

*Recovering from Violence:*

# Reconciliation in Practice

**Transforming Trauma and Grief:  
Policy Considerations for Northern  
Ireland Conflict Legacies**

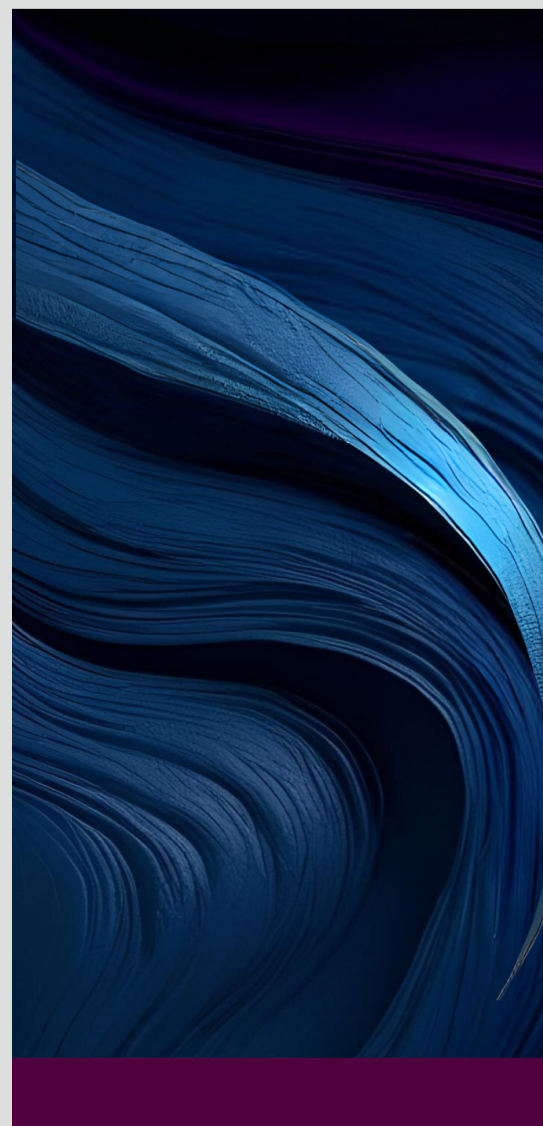
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# Context

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed,  
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”  
– James Baldwin*

The most recent of period of armed conflict in Northern Ireland extended for over thirty years between the mid/late - 1960s and the late 1990s, claiming the lives of over 3,600 people and causing injuries to over 40,000.<sup>1</sup> Commonly known as the Troubles/Conflict,<sup>2</sup> these decades of conflict formally came to an end with the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) in 1998, however instances of violence continued after the signing and persist until today. With a primary purpose to bring an end to violence and establish a power-sharing government, the B/GFA did not provide for a mechanism to address the legacy of the Troubles/Conflict<sup>3</sup> Consequently, approaches to address legacy issues have been piecemeal.<sup>4</sup> Further, political proposals to address legacy issues have either not been successfully implemented or remain highly contested, respectively.<sup>5</sup>



Almost 60 years since the beginning of the Troubles/Conflict, there has been no significant political progress made on addressing the legacy of the past. It is important to recognise that coming to terms with the past — especially one of mass atrocity and violence — is a life-long, trans-generational, and ever-evolving process.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Hamilton and Marie Smyth, “The Human Costs of the Troubles,” in *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict*, ed. David Dickson and Owen Hargie (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2003), 19.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘the Troubles’ has been used to describe periods of active direct violence in Northern Ireland, and is commonly used to refer more specifically to the period of violence between the 1960s and late 1990s. There is a lack of consensus around this terminology amongst parties to the conflict. Accordingly, throughout this policy brief, this period of violence is referred to as Troubles/Conflict.

<sup>3</sup> Kieran McEvoy, Daniel Holder, Louise Mallinder, Anna Bryson, Brian Gormally, and Gemma McKeown, *Prosecutions, Imprisonment and the Stormont House Agreement: A critical analysis of proposals on dealing with the past in Northern Ireland*. (Belfast: QUB Human Rights Centre, 2020), 6, <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/caj.org.uk/2020/04/09093700/Prosecutions-Imprisonment-the-SHA-LOW-RES.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Kieran McEvoy and Anna Bryson, “Justice, Truth and Oral History: Legislating the Past ‘From Below’ in Northern Ireland,” *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 67, no. 1, (2016): 70, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nllq.v67i1.96>.

