



**SHARING EXPERIENCES FROM
NORTHERN IRELAND**

REINTEGRATION OF EX-COMBATANTS

#2

PEACEBUILDING PRACTICE NOTES: SHARING EXPERIENCE FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

The Social Change Initiative (SCI) believes in the power of peer learning and exchange. Located in Belfast (Northern Ireland) it has identified issues and strategies that address the challenges of peacebuilding in a violently contested society. The purpose of these short Peacebuilding Practice Notes is to share insights and experience with activists and peacebuilding practitioners in other divided societies.

The Peacebuilding Practice Notes focus on specific initiatives that helped to provide alternatives to violence and consolidate the peace process in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that the learning can travel and be adapted to circumstances in other countries. While no context is the same, The Social Change Initiative believes that examples of conflict transformation offer the potential for shared learning.

The Peacebuilding Practice Notes are available to download from The Social Change website (www.thesocialchangeinitiative.org). Each Note provides links for further information. This Note describes how non-state organisations addressed issues of support for political former prisoners on a self-help basis, framing these strategies as an important aspect of peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

Political Ex-Prisoners:

The Challenge and Opportunities of Peacebuilding

This Practice Note draws on the experience of work carried out by, and with, political ex-prisoner groups since 1994 in Northern Ireland. Much learning has been identified on both the specific needs of individuals that have served often lengthy prison sentences, as well as the contribution that political ex-prisoners have made to peacebuilding. This has taken the form of political activism, involvement in community activism and the design of support structures for the ex-prisoner population and their families. The work was carried out over an extended period that was marked by the uncertainties of a tentative peace process. The framing of what became known as DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation and Re-integration) was also lacking. Although the issue of disarmament/decommissioning was a constant item, there was little or no agreement on policies or measures to implement what Kofi Annan was to describe in his Preface to the UN Report on 'Integrated Demobilisation, Disarmament and Re-Integration Standards (UNDKPO, 2006) in the following terms *'The disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration of former combatants and those associated with armed groups is a pre-requisite for post conflict stability and recovery'*.

Most political ex-prisoners were aligned to one or other of the various organisations actively engaged in the violence, leaving these organisations to mobilise support for 'their' prisoners over the course of the conflict. What many had previously termed 'Prisoner of War' sections were effectively replaced with self-help political ex-prisoner organisations when European Union funding became available in the post 1994 peacebuilding period. The information in this Practice Note is drawn from the work of these groups and from independent funders and NGOs that supported their programmes. It examines political ex-prisoner needs, opportunities and challenges, as well as the organisational support required.

As many aspects of DDR are still outstanding in Northern Ireland and politically contentious, the Practice Note touches on the politics of what is a still unresolved situation.

Northern Ireland: The Issue of Political Prisoners

The conflict in Northern Ireland focused on the constitutional status of the region, with violence a daily occurrence over the years since 1968. Armed parties to the conflict fell into three categories: militant Republicans (fighting for a united island of Ireland); Loyalist paramilitaries (supporting continued union with Britain); and the state security forces (the locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment, the British Army and the police – the Royal Ulster Constabulary). There was a diversity of non-state armed organisations within both Loyalism and Republicanism, all of which had prisoners sentenced under emergency legislation.

A central dilemma for political ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland is the fact that they were designated as criminals by the British Government despite specific 'special category' trial, sentencing and prison policies. Consequently, the number of 'political' ex-prisoners was not officially recorded, but is estimated as being some 30,000 for conflict-related offences over the period 1970-1998. These prisoners relate to the three main Republican organisations: Provisional IRA, Official IRA and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), and three Loyalist organisations: Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Freedom Fighters/Ulster Defence Association (UFF/UDA). While there are prisoners that relate to other non-state armed groups, the support work with political ex-prisoners largely focused on the named organisations.

