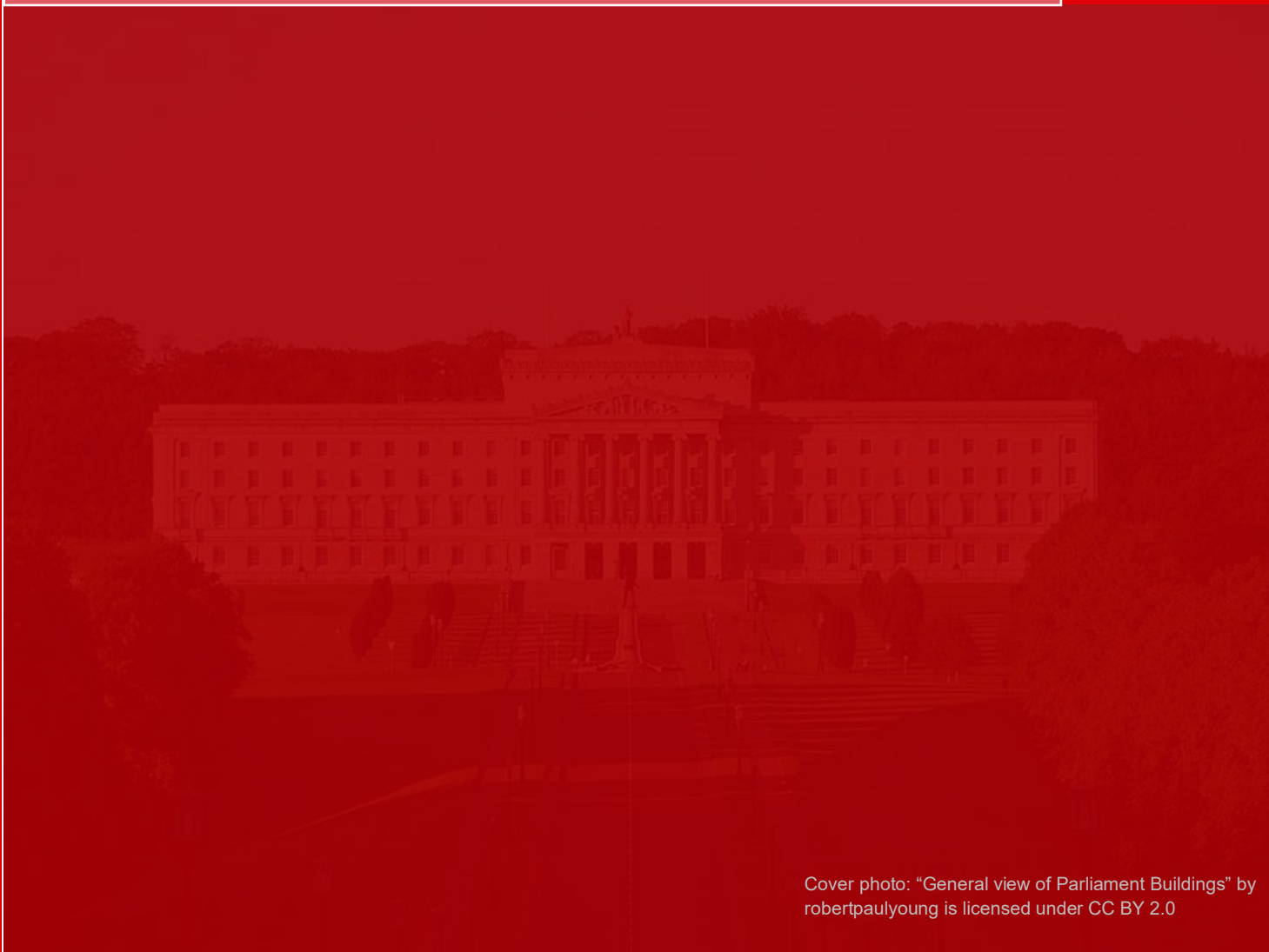


Civil Society Organisations in Northern Ireland

Representation of interests in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly



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A report by Dr Michele Crepaz and Niall Robb in association with
the Democracy Unit, Queen's University Belfast



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Objectives of the Study

To map and provide a 'health check' of civil society organisations in Northern Ireland.

