

Creativity, Cohesion and the ‘Post-conflict’ Society: A Policy Agenda (Illustrated from the Case of Northern Ireland)

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(Received March 2013; accepted February 2015)

ABSTRACT The intertwining of economic crises and political violence has been an ongoing narrative for Northern Ireland over the past four decades. However, with the end of ‘The Troubles’ and the transition to what has been termed a ‘post-conflict’ society (i.e. one in which the violence has largely ceased but its legacy remains), what is an appropriate agenda for economic development? To this end, we consider the current context in Northern Ireland in terms of cohesion, diversity and inclusion, and the implications therein of present policies. The geography of creative individuals within Northern Ireland is reviewed, and found to be particularly polarized within Belfast. That the highest areas of present deprivation are typically found in those most affected by past conflict suggests failures of policy since the ‘Good Friday’ Agreement of 1998. If economic growth, tolerance and diversity are linked, then all stakeholders must address these issues. Northern Ireland should neither be seen as a ‘normal’ lagging region nor one into which a standard neo-liberal development agenda can be transplanted free of context. At present, social cohesion appears to be regarded as an outcome of economic prosperity rather than as a factor that might actually drive it.

Keywords: Creativity; Northern Ireland; Belfast; policy; social cohesion; economic development

1. Introduction

The previous decade and a half has seen a growing focus on the role of creativity in fostering economic development, with the emergence of concepts such as creative industries, creative economy and the creative class (Chapain, Clifton, & Comunian, 2013). The underlying assumption is that these industries—and the firms and individuals that

comprise them—are highly innovative and are thus the new motor of economic growth. Consequently, they are placed by many policy-makers across Europe at the heart of their national innovation and economic development agendas (Comunian, Chapain, & Clifton, 2014), within a broader adoption of a neo-liberal (Sager, 2011) policy-making orthodoxy. Context matters in the successful nurturing of creativity and its translation into sustainable economic outcomes (Clifton, Cooke, & Hansen, 2013; Huggins & Clifton, 2011); however, this very success can have the effect of countering the social cohesion and diversity that is said to underpin creativity and the locational choices of creative people. Such potential complications are typically disregarded in simplistic adoptions of this neo-liberal development agenda (Boland, 2014; Nagle, 2009).

So if it is true that the most economically successful places are those which are characterized by tolerance, diversity, creativity and social cohesion, how might the various stakeholders in societies with particular challenges in these areas—and indeed ones that have experienced high levels of social division and/or actual conflict—respond with regard to social and economic policy? In order to address this question, we consider the case of Northern Ireland—a ‘post-conflict’ society. The term post-conflict can appropriately be applied in the case of Northern Ireland because, although the majority of the political violence has ceased, the historical conflict is clearly not resolved in the sense that neither side has demonstrably ‘won’. Thus, rather than being placed in the largely arbitrary states of being ‘in conflict’ or ‘at peace’, as Brown, Langer, & Stewart (2011) suggest ‘post conflict’ societies should be seen as lying along a continuum of transition—in which at any given time the direction of travel is not necessarily always from the former to the latter.

Although Northern Ireland has become a more diverse society in recent years, the size of the minority ethnic and religious communities is still much smaller than many other European countries. Northern Ireland remains a predominantly white and Christian society, albeit a deeply divided one. However, there is evidence of a significant level of intolerance towards even this relatively limited level of ethnic and religious diversity. This is unsurprising in a post-conflict and divided society in which there have been generations of acceptance of fear and mistrust of the ‘other side’.

Crucially, with regard to policy-making, tolerance and inclusion appear to be regarded as an *outcome* of a strong economy, rather than being among the *drivers* of prosperity in Northern Ireland. Moreover, The Programme for Government document (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister [OFMDFM], 2011) makes no substantive mention of migration, diversity or ethnic minorities. Thus, the approach has essentially been to address problems created by migration in the ‘stand-alone’ spheres of service provision and so on, rather than to develop a long-term policy on migration as an opportunity within the knowledge-based sectors of the economy. Moreover, we suggest that the failure to adequately join up the social cohesion policy agenda with the economic development and innovation one has allowed the presence of an untapped reservoir of indigenous creativity within Northern Ireland to persist. This is particularly prescient for those areas most affected by the legacy of the conflict, where the danger is that social division, related to but distinct from the sectarian division, will take root.

The paper thus proceeds as follows: the section below provides an overview of the economy and context of Northern Ireland; there then follows a discussion of the policy-making framework with specific reference to economic development issues. We then

move on to an overview of the geography of creativity in Northern Ireland and Belfast in particular, and consideration of how Belfast performs as an ‘open’ city. The current context in Northern Ireland in terms of diversity and social cohesion is then considered in some detail, before attention is turned to the implications thereof for current government policies. Finally, we speculate on the unique challenges faced in developing creativity in Northern Ireland, the broader implications for other post-conflict societies and potentially fruitful avenues for further research.

2. Northern Ireland: Economy and Context—An Overview

While attention over the last four decades has typically focused on the sectarian conflict, the ongoing weakness of its economy is such that Gaffikin and Morrissey (2001a) have described it as Northern Ireland’s ‘other crisis’. Northern Ireland is the smallest region of the UK with a population of 1.8 million (thus around 3% of UK population) and 2% of its gross value added (GVA). As in other peripheral regions of the UK, the heavy industries which underpinned Northern Ireland’s economy began to decline in the period following the First World War, with this relatively highly paid employment not adequately replaced for many decades if indeed at all. The inward investment that did begin to flow into Northern Ireland during the 1960s was itself victim of the subsequent oil shocks of the 1970s (Gaffikin, McEldowney, Morrissey, & Sterrett, 2001). Unsurprisingly, this has provided the region with a legacy of socio-economic problems, many of which persist to the present day. Average earnings are approximately 90% of UK average and there are relatively higher levels of economic inactivity, similar to those of other post-industrial regions of the UK (Brooksbank, Clifton, Jones-Evans, & Pickernell, 2001; Pickernell, 2011).¹ Northern Ireland also has the youngest demographic of the UK regions, with 21% of the population under the age of 16. Unlike some other peripheral regions of the UK however, systematic under-investment during the period of the Thatcher government in the early 1980s cannot be highlighted as a causal factor; as Gaffikin and Morrissey (2001a) note, during this period there were relatively high levels of spending and industrial development in Northern Ireland. However, the legacy of this is manifested in a subsidy culture, and a labour market in which high-skilled workers are often taken up by the public sector.

