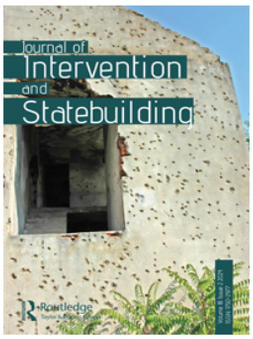

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# Inclusion in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: A 'History of the Present'

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents a 'history of the present' of the concept of inclusion and how it has been centred in analysis of the Northern Ireland process in recent years. Historical discourse analysis is used to deconstruct how the idea of inclusion as a defining feature of the NI process came to predominance over time. The analysis reveals the existence of different 'patches' of peacemaking activity that combined to deliver the agreement. Analysing the ways these different types of mediation were stitched together reveals the bigger picture of the varied role of mediation in NI, with broader lessons on the multi-track/inclusion nexus.

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Mediation; inclusion; genealogy; Northern Ireland; Peacebuilding

> While governments summit agreements, people and political parties make peace (Corry 2012).

## Introduction

Belfast. April 2023. The city was buzzing with activity. Political leaders, including the US president, UK prime ministers (past and present) and Irish Taoisigh (past and present) were in town to attend a series of high-level events to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement (hereinafter 'the agreement'). Mediated by US Senator George Mitchell, with the backing of the governments of the US, the UK and Ireland, the 1998 agreement brought an end to 30 years of *violent* political conflict in and about Northern Ireland (NI). Addressing a wide range of issues from the constitutional status of NI, the creation of power-sharing institutions, and the reform of the legal system, the agreement is now promoted globally as a model of good practice in ending violent conflict (Mac Ginty 2009). Further, the agreement, and the talks that led to it, have been celebrated in recent years for their inclusivity. The participation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in particular, is now widely used as a case study in inclusion for those interested in increasing women's representation in peace processes (Patty et al. 2016).

However, these events also exposed an emerging tension between the celebration of the political achievement of the agreement on one hand, and the exclusion of civil society

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from the celebrations on the other. Civil society leaders, widely credited with having built the constituency necessary for the peace talks to succeed in 1998 (Stanton 2021), have become increasingly frustrated in recent years at their marginalisation from political discourse and indeed influence. With all attention on the political leaders, civil society were left feeling overlooked.[1] This feeling arises from a broader trend whereby attention has been increasingly oriented towards the political process and away from the grass roots activity that characterised the years of the conflict and the immediate post-agreement years, despite the significant dysfunction of the political institutions that has left civil society to carry the burden of upholding the principles of the agreement (Torrance 2020).

The NI process, defined here as beginning with back channel talks in the early nineties and resulting in the agreement in 1998, is predominantly understood as a political process, without a formal multi-track structure. It played out at a moment of transition between two paradigms of mediation (and conflict resolution) globally. While in recent years it has been analysed through the lens of the modern construct of inclusion, this is a retrospective framing that differs in many ways from the context at the time. The talks predate United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and the inauguration of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda as a global project, with its emphasis on the inclusion of women in peace processes. It also predates the normative turn in peace mediation which brought much greater attention to the activities of civil society and their contribution to peace processes. NI is therefore interesting as a case study of the relationship between mediation and inclusion in a context that pre-dated the establishment of the multi-track/inclusion nexus.

## The multi-track/inclusion nexus

A 'multi-track process' is a technical form of process design in peace mediation in which multiple 'tracks' of peace mediation activity 'reinforce, inform and complement each other' (Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger 2025). Track One refers to formal political level talks. Participants are representatives of governments, official opposition or armed opposition groups. They are often facilitated at a high level by representatives of other states or international organisations. Track Two refers to unofficial talks that take place between civic leaders (for example from politicians, religious organisations, civil society, or academia) participating in their private capacity. The purpose of these talks is to generate creative thinking and potential solutions to political problems. Track Three is a more recent addition to the lexicon of peace mediation. It refers to the use of mediation at the grass roots level to address conflict and social cohesion at the community level. A 'multi-track' process combines elements of each of these tracks into a structured peace process.