<sup>5</sup> See: Northern Ireland Office, “The Stormont House Agreement,” *GOV.UK*, December 23, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement> UK Government, “UK Government Sets out Way Forward on the Legacy of the Past in Northern Ireland,” *GOV.UK*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-sets-out-way-forward-on-the-legacy-of-the-past-in-northern-ireland>; “The Government’s new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland,” *GOV.UK*, Dec 04, 2024, <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8761/the-governments-new-approach-to-addressing-the-legacy-of-the-past-in-northern-ireland/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brandon Hamber and Ingrid Palmay, “A Dance of Shadows and Fires: Conceptual and Practical Challenges of Intergenerational Healing after Mass Atrocity,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 15, no. 3 (2021): 103, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.3.1779>.

This policy note posits that there are ways in which a more coherent structure and framework could be imagined and implemented to support victims, survivors, and society as a whole to grapple with the past and move forward together.

Whilst acknowledging the ongoing importance of addressing the political-legal dimension of the Troubles/ Conflict legacy, the limited progress both in this area and in addressing structural barriers to relationship building<sup>7</sup> suggests that an additional framework and process is required. In this regard, this policy note asserts the value of a socio-ecological model (see Figure 1 below) as a framework to invite collective consideration of how individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole continue to be impacted by the legacy of the past.<sup>8, 9</sup>

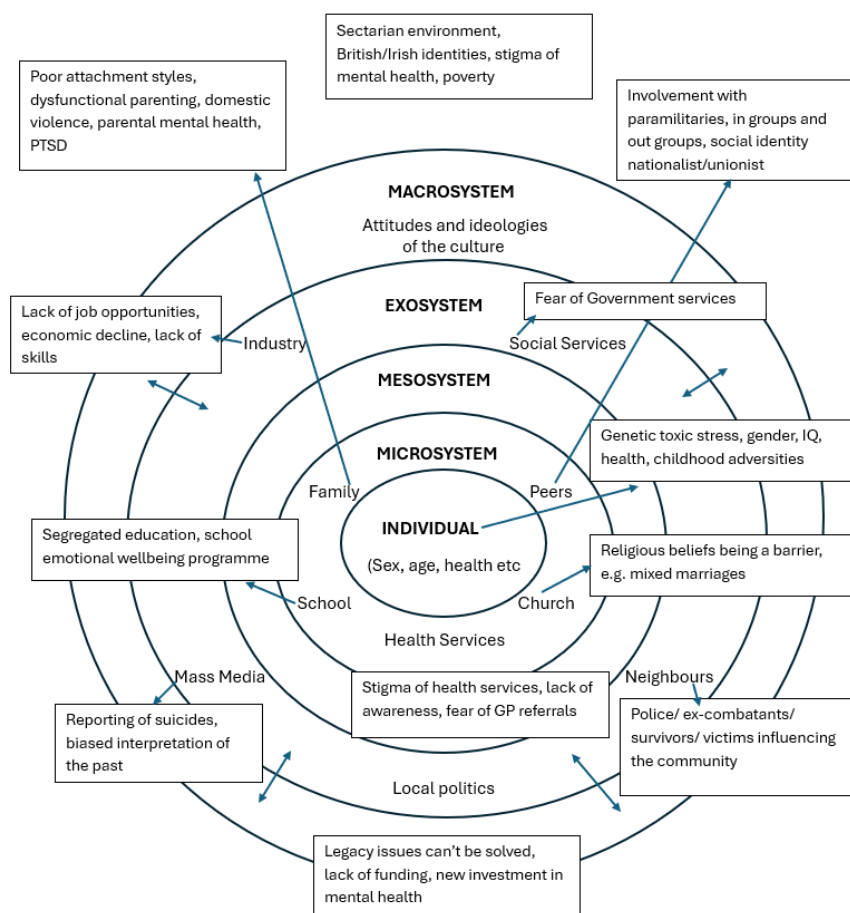


Figure 1: Adaption of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to relate to the transmission of trauma<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Grainne Kelly, *Everyday Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: Gathering Indicators of Positive Progress within Hyperlocal Communities in Northern Ireland* (Ulster University, 2024), 25, [https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/206667499/KELLY\\_UU\\_Everyday\\_Reconciliation\\_MAR24\\_FINAL.pdf](https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/206667499/KELLY_UU_Everyday_Reconciliation_MAR24_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> As an important dimension of the socio-ecological model and frame, it should be noted that victims of political conflict are unlikely to divorce the questions of truth, justice, responsibility for violations, compensation, and official acknowledgement of what happened to them from their healing process. See: Hamber and Palmary, *A Dance of Shadows and Fires*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> This work is informed by the findings and methodological approach of the first comprehensive study of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Northern Ireland which found that 30% of respondents reported conflict-specific adversities and young people continuing to be affected by paramilitary activity. See: Colm Walsh et al., *The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland* (The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism & Organised Crime, 2025), 9. <https://www.endingtheharm.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Impact-of-Adverse-Childhood-Experiences-report-060225-1.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Victoria McIlwaine, "The Transgenerational Impact of the Troubles on Children and Young People's Mental Health," in *The Transgenerational Impact of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland*, ed. Emily Fitzgerald, Mark Given, Maighread Gough, Linzi Kelso, Victoria McIlwaine and Chloe Miskelly (Queens University Belfast: 2017), 51-53, <https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/psy/files/Filetoupload,784073,en.pdf>.