With over 300,000 inhabitants and a greater metropolitan area population of approximately 700,000, Belfast is the driver of the Northern Ireland economy, and thus its performance is influential for the prosperity of the region as a whole. Belfast was essentially a market town up until the early 1800s, after which rapid expansion followed in the first half of the nineteenth century, driven largely by the textile industry (Bronte et al., 2015). A second industrial revolution then followed from the mid-1850s, based on shipbuilding and associated trades. Belfast was thus the only industrial city on the island of Ireland, with the British Empire and its associated access to markets playing a key role in this. Now the city possesses nearly a third of all service-sector jobs in the region, with half of Northern Ireland’s high-tech manufacturing jobs, three-fifths of information and communications technology (ICT) and related jobs, and two-thirds of creative media and arts jobs located in Belfast (Oxford Economics, 2011).

The distinguishing factor between Northern Ireland and other ‘lagging’ regions of the UK, however, has been the intertwining of economic crises and political violence, which have served to reinforce each other over the course of the previous four decades

(Gaffikin et al., 2001). Northern Ireland was for many years the scene of a violent and bitter ethno-political conflict—known as ‘The Troubles’—between nationalists (predominantly Roman Catholic and seeking unification with the Republic of Ireland) and unionists (predominantly Protestant and intent on maintaining Northern Ireland as part of the UK) (Mesev, Shirlow, & Downs, 2009). The Troubles are typically viewed as beginning in the late 1960s and generally considered to have ended with the ‘Good Friday’ Agreement of 1998.

The conflict has had a direct impact on the prosperity of Northern Ireland as one would expect—research into the financial cost of the divided society by Deloitte (2007) put the cost of this divide at around £1.5 billion per annum. This included policing and security costs, and expenditure on social housing inflated by an estimated £24 million due to issues such as dual provision. The report also estimated that an absence of civil unrest could realize in excess of £3 million from savings on roads and public transport. It also identified a range of potential savings by greater collaboration across the schools sectors of between £15.9 million and £79.6 million per year. Lost opportunities were also quantified in terms of lost jobs (27,600 from 1983 to 2000), investment (£225 million) and the impact on tourism (£1461 million at 2006 prices). Significant though these direct costs have been, it is argued in this paper that the less-tangible impacts of a divided society are potentially even more serious in the long run.

Since 1999, Northern Ireland has possessed devolved governance within the UK via the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, the legacy of nearly four decades of conflict persists, and sporadic violence has been ongoing (Shirlow, 2006a). In terms of the direct impact on the labour market, evidence from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has shown a decline in the overall level of religious segregation. However, less-tangible ‘chill factors’ remain influential (Shirlow, 2006b)—essentially the avoidance of places of employment due to fears relating to hostility and personal safety.

3. The Policy-making Context

With regard to economic development policy specifically, one of the first acts under devolution in Northern Ireland was the creation of the InvestNI development agency, drawing together the activities of the previous disaggregated development agencies (Cooke & Clifton, 2005). This would appear to have offered an opportunity to ‘join-up’ development priorities and indeed better connect them with the broader needs of the territory, but this has been something of a missed opportunity. The lead was taken from the model adopted by *Enterprise Ireland*, including instruments such as university incubators, spin-out firms, venture capital, exacting technology customers, supply chains, cluster-building programmes, science park facilities and science entrepreneurship support. Thus, the priority was to engage fully with the knowledge economy. Such initiatives can be interpreted in the context of a broader shift towards neo-liberal policy-making as orthodoxy, exemplified by a focus on growth and the benchmarking of competitiveness (Boland, 2014) via policies focused on competitive bidding (quasi-markets and partnership working), attracting potential ‘customers’ (companies, tourists, mobile knowledge workers), urban planning involving spaces for consumption, recreation, cultural events, nightlife and artistic districts, plus high-quality residential areas (Sager, 2011). The case has indeed been made by a number of authors for such an agenda pervading policy-making in Northern Ireland, and in particular its association with the transition towards a post-conflict society

(Horgan, 2006; Nagle, 2009; O’ Hearn, 2008), with the Programme for Government 2011–2015 (OFMDFM, 2011) highlighting the Northern Ireland Executive’s ‘top priority’ as the economy, although such statements are hardly unique of course. Moreover, Boland (2014) notes that a belief in free-market policies as the key route towards peace and reconciliation is to be found across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland. This then is essentially the ‘fix the economy and society will follow’ view—with the neo-liberal policy-making route seen as the best bet with which to achieve the former goal. There are, however, complications that are specific to Northern Ireland, namely ethno-sectarian resource competition post-devolution, and the higher than average dependency on state transfers (Boland, 2014; Murtagh & Shirlow, 2012).