In recent years the multi-track process has become the vehicle through which 'inclusion' it to be achieved in peace mediation, generating a multi-track/inclusion nexus (Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger, forthcoming this issue). The goal of inclusion in the context of a multi-track process is to ensure that the 'views and needs of conflict parties and other stakeholders are represented and integrated into the process and outcome of a mediation effort' (United Nations 2012, 11). The meaning of inclusion has been forged through a series of normative developments through for example UN Security Council Resolutions, legal frameworks and guidance notes (Convergne 2016;

United Nations 2012). Specifically, this nexus is characterised by a set of defined categories of actors who are expected to participate in political talks (Hirblinger and Landau 2020). These include women, civil society, and increasingly youth (UNSC 2000; UNSC 2013; UNSC 2015).

As the article demonstrates, this definitionally limited idea of inclusion has tended to reduce it to a technical activity in service of specific political priorities. Specifically, it results in the exclusion of other economic or social indices which, if proper attention were paid to them, would result in more transformative change (Holland and Rabrenovic 2018; Van Santen 2021). However, as these categories are currently excluded from the political categories that constitute the multi-track/inclusion nexus and are not (yet) incorporated into the global-level normative frameworks they fall outside the scope of the current analysis.

In this article I present a 'history of the present' (Garland 2014; Roth 1981) of the concept of inclusion and the ways in which it has been centred in analysis of the NI process in recent years. A critical re-reading of contemporaneous sources is used to deconstruct how the idea of inclusion as a defining feature of the NI process came to predominance over time notwithstanding the absence of a formal multi-track structure. The analysis reveals the existence of different 'patches' of peacemaking activity that combined to deliver the agreement. Throughout the conflict there was considerable mediation and peacebuilding activity both at grass roots level and in later years at the Track Two level that supported efforts towards peace. Evident in these activities, as well as in the political process, are a number of distinct understandings of inclusion that sit alongside each other. Drawing on the analogy of patchworked peacemaking I characterise these distinct efforts as different patches of the process, each with their own specific colour and pattern.

Applying a historic lens makes visible how the concept of inclusion as it is currently understood and celebrated was applied retrospectively. The patchwork approach provides a tool for exploring and understanding the different natures and logics of each of the approaches, as well as how these diverse patches were stitched together in different periods of time. It further highlights the value of an approach rooted in diversity, in contrast to technical or homogenising approaches that have gained ground in more recent years. Analysing the ways these different types of mediation were stitched together reveals the bigger picture of the varied role of mediation in NI, with broader lessons on the multi-track/inclusion nexus.

## On critical junctures and the 'history of the present'

The multi-track process has emerged as the embodiment of a specific rationality when it comes to inclusion. According to this rationality, a technically well-designed multi-track process offers spaces for different groups to participate in peace talks across a range of different levels. The gradual equation of inclusion with multi-track processes has resulted in inclusion being pursued as a normative technical activity of process design in which each of the tracks is oriented towards a specific and defined policy goal of inclusion in Track One.

The growth of policy frameworks on inclusion globally has in turn created new vernaculars through which the achievements of the agreement in NI have come to be

celebrated. In this article, I use the NI case study to explore the extent to which this normative account of the peace process has become dominant. I examine the evolution of discourse on inclusion over time, considering what understandings were promoted at specific junctures, and also what understandings were lost when it comes to the relationship between inclusion and multi-track processes. It is argued that the epistemological structures of the NI peace process itself, and the conditions that they placed on the actors and process, have shifted significantly over time. Therefore, while it is tempting to explain this historic process using the concepts of the present, by juxtaposing modern conceptions of inclusion with those from previous eras, a genealogical approach usefully helps to understand more fully the ways in which the past was in fact very differently constituted (Garland 2014). It demonstrates the diversity and specificity of battles between different interpretations of inclusion at different points in the past, as well as the existence of epistemically varied truth claims in that period (Vucetic 2011). In this context, a genealogy, much like a patchwork, offers an explanatory whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

I further utilise the concept of critical junctures to explore the movement between distinct 'episodes' that characterise the genealogical approach. An 'episode' is understood as a historic period of events that periodises the study of the object in question (Vucetic 2011, 1300), in this case the concept of inclusion. This approach speaks to the genealogical idea of 'historically specific orders of words and things' that both shape the discourse and experience of a particular era but are also simultaneously shaped by 'fundamental transformations and historical discontinuities leading to the emergence of new systems of thought' (Garland 2014, 370).