In turn, this lens is used to invite the engagement of all members of civil society as active participants and leaders in the transformation of the harms of the past.

This policy note highlights the importance to address two ill-defined and interlinked areas of concern – namely what is meant by the ‘legacy of the Troubles/Conflict’ and what is meant by ‘trauma.’ The legacy of the Troubles/Conflict has been narrowly focused on conflict-related trauma and psychopathology in such a way that individualises legacy impacts, diverting attention away from the need for comprehensive social, economic, political, and cultural change.<sup>11</sup> Relatedly, dominant understandings of trauma follow an individualised and medicalised model, which obscures trauma’s multifaceted and multidimensional impacts.<sup>12</sup> This policy note advocates for a more nuanced understanding and greater acknowledgement of the ways in which trauma and Troubles/Conflict legacy continue to shape the current social, political, and legal context. It contends that such an understanding and acknowledgement would support policymakers, community leaders, and ordinary citizens alike to more fully deal with the past.

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<sup>11</sup> Siobhán McAlister, Mary-Louise Corr, Clare Dwyer, Orla Drummond, and Montserrat Fargas-Malet, “It Didn’t End in 1998”: Examining the Impacts of Conflict Legacy Across Generations (Belfast: Centre for Children’s Rights, 2021), 19, <https://www.cvsni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/It-didnt-end-in-98-Peace-IV-Research-on-Intergenerational-Impacts-of-the-Troubles-Conflict.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda, “Cultural Trauma and Epigenetic Inheritance,” *Development and Psychopathology* 30, no. 5 (2018): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418001153>. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327942788\\_Cultural\\_trauma\\_and\\_epigenetic\\_inheritance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327942788_Cultural_trauma_and_epigenetic_inheritance).

# Relevance to Policy and Practice

Alongside a lack of progress to address political-legal aspects, two significant factors have inhibited the process of addressing the Troubles/Conflict legacy in Northern Ireland: The lack of a collective and comprehensive understanding of legacy impacts and a limited, medicalised understanding of trauma. Both of these factors are considerably shaped by a culture of silence in public and private spheres that plays an active role in the transmission of trauma to new generations.<sup>13</sup>

## *Defining Legacy*

Public discourse regarding the Troubles/Conflict legacy has tended to focus primarily on political-legal solutions to unresolved legacy cases. Additionally, previous research on the transgenerational legacy has mainly focused on the generational transmission of trauma within families and individual mental health difficulties. Transgenerational legacy extends beyond psychological trauma within families and individuals, however.<sup>14</sup> Both of these perspectives, namely legal and medical, whilst important, hinder a full recognition of the extent of Troubles/Conflict legacy impacts within communities and society in general.

A socio-ecological perspective is valuable in this regard, as it invites a recognition of the ways in which the legacy impacts all facets of life in Northern Ireland. Further, it accounts for the interrelatedness of these domains and acknowledges how each of these domains — including economic standing, societal relations, housing and education segregation, paramilitarism and sectarianism, and significant social and economic inequalities — impacts individual and collective mental health and wellbeing. Such a perspective and understanding reveals the importance of comprehensive and multifaceted interventions to adequately respond to the wide reach of legacy challenges in Northern Ireland.

## *Understanding Trauma*

One of the factors that shapes the ways in which legacy issues have been approached in Northern Ireland is the way in which trauma is dominantly understood. There is much debate around what the term ‘trauma’ actually means.<sup>15</sup> In Northern Ireland, the public understanding of trauma predominantly draws from a Western biomedical and psychological perspective, which is highly individualised, oriented toward pathology, and focused on discrete events as the cause of traumatisation.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, public policy responses to

<sup>13</sup> McAlister, Corr, Dwyer, Drummond, and Fargas-Malet, ‘It didn’t end in 1998,’ 20

<sup>14</sup> McAlister, Corr, Dwyer, Drummond, and Fargas-Malet, ‘*It didn’t end in 1998*,’ 5.