Produced in the immediate aftermath of devolution, Strategy 2010 (Department of Economic Development, 1999) had ambitious targets for closing the gap between Northern Ireland and the UK. For example, GDP per head (80% of the UK level in 1998) was targeted to increase to 90% by 2010; similarly a business start-up rate of 31 per 10,000 adult population was to rise to 40. However, despite some relative improvements in areas such as skill levels, the performance gap remains largely intact and indeed wider in a number of areas. This broader picture can be seen in Table 1, which shows regional data from the UK Competitiveness Index (Huggins et al., 2014); the pattern is one of diverging performance within the UK with only three regions—London, South East and East of England—scoring over 100. That this gap has widened between 2006 and 2014 suggests that the global crisis has exacerbated already significant regional disparities in the UK. With specific regard to Northern Ireland, it remains at number 10 in the rankings albeit further away from the UK average than it was in 2006 (as is the case for most of the non-core UK regions). Similarly, Northern Ireland remains well below the UK averages for share of knowledge-based businesses and share of businesses engaged in exporting (Huggins & Thompson, 2010).

In their report, Oxford Economics (2014) refers to Northern Ireland as an ‘economy in transition’; having come through the globally driven recession of 2008–2012, they identify a more internal set of drivers for the following five years or so—UK government policy, historic weaknesses of the Northern Ireland economy but also its future demographics. In other words, the underlying weaknesses of the economy remain, and these will need to be addressed in more innovative ways if progress is to be made (which chimes with issues we address in this paper). Although beyond the remit for which it was commissioned of course, it is still significant that the report makes no mention of the parallel social challenges involved in realising Northern Ireland’s future as a post-conflict society. This issue is not unique to the work of Oxford Economics; in their discussion of Strategy 2010, Gaffikin and Morrissey (2001a) suggest that building competitiveness needs to go beyond a narrow focus on economic growth—rather a more nuanced understanding of what is required should include networking, social capital and inclusive government institutions. Thus, with specific reference to Northern Ireland, they state that “... it is contended that social cohesion and reconciliation, within the region and between the states in Ireland, have also to be at the core of the [competitiveness] agenda” (Gaffikin and Morrissey 2001a, p. 4). We argue in this paper that a decade and a half later this is an issue that still needs addressing, and one which remains neglected in the policy discourse.

As outlined above, a neo-liberal policy-making development agenda pervades the regions and nations of the UK and despite its unique set of circumstances, Northern Ireland is also home to such a consensus. Regions have become more open to competition

Table 1. UK Regional Competitiveness Index 2006–2014.

Rank	Region	2014 index score	2006 index score	Change in rank 2006–2014
1	London	128.32	113.9	0
2	South East	117.98	110.5	0
3	East of England	104.82	106.0	0
4	South West	97.68	94.9	+1
5	North West	95.41	92.3	+3
6	Scotland	93.59	94.2	0
7	East Midlands	92.13	96.1	23
8	West Midlands	88.43	92.7	21
9	Wales	84.22	86.7	+2
10	Northern Ireland	83.53	88.0	0
11	North East	82.88	84.2	+1
12	Yorkshire and the Humber	80.57	90.5	23
	UK	100.00	100.00	2

Source: Derived from Huggins, Izushi, Prokop, & Thompson (2014).

from elsewhere, hence the increased emphasis on competitiveness, and there has therefore been an increasing focus on the importance of creativity in fostering economic development with the emergence of concepts such as creative industries, creative economy and the creative class (Chapain et al., 2013). In particular, the creative class thesis (Florida, 2002) suggests that the ability to attract and retain creativity and to be open to diverse groups of people of different ethnic, racial and lifestyle groups can provide distinct advantages to regions able to foster such environments. Northern Ireland clearly faces particular challenges here, which have largely been ignored within the neo-liberal consensus—or more to the point assumed to be solvable by economic success itself. However, there is increasing evidence that for realising creativity context matters (Boschma & Frisch, 2009; Clifton et al., 2013; Comunian et al., 2014; Martin-Brelot, Grossetti, M., Eckert, D., Gritsai, O., & Kovács, 2010) and that society and business are deeply intertwined at the cultural level (Clifton et al., 2011). Moreover, the policy climate plays an important role in the degree to which creativity is successfully translated (or not) into economic outcomes at the local level (Huggins & Clifton, 2011).

A decade earlier, Gaffikin and Morrissey (2001b) posed the key question as to what extent development in Northern Ireland would depend on effecting reconciliation within civic society; they argued that the twinning of the regeneration and reconciliation processes would be essential in the long term, but what they were not explicitly considering was the more direct relationship between society and economy implied by a creativity-based model of development where ‘softer’ factors play an important role in providing the right climate for innovation as the motor of economic growth. This is particularly pertinent for Northern Ireland given its low innovation base (Roper, 2009).

4. The Geography of Creativity in Northern Ireland, Belfast as an ‘Open’ City

In this section, we provide an overview of the geography of creativity in Northern Ireland, and within Belfast, using data on ‘creative core’ occupations as the best proxy indicator available (for a full account of the data and methods employed in associated research on creativity in the UK, see Clifton, 2008; 2013). Attention is then turned to how Belfast performs as city which is open to talent and creativity, via a range of comparative quality of place indicators derived from data generated by the British Council (see below for details). Additional factors specifically related to tolerance and social cohesion are then discussed in the following section.

Figure 1 shows the concentration of creative core occupations across the 26 Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland.² At this level of geography, there are relatively few outliers to be observed; the districts of Strabane, Limavady Ballymoney (listed west to east) are the areas of lowest concentration, that is, below 8.33% of the labour force. Conversely, Belfast has a relatively high concentration of creative core occupations, but not outstandingly so. Castlereagh to the immediate southeast of Belfast has the highest level of concentration; it should be kept in mind that these statistics are residence-based (i.e. as opposed to those collected by workplace location), meaning a significant number of these are likely to reflect employment in Belfast’s knowledge-based economy.