Each 'episode' is narrated using examples from contemporaneous literature, reconstructed as a historic discourse analysis (Vucetic 2011). Literature reviews were conducted to identify the bodies of contemporaneous work – published within the historic 'episode' – that engaged with the concept of inclusion. This literature was used to identify the dominant discourses on inclusion present at the time. Selecting only contemporaneous (and as far as possible indigenous) literature counters the revisionist effect of using research published in later episodes under different epistemic conditions. In addition to academic discourse, I draw on developments in practice to demonstrate shifts in the ways in which inclusion was characterised in different episodes. These developments are identified through review of archival material from both organisational and private archives that cast light on the way in which inclusion was understood in practice.[2] The combination of academic and practical material is used to provide a critical re-reading of the progression of understandings of inclusion as they existed in specific historic episodes, and the way in which these understandings shifted over time. In this way the approach demonstrate note only shifts in the dominant discourse over time, but also how these play out in practice.

Critical junctures are moments in time in which the constraints of structure ease in a way that makes change possible (Cappocia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012, 1573). They can be understood as windows of opportunity for new approaches to emerge (Soifer 2012, 1574). Once the constraints have been loosened new conditions will bring about a process of change in which a number of competing possibilities combine. This window of opportunity for change closes when one particular approach emerges as dominant, foreclosing for the time being, further contestation. For example, the end of

the Cold War created permissive conditions for the emergence of a new world political order. As the constraints of the Cold War were loosened, new productive conditions were characterised by the growth in civil wars, and the dominance of liberal understandings of world peace. These conditions combined in the period of the 1990s to bring about a critical juncture in peace mediation scholarship and practice. Once the juncture closed the liberal peacebuilding paradigm remained dominant for more than a decade.

Critical junctures help to explain not only the existence of distinct 'episodes' but also how the discursive conditions of each were formed in a process of contestation and change. Each of the distinct episodes of time discussed in this article, in which certain understandings of inclusion become dominant, are precipitated by a critical juncture in which the structural conditions for peace mediation changed. Exploring each of these distinct episodes and their discursive conditions allows for a detailed analysis of contingency and power in the narrative of inclusion and how it became such an effective rhetorical aspect of the history of the NI process.

I identify two specific critical junctures that shape the way in which the NI process is narrated. The first is the move in the literature from the dominance of inter-state conflict and international mediation towards the ethnic conflict paradigm, and interest in the mediation of civil wars (Bercovitch and Derouen 2005). The NI process sits squarely within this juncture and both influences and is influenced by broader developments at the time (Arthur 1999). The second is the beginning of the normative turn in peace mediation from 2010 onwards (Turner and Wählisch 2021). This is the period in which the multi-track/inclusion nexus is forged in global policy, and the one that now frames current approaches to the study of the NI process. It similarly is both shaped by and shapes developments in thinking globally, particularly with reference to both women's inclusion and the inclusion of civil society more broadly. By locating analysis of the NI process with reference to these critical junctures the article demonstrates how the trajectory of the NI process follows that of the broader intellectual history of inclusion in the mediation literature, in which different ideas of inclusion that are initially present in the field are gradually subordinated to one which becomes dominant. Drawing on a discourse analysis of contemporaneous sources from the episode that follows each juncture I demonstrate how historical contingencies and discontinuities have shaped thinking when it comes to the NI process, resulting in the current focus on inclusion in the political talks as the defining feature of the way the process is now narrated. By focusing on the relationship between political and civic spheres of activity over time, I demonstrate the diverse patchworked nature of the different understandings of the causes of conflict, of the ways in which civil society responded to violence, and ultimately of inclusion that shaped civic engagement with the peace process across 30 years.