To assess the impact of the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly on the representation of interests by civil society organisations.

To capture their perceptions and views about pathways to overcome the political deadlock.

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MAIN FINDINGS

- 1.** The Northern Irish community of civil society organisations is healthy and politically active. Its main challenges come from the potential loss of funding and from the effects of political instability.
- 2.** Exchanges with policymakers have decreased in the last year. The transfer of policy-making power from the Assembly and Executive to the NI Civil Service and the NI Office was not associated with an increase in advocating to those institutions.
- 3.** While not all organisations call for an end to the political deadlock, the majority laments its negative impacts and has clear views on the role of civil society organisations in solving the stalemate.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Between March 9th and April 22nd, 2023, Illuminate Vice Chancellor's Fellow Michele Crepez and QUB NINE PhD Candidate Niall Robb, in association with QUB's Democracy Unit, conducted a survey amongst civil society organisations in Northern Ireland.

Civil society organisations, such as business and professional associations, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charities, and citizen associations play a vital role in supporting governments' day-to-day operations and the policy-making process. While their involvement and participation in decision-making is well-documented abroad, their role in Northern Ireland is poorly understood. Moreover, the exceptional, yet prolonged, circumstances of political void in Northern Irish devolved institutions posed a renewed challenge for these organisations. This research documents the response of these organisations to the changing political situation in Northern Ireland.

As part of the Interest Groups in Northern Ireland Project (IGNIP), the research team compiled a list of 228 interest organisations from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 [Northern Ireland Yearbook](#). This list includes 26 trade unions, 32 associations of professionals, 43 business and trade groups and 125 NGOs, charities and citizen associations. These associations are either Northern Ireland based or are branches/offices of other organisations mainly based in the UK, the Republic of Ireland or other countries. Their inclusion in the yearbook, however, means that they work on issues relevant to Northern Ireland's political system and territory and are recognised as stakeholders in its network of civil society organisations.

After receiving approval for the project from QUB's Research Ethics Committee, the research team fielded an **online survey** using the Qualtrics platform. The survey was sent to the person responsible for public affairs within each organisation. When not available, generalist addresses, such as info@, were contacted with a request to forward this to the relevant person. The survey was in the field for 44 days, with reminders after two, three and four weeks. A notice in the Northern Ireland Council of Voluntary Action eNews Bulletin prompted two additional responses.

Overall, the survey was **completed by 62 organisations yielding a response rate of 30.2%**. Compared to the sample frame, the survey responses

- overrepresent NGOs, citizen groups and charities which, taken together, account for 68 percent of our respondents (compared to 44 percent in the sample frame);
- slightly underrepresents associations of professionals and unions (14 percent of the respondents and 20 percent in the sample frame); and
- slightly overrepresents business associations (18 percent of the respondents and 15 percent in the sample frame).

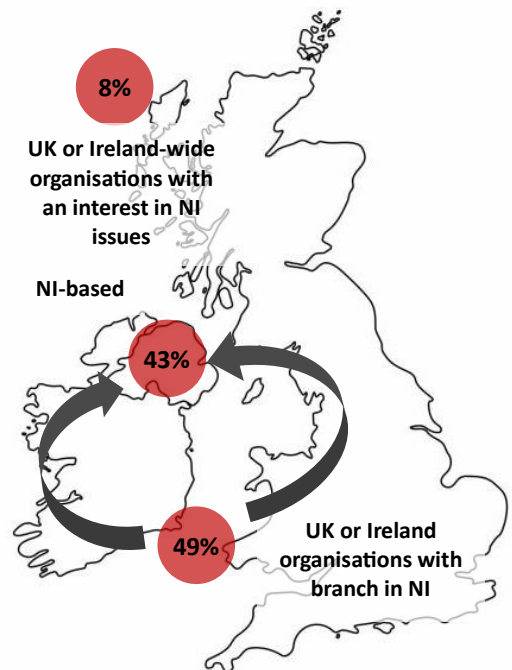
None of these are worrying unbalances and we consider the survey data appropriate for the aims of our study.