When the spatial units are changed to Parliamentary Districts (of which there are 18—see Figure 2), most of the variation that was visible in Figure 1 disappears around the Northern Ireland average of approximately 10% of the labour force. However, what does begin to emerge is the polarisation that is apparent within Belfast itself, with the

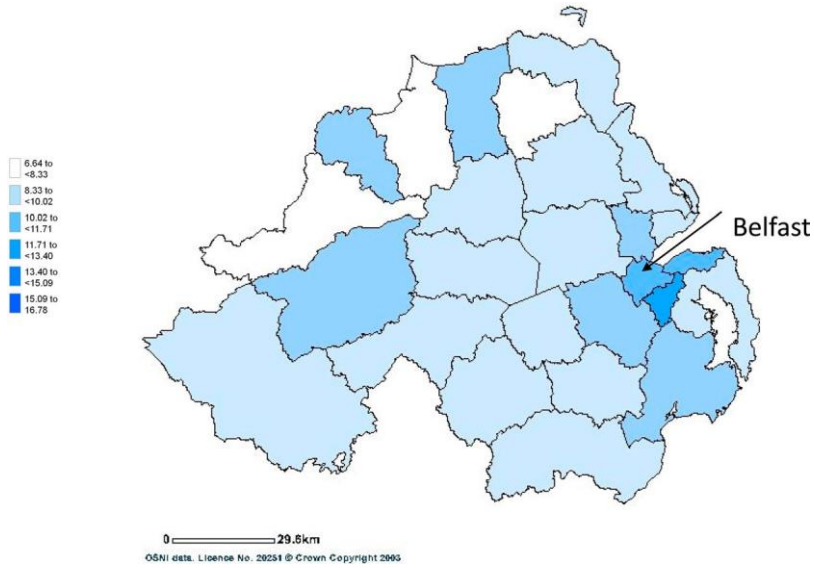


Figure 1. Creative core occupations by Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland (percentage of labour force).

Source: Generated using Census data from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

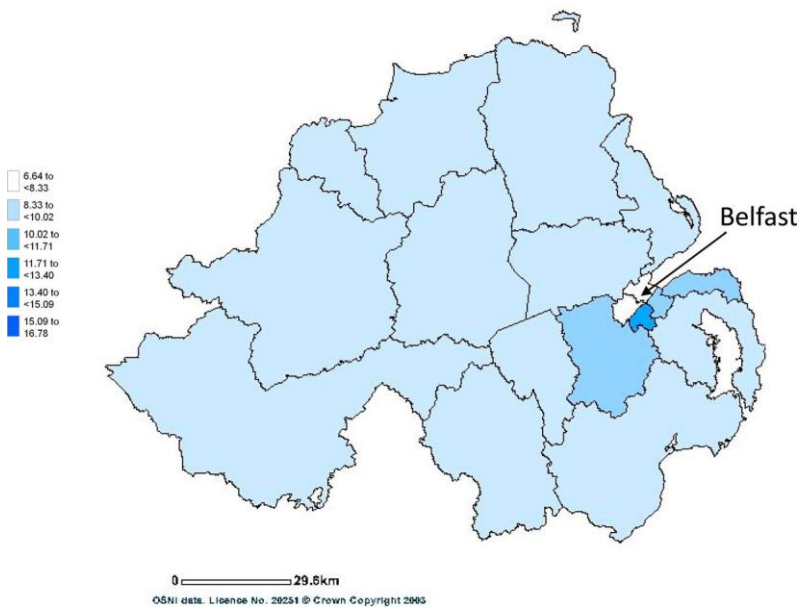


Figure 2. Creative core occupations by parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland (percentage of labour force).

Source: Generated using Census data from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

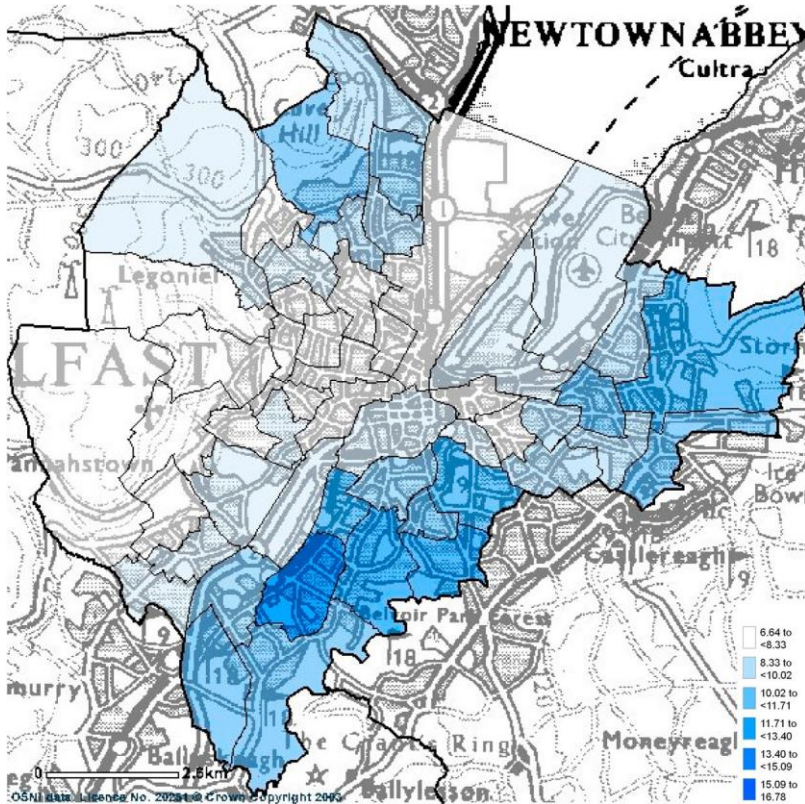


Figure 3. Creative core occupations by electoral wards in Belfast (percentage of labour force).
Source: Generated using Census data from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

highest levels of creative core occupations in Northern Ireland (South Belfast) but also the lowest within the region (West Belfast) in close proximity. This is shown in more detail using ward-level data in Figure 3. This confirms what Shirlow (2013) has described as the ‘four cities’ model of Belfast, with the West of the city as nationalist, catholic and largely working class, the South affluent and politically moderate, North Belfast being contested, while East Belfast has a mixture of affluence and poverty. Thus, Shirlow sees Belfast now as much as a socially divided city as a purely politically or religiously segregated one. That said, Shirlow (2006b) also identified fewer than 20% of the population of Belfast (which is shared roughly 50/50 between Catholics and Protestants) as living within areas that can genuinely be described as mixed.