## Episode 1: Violence, negotiation and repair (1994–2005)

### *The critical juncture*

The decade of the 1990s represents a critical juncture in the evolution of the field of peace mediation. It was a moment of opportunity in which the loosening of constraints caused by the changing nature of international security created a window of opportunity for the

emergence of a new set of 'permissive conditions' for peace mediation (Soifer 2012). Until this time the study of international mediation had been dominated by state-based approaches to negotiation, centred on the brokering of agreements between elite warring parties through rational bargaining. The NI peace process does not feature heavily in this body of literature on international mediation. This is perhaps because the process defies easy categorisation, either as an inter-state or an intra-state conflict. It was a conflict that undoubtedly had inter-state undercurrents, but that was being fought primarily as an internal war. A further complicating factor is that the nature of the conflict was largely ideological, and of the type identified in the literature as less suited to mediation (Bercovitch 1985). While there is some work that assesses the process within the traditional conflict management frameworks (Pruitt 2007) it is not the primary lens through which the process has been analysed in the mediation literature.

As the nature of wars began to change in the post-Cold War era, so too did scholarship on mediation. By the early 2000s, following the broader reforms of the UN's Agenda for Peace (1992), scholars of mediation were beginning to look beyond the moment of signing of peace agreements towards their durability (Bercovitch and Simpson 2010, 69). The NI case fits more squarely within what was at the time an emergent literature on the management of ethnic conflict, which was recognised as presenting different challenges for international peace mediation, in particular because of the centrality of intangible drivers such as values and identity among conflict parties that are less amenable to negotiated settlement (Bercovitch and Derouen 2005). It was this scholarship on peace mediation in civil wars which began to establish the connections between the implementation of comprehensive political agreements, in which all parties to the conflict had a stake in peace negotiations, and ongoing stability through measures such as security guarantees and power sharing (Bercovitch and Simpson 2010).

The NI process sits squarely within this transition from an earlier era of state-based diplomacy towards greater understanding of the need for peace processes to adopt a broader frame of reference (Arthur 1999; Nagle 2011; Richmond 2001), evidenced in its prevalence in the emergent literature on both ethnic conflict and intractable conflict (McGarry and O'Leary 1993; Pruitt 2007) and its management. Its position within this critical juncture has made the NI process a formative example of how to address so-called ethnic conflict through a mediated political agreement. As such it has been instrumental in the subsequent reproduction of a new set of conditions that acknowledged the importance of a more inclusive approach to mediation. Within the process itself, however, are a number of different 'patches' of activity, each with its own specific understanding of inclusion and its contribution to peace.

## *Patch 1: Formal political talks and 'strategic' inclusion at Track One*

Within a shifting global context, the NI peace process brought together representatives of opposing parties, divided along political (sometimes conflated with ethnic) lines, and representatives of armed groups to negotiate macro-political issues. The agenda was dominated by political violence, and the constitutional future of NI, and talks were convened by a third-party mediator with powerful state backing. The first 'patch' is therefore the formal political process which mirrors established understandings of mediation at the time.

Until the early 1990s the conflict, and the response of the UK government to it, had been framed by a security narrative centred on 'terrorist' activity and drawing on familiar constructs from the international mediation literature such as 'ripeness' and the 'mutually hurting stalemate' (Hancock 2008). In the contemporaneous literature on the NI process this period of time is analysed in terms of the 'ripening' of the conflict, and analysis of the conditions that make talks both possible and ultimately successful in the 1990s (McSweeney 1996). At the time this was the *dominant* framing of the peace process – that of a peace agreement between the leaderships of the state and armed groups, brokered by an international third-party mediator, that brought an end to a sustained period of violence and insecurity. Yet contemporaneous literature on the NI process also reveals the absence of a unitary or agreed narrative of either the cause of violence or the best way to resolve it. Both a traditional 'security' narrative and that of the management of and identity-based ethnic conflict co-exist within the literature from the time (McSweeney 1996). The 'ethnic conflict' narrative, and the idea of identity-based conflict, was influential when it came to imagining what a durable solution that extended beyond simply ending the violence might look like.