In the following report, we provide a **summary of the survey’s main results** and a first interpretation of the importance of the findings for Northern Ireland’s democracy.

WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY

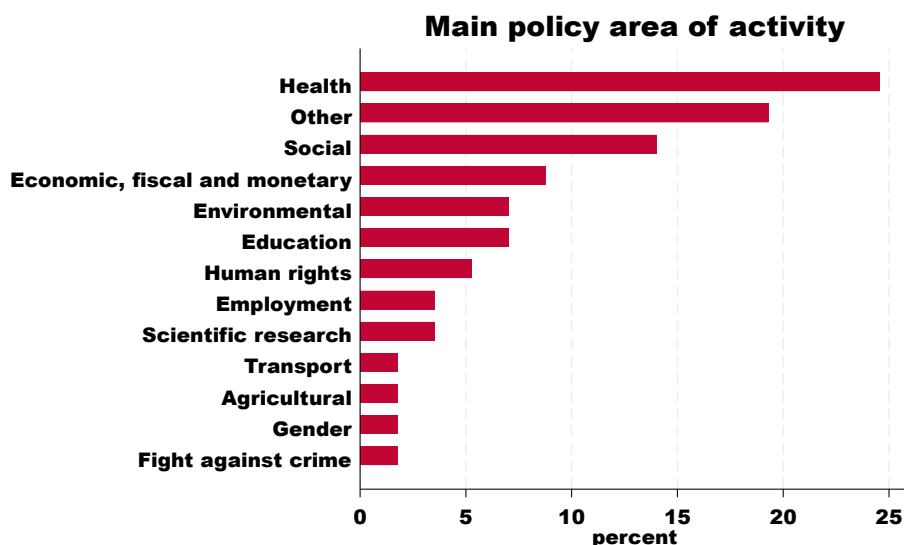
In 59 percent of the cases our survey was taken by the organisations’ policy officer, communication, or project manager. In all other cases, the head of office, director, secretary general or someone in a similar leadership position answered the survey.

Our respondents are representatives of civil society organisations located primarily in Northern Ireland, either because they are NI-specific organisations (43 percent) or because they are NI-based branches or offices of organisations based in the UK or the Republic of Ireland (49 percent). Only 8 percent are UK or ROI-wide organisations that do however follow NI issues from London or Dublin.



Organisations in our study are active in a wide range of policy areas. For example, almost 25 percent operate in health policy, 15 percent in social policy, and almost 10 percent in economic policy.

Table 1: Main policy area of activity of survey respondents



Moreover, many of the organisations participating in our study are well-established. Approximately 50 percent of respondents were formed before 1980; 25 percent before the 1940s. About 20 percent are relatively newer, operating since the 2000s.

The current finances of these organisations appear to be stable with a declared median annual budget between £1-5 million, and in 59 percent of the cases, coming in part from public funding. Only 25 percent of the respondents declared to have not received public funding in the last year.

Among the organisational challenges we listed in our survey, the **worry of losing funding, donations and other financial assets** is clearly the most important one, followed by 'not being able to voice a cause or influence policy' and 'the loss of supporters, members and volunteers'.

LOBBYING WITHOUT A FUNCTIONING EXECUTIVE AND ASSEMBLY

The organisations participating in our study are well rooted in Northern Ireland’s network of civil society organisations. Evidence shows that these organisations are **very active on NI policy issues** as far as lobbying is concerned.

71 percent of surveyed organisations declared that – during an average year – they would lobby on NI issues ‘*at least once a month*’ (with 39 percent lobbying ‘*almost on a daily basis*’), while this percentage drops to 54 percent when UK-wide issues are considered.

	Northern-Ireland Issues (%)	UK-wide Issues (%)
<i>Never</i>	6.8	9.3
<i>At least once a year</i>	8.5	13.0
<i>At least every three months</i>	13.6	24.0
<i>At least once a month</i>	15.3	18.5
<i>At least once a week</i>	17.0	14.8
<i>Almost on a daily basis</i>	39.0	18.5

** Don’t knows excluded

The Northern Irish interest group community appears to be very active, vibrant even, when it comes to policy-related activities, in particularly concerning issues related to its polity.