Figures 1–3 have focused on Northern Ireland (and Belfast) internally, regarding the distribution of its creative core of knowledge workers; Figure 4 focuses on another important aspect of a successful creative economy—how open it is to the outside world. There are various ways that such a notion might be captured (Clifton & Cooke, 2009; Florida, 2002), but here we have chosen to use data generated by the British Council and made available via their OPENCities Project. This has the advantage of providing a comprehensive set of indicators—themselves each comprising a number of underlying

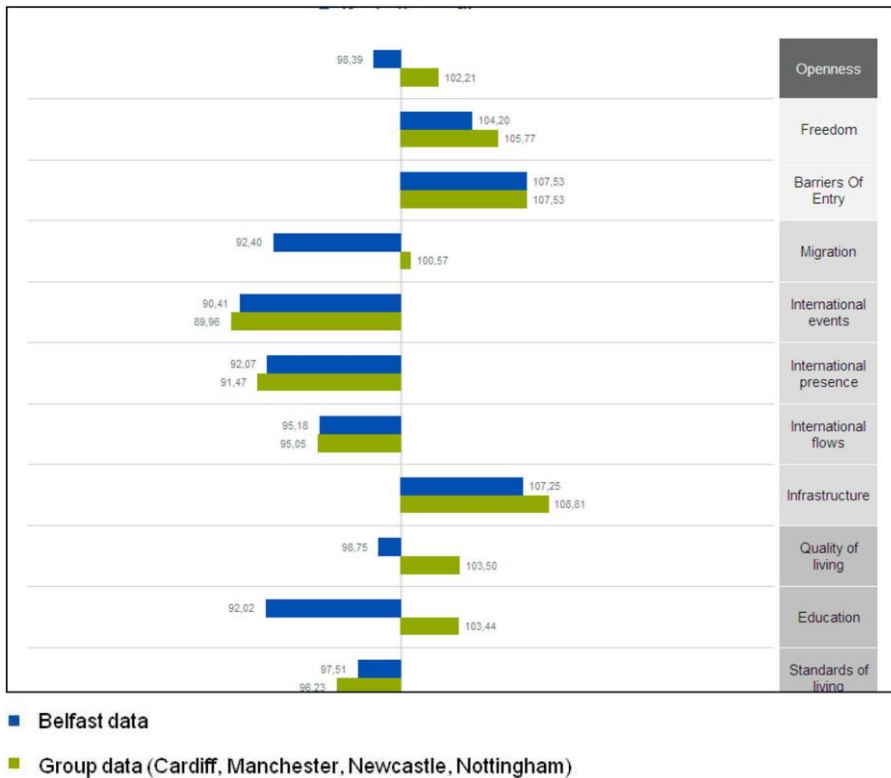


Figure 4. Belfast profile—measuring the 'openness' of the city.
 Source: Generated using data from British Council OPENCities Project.

variables—which are comparable across 26 cities from different continents.³ Thus in the figure, the centre line represents a normalized score of 100, that is, the average across all the cities in the database, with data shown for Belfast itself and for a comparator group of other UK 'provincial' cities.

From this analysis, Belfast is shown overall to be less open than its counterparts. Within this, the areas of Migration, Quality of Living and Education are of particular concern. The Migration figure reflects both the presence of international populations in the city, but also public attitudes towards ethnic diversity. Belfast scores well below the average, while the UK comparator group is on a par with this figure. Quality of Living assesses employment possibilities, rates of violent crime and also access to medical services. The quality of life of the international population in the city also depends on public attitudes towards people from another cultural/religious background, hence the inclusion of data on levels of trust towards those of different religions and nationalities. The historical context means it is unsurprising that Belfast ranks below average here, but given its significance for future prosperity, this is a key area that needs to be addressed. Similarly so with regard to Education, the measure refers to the choice of good-quality education opportunities in the city at all levels—including higher education and the presence of international schools—and the presence of international

students in the city's universities. Ranking well below the average (and even further behind the UK comparator group) is thus a major cause for concern and one that merits significant effort to address—something that present policy is ill-equipped to do, as discussed below.

5. Diversity, Tolerance and Social Cohesion

Although Northern Ireland has become an increasingly diverse society in recent years (Wallace, McAreavey, & Atkin, 2013), the size of the minority ethnic and religious communities is still much smaller than many other European countries.⁴ Northern Ireland remains a predominantly white and Christian, albeit with a deep divide down the middle. However, research into racism experienced by minority ethnic groups alongside police statistics on reported racially motivated hate crime suggests that there is a significant level of intolerance towards even this relatively limited level of ethnic and religious diversity. For example, survey research by the Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (2007) showed high levels of perceived prejudice towards migrant workers in Northern Ireland; 24% of respondents thought that people were very prejudiced towards migrant workers, with 60% stating that people in Northern Ireland are 'fairly prejudiced'. Perhaps most worryingly, younger people were more likely to be prejudiced than were older respondents. In the late 2000s, there were some highly publicized attacks in which minorities (the majority Roma and Polish people) were displaced from their homes and, as Knox (2011) has noted, the reputation of Northern Ireland in terms of race relations was damaged. More positively, there is evidence to suggest that the increase in sectarian and hate crime has now been reversed (Nolan, 2012). Although the Good Friday Agreement requires public agencies to promote equality and 'good relations' between religious and minority ethnic communities, both policy and legislation on racial equality in Northern Ireland have lagged behind that in the rest of the UK (Wallace et al., 2013). The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order became law in 1997, 21 years after similar legislation in Great Britain, with the first Racial Equality Strategy published in 2005 (OFMDFM, 2005).