At the political level, however, the talks continued to be framed by a security analysis, with the primary issue to be resolved being that of political violence (Dixon 2011). As a result, a key potential barrier to talks was the perennial question of talking to 'terrorists'. From 1993 it had been clear that an end to violence would be achieved not through military defeat but through a negotiated process that would involve not only political parties but armed actors also. The inclusion of both republican and loyalist armed groups represented a new direction in the process (McSweeney 1996). As a result, the early stages of the negotiations centred on the question of decommissioning, and whether giving up weapons should be a precondition to participation in talks. George Mitchell, credited with the successful mediation of the agreement, had first become involved in NI as part of an independent body created to report on the question of decommissioning of weapons as a precondition to participation in peace talks. Mitchell, together with Harri Holkeri of Finland and John de Chastelain of Canada, was appointed to an independent body created to independently assess the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. This body proposed an alternative formula for participation in talks that did not require prior decommissioning of weapons, but rather a commitment to a set of principles whereby parties rejected the use of political violence (Guelke 2012), thus creating a pathway for the strategic inclusion of armed groups – but particularly the IRA – in the talks.

Of particular concern was the need to ensure that the talks were as representative – or inclusive – as possible. Inclusive, in this sense, refers primarily to the inclusion of armed actors, and as building a more legitimate peace through broader participation. While most of the key players had established political representation, there was a 'gap' when it came to non-state groups on the loyalist (or pro-state) side. Given the sensitivities around inclusion of parties linked to armed actors, and to enhance the democratic credentials of participants, an election was held to determine participation (Elliott 1997). The design of the electoral process enabled such smaller parties to stand for election and, if sufficient seats were secured, to nominate negotiators to take part in the talks. In addition to the smaller loyalist parties, this mechanism also returned two seats for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) who mobilised women's civil society in

NI to stand for election to secure a place at the table (Roulston 1999; Rynder 2002). The election had been designed to help bypass the question of decommissioning of weapons, and all parties were therefore present at the talks on the basis of a mandate secured through the democratic process of election – maintaining the link between legitimacy, representation and political participation (Bercovitch 1985). This election is regarded as having been key to ensuring an 'inclusive' negotiating process.

What emerges from the contemporaneous literature is a distinct understanding of inclusion – of who should be included, and why it was necessary for the success of the talks. Inclusion at this time was strategic (Hirblinger and Landau 2020), concerned primarily with political level representation of the opposing political communities, as well as the armed organisations. This reflects the structural nature of the analysis of the causes of the conflict that underpinned the agenda of the talks, focusing on constitutional questions and security guarantees such as the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the reform of state security and justice institutions. Even taking into account the different approaches of the 'security' versus 'ethnic conflict' paradigms, the focus remained on elite level politics, and the potential for agreement at that level. There is little to suggest in the literature of the time that a broader understanding of inclusion was a potential solution to the problem. And while there are competing analyses of the core nature of the 'problem' to be resolved, there is nevertheless some convergence in the analysis of the nature of the process itself and the reasons for inclusion.

While the inclusion of the NIWC is now commonly cited as an early example of women's participation in peace processes, it had to be won on the basis of a political mandate. The NIWC had to mobilise to contest an election to secure their credentials as representatives to the talks (Roulston 1999). Had they failed to secure those seats there is no suggestion in the contemporaneous literature that they would have had any entitlement to inclusion on a normative basis – indeed their treatment at the talks further suggests that such a proposal would have been roundly denounced as anti-democratic. What is notable, therefore, is that beyond the initial election of parties to the talks, there was no (formal) expectation that civil society would be either present to the talks, nor shape the agenda. The discursive conditions required a democratic mandate for inclusion. The Command Paper that had laid the ground for the election to the talks had provided for a 'Forum' 'for the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland' (Elliott 1997). However this was purely consultative in nature, and not widely supported by the political parties (Elliott 1997). Civil society engagement in the peace process at this time was happening in a separate sphere of activity.