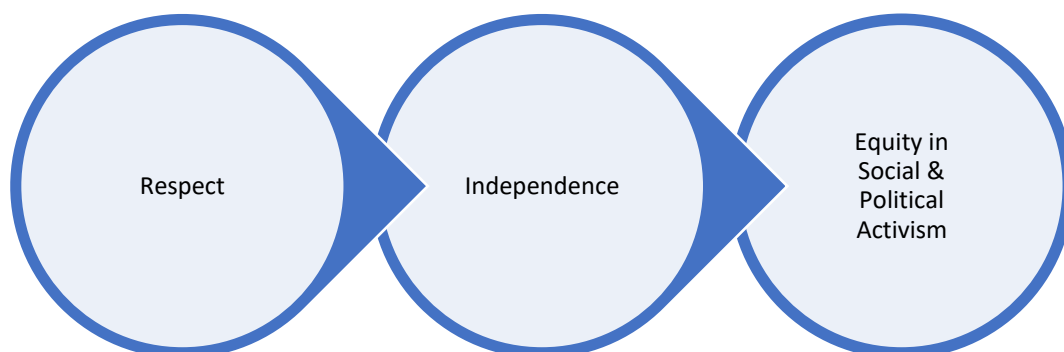
The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) contained a section on 'Prisoners' which agreed the establishment of an independent commission in Northern Ireland (with parallel provision in the Republic of Ireland) to provide an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners affiliated to organisations deemed to be maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire. Specific reference was also made to the need for appropriate reintegration mechanisms for political ex-prisoners. Although politically controversial, a timetable was adhered to which saw all qualifying prisoners released by 2000. The legislation was sufficiently flexible to allow for recognition of any additional organisational ceasefires, extending the groupings of prisoners eligible to qualify under the early release provisions.

All 'qualifying' prisoners were released on licence. The terms of the licence stipulate that s/he does not support an organisation not on ceasefire; does not become involved in acts of terrorism; or, in the case of life-sentenced prisoners, that s/he does not become a danger to the public. This technocratic approach triggered early release but left ex-prisoners with the label of a criminal conviction, with consequent residual criminalisation that continues to present certain barriers to effective societal reintegration. This compromise failed to address the political ex-prisoner demand for

amnesty which, to date, is still a matter of political disagreement. Despite this, many political ex-prisoners played a major role within their organisations and communities to argue in support of the peace process and conflict transformation more generally. Much of their credibility was drawn from their status as political ex-prisoners and their previous activism.

Developing Self-Help Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres

The work to both identify and meet the needs of released political prisoners was taken forward by both Republican and Loyalist Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres. Each political/paramilitary organisation developed Support Centres to serve its own constituency of ex-prisoners and their families – although, as they developed, a number reached out to act as advice centres and development hubs to the local community. The various Centres shared some core principles:

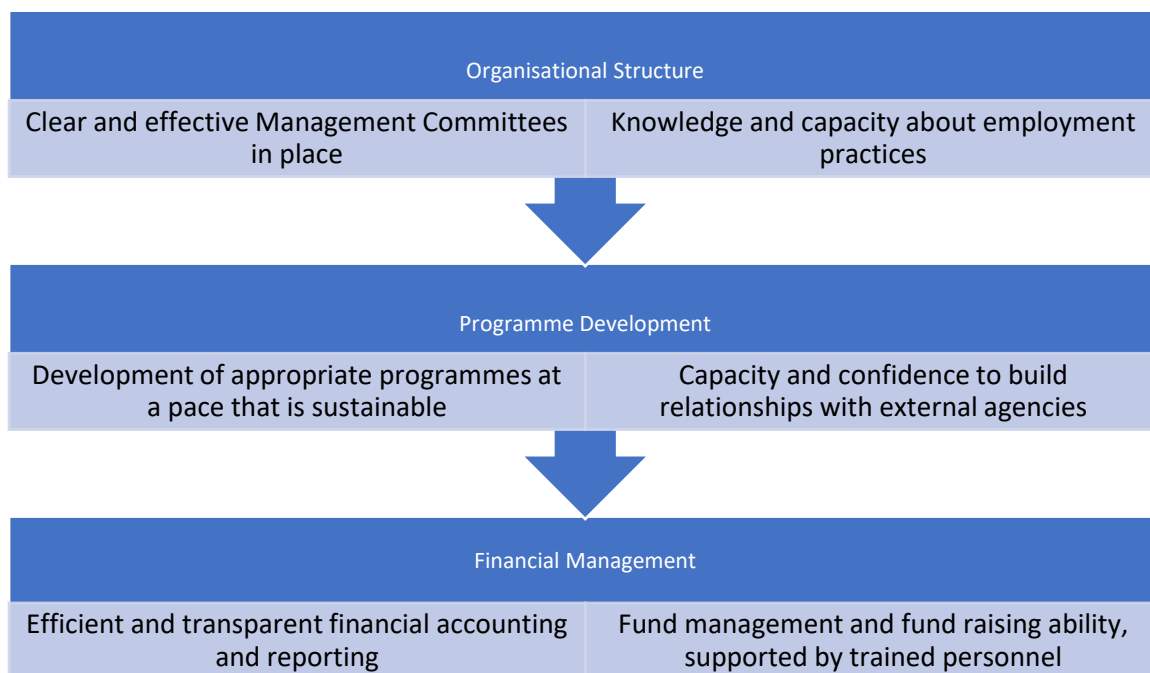


- Respect for the political status and agency of the ex-prisoner constituency
- Independent management and direction by the political ex-prisoner base
- The right for political ex-prisoners to be full and equal citizens, demonstrated, in part, through their social and political activism.

Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres demand respect for a constituency that experienced imprisonment due to conflict-related actions. Clear demarcations were established between political ex-prisoners and criminal ex-prisoners. There was a resistance to working with agencies that failed to make this distinction, or that

sought to control the ex-prisoner re-integration process. The very existence of these Centres symbolised progress within the peace process itself.

As funding was made available to facilitate the establishment and development of Self-Help Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres (in the main provided through EU PEACE Programmes) some shared development needs were apparent:

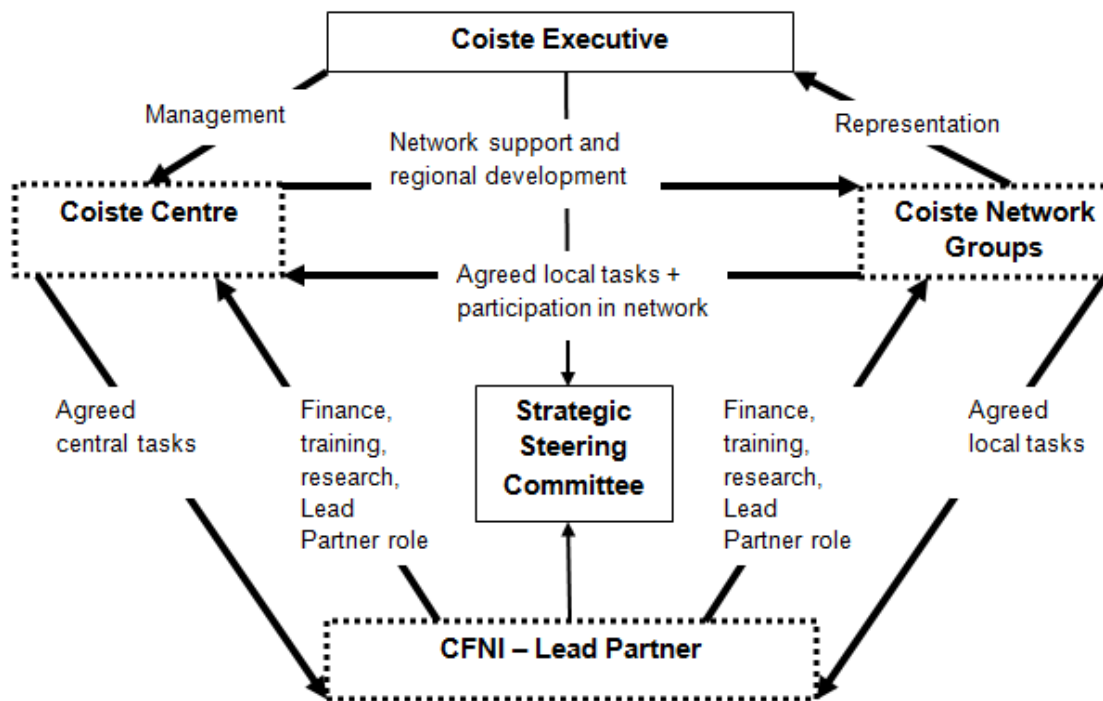


It is normal for the Political Ex-Prisoner Centres to be staffed by ex-prisoners/ex-combatants themselves. This requires clarity of employment and recruitment practice to avoid the Centres being seen as political cliques. Ideally, Centre Management Committees should be open to the broad base of political ex-prisoners rather than being viewed as controlled by hand-picked political activists. This can be difficult in practice, where ad hoc funding arrangements result in Centres being periodically maintained through politically-motivated volunteer commitment. What is essential, however, is that the Centres are run in an efficient and transparent manner which can withstand the scrutiny of external funding agencies and society more generally. The Northern Ireland experience highlights the tendency for the media and politicians critical of the work to demonise the operation and funding of ex-prisoner re-integration work that is outside statutory control. It is essential that these suspicions and questions are answered and challenged.

Self-help Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres can expect to be treated with suspicion by the media and politicians that are critical of the peace process. They

must be prepared to answer any questions and to challenge/respond to politically-inspired criticism.

