



Non-Governmental Public Action Programme

Preliminary Research Findings Brief

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

Project aims, objectives, methods

1. 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.
2. 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 findings

- To investigate the relationship between voluntary work, volunteer well-being, perceptions of security and cross-community attitudes a literature review was undertaken and a telephone questionnaire conducted on a representative sample of the Northern Irish population. The key findings of the review and questionnaire were:
1. A review of evidence on the *general impact of volunteering on volunteers* shows strong evidence of physical and mental health benefits, especially amongst the elderly, and some evidence of positive impacts on anti-social behaviour amongst young people. But the effect of volunteering on cross-community attitudes had not been investigated until this study.
 2. The telephone survey found that *formal volunteering* was positively associated with more forgiving cross-community attitudes, but the association was not statistically significant. However, a strong and significant positive association was found between formal volunteering and reduced fear of crime, including sectarian-related crime such as intimidation and harassment.
 3. Some *informal forms of voluntary work* were strongly and positively related to cross-community forgiveness, including 'visiting an elderly person' and 'baby-sitting or caring for children'. No relationship between informal volunteering and fear of crime was found.
 4. Formal and informal volunteering provide a *significant arena for interaction between individuals from different communities*, and the mixing occurs in conditions of helping and co-operation which previous studies suggest are supportive of positive attitude change. The survey suggests that 14.5% of adults across Northern Ireland as a whole do voluntary work for an organisation organised on a cross-community basis, providing varying levels of opportunities for social contact. Furthermore, 10.3% of the total population 'frequently' and 13.6% 'sometimes' help a member of the other major community during informal voluntary work.
 5. Informal volunteering which involved 'frequently' or 'sometimes' involved helping a member of another community was significantly and positively associated with cross-community forgiveness. Volunteering for an organisation that was organised on a cross community basis (about two-thirds were) was not associated with higher cross-community forgiveness scores. It may simply be that being formally organised on a cross-community basis did not necessarily lead to much community contact.
 6. Volunteering for 'mainly Catholic' and 'mainly Protestant' organisations was significantly associated with high cross-community forgiveness scores. This is particularly striking in the case of volunteers for mainly Protestant organisations, because being nominally Protestant was negatively associated with cross-community forgiveness. This may related to the curvilinear relationship between religiosity and prejudice first observed by Allport (1979), in which those who are actively religious and those who are strongly secular both have lower levels of prejudice than nominal religious believers.

Results so far from the **longitudinal evaluation of cross-community projects** show:

7. Significant impact of interventions on willingness to volunteer, become involved in cultural and sports activities associated with the other main community, and an increase in desire to make and sustain cross community friendships.
8. On the basis of evidence gathered so far, the strength of these effects varies principally as a function of the duration of the project, (longer projects produce more enduring relationships and attitude change), and the extent to which projects engage with culturally salient issues in community relations.

Policy and practice implications

1. Voluntary organisations can be confident in being positive about the unintended consequences of voluntary work in promoting themselves to volunteers and potential volunteers and funders, since our review shows that in terms of mental and physical health (amongst elderly) and anti-social behaviour (amongst young people) these findings are robust. Furthermore, concerns about the negative impact of instrumentalisation seem not be justified, judging by the attitudes of participants in the telephone study.

2. Voluntary organisations can maximise their impact on good relations by:

- providing opportunities for people to interact in a helping or mutually supportive ways;
- developing organisational cultures which actively challenge prejudice;
- creating environments which continually challenge settled groups to accommodate new newcomers and negotiate differences.

3. The association between duration of project (longer is better) and engagement with cultural salient aspects of community relations with impact on volunteers in our longitudinal evaluation of cross-community projects suggests that voluntary organisations and funders should prioritise directing resources to those programmes and organisations which have these features. However, this last conclusion should be treated with some caution as this section of the project is not yet completed.

Key publications and outputs

For further information

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