### *Patch 2: Civil society and 'relational' inclusion at Track Three*

In contrast to the 'security' and 'ethnic conflict' narratives of conflict that led to an emphasis on politically negotiated top-down solutions, from the late 1980s a movement had been developing in NI that addressed the grass roots aspects of the conflict. The second 'patch' is therefore comprised of civil society actors, funded largely by international organisations such as the EU and the International Fund for Ireland (Byrne et al. 2009). The work in this space was fundamentally different from the political 'patch' in that it focused on the micro-level relationships between individuals and communities rather than on the negotiation of the macro-political issues. It was also driven by

bottom-up approaches to community relations and participation in public life rather than in a political peace process.

While there had been civic engagement with violence from the outbreak of the 'Troubles' (Stanton 2021), from the late 1980s it became more consciously oriented at contributing to peace. Cochrane draws the distinction between work that was rooted in two alternative views of the conflict; behavioural analysis, and structural analysis. Whereas the security narrative, and the ethnic conflict models that dominated the political talks were rooted in structural analysis of the causes of conflict, work at the grass roots was rooted much more deeply in a behavioural analysis, following which the ongoing violence was the result of a breakdown in relationships between individuals and communities that could be addressed at the interpersonal level. At the time, however, much less attention was paid to the ways in which this civic activity contributed to peace at the political level (Cochrane 2001; Guelke 2003).

While the idea of 'civil society' has become almost synonymous with apolitical or technical peacebuilding work in the modern mediation literature, the relationship between the two historically is not one of complete alignment. In 1990s NI there was a wide ranging 'civil society' that encompassed a diverse range of organisations from churches, to sporting organisations, historical societies, trade unions and other voluntary societies that made up the fabric of everyday life in NI against a backdrop of violence. Community relations work was only one aspect of a relatively well-established community sector (Stanton 2021), which included the women's sector from which the NIWC emerged (Roulston 1999). What is referred to by the term 'civil society' in this context is not a unitary unit of analysis, but a range of organisations that existed and operated independently of the political process (Buchanan 2008).

Civil society that was specifically concerned with the work of peace and reconciliation was a further sub-set of the work of community relations at the time. It was not a coherent political 'sector' with its own unifying vision of peace. Rather it operated along the same segregated lines as politics, responding to the needs of the communities in which the organisations were based (Cochrane 2001). Civil society work was a way of engaging people in the 'political' and giving them a voice (Cochrane 2001, 105).

In the context of the development of mediation capacity this work was not limited to the mitigation of the effect of violence. It had a much deeper underlying purpose which distinguished it from the political level work. Whereas political talks were concerned with conflict management, and conflict resolution via an agreement that addressed the structural causes of conflict, the work at the grass roots level was directed towards conflict transformation (Buchanan 2008; Byrne 2001). What is interesting from a peace mediation perspective is the way in which local civil society activists were influenced by a different body of thinking on, and practice of, mediation emerging from the US at the time – and the development of an indigenised model of mediation that responded specifically to the circumstances of NI (Lederach 2002). This began with the creation of the Northern Ireland Conflict Mediation Association in 1986, developing later into a Mediation Network for Northern Ireland, and then Mediation Northern Ireland. When the political talks began to gain momentum in the mid 1990s, civic mediation was already well established in NI.