<sup>15</sup> Judy Atkinson, Jeffrey Nelson, and Caroline Atkinson, “Trauma, transgenerational transfer and effects on community wellbeing,” in *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*, ed. Nola Purdie, Pat Dudgeon and Roz Walker (Canberra: ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), 135.

<sup>16</sup> See: Elizabeth Gallagher et al., “Perspectives and Possibilities: Mental Health in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland,” *Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* 13 (March 2012): 70–71, <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/media-files/perspectivities%20and%20possibilities%20mental%20health%20in%20post%20agreement%20northern%20ireland.pdf>; Donncha Hanna et al., *Young People’s Transgenerational Issues in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Commission for Victims and Survivors, 2012), 20; Chloe Miskelly, “The Transgenerational Impact of ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland on the Family System,” in *The Transgenerational Impact of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland*, ed. Emily Fitzgerald, Mark Given, Maighread Gough, Linzi Kelso, Victoria McIlwaine, and Chloe Miskelly (Queens University Belfast, 2017), 32, <https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/psy/files/Fileupload,784073,en.pdf>.



trauma have focused on medical, psychological, and psychotherapeutic interventions.<sup>17</sup> This perspective and accordant responses, however, are limiting, particularly as they fail to account for war and other disasters' collective impact, and also privilege singular traumatic events rather than on processes that are historic, ongoing, continuous, and evoking different reactions and responses over time.<sup>18, 19</sup>

Evidence has shown that trauma has a broader bio-psychosocial basis for which it is important to consider wider and longer-term systemic factors of causation and impact, including one's social and political environment, economic context, family dynamics, and genetic inheritance.<sup>20</sup> While certain people may benefit from individualised interventions, in order to adequately address the widespread suffering that persists after the Troubles/Conflict (much of which does not fit into diagnostic categories), a psychosocial perspective suggests that political and social responses must also be put in place to minimise the continued transmission of trauma into the future.

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<sup>17</sup> McAlister, Corr, Dwyer, Drummond and Fargas-Malet, *'It didn't end in 1998,'* 19.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Saul and Saliha Bava, "Implementing Collective Approaches to Massive Trauma/Loss in Western Contexts: Implications for Recovery, Peacebuilding and Development." *Paper presented at the Trauma, Development and Peacebuilding Conference New Delhi, India, September 9-11 (2008)*, 3, <https://www.incore.ulster.ac.uk/pdfs/IDRCsaul.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to acknowledge the work of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) on implementing trauma informed approaches (TIAs) across child and adult services in areas such as education, health, justice and social care. A common theme raised in SBNI's review of the implementation of TIAs was the particular relevance of trauma informed approaches to the NI context given the history of political conflict. As a result of this unique context, the implementation of TIAs was referenced to provide an opportunity to leverage political and societal momentum toward sustainable peacebuilding. The review noted whole-system transformation as being challenging to achieve and called for a governmental mandate and trauma informed strategy for Northern Ireland. (See: Suzanne Mooney et al., *We Are on a Journey: Implementing Trauma Informed Approaches in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, 2024), <https://www.safeguardingni.org/resources/executive-summary-we-are-journey-implementing-trauma-informed-approaches-northern-ireland>.) It appears that this recommendation has been heard through the commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a trauma-informed public sector as part of its cross-cutting commitment to peace as part of its Programme for Government for 2024-2027. It remains to be seen how such a commitment will be implemented. (See: Northern Ireland Executive, *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, Programme for Government 2024-2027* (2025), <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most>.)

<sup>20</sup> See: Chloe Miskelly "The Transgenerational Impact of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland on the Family System," 32; David Becker and Babara Weyermann, *Gender, Conflict Transformation and the Psychosocial Approach: Toolkit*. (Bern: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2006), 12, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/gender-conflict-transformation-psychosocial-approach>; Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda, "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," in *Development and Psychopathology* 30, no. 5 (2018): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418001153>.

# Recommendations/Challenges and Opportunities

The following recommendations provide pathways through which to address the legacy of the Troubles/Conflict, with particular attention to the impact of trauma and grief on individuals and society as a whole.

The families and friends of more than one thousand people are still awaiting justice for the death of their loved ones as a result of the Troubles/Conflict.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of a political agreement to establish a justice process, it is important that those bereaved and injured receive acknowledgement of their experience and are provided support to better understand the impact of trauma on their lives. Such support must extend beyond those immediately impacted by Troubles/Conflict-related loss, including all members of society in Northern Ireland and further afield (notably in the broader United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland) who live with the consequences of the Troubles/Conflict to a greater or lesser extent.

