Ireland. The foremost is the palpable sense of frustration felt among those in the newcomer community, as well as those belonging to ethnic and racial minorities and those organisations that service them. This frustration is borne from the longitudinal feeling of their presence not mattering, from being treated as an afterthought in Northern Ireland's social landscape. When working with these groups one will rightly hear their frustration and it is important to be sensitive to their experiences and particularly careful with the use of language. Even the term 'newcomer', one we have used in our scholarly work, can be problematic as it feeds into notions that some ethnic racial groups are 'newly arrived', even when many have been here for decades. For many our interlocutors, this framework thinking belittles contribution that they have been making to Northern Ireland society, as well as their own communities.

Second, it has been extremely important for us appreciating the reasons for 'newcomers' frustration whilst channelling their creative energy into productive areas. In hindsight, our stakeholder CBOs

have also noted that in conversations and interactions on this project, they have learnt that their personal experiences are widely shared across the community of those working in this field, newcomers themselves or not. In many of our meetings and time together with our contacts, all involved noted that they too were learning of the extent of such frustration. Thus, we encourage everyone embarking on collaborative work with, on and for the newcomers to develop not only a nuanced understanding of the difficulties they face, but also of the bruising experiences political exclusion produces for societal activists and community entrepreneurs.

Third, it is important to appreciate that groups targeting newcomers are part of the Northern Irish civil society and as such face competition with similar, more established organisations. Since all of them suffer from underfunding, lack of resources and are only starting to feel a growing sense of confidence as they more forcefully claim presence in the public space, we have concluded that fostering cooperation between groups ought to take priority. We sought to support groups and individuals that make them up emotionally and offered networking opportunities to likeminded groups and individuals that are prepared to work together. As they found their way, we were jointly better able to identify (oftentimes unjustified, and mostly unnecessary) competition between groups for funding, reputation and recognition as the factor hampering on the effectiveness of their work. Provided support is continued, newcomer organisations should grow in number and proficiency which will ensure smoother and quicker evolution and delivery of projects.

The central takeaway from working on this project is that organisations representing newcomers are underfunded and struggle to complete the work that is socially under-recognised but urgently necessary to give voice to and represent the growing number of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. Helping these organisations grow in capacity, the public eye and in networks to key powerbrokers is crucial to facilitate the change that is badly needed and will require patience.

## References

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