

ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND PEACEBUILDING
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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This article examines the role of the European Union Peace II Fund and the International Fund for Ireland in building the peace dividend in Northern Ireland through the perspectives of the members of community groups, local strategic partnerships and funding agencies, civil servants, and development officers. It examines the views of ninety-eight study participants regarding the sources of community development funding and the accessibility of these funds. It analyzes their experiences with the European Union Peace II Fund and the International Fund for Ireland in the greater context of community development, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border communities.

When any ethnic conflict comes to an end, be it in Northern Ireland or in Bosnia, the post-violence peacebuilding process can begin.¹ International agencies have an understanding of how to use foreign aid and humanitarian assistance to address structural inequality and economic deprivation, and thus assist in building the peace process in post-violent societies.² There is awareness among donor agencies that “the inequalities that cast a shadow over the prospects for peace include not only the vertical disparities of class, but also horizontal divisions of race, ethnicity, religions and regions.”³ The economic policies that exacerbated these political cleavages need to be addressed to remedy past grievances.⁴ However, economic aid is not a panacea and may escalate rather than de-escalate group tensions.⁵ It is very important that we know what works and what does not work to improve the effectiveness of community groups doing the hard work of achieving equity and peace in troubled communities. In this study we explore whether the recipients of economic assistance in Northern Ireland perceive the aid allocation process as allowing crucial peacebuilding work to move forward.

In the summer of 2006, over a period of fifteen weeks, Sean Byrne carried out extensive interviews with ninety-eight persons, including recipients of the aid, funding agency development officers, and senior civil servants managing the International