These recommendations are intended to help advance the long-term and multifaceted process of addressing legacy challenges. Any singular intervention on its own will be insufficient to address the complexity of legacy impacts, particularly as it pertains to experiences of complex grief, trauma, and loss.<sup>22</sup> This holistic orientation evokes Hamber and Kelly's working definition of reconciliation that consists of five interwoven strands: Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; acknowledging and dealing with the past; building positive relationships; significant cultural and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic, and political change.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, these recommendations are put forward as essential elements of a much broader process of conflict transformation.

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## *Create a civic vehicle for the acknowledgement of grief, focusing on victims and survivors alongside broader society*

Whereas it is the responsibility of the UK and Irish governments to grapple with the political-legal dimensions of the Troubles/Conflict legacy, there must also be a way in which other aspects of legacy challenges can be navigated and addressed at the community level, notably working with existing community-based and regional organisations and institutions.<sup>24</sup> In the context of calls for the establishment of a vehicle for civic engagement to undertake civic education on the past and future,<sup>25</sup> such a vehicle could carry the grief experience as a focus, particularly that of those suffering from bereavement, injury, and trauma.

<sup>21</sup> Julian O'Neill, "NI Troubles: Legacy bill published by the UK government," *BBC*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61473251>.

<sup>22</sup> See: Brandon Hamber, "Dealing with Painful Memories and Violent Pasts. Towards a Framework for Contextual Understanding," in *Transforming War-related Identities*, ed. Beatrix Austin and Martina Fischer, Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 11 (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2015), <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/dealing-with-painful-memories-and-violent-pasts-towards-a-framework-3>.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, *Everyday Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> See: John Brewer. *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Peace+Processes%3A+A+Sociological+Approach-p-9780745647760>.

<sup>25</sup> Brandon Hamber, Debs Erwin and Eliz McArdle, *Peace Summit 2023: The Unfinished Business of Peace and Reconciliation. A Call to Action*. (Belfast: John and Pat Hume Foundation, Community Dialogue and Ulster University, 2023), 18. <https://humefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Peace-Summit-A-Call-to-Action-24-May-2023.pdf>.



Many individuals, families, and communities continue to suffer from the harms they experienced during the Troubles/Conflict, an experience that is insufficiently acknowledged and understood. To best accompany individuals and communities in their grief experience, the civic vehicle should draw on the frameworks of ambiguous loss<sup>26</sup> and disenfranchised grief.<sup>27</sup>

Ambiguous loss occurs when there remain unanswered questions about the fate a loved one, creating ambiguity and depriving survivors of closure.<sup>28</sup> This may occur when someone has been physically lost (non-confirmed death or disappearance) or psychologically lost (such as due to injury, frozen grief, or depression).

Disenfranchised grief refers to grief that is not sufficiently acknowledged or socially sanctioned and thereby is unable to be publicly shared. This kind of grief can occur because others may not recognise the loss of a friend/colleague or the loss of livelihood and relationships due to injury. In both of these examples, survivors are denied the right to grieve.<sup>29</sup>

In circumstances of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, the suffering of survivors and victims is exacerbated by an absence of recognition or acknowledgement of their loss.<sup>30</sup> While grief is a complex and nonlinear process that is unique to each person, a vital element to integrate and heal through the grief experience — particularly emergent from mass atrocity and conflict — is public recognition not only of one's grief and why it persists, but also of the lives that were lost and the lingering impact of their absence.

Working with museums, public spaces, and practitioners in Northern Ireland, notably those that have already curated exhibitions addressing the past through principles of ethical remembering,<sup>31</sup> the aforementioned civic vehicle should further develop public spaces of acknowledgement that enable victims, survivors, and wider society to share their experiences and be witnessed in the public sphere. This could take shape as permanent or annual participatory art exhibitions whereby people can provide multi-media contributions that are displayed in a public forum. For example, in the context of collective trauma and grief due to racialized violence and the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the Flushing Town Hall in the state of New York has hosted a community art initiative wherein participants were invited to artistically express reflections on the themes of community resiliency, hope, grief, and connection.<sup>32</sup> While numerous organisations in Northern Ireland have developed exhibitions and projects to provide a platform for victims and survivors to share their stories,<sup>33</sup> due to inevitable constraints of programme reach, they have been limited either in their duration or the range of voices included. It is important to create a more expansive and inclusive space where all people living with the consequences of the Troubles/Conflict can share and be acknowledged in their experiences of grief.

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<sup>26</sup> See: Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (WW Norton & Company, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> See: Kenneth Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," *Bereavement Care* 18, no. 3 (1999): 37–39.

