

Abstract

Measuring Bridge Building: The Evaluation of Small Scale Reconciliation Projects in Northern Ireland

Investigators

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Aims and Objectives of Research

- To develop a tool-kit for self-evaluation for small voluntary projects engaged in community reconciliation work, especially in the Northern Irish context but with intended relevance elsewhere.
- To develop a methodology for the assessment of the impact of such projects on their local communities, and to increase understanding of factors influencing varieties of impact.

Key Research Questions and Methods

1. How can small community reconciliation projects practically and effectively assess their progress in a way that articulates with their own ethos, aims and objectives, meets the needs of funding bodies and other key stakeholders, and enables them to gauge their community impact and respond accordingly?
2. What factors influence the effects of community reconciliation projects, and what strategies and resources have projects developed to respond to set backs such as outbreaks of violence and stalling of the political process?
3. How can the impact of community reconciliation projects most effectively and insightfully be measured?

The project is inter-disciplinary in design and conception, primarily using methods of sociological fieldwork (focus groups, interviews, surveys), but drawing on methods and concepts from other discipline areas, for example oral history and social policy. The research for this project will be carried out in two phases.

Phase 1:

1. A telephone survey carried out with 1500 participants examining issues relating to reconciliation and community relations.
2. Workshops held to discuss existing evaluation practices the main stakeholders, i.e. funding bodies, government agencies and community reconciliation projects (CRPs).
3. Semi-structured interviews with the main stakeholders as well as the participants and leaders of the CRPs.

Phase 2:

The development of the draft toolkit which will then be piloted by the CRPs.

1. Those interviewed in phase 1 will be re-interviewed, to examine changes in attitudes, experiences and levels of relational capital.
2. The toolkit will developed in response to the pilot evaluations, and launched and disseminated.

Relation to the programme

The projects involved in this research seek to reduce exclusion and achieve social transformation through a variety of means, including youth work, victim support, and the development of inter-community social activities. This project seeks to enhance their capacity, by enabling them to critically evaluate their own practice, as well as respond more effectively to the needs of funding bodies and other key stakeholders. It will also seek to assess the impact of these projects in their localities. This process should strengthen the co-production of knowledge through increased and improved communication between researchers, non-governmental actors, funding bodies and policy makers. Increasing understanding of how these projects work and their capacity of self-evaluation will be of benefit to those concerned with developing the capacity of small voluntary organisations, and the toolkit for self-evaluation will be designed with these wider needs in mind.

Relevance of this research to user groups

Three main groups will benefit from this research.

1. Voluntary and Community Sector: This research centres upon developing a measurement tool in consultation with the organisations that will be using it. It will therefore enable them to measure the impact of their work in a more effective manner and decide which types of projects will be the most salient for the local situation.
2. Funders of community and reconciliation work: The results of this research will provide funders with a uniform way of measuring the effectiveness of the projects that they fund, thus enabling them to make informed decisions regarding policy.
3. Government and policy makers: Government and policy makers will benefit in a similar manner as the findings of this research and the development of the tool kit will provide another avenue through which they can evaluate peace and reconciliation work.

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