However, given the current political stalemate at Stormont and absence of a devolved government, we find that participating organisations have **reported difficulties** accessing what are now the key policymaking venues.

Overall, our survey registered a **drop in the engagement** between interest groups and Northern Ireland Executive ministers, MLAs and their staff. More specifically, this fall in lobbying activity worsened progressively, from the May 2022 elections to the moment caretaker ministers left their posts and civil servants were granted limited decision-making powers over policy in October 2022.

Interestingly, this drop in engagement with elected officials **is not counterbalanced by a higher volume of communication** with the newly empowered actors, such as the civil service and agencies, who now had stronger policymaking powers, the media or representatives of political parties.

Percentage of respondents who contacted “at least once a month”

	NI Executive	NI Assembly	NI civil service	Political parties	Media	UK Gov
Period 1	46.3	64.8	70.4	51.9	70.4	34.6
Period 2	42.6	51.9	66.7	46.3	66.7	37.3
Period 3	N/A	50.9	66.0	39.6	62.3	44.0

Note: Respondents were told to think of Period 1 as January 2020 to May 2022, Period 2 as June 2022 to October 2022, and Period 3 as November 2022 to February 2023

In short, our data **does not document the existence of a balancing mechanism**, whereby civil society organisations knock at an alternative door to voice the interests of their constituencies. We do register **a slight increase** in the instances of exchanges between the organisations in our study and institutions of the UK government such as the Northern Ireland office. However, such an increase is only marginal and could not have absorbed the full magnitude of the drop in interest representation during the studied period.

To better illustrate this point, we see a substantial drop over time when we asked respondents to **self-assess their lobbying influence** during this period on a scale from 0 to 10.

Up to the May 2022 election, organisations declared an average influence score of 6 out of 10. This dropped to 5 in the period up to when caretaker ministers left office in October 2022; and to 3.4 in the successive period to April 2023. All organisations, from business representatives to NGOs declare similar drops in perceived influence over public policy.

	Total	Business groups	Professional and Union	NGOs, charities, and citizen organisations
Period 1	6.1	5.4	5.7	6.4
Period 2	5	4.7	4.6	5.2
Period 3	3.4	2.4	3.2	3.7

Note: Respondents were told to think of Period 1 as January 2020 to May 2022, Period 2 as June 2022 to October 2022, and Period 3 as November 2022 to February 2023

This represents a challenge for civil society organisations. The absence of functioning institutions has reduced the democratic capacity of their lobbying activities making it more difficult to conduct policy-related work effectively. We here report some examples of such challenges using the words of the organisational representatives thanks to answers to open-ended questions.

One respondent reported that *“it was difficult at times to get access to Ministers in this period [refers to period between May and October 2022] as there was a flurry of activity in the departments before Ministers left office”*.

Similarly, another notes that *“it was (also) difficult to contact MLAs and they were unable to make decisions as they had previously”*.

Others noted the same difficulty. Interestingly, however, it sometimes mentioned the lack of interest and engagement from the perspective of decision-makers as the main reason for it:

“We still contact politicians regularly but they are less interested in our issues than they should be.”

“We continue to meet with MLAs but it feels a bit pointless if nothing new can be done.”

“Of all the people in the room only two MLAs came [talking about an event]. Engagement seems to be at an all-time low which is really disappointing.”

Some organisations mention the NI Civil Service and UK Government departments as an alternative target of their lobbying activity. But also in these exchanges, the absence of functioning institutions posed challenges:

“Without a Minister they [refers to civil servants] have to be careful what they can and can't do, but there are always things that can be done and it's important we are there to make sure our priorities are at the heart of what they can do.”

“Engagement in this period with Permanent Secretary and senior officials has been much less constructive in terms of strategic or high-level issues - perhaps not unexpectedly without Ministers.”