<sup>28</sup> Pauline Boss, "Families of the missing: Psychosocial effects and therapeutic approaches," *International Review of the Red Cross* 99, no. 2 (2017): 522, [https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc\\_99\\_905\\_4.pdf](https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc_99_905_4.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Doka, *Grief is a journey: Finding your path through loss*. (New York: Atria Books, 2016), 227.

<sup>30</sup> As is the case for many societies engaged in the complex process of navigating a history of conflict and division, acknowledging conflict-related grief and harm in Northern Ireland is a highly politicized endeavor. The complexity of these dynamics has impeded the full implementation of numerous attempts to address legacy issues at a macro scale since the signing of the B/GFA.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Karen Logan, "Collecting the Troubles and Beyond: The role of the Ulster Museum in interpreting contested history," in *Difficult Issues: Proceedings of the ICOM International Conference 2017* (2019), 169, <https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/arhistoricum/reader/download/428/428-17-84269-1-10-20190314.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> "Community Art Exhibition - Call and Response: Grief, Resiliency, and Hope," n.d. <https://flushingtownhall.org/call-and-response-exhibition>.

<sup>33</sup> Among other examples, see: Wave Trauma. "Stories from Silence | Northern Ireland," September 2, 2022, <https://wavetraumacentre.org.uk/who-we-are/wave-stories/>; Colin Davidson. "Silent Testimony," n.d. <http://www.colindavidson.com/silent-testimony-2015/>; "Peacebuilding - Theatre of Witness." The Playhouse Derry, n.d. <https://www.derryplayhouse.co.uk/peacebuilding/theatre-of-witness>.

It is important that any such public space be one in which people can engage and return to over time as they may choose — serving as a space for individual and collective meaning making that can evolve over time. In this way, it can function as a container for the creation of individual and collective experiences that both honour and allow the possibility to reimagine new ways of relating to the past.

### *Develop psychoeducational programmes to teach about the social and political causes and consequences of trauma*

It is critical to address the intergenerational impact of the Troubles/Conflict as the mental health impact has profound consequences.<sup>34</sup> These impacts cannot be divorced from other interrelated social and economic pressures that are most prevalent in areas most impacted by the Troubles/Conflict. A socio-ecologically based approach is required through which a fuller discussion can take place as to how individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole continues to be impacted by the legacy of the past, with particular attention to how trauma is understood and continues to affect society. This could be a key framework underpinning the approach of the proposed initiative for civic education on the past and future.<sup>35</sup>

In this regard, schools and training programmes, especially those for public service positions such as nurses, counsellors, youth workers, etc., should integrate psychoeducational courses that teach about trauma from a socio-ecological perspective. As communities discuss how they view their lives, neighbourhoods and society continuing to be affected by past events, Figure 2 below offers a framework to be used and further developed in conversation with work that seeks to discern the micro-dynamics of peace and conflict.<sup>36</sup> This lens recognises the social, political, economic, and environmental causes and consequences of violence at individual, relational, community, and societal levels.<sup>37</sup>

By sensitising those whose work places them on the front edges of legacy consequences — with communities most impacted by the Troubles/Conflict and those excluded or marginalised in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, class, religion, or political opinion — individuals, communities, and society as a whole can be better supported in navigating and healing through trauma.

In addition to teaching about the impact of trauma, it is important that such psychoeducational programmes be trauma-informed, offering participants spaces for connection, respite, and potentially healing. Acknowledging that many individuals are drawn to service positions because of harms they have experienced in their own lives, holistic psychoeducational programmes can provide opportunities for greater self-understanding and transformation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rory O'Connor and Siobhan O'Neill, "Mental health and suicide risk in Northern Ireland: a legacy of the Troubles?" in *Lancet Psychiatry* 2, iss. 7, (2015): 582–4. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(15\)00240-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(15)00240-0).