Much of this is unsurprising in a post-conflict and divided society. Where there have been generations of acceptance of fear and mistrust of the 'other side', it is not surprising that this intolerance towards the others who are different is transferred towards newcomers (Wahidin, 2012). Thus, there is evidence that those who are prejudiced against one group of people are likely also to be prejudiced towards other groups who are different (Wallace et al., 2013); research into legacy impacts of the conflict in Northern Ireland has identified fear and anger at the 'other community' as the dominant emotional response (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth, & Wong, 1999). Thus, social prejudice can become a mind-set, a way of thinking and an unchallenged cultural norm.

The community and voluntary sector (in partnership with statutory bodies or acting alone) has been identified as a critical conduit for many marginalized groups (McAreavey, 2010; McVeigh, 2006). However in spite of much hard work, sectarianism and segregation remain deeply embedded, and ethnic diversity poses further challenges. The policy drift in community relations over the past 10 years has resulted in slow progress in addressing what was already going to be a long-term process. Indeed as Nolan (2012) bluntly stated, there is no strategy for reconciliation and no real solution found for dealing with the past. Sectarianism, racism and intolerance not only damages people and communities,

but it also projects a negative image overseas which results in Northern Ireland becoming less attractive to international investors and to newcomers and indeed potential returners. It may also hamper the efforts of firms seeking to export products outside the region (Clifton, 2014).

If economic growth comes with tolerance and diversity, then all stakeholders in Northern Ireland need to address these issues. Moreover, if the most successful places are typically those with greater social cohesion, then there is another equally big challenge to face. The places in Northern Ireland that have suffered most from the conflict are also those with the highest levels of multiple deprivation. These two factors are intertwined not just at the regional level, but also at the local one; Mesev et al. (2009) show that neighbourhoods with high levels of conflict-related deaths were those with the highest levels of segregation—but also deprivation. They were also more likely to be located near physical barriers, the so-called peace lines. Moreover, post-conflict, a negative predictor of reconciliation and forgiveness has been shown to be direct personal experiences of violence (Bakke, O' Loughlin, & Ward, 2009)—which supports the view that the challenges to overcome in interface areas are likely to be greater.

Thus, we can add on to the sectarian divide another layer of social divide. Inequalities in physical and mental health, educational attainment and employment are a reality for people living in the most highly segregated areas, interface communities and areas with continued tensions and violence. As an example of this, work undertaken by one of the authors (Macaulay, 2012) regarding a Good Relations (see OFMDFM, 2007) project in an interface area of Belfast highlighted the fact that while there was evidence of progress in indicators such as 'Level of Interface Violence', there was no progress whatsoever in the local service provision indicators relating to educational provision, employment opportunities, level of economic investment, youth provision, and healthcare facilities. As Shirlow (2013) highlights, the generation that took part in the conflict is experiencing ongoing health issues—both physical and mental, and the lack of a comprehensive health strategy to deal with this in the post-conflict society is a problem. These issues can be observed more broadly across what we might term Low Peace Impact Areas (Macaulay, 2010)—geographical areas where there has been low engagement in peacebuilding activities, few benefits from the peace process and a continued risk of instability and violence. Such areas are characterized by high levels of economic and social deprivation, embedded and unchallenged sectarian attitudes, and alienation from the political process and the government. They typically have a low uptake up of government-sponsored programmes and little meaningful cross-community contact or dialogue. Most fundamentally, there is insufficient local community leadership committed to a shared future. There is therefore an urgent need for substantive, innovative and long-term investment in Low Peace Impact Areas if social cohesion is to be built into Northern Ireland, and this is not just about social inequality of course. There is potentially a large reservoir of untapped creativity and talent in such areas; thus, alongside efforts to attract new talent into Northern Ireland, existing talent within Northern Ireland could be released.

6. Current Northern Ireland Executive Policies

6.1. *The Programme for Government*

The Programme for Government (OFMDFM, 2011) states that

A strong modern economy is built upon a healthy, well-educated population backed by high quality public services and a commitment to use prosperity as a means of tackling disadvantage. This, in turn, will lead to a tolerant, stable and inclusive society that has the skills necessary to attract investment and promote growth. (p. 28)

From this, it is clear that tolerance and inclusion are regarded as outcomes of a strong economy rather than among the drivers of prosperity. The Programme for Government also commits to finalize the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy (CSI) in order to “build a united community and improve community relations” (OFMDFM, 2011; p. 50). The CSI policy was first introduced by OFMDFM in January 2007; the slow progress in publishing the draft for consultation (OFMDFM, 2010) and the fact that it was broadly criticized as lacking ambition and specific actions (Wallace Consulting, 2011), and subsequent further delays in the publication of the policy, has resulted in a policy vacuum around community relations. The key commitments in the Programme for Government were to finalize the strategy and agree early actions in 2012/2013, achieve and review early milestones in 2013/2014 and to achieve the remaining milestones and review performance in 2014/2015. However, due to fundamental disagreements on the implementation and progress of CSI, it was eventually scrapped, and subsequently replaced with the less ambitious ‘Together: Building a United Community’ policy in 2013 (OFMDFM, 2013), which largely side-steps the major reconciliation issues involved in dealing with the past—parades and protests, cultural expression (i.e. flags and emblems and so on). Despite this agreement, progress remains slow.