Where the political ex-prisoner constituency is spread over a wide geographical area, then the development of a networked organisation, with a central coordinating structure, can be effective. It is important that there is a clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the local groups/centres vis-à-vis the coordinating hub. One model that was developed to serve Republican (IRA) ex-prisoners (Coiste na n-Iarchimí) was structured in the following manner to relate to its then main funder partner – The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI):



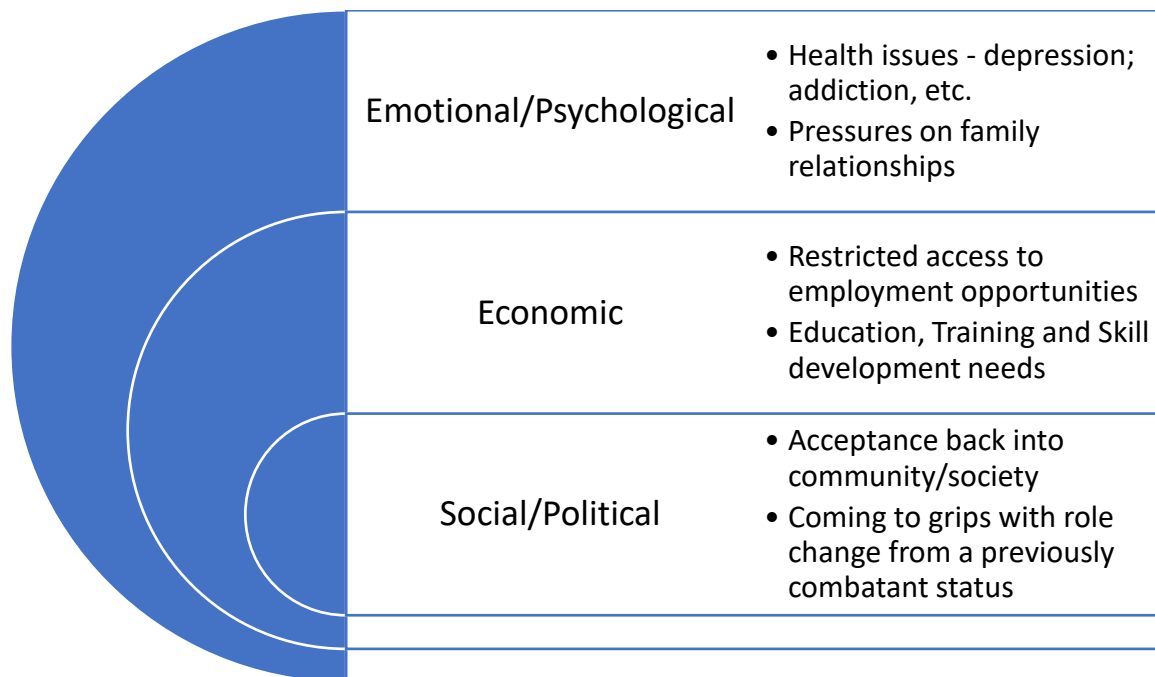
The Coiste network groups are geographically dispersed local Self-Help Centres; the Coiste Centre acting as the coordination hub (with an information and support function); and the Coiste Executive drawing the structure together through strategic direction and management. The relationship with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, as the channel for EU PEACE funds, was time limited and funder specific.

It is important to design a structure that can offer coordination and representation for political ex-prisoners belonging to a specific party/organisation where work is conducted on a national or widely dispersed geographic basis. Equally, however,

individual ex-prisoners should be free to move on with their lives outside structured organisational support, if this is their preference.

Identifying the Needs of Political Ex-Prisoners

The first fact to recognise is that political ex-prisoners are individuals, with different needs and capabilities. The second, is that political ex-prisoners and their families are in the best position to identify their own needs; with the caveat that the very camaraderie and peer expectations that supported them during the conflict can make it difficult to demonstrate vulnerability. Evidence in Northern Ireland shows that former prisoners and their families experienced extremely high levels of personal loss (in terms of family members being killed or severely injured). In addition, the psychological pressures of coming to terms with actions carried out can also exact a toll during the post-conflict period. These, often hidden issues, combined with the more expected economic, social and welfare needs, create a series of overlapping challenges:



Early work, largely conducted by political ex-prisoners themselves, researched the individual circumstances and needs of ex-prisoners and their families. Much depended on whether family relationships could be maintained and/or re-established and how local communities responded to them. In some cases, released political ex-prisoners were welcomed as heroes (which brought its own pressures and

expectations); in others, they faced social stigma. Few ex-prisoners found that imprisonment had a positive impact on their family relationships, with family members having moved on with their lives. This is particularly the case where individuals served long prison sentences:

"I hadn't seen my daughter. She was born when I was in prison so there had to be a family bond built again. You're moving into an area where it's alien to you, and you had to get your bearings around that, and new neighbours, and as I say, the family commitments. ."