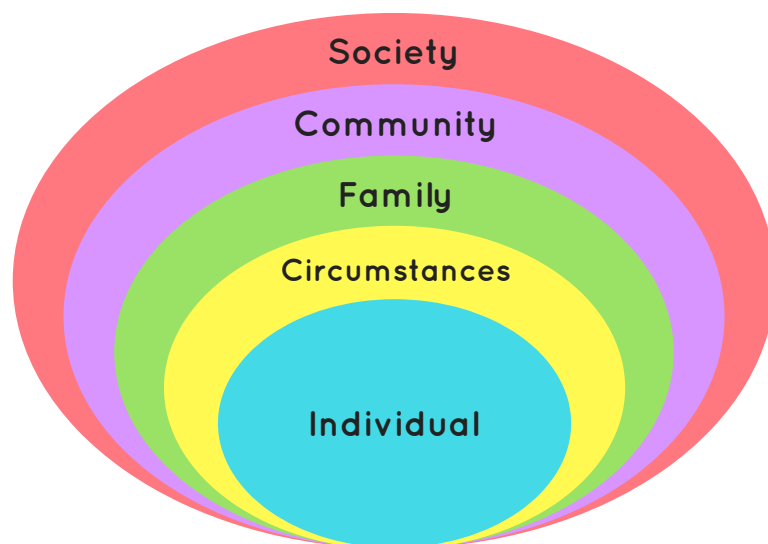
<sup>35</sup> Brandon Hamber, Debs Erwin, and Eliz McArdle, *Peace Summit 2023: The Unfinished Business of Peace and Reconciliation. A Call to Action* (Belfast: John and Pat Hume Foundation, Community Dialogue, and Ulster University, 2023), 30, <https://humefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Peace-Summit-A-Call-to-Action-24-May-2023.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> See: Roddy Brett et al., "The Micro-Dynamics of Peace and Conflict," *Security Dialogue* 55, no. 5 (2024): 443–461, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106241269753>; Kelly, *Everyday Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Marian Tankink and Friederike Bubenzer, "Building Sustainable Peace through an Integrated Approach to Peacebuilding and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: A Literature Review," *Intervention* 15, no. 3 (2017): 206–207, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320316793\\_Building\\_sustainable\\_peace\\_through\\_an\\_integrated\\_approach\\_to\\_peacebuilding\\_and\\_mental\\_health\\_and\\_psychosocial\\_support\\_a\\_literature\\_review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320316793_Building_sustainable_peace_through_an_integrated_approach_to_peacebuilding_and_mental_health_and_psychosocial_support_a_literature_review).

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: Hyojin Im et al., "Trauma-Informed Psychoeducation for Somali Refugee Youth in Urban Kenya: Effects on PTSD and Psychosocial Outcomes," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 11, no. 4 (2018): 431–41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0200-x>.

# Factors Influencing Bereavement/Loss Experience



## Individual

- Male/Female
- Child
- Adult (Age when bereavement occurred)
- Older Adult
- Intellectual disability
- Health status
- Race
- Sexual Orientation
- Mental health & coping ability
- Socio-Economic Group
- Education/career
- Resilience & life outlook
- Other grief/trauma experiences

## Circumstances of Bereavement

- Loss of parent, sibling, child, friend/colleague
- Traumatic nature of bereavement? (accident, homicide, suicide, natural disaster)
- Is death of a stigmatized nature?
- Death as result of war/conflict?
- Included in funeral ritual?
- Information available/outstanding
- Was justice secured?

## Society

- Societal silence or openness about discussing grief?
- Open about discussing impact of grief as result of war?
- Political environment amenable to providing answers?
- Influence of the media. Help or hindrance?

## Community

- Social support available? School, workplace, friends, mutual help/support groups, others?
- Ability to discuss bereavement in social support mechanisms? Is support helpful?
- Are cultural traditions helpful/hindrance? Is silence an issue?
- Expectations around grief reaction?
- Ability to access appropriate support services?

## Family

- Family support?
- Communication about bereavement
- Mental health of parents/carers (absent parenting, restrictive parenting)
- Child adopting parenting role?
- Addiction issues at home?
- Financial difficulties?
- Moving home/school?
- Family break-up or reduced relationships?

Figure 2: Factors influencing the experience of bereavement and loss.



Numerous localized and international programmes exist that provide such trauma-informed psychoeducation. For example, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's (SBNi) Trauma Informed Practice Committee<sup>39</sup> works to develop trauma informed practice within organisations and across sectors of practice including justice, education, mental health, and child welfare. While such psychoeducational programmes often focus on the impact of trauma at the individual level, SBNi provides a helpful example of a systemic approach to trauma awareness and transformation. While SBNi engagement focuses specifically on child welfare, this model could be helpfully expanded in Northern Ireland to integrate a more holistic understanding of the impact of trauma and pathways for healing for legacy issues broadly speaking. Northern Ireland's WAVE Trauma Centre provides a helpful model for such programming, which is constantly evolving and responding to increasing demand.<sup>40</sup> In this region slowly emerging from conflict, there is opportunity and urgent need not only to develop new psychoeducational programming, but also to expand upon existing initiatives.