The draft CSI Strategy did acknowledge a link between the impact of improving community relations and reducing poverty and building prosperity. However, tolerance, diversity and social cohesion are seen as underpinning rather than actively driving economic growth. A more ambitious and robust replacement of the CSI policy could contribute to improving diversity, tolerance and cohesion in a way that could more effectively contribute to growth. The Programme for Government does include a commitment to seek local agreement to reduce the number of ‘peace walls’⁵ and this is the one area where ‘Together: Building a United Community’ is arguably more robust than its predecessor, with the stated policy goal of dismantling the peace walls by 2023. This is the first time it has been government policy to work towards the removal of one of the most visible signs of division. There is thus at least an implicit recognition that interface barriers are a barrier to economic growth both within interface communities themselves, and also a barrier to positive international perceptions of Northern Ireland as a normal place to do business. The Programme for Government also includes priorities and commitments on shared education not least to ensure all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015. This new commitment does show recognition of the costs of the divide in education, and collaboration in the curriculum through the Entitlement Framework (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2010) has already resulted in a substantial increase in cross-sectoral collaboration. There has been a substantial growth in shared education initiatives throughout Northern Ireland since 2009. There are now around 300 schools working together in over 80 separate partnerships involving around 44,000 pupils. However, they are almost entirely short-term projects, funded by international donors, rather than the Department of Education. This raises obvious and important questions regarding long-term sustainability and change, and the fact remains that nearly half of Northern Ireland’s children are still taught in schools where 95% or

more of the pupils are of the same religion (Hansson, O' Connor Bones, & McCord, 2013). More generally, there is a significant body of research available demonstrating the benefits of integrated education with regard to attitudes towards those perceived as the 'other' (see, e.g. Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Hughes, 2011; Niens & Cairns, 2005). Kelman (2008) makes the point that ultimately reconciliation can only be achieved with the removal of the negation of 'the other' in people's identities. Thus, contact with, and trust of, members from other communities are likely to be key determinants of this process (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Moreover, with regard to the potential advantages of achieving a more integrated society in the broader sense—that is, moving beyond resolving those social problems arising as a direct result of Northern Ireland's past—the Programme for Government has practically nothing to say. It also does not directly mention migration, diversity or ethnic minorities.⁶

6.2. *Economic Strategy*

The Economic Strategy for Northern Ireland (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Northern Ireland, 2012) has the explicit overarching goal of improving the economic competitiveness of the Northern Ireland, as alluded to above. It also stresses the need to 'rebuild and rebalance' the economy in response to the economic downturn, with the longer term vision of creating an export-led globally competitive regional economy by 2030. Viewed in parallel with the Programme for Government, The Economic Strategy can be criticized for not including a sufficient array of direct actions to improve social cohesion and to reduce poverty and inequality. It does not consider the costs or impact of ongoing division as a restraining factor to growth, and does not consider tolerance, diversity and social cohesion as economic priorities in the way we propose them in this paper; indeed the only use of the word 'diversity' in the Economic Strategy relates to fuel diversity.

The Strategy commits to 'stimulate innovation, R&D and creativity so that we widen and deepen our export base' (p. 10) with the note that a specific strategy in this area is due to be launched in 2012 to underpin this key economic priority (p. 48). In actuality this was published in 2014, by which time the proposed Innovation, R&D and Creativity Strategy had become more narrowly the Innovation Strategy (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Northern Ireland, 2014).⁷ This document in turn sets out the desire that by 2025 Northern Ireland '... will be recognized as an innovation hub ... which embraces creativity and innovation at all levels of society' (p. 7). We would suggest that promoting this culture of creativity and innovation is the context in which some of the ideas discussed in this paper could be further developed. Indeed, the 2012 Economic Strategy makes no mention of (in) migration; this is interesting given that as outlined earlier in this paper Northern Ireland appears to fare badly in its relative performance in this area. This in turn would seem to reflect the limited level of cultural/international diversity that exists therein. Migration to Northern Ireland has been characterized by relatively large numbers of Eastern European migrants, with higher a concentration in the manufacturing, food processing and construction sectors (Jarman & Byrne, 2007). Policy in the area has tended to focus on issues such as discrimination, service provision, and information and advice for migrants. Thus, the approach has been to address problems created by migration rather than to develop a long-term policy on migration as an opportunity as envisaged in the creative-class idea. As we have seen, the

other factors where Northern Ireland scores relatively less well are quality of living and education. Again this would appear to confirm the need to address the problems of social cohesion highlighted earlier, and educational underachievement in particular. Ultimately, as Ferguson and Michaelsen (2013) have noted, the fact that those places most affected by a conflict that formally ended well over a decade ago largely remain the most deprived today suggests significant failures—from successive governments—to deal effectively with the legacy of conflict.

7. Further Reflections and Conclusions

The economy of Northern Ireland, like those of many other peripheral regions, has faced continued pressure to improve its relative performance in a global climate now characterized by the advent of global value chains and trans-national corporate networks. To this can be added all forms of mobile capital, including talent. The response—as elsewhere—has been to adopt the standard suite of neo-liberal development policies in a more or less off-the-shelf fashion, with relatively little deviation from this consensus across the political divide. In one sense, this is perhaps unsurprising, given the extent to which these ideas have become received wisdom amongst policy-makers, politicians and other stakeholders far beyond Northern Ireland.

