

**Thematic Evaluation of  
Funded Projects:  
Politically-motivated Former  
Prisoners and their Families in  
the Border Areas**

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# Nature of the Evaluation

- Thematic rather than individualised
- Collective Impact of the Funded Projects
- Benchmarked against the objectives of the Peace Programme and the 'reintegration' of political ex-prisoners
- Development of Framework of Analysis
- Not project specific

# Methodology

1. Examination of individual project evaluations
2. Review of relevant academic literature
3. Site visits to 6 border region projects and 2 Belfast support projects
  - Users, staff management, local stakeholders, focus groups and individual interviews
4. Agreement of Key Themes with steering committee, stakeholders and projects
5. Range of interviews with stakeholders re themes
6. Production of Report

# Rethinking Reintegration

- Reintegration as residual criminalisation
- Reintegration – passive individualistic versus social reintegration
- The centrality of agency
- “Removing the barrier to full participation”
- Ex-prisoners as active leaders in conflict transformation (military, political and communal).

# Barriers to Participation

- Barriers to employment, practical and legal
- Housing
- Stress on families
- Long-term effects of imprisonment
- Isolation
- “Criminalising” effect of contact with statutory agencies

# Target Group

The distinctive problems and experiences of:

- Ex-prisoners
- Ex-combatants
- Displaced persons
- Families

# Projects consulted

- Abhaile Aris
- Expac
- Failte Abhaile
- Failte Chluan Eois
- La Nua
- Tus Nua Sligeach
  
- Coiste na n-Iarchimi
- The Education Trust

# Management and Organisation

- Self-help, autonomous organisation principle
- Led by activists amongst target group; formal democracy less significant, though users have plenty of opportunity to influence direction
- Border Action requests to broaden management committee have led to problems – rationale?

## Service Delivery

- Vocationally oriented training in a “safe space”
- Provision of long-term peer counselling
- Social support and symbolic capital

# Vocational Training in a “Safe Space”

“Other groups offer training no different than our own. These courses have always been available, yet the reality is that they weren’t being accessed by former prisoners. This sort of work is not as simple as saying ‘there’s the training, go and use it’. We have an interest in our target group whereas other organisations don’t. [Others] claim to make ex-prisoners one of their target populations [on a list of 10 or more]. Yet, when you talk to them, no actual ex-prisoners are receiving any help. Our specialist focus is only on ex-prisoners and their families. They know us, and are willing to work with us.”

“This is a whole different relationship than with a statutory agency. It is this personal touch that matters”.

## Value of Peer Counselling/Mutual Support

“There is a need for a trained counsellor who is one of our own who you can trust. If you don't trust them you won't open up. If you have been involved in the struggle you can't open up. We are on delicate ground”

“We would not have confidence in a counsellor from outside. We would not trust them”.

## Legacy of conflict requires long-term commitment

“We have a huge responsibility to each other. We have encouraged people to open up stuff that they were happy to keep closed. We encouraged people to start the process of counselling. ... To pull that, stop that, withdraw that service would be immoral. This is completely different than a computer course or a training course. Anyone that thinks we can open up these wounds in the counselling process, just to pull the rug out from under them now, doesn't understand half of what these people are going through”.

# Social Support & Symbolic Capital

## 1. “Drop in” space counters isolation/exclusion:

“I come here at least once per week. Having a central place means you don’t have the same sense of isolation. I think we are gradually being accepted by the community and having the centre is part of that; absolutely, there is no doubt about that.”

## 2. Provides Symbolic Capital

“Letterkenny is the major city in Donegal and to have this building on Main Street in Letterkenny is just so important.”

# Projects and Post-Conflict Transition

- Working in the broader community
- Political transition and the Republican community
- Political transition and work with former opponents
- Relations with the State in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- Conflict transformation and the significance of location

# Working in the broader community

Peaceful means of political activism

- **Engagement with socially excluded groups**

“On the Runs know a lot about being refugees... It occurred to us that we could be ambassadors for asylum seekers and others.”

“It was felt that ex-prisoners and asylum seekers could explore common themes of displacement, exclusion and discrimination.”

“We can draw on the wider republican experience of the peace process to promote better relations between travellers and the settled community.”

“Our experience of discrimination makes us more able to reach out to other marginalised groups.”

- **Linking with community networks**

“Local people now accept the project as partners in local development; negative perceptions of the group are changing ... people from a range of backgrounds are using the services especially the childcare – our participation in other structures at local and county level is accepted and welcomed.”

# Political transition and the Republican community

Ex-prisoners have nothing to prove to anyone and so may, if they so wish, take the lead in cultural and attitudinal change within their broader political constituency.

- **Seeking to interpret Republicanism in a progressive, inclusive way**

- “nation-building”
- culture, commemorative, exploring memories

- **Forum for discussion and evaluation of the demands of the evolving peace process**

“The project certainly has a role as a centre of discussion and debate for the movement – not everyone is in Sinn Fein! Participation in projects like this takes away personal bias – taking someone out of isolation actually makes them more broad-minded – it takes them away from tunnel vision. An organisation like this is not under party discipline – the discussion can widen out into the broader community. Without such projects the group could go back into isolation. ‘Soldiers were left at the side of the road as the politicians went forward...’ Projects like this make sure that doesn’t happen.”

- **“Keeping people on board...”**

# Transition and engagement with former opponents

- Responsibility to engage with ‘the other’ as ex-combatants
- Nation Building Program, The Other View
- Engagement with Orange Order, PUP, Roy Garland, etc.
- Engagement with other post conflict initiatives eg. Glencree, Healing Through Remembering, Derry\Raphoe Action Group
- “A year ago I never thought I would be in the same room as a PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) officer or a UDA and an Orange man and a member of the IRSP (Irish Republican Socialist Party). We need more interaction like that, for example the UDA person and I realised we had the same problems”

# Ex-prisoners and engagement with the State

- State not a monolith in either jurisdictions (differences re volume, culture, etc across state agencies in the Republic)
- Centrality of ex-prisoners relations with police for the broader peace process
- Continued harassment North and South
- Particularities of Republican attitudes to Gardai and the notion of 'political generosity.'

# Ex-prisoners and the centrality of location

- Particularities of Border Region
- Rural versus urban distinctions
- Distinction between and amongst different 'locales' e.g., W Belfast, Leitrim, Sligo, Dundalk etc
- As above, significance of projects as 'symbolic capital' particularly in 'garrison towns' and communities where Republicans a minority

# The Future

- Funding insecurity – govts not living up to Agreement
- Ageing
- Symbolic statement of the right of ex-combatants to full civic participation
- “When does an ex-prisoner stop being an ex-prisoner?”
- Diversification, mainstreaming?
- Projects as ‘donors’ rather than recipients.