### *Connect existing community-based initiatives*

While there have been no holistic, society-wide interventions to address legacy challenges, many individuals, communities, and organisations have developed initiatives across varying scales of impact to support healing for victims and survivors alongside addressing other legacy challenges. Though these initiatives have been supportive for victims, survivors, and for society more generally, they have remained largely siloed.

The aforementioned vehicle for civic engagement should provide network-weaving support, connecting these disparate initiatives. This would be beneficial in a number of ways, for example by creating a platform through which initiatives could learn from one another in their approach and practice and enabling victims and survivors to connect with a wider network of individuals directly impacted by the Troubles/Conflict.

In the context of piecemeal political approaches to addressing legacy challenges in Northern Ireland, developing such a multisectoral platform through which to connect civil society efforts to support healing and transformation would greatly enhance Northern Ireland's collective capacity to address the past and build a more peaceful future. In addition to connecting existing and emerging efforts, this platform would provide a means through which to expand public awareness and understanding about the continued need to address trauma and accompany individual and collective healing.

A number of existing organizations and networks are well placed to contribute to the development of a platform to connect community-based initiatives, each providing support in a unique and valuable capacity. These include organisations supporting victims and survivors, museum networks, women's organisations, youth organisations, human rights bodies, community development groups, arts-based organisations, faith-based organisations, trade unions, and interested academics.<sup>41</sup> Connecting these organisations with greater intention and regularity would contribute to a systemic approach to transforming trauma and encouraging healing in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>39</sup> Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. "Trauma Informed Practice Committee," <https://www.safeguardingni.org/trauma-informed-practice-committee>.

<sup>40</sup> Wave Trauma. "Trauma Education," <https://wavetraumacentre.org.uk/what-we-do/trauma-education/>.

<sup>41</sup> See: John Brewer, "Sociology and peacebuilding," in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty. (London: Taylor and Francis Books, 2013), 16, <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/FileStore/Fileupload,756763,en.pdf>.

# Conclusion

In order to fully address the trauma legacy of the Troubles/Conflict, a process must be established, free from political interference, that seeks to support a more inclusive and communal engagement with the past.

While political and legal mechanisms remain to be effectively implemented, civil society can take initiative in this endeavour — not in lieu of, but rather as an additional process. This process should engage those most directly affected by the Troubles/Conflict. However, at the same time, wider society should be involved, to support a collective process of healing. This is why a campaign for a public understanding of the social causation of trauma and a fuller understanding of the Troubles/Conflict legacy is required. As many people, including those who do not meet the definition of a victim/survivor, continue to suffer without acknowledgement from harms incurred in the past, it is vital that their suffering be witnessed and acknowledged in a meaningful way.

A civic campaign for public understanding and the creation of a coherent structure of existing efforts would help break the culture of silence that characterises Northern Ireland's relationship with the past and present, a dynamic which only serves to perpetuate the transmission of trauma into the future. Such a campaign could make a significant contribution to addressing the need to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and peacebuilding. It would elevate the interdependency of these fields of practice — amplifying the important understanding that trauma and mental ill health are influenced by social, political, economic, and environmental conditions, and that peacebuilding is less likely to succeed if the mental health needs of communities are not comprehensively addressed.<sup>42</sup>

The recommendations proposed in this policy note would contribute to this process through the creation of platforms and processes that enable a wider collection of voices and issues to be heard and expand public awareness and understanding about how the legacy challenges continue to overshadow daily life in Northern Ireland. In these ways, it would assist in the development of responses to more effectively address the past for individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole.

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<sup>42</sup> See: Friederike Bubenzer et al., *Research Findings Summary Report: Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Peacebuilding* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2022), 7, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-05/UNDP-Integrating-Mental-Health-and-Psychosocial-Support-into-Peacebuilding-V2.pdf>.

# Suggested Further Reading (by topic)

## *Generational Transmission of Trauma*

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## *Bereavement - inclusive of ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief*

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## Collective/Contextual Approaches to Addressing Trauma

- Becker, David. "Working on the Psychosocial Gap: Challenges, Hopes, Perspectives. Comment on a contribution by Hamber, Brandon, 2015. Dealing with Painful Memories and Violent Pasts. Towards a Framework for Contextual Understanding." In *Transforming War-related Identities Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 11* edited by Beatrix Austin and Martina Fischer. Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2015. Accessed on July 15, 2023: [https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/dialogue11\\_becker\\_comm.pdf](https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/dialogue11_becker_comm.pdf).
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## The Unfinished Business of Peace in Northern Ireland

- Brewer, John. "Sociology and peacebuilding." In *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, edited by Roger MacGinty, 159-170. London: Taylor and Francis Books, 2013. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/FileStore/Fileupload,756763,en.pdf>.
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