Republican Ex-Prisoner

When Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres opened in the period immediately after the 1994 cessation of violence, they provided a range of basic services:

- ✓ Information and advice on welfare benefits, personal finances and sources of financial support
- ✓ Information on housing and accommodation, where required
- ✓ Help in updating CVs (Curriculum Vitae) to enable ex-prisoners to apply for employment, education or training
- ✓ Information about education and training opportunities
- ✓ Referral to specialist agencies, where required

In addition, the Centres offered a social drop-in function, providing a listening ear and mutual support. As Centres developed they hosted training courses on IT, Basic Skills, Return to Education, etc. A number of Centres also provided a counselling service, or a referral to counselling services:

"We've had a huge number of people who have committed suicide on the basis that they found it very difficult to live with some of the things that happened during the conflict. That comes down to the individual. I don't mean how strong they were mentally. . .but something inside them snapped and they decided to take their own lives, and that's very difficult to understand and put into context. . ."

Loyalist Ex-Prisoner

Because of legal regulations that required counsellors to report any crimes admitted by their clients during treatment to the police, Political Ex-Prisoner Centres had to train their own members as qualified counsellors to allow for confidentiality.

Over time, it was found that health issues were of major concern, including alcohol addiction and depression. Welfare concerns highlighted the poor economic circumstances of many political ex-prisoners in old age.

While initial research into the support needs of individual political ex-prisoners is essential, it must be remembered that these needs change over time and depending on circumstance. Consequently, there must be ongoing contact to identify and respond to changing priorities.

Employment, Education and Training

Access to employment, education and training was high on the priorities for prisoners on release. They faced a range of problems. Very often long prison sentences meant that their skill attainment was dated and needed up-graded. Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres required the flexibility to respond to the needs of individuals with variable levels of educational qualifications (or indeed, some had none). If poor skills and educational levels made it difficult to obtain employment, there were other factors to take into account – the continuing criminal conviction label closed some job opportunities (particularly in areas where security clearance was required); there were concerns about personal security if the jobs on offer required travel into unfamiliar areas; and political ex-prisoners often lived in communities that suffered from high levels of unemployment.

“When I got out I went for a job and had to draw a plan in metres and centimetres. I simply didn’t know what these things meant. When I went inside everything was pounds, shillings and inches. I just couldn’t do what was a very simple test”.

Republican Ex-Prisoner

In addition, there was often the need to take the time to build the confidence of individuals that had been subjected to the prison regime on a long-term basis.

Political Ex-Prisoner groups adopted various strategies:

- ✓ Offering training courses in areas where political ex-prisoners felt comfortable and secure
- ✓ Negotiating with mainstream training and educational providers for ex-prisoner access to courses

- ✓ Establishing an Educational Bursary Scheme which offered financial support to political ex-prisoners, and immediate family members, who wanted to return to education
- ✓ Developing job creation programmes, which re-trained political ex-prisoners on the job, such as construction companies
- ✓ Helping political ex-prisoners to meet the costs of obtaining basic skills, such as driving licences, etc.
- ✓ Developing and opening social economy projects to provide employment within the communities where political ex-prisoners lived
- ✓ Providing start-up support for small businesses, which included developing networks of supportive established business people.

Political Ex-Prisoner Support Centres consistently recorded and challenged situations where ex-prisoners were excluded from educational, training and employment opportunities due to their perceived political allegiances or continuing criminal conviction label.

Offering support for employment, education and training is a core aspect of work in providing opportunities for political ex-prisoners. This, however, must be delivered at a pace that ex-prisoners feel comfortable with and time allowed for confidence-building around personal security and opportunity-related ability. It requires networking and partnership working with external agencies that may be initially apprehensive of working with political ex-prisoners. There needs to be flexibility in responding to the needs of individuals with no formal educational or skills attainment, alongside those that may be very highly qualified.

Political Ex-Prisoners and Community Activism

“Our war now is to make sure that our communities reap the benefits of the peace process. With better education; better health services; better opportunities for employment; people can aspire to whatever they want to be. I look forward at the end of the day for an inclusive society that shares everything and for our communities to be at peace with each other.”

Loyalist Ex-Prisoner

Political ex-prisoners often question the use of the term ‘re-integration’, arguing that they are part of their communities and do not need to be ‘re-integrated’. However, in practice, experience varies depending on the way specific communities perceive the returning political ex-prisoner and his/her previous actions/affiliations. Where there

is community scepticism then efforts need to be made to build relationships of trust. Where there is a general acceptance of the individual (and his/her politics) then community activism is an accepted path for participation, and potentially, for skills development.

Where political ex-prisoners became involved in community activism it can help them to relate to a broader range of local needs and opportunities alongside focusing on their own specific circumstances. It can also position them to work in partnership with a wide range of organisations, agencies and government authorities, serving to normalise relationships and challenge stereotypes.