There is of course one significant difference between Northern Ireland and the vast majority of other territories where such approaches to development have been implemented—namely a recent history that includes four decades of ethno-sectarian conflict, with all the associated legacy issues that implies. We make the case in this paper, therefore, that the particular challenges of the Northern Ireland context have not been sufficiently taken into account within the present policy landscape. Similarly, policy that essentially treats the territory as a ‘normal’ weaker region of the UK (as per a simplistic interpretation of [Table 1](#) in isolation to context) is also unlikely to meet with success in the long run. There are of course potential dangers in arguing a ‘special case’ for any given region, but we would suggest that for Northern Ireland such an approach is justified. The two key challenges in Northern Ireland—the transition from past conflict and the need for economic renewal—have to date largely been tackled in distinct policy spheres. This approach can be implicitly summarized as: fix the economy first, and the other issues (decreased sectarianism, a more tolerant and cohesive society) will follow. As we have seen in the sections above, while there has been a raft of social policies in Northern Ireland, these are typically not joined up with economic imperatives and thus development policy and cohesion policy have not been sufficiently intertwined to maximize effectiveness. This has been brought to a head by the current paradigm of development, that is, a globalized knowledge economy in which creativity and innovation are the key drivers of prosperity, and thus the attraction, retention and harnessing of creatives are particular issues. Tolerance and social cohesion have an important role to play here—thus a simplistic adoption of neo-liberal development policy is inconsistent with the best interests of Northern Ireland in the long run. Given that many of those individuals receiving the highest levels of education ultimately migrate to high-tech/high-wage regions, retention is a particular issue; that is, the benefits of knowledge economy policies around education and skills are unlikely to be fully realized in the absence of social cohesion and high quality of place. This would suggest that a more integrated approach to development policy—which we have argued has been largely absent to date—is imperative. Indeed,

without it, Northern Ireland (in general) and Belfast (in particular) will be unable to reposition themselves as genuinely progressive places, as per Shirlow (2006a). That said, as Nolan (2012, p. 10) has observed “a new, confident, and neutral urban culture has emerged” within Northern Ireland, albeit often in close proximity to areas of persistent deprivation. The key question then is to what extent can the people who are able to enjoy this culture—the restaurants, arts venues and so on—themselves demonstrate a degree of civic leadership? Shirlow (2013) highlights the danger that in being ‘post-sectarian’, these individuals may actually be less politically engaged per se; put bluntly if sectarians are the only people voting, then politics cannot move on from post-conflict debates.

As Leadbeater (1999) highlighted, collaboration is key for creativity, and effective collaboration requires social capital, which in turn implies trust. In many ways, Northern Ireland is a society with high levels of social capital—but this is problematic when related to deep division and thus social capital is strong but typically *sectarian* rather than *civic* in nature. In the language of Putman (1995), *bonding* social capital is high—what is lacking is the *bridging* social capital, and both are needed for balanced development (Cooke, Clifton, & Oleaga, 2005). Consequently, Northern Ireland does possess communities of high social cohesion, but ones which also have been essentially closed to outsiders or those who otherwise do not fit in. As Ellison, Shirlow, & Mulcahy (2012) noted, the conflict actually fostered close-knit communities within which anti-social behaviour was paradoxically seen as an affront to ‘community values’—values which were enforced often by paramilitary organisations rather than by more ‘normal’ forms of government or policing. Thus, in one sense, the very notion of ‘community’ was viewed by the authorities as ‘toxic’. A key challenge of the peace process, therefore, is to build the cross-community links while not completely undermining beneficial aspects of existing community cohesion.

This paper has revealed some potentially fruitful areas for further research; for example, our mapping of the creative core is residence-based, but also of interest are the ‘day-time’ concentrations—that is, where are these people actually employed—and how open (or not) are these places? More detailed quantitative analysis of the Census data (possible if the Office for National Statistics extends its Workplace Zone output data to Northern Ireland as planned) could be revealing, particularly in combination with qualitative data (interviews) to gain a better understanding of individual trajectories and the drivers involved. We should also keep in mind that new forms of segregation might be emerging as the economy changes and working patterns evolve. For example, Shirlow (2006b) shows that firms with fewer than 25 employees are more likely to have polarized employment profiles—what might this mean for an employment model that features rising levels of free-lancing, co-working, and entrepreneurship? This might be an area in which lessons could be learned from other post-conflict places and/or those with an ongoing ethnic frontier—for example, the Balkans, Israel. Finally, given the implications for returners, new investors and potential migrants to Northern Ireland, an improved grasp of the wider destination-branding and place-marketing challenges by the relevant stakeholders is of high importance—that is, gaining a more holistic understanding of the projection of Northern Ireland to the outside world.

To conclude, Northern Ireland as a region and Belfast as a city have undergone dramatic changes over the past four decades, but still face challenges if they are to become places which can truly embrace a creative economy, and to ensure fair access to the economic opportunities thereof across all members of society. If this is to happen, we have argued

in this paper that tolerance, diversity and social cohesion need to be placed much more within the mainstream of economic development policy in Northern Ireland, such that they are regarded as actual drivers of future economic growth, rather than as essentially at best by-products of it. The prevailing neo-liberal policy-making orthodoxy is unlikely to shift radically in the near future, but it can and should be adapted to a very particular set of circumstances—that is, that of a post-conflict society.

Acknowledgements

The genesis of this paper arose out the authors' contribution to a 'Masterclass' session organized by the Centre for Economic Empowerment at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. We thank them for that invitation. We would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Various data from <http://www.ons.gov.uk> (2013/2014).
2. These 26 units were merged into 11 new Local Government Districts as of 1 April 2015.
3. For full details of the methodology which employs data from Eurostat/Urban Audit, European Social Survey and OECD, commissioned by the British Council and developed by BAK Basel Economics Ltd, see http://www.opencities.eu/web/index.php?areas_en.
4. Data from the 2011 Census show that only around 1% of the population of Northern Ireland is of non-western foreign-born origin (the UK figure is around 6%). Belfast is 1.4%, and the highest electoral ward around 5%.
5. Barriers erected at urban interface areas designed to prevent inter-community violence.
6. The consultation on "Development of the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014–2024" took place between June and October 2014. At the time of writing, the final strategy has still not been agreed.
7. There is a preceding strategy for the Creative Industries specifically (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Northern Ireland, 2008).

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