“Given there was no NI Executive, we found ourselves lobbying UK government directly for necessary secondary legislation.”

However, it is also important to stress that we have **collected many instances of successful lobbying** and effective interest representation, even in the absence of the Assembly and Executive. Organisations participating in our study have continued working and collaborating with the NI civil service and agencies, some have declared *‘no change’* in their ability to affect policymaking in the last year. Others described ongoing exchanges as *‘constructive’*, *‘benefitting members’* and still helpful for the organisation and its constituency. As one respondent summarises:

“While there is no movement on these as we have no Assembly/Executive I believe we have helped to raise awareness of these issues.”

This shows that a lot can still be done without a devolved government in power.

However, we stress that, *on average*, **the absence of an Assembly and Executive appears to have potentially damaged the interest representation work of Northern Irish civil society organisations:**

- first, because it has produced fewer exchanges between civil society, institutions, political organisations and the media; and
- second, because this reduced the organisations' capacity to successfully represent their constituency's interests in policymaking .

When we asked this question directly to our survey participants (*What impact is the current absence of the Executive and Assembly having on the work of your organisation?*) we prompted a variety of responses, by large, illustrating **negative** impacts. These include (from more to less obvious ones):

- Reduced policy change
- Impossibility of allocating funding
- Reduced ability to influence local government on funding distribution
- Falling behind on service provision because pending legislation is not agreed and enacted
- Challenges in budget forecasting
- Challenges in retention of staff and staff morale
- Uncertainty over issue priorities of future governments
- Reluctance from NI civil service to commit to policy change
- Challenges in work on North-South relations
- Loss of momentum for existing campaigns

So where to go next? Perhaps a bit provocatively, we asked organisational representatives to offer their organisation's views on possible pathways to resolve the political deadlock. It is important to mention that we stressed our interest in the view of the *organisation* (and not of the individual taking the survey). As a result, in our questions, we always offered an option whereby respondents could answer that 'their organisation had no opinion on this'.

SUPPORT OF PATHWAYS TO OVERCOME THE POLITICAL DEADLOCK

Typically, whether an election should be called or a citizen's assembly on an issue should be formed as questions that appear in public opinion polls. However, given the negative impacts of a missing Executive and Assembly documented so far, we decided to include such questions in our survey and document civil society organisations' views on such topics.

First, quite intuitively we asked **if an election should be called**. 77 percent answered that their organisation had no view on this; 21 replied yes and one respondent only indicated no as an answer.

In an open-ended question, we then asked what **role civil society organisations should have in the absence of government institutions**. Among the answers we identify frequent themes:

- Providing accountability structures for civil servants in the absence of government.
- Continuing consultations and involved participation, especially, with the Northern Ireland Office that 'needs to step up' in these circumstances.
- Offering an additional voice in citizens' assemblies and civic fora which involve citizens but could potentially extend to civil society organisations.

We also asked whether organisations would support a call for a citizen's assembly to consider **reforms to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement**. 62 percent declared they had no opinion about it, while 34 percent supported it and 4 percent who answered in the negative. The percentage of organisations without an opinion on pathways for potential constitutional reform is high compared to the rest. However, when we asked organisations to tell us how *important it would be for organisations like theirs to be involved in such a citizens' assembly* a large majority (73 percent) answered that it would be at least important if not very important.

Importance of CSOs in citizens' assembly	(%)
<i>Not important at all</i>	11.76
<i>Not very important</i>	1.96
<i>Indifferent</i>	13.73
<i>Important</i>	25.49
<i>Very Important</i>	47.06

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1.** Civil society organisations are healthy and politically active, but are concerned about their ability to deliver for the people they represent as funding is at risk and the stalemate at Stormont continues.
- 2.** The absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly has a visible impact on the access of Northern Irish civil society organisations to policy-making. This stalemate is perceived as having a negative impact on the representation of interests by civil society organisations.
- 3.** Civil society organisations are keen to play a role in policymaking in Northern Ireland in the absence of functioning institutions at Stormont, including changes in how Northern Ireland is governed.



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Representation of interests in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly

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