“When the ceasefires came about, I thought, my own personal view and the view of my peers that I socialised with and comrades I went about with was that, if the war is basically over now, then we have to start rebuilding our communities. That was the approach we basically took. . .”

Loyalist Ex-Prisoner

While highly motivated political ex-prisoners can contribute in a positive manner to local community development it is important that they are sensitive to pre-existing local activists and organisations. They should be aware of how they might be perceived in terms of their credibility, influence and legitimacy. There is a need to participate on an equal basis rather than being seen as dominant or controlling due to their past record and/or affiliations.

Political ex-prisoners can make a positive contribution by participation in community organisations and activism. This participation needs to take account of existing activists, processes and structures; being sensitive to how their community involvement might be perceived locally and ensuring that it is not seen as being dominant or controlling in approach.

The contribution of political ex-prisoners working to discourage young people from involvement in paramilitarism can be particularly effective given the credibility they bring from their political activism and ex-prisoner status. They need to be able to relate to the current generation of young people, as well as to be able to explain how they became involved in past struggles, and why they support current peace processes, in an open and honest manner.

“I’m glad there’s not a young generation of Republicans going to prison and going through what we went through. I don’t want that for my people, or my family, or my community. you have to think of the bigger picture and not just our own narrow, political narrative. . .”

Republican Ex-Prisoner

When exercising community activism, it is necessary to strike a balance between the legitimacy the political ex-prisoners bring from their experience and activism in past struggles and the need to create space for broader community participation and new priorities. Political ex-prisoners often have the credibility to argue for peace and to demonstrate leadership in developing practical initiatives to alleviate potential violence. Where there is a leadership vacuum there is a danger that support for peacebuilding can be eroded or undermined by critics of the peace process.

Political Ex-Prisoners and Conflict Transformation

If re-integration was not always an issue at local community level, there were still challenges within broader society. The role of supportive influential individuals who were external to the political ex-prisoner constituency was important. So too was the commitment that many political ex-prisoners, and ex-combatants generally, showed in promoting the peace process and conflict transformation. This highlighted a 'strengths-based' approach advocated by Political Ex-Prisoner groups rather than focusing solely on needs. As such, the leadership role of political ex-prisoners is important and should be fostered, albeit on the basis of equality with other sources of activism.

Areas of training that were found to be useful included:

- ✓ Training in conflict management
- ✓ Communications training and dealing with media stereotypes
- ✓ Information on policy-making and advocacy
- ✓ Support in holding 'difficult conversations' and dialogue on potentially sensitive and divisive issues.

Conflict transformation invariably involves relationship-building with previously estranged groups, communities and institutions. It can also involve political ex-prisoners in helping to alleviate continuing tensions at societal and community level. **Political ex-prisoners have been to the forefront across many communities in Northern Ireland by using their influence and connections to alleviate potentially violent situations.**

"We don't shirk away from hard issues, or hard questions. We sit with our Republican colleagues now and we've a line of contact where we can talk to each other. . . We use our influence with our own community activists to try and quell things as opposed to allow them to . . . be pushed into a situation that's going to be violent."

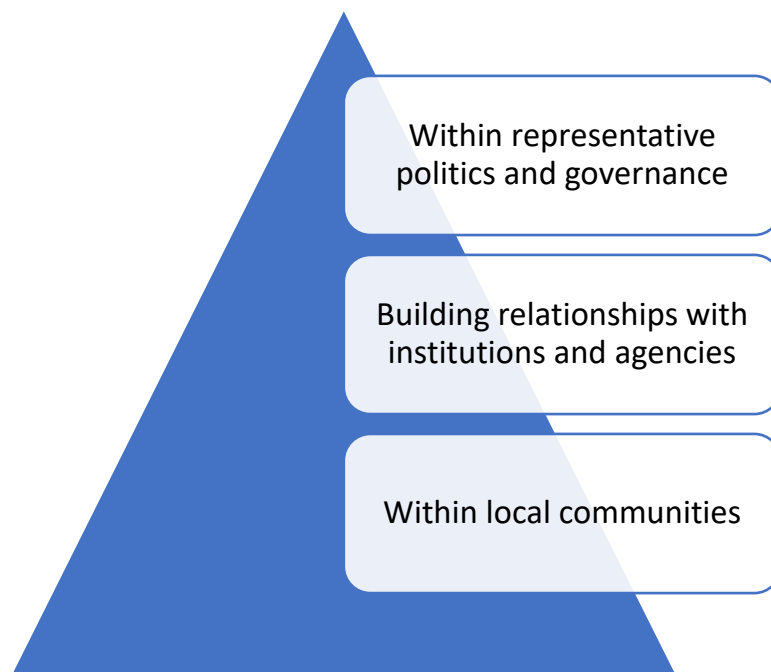
Loyalist Ex-Prisoner

There is a balance between the external and the internal leadership expected from political ex-prisoners. In Northern Ireland many of them played a prominent role in the peace process, as well as explaining the implications, and arguing for support for that process, with their comrades. At the same time, political ex-prisoners are often expected to relate to potentially critical groups and institutions, such as victim/survivors, politicians and former armed opponents. Given the ability to engage within both these contexts, an evaluator of work undertaken by political ex-prisoners concluded:

“A central conclusion of this evaluation is that there is a requirement to encourage understandings of the former prisoner community which stretches beyond the stereotypical depictions found within much of the public domain. Without doubt former prisoner groups are at the fore of promoting and articulating change and have provided a meaningful model of conflict transformation and leadership that has national and international appeal.”

-External Evaluator of Political Ex-Prisoner Funding Programme

Evidence suggests that a positive contribution was apparent at three levels of conflict transformation and peacebuilding:



“Because of the background that former prisoners have, they have been able to argue successfully for moderation in terms of dealing with the conflict. It’s difficult for people in the community to accuse them of unwillingness to engage in violence, if necessary. If they advocate a non-violent response it tends to be respected more by the community.”

Loyalist Ex-Prisoner

Political ex-prisoners have been described as ‘the middle management’ in the peace process. As such, they have the right to express their politics as an expression of full citizenship without being at risk of physical attack:

“You can’t sit on the margins all the time, you have to get in there and do the best you can for your people. . .We can still be militant and revolutionary in our politics. I think that’s important as well, that our message is as valid as anybody else’s. . .”

Republican Ex-Prisoner

For conflict transformation to be effective, the conditions must be in place that allows politics to work on the basis of persuasion, dialogue and debate rather than through violence.

The political agency of ex-prisoners needs to be recognised and respected. They have a right to be engaged in political activism for social change on an equal basis with other citizens. It is also important to acknowledge, and where possible utilise, the potential credibility that they can contribute in arguing for conflict transformation and non-violent approaches to social change.

Drawing on External Support

The importance of political ex-prisoner directed self-help strategies has been a feature of work in Northern Ireland, respecting the insights, expertise and contribution of these individuals. There are areas, however, where expert external support also proved useful. This included education and training opportunities, as well as addressing health issues (such as depression, addiction and other concerns). Often, political ex-prisoners will have suffered serious physical injury due to either, or both, the conflict or imprisonment. Family members may have suffered similar physical

and psychological health issues. This requires relationships that can ensure response from the mainstream agencies and services.

A specific area of external support is that of establishing social economy business and employment opportunities for political ex-prisoners. Initiatives supported to work with the self-help groups highlighted the need for:

- ✓ Social economy ideas generation
- ✓ Strategic planning around specific ideas
- ✓ Project feasibility appraisal
- ✓ Project management skills and approaches
- ✓ Marketing
- ✓ Legal structures of enterprises
- ✓ Business plans
- ✓ Training needs analysis
- ✓ Committee skills

While ex-prisoners received training and development support in these areas, it was also productive to draw on external sources of expertise. Sympathetic business people and professionals (accountants, lawyers, etc.) could be supportive. Where social enterprise initiatives are poorly planned, or rushed, they can undermine confidence by either failing or running up against barriers.

Given the adverse media and political attention often attracted by political ex-prisoner work, it is useful to build up networks of external support that speak of the positive contribution that is being made. Academics who are prepared to take the time to work with Political Ex-Prisoner groups can offer external validation, as can representatives of broader civil society institutions, such as Churches, Trade Unions, Employers' Bodies, etc. Time taken to foster these relationships is well spent. The identification of individual 'champions' (preferably seen in public as 'unexpected allies') can help smooth the path of relationship-building.

The supportive role of 'unexpected allies' who carry weight, influence and respect in broader society is invaluable in seeking to address re-integration challenges.

The Contribution of External Funders

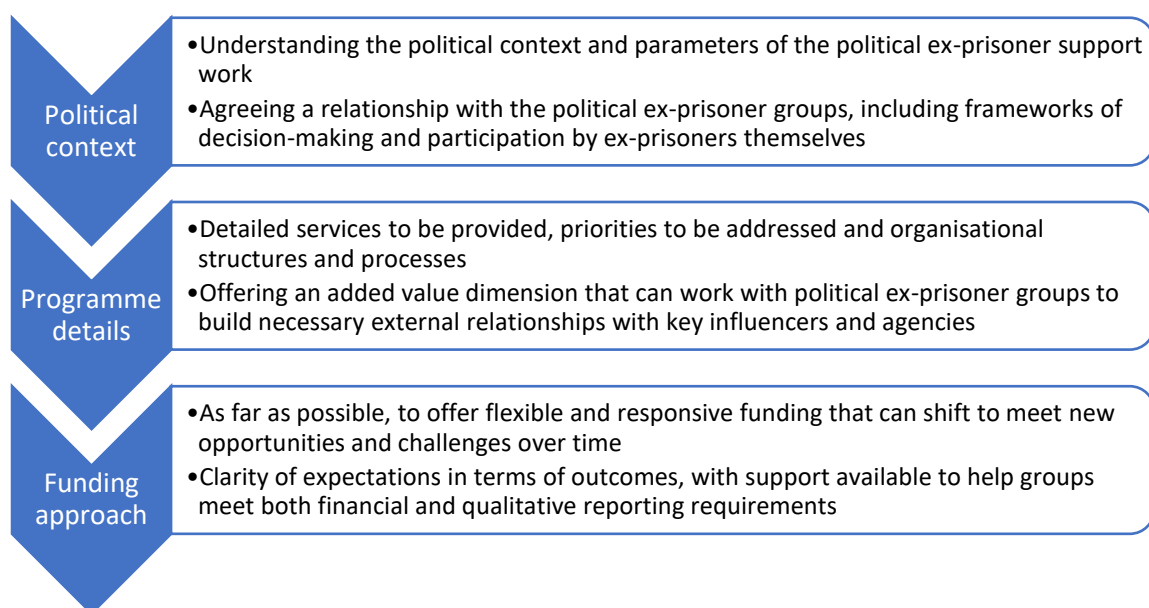
Where possible, mainstream Government financial support for the re-integration of political ex-prisoners should be written in, and specified, by the peace agreement. This did not happen in Northern Ireland, resulting in a dependence on EU PEACE funds, and some independent philanthropy, with access to government programmes

being uncoordinated and haphazard in nature. Whatever the source of the funding the core questions to be posed might include:

- (i) Will the proposed work address the needs and priorities identified by political ex-prisoners?
- (ii) Will the approach proposed encourage self-help and the active participation of political ex-prisoners and their family members/communities?
- (iii) Does the work build the capacity of those involved to gain skills and confidence and to build the necessary relationships with external agencies?
- (iv) Does the work create the conditions for political ex-prisoners to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict transformation?
- (v) Are there alternative sources of funding available, and if so, can partnerships be built to provide the necessary financing to develop and support viable projects?

If a funder is to answer these questions, they need to meet with the groups representing political ex-prisoners rather than relying on written applications alone or working through intermediaries. It is an added advantage to have accessible staff, with experience and political awareness, who are not afraid to pose challenging questions. Open and honest relationships forged at an early stage can create the conditions of trust between funder and self-help organisations that allow difficulties to be shared if they arise, and dealt with before becoming a crisis.

The following diagram summarises a range of the issues to be agreed between funder and the self-help organisation. Discussion and agreement in advance can help avoid misunderstandings at a later stage in the relationship:



Funder flexibility and responsiveness is particularly important given the changing circumstances of peacebuilding, and the shifting needs and priorities experienced by political ex-prisoners. Inflexibility, and unrealistic expectations, can be one of the biggest problems with largescale government and/or institutional funding programmes. Training and support to help funded organisations to meet reporting requirements can also avoid longer-term difficulties, although the nature and relevance of the reports required should be clarified by the funder.

Finally, funders can offer an added value dimension by going beyond the money. They can open doors to a variety of stakeholders, decision-makers and sources of external support and expertise. They can help identify 'champions'. They can act as critical friends in an inclusive peacebuilding process, while maintaining faith with the process itself.

Further Links

Shirlow, P. & McEvoy, K. (2008) *Beyond the Wire: Former Prisoners and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland*: Pluto Press, London

Coiste na n-Iarchimi, 10, Beechmount Avenue, Belfast BT12 – www.coiste.ie

EPIC (Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre), 33a Woodvale Road, Belfast BT13 3BN – www.epic.org.uk

Resurgam Community Development Trust, Office Suite 3, Laganview Enterprise Centre, 69. Drumbeg Drive, Old Warren, Lisburn BT28 1QT – www.resurgamtrust.co.uk

Teach na Failte, 31 Patrick Street, Strabane, Co. Tyrone, BT82 8DQ – www.teachnafailte.com

Kilmurray, A. (2017) *Notes for Funders in Conflict Affected Environments: The Social Change Initiative*, Belfast – <http://www.thesocialchangeinitiative.org/conflict-affected-environments-notes-for-grantmakers/>