A specific feature of conflict transformation, as opposed to management or resolution, is the inclusion and empowerment of civil society – but also of people more broadly – to handle conflict (Buchanan 2008). Addressing the relationship between people and

communities, it was argued, creates the conditions for transforming the conditions that give rise to violence (McAllister and O'Reilly 2000). However, it should be noted that 'inclusion' in this case refers not to direct access to political processes, including talks, but the capacity of communities to participate in public life and in decision making as it affects them. Activity is not oriented towards a specific forum – such as participation in formal talks or 'peace process' – but towards a much more dispersed capacity for participation and democracy in which the ability of communities to handle conflict, for example through local group dialogue initiatives and engagement with statutory authorities, is strengthened (MNNI 1999). As such it represents a relational model of inclusion that aims to transform the social structures that underlie conflict by focusing on the everyday relationships between individuals who are embedded in divided systems (Hirblinger and Landau 2020; Turner 2020a). Civic mediation in this context differs fundamentally from the traditional model of a structured process. The difference is captured by Lederach, reflecting on his experience in NI.

> The effort is not focused on producing agreements and solutions as the primary goal. Instead, it promotes relational spaces through which constructive nonviolent change processes can be initiated and sustained. (Lederach 2002, 93).

From this approach the concept of 'mediative capacity' was developed as a specific response to the needs in NI (Lederach 2002; McAllister and O'Reilly 2000).

While the empowerment of individuals and communities was a primary objective, an indirect link was established between this work and the political process. The connection between grass roots initiatives and the political track became influential in the design and delivery of mediation in NI. For example, local level initiatives and capacity building were credited with enabling progress to continue at local level even during periods of instability in the political talks (Buchanan 2008). Indeed, NI is an early example of the supporting of Track Three initiatives with the explicit goal of *indirectly* strengthening political progress (Arthur 1999; Buchanan 2008; Roulston 1999).

With the passage of time there has been much greater attention paid to the ways in which civil society contributed indirectly to the success of the political talks by creating a constituency for peace (Stanton and Kelly 2015; Syna and Corry 2023), and therefore introducing an 'inclusivist NGO philosophy to the political arena' (Cochrane 2001, 110). While the role of civil society is now generally regarded in positive terms, at the time there was considerable tension between what was perceived as the idealism of civil society on one hand, and the realism of the political process on the other (Cochrane 2001; Guelke 2003). For example, Cochrane's contemporaneous work on NI documents the perception of civil society as 'muddle-headed peaceniks', or as a 'community relations industry'. During the 1990s, while there was some evidence of thinking that connected grass roots empowerment with the stability of peace – most notably through the European Union – there was no clear conceptual nor practical connection between 'inclusion' in this sense, and the political negotiation process (Buchanan 2008). They remained separate pieces of the patchwork of peace.

Despite scepticism about the idealism of civil society, and the extent to which value-driven action can contribute to peace at the political level, the work of civic mediation, and community relations more broadly, in NI helped to create not only the conditions but also the mechanisms whereby connections were able to be made between the two

fields of practice, beginning to stitch the pieces together. While much of the grass roots work was not explicitly connected to the political realm, a number of connecting actors emerged from academia and civil society to begin to bridge the divide. The potential for such connections became more evident with growth of Track Two initiatives from 1990 (Arthur 1999).

### *Patch 3: Track Two and 'middle out' approaches*

From the early 1990s, the promotion of political dialogue was a significant feature of peace work in NI through a number of academic and civil society initiatives (Arthur 1999; Corry 2012). The third patch is made up of a different set of actors who sought to work between the political and the grass roots to forge meaningful connections between people in a way that enabled progress on political issues.

Track Two dialogues as a tool of peace mediation were originally conceived as a means of facilitating informal interaction between parties to a conflict (Burton 1969; Fisher 1972). In contrast to the heavily rationalist approach to political negotiations that was dominant in the international mediation literature at the time, the development of Track Two initiatives brought a social psychological lens to dealing with conflict. This approach was characterised as 'problem solving', running alongside formal negotiations with the aim of moving parties away from a zero-sum negotiating mindset and towards a joint problem-solving approach (Palmiano Federer 2021). In NI, the development of problem-solving workshops was supported by non-governmental actors from the US, Germany and South Africa (Corry 2012) in an attempt to bridge civil society and political approaches. As such they played the role of 'middle out' (Lederach 1997; Richmond 2001) connecting activities. The timing of the NI process, and the development of problem-solving workshops as method, once again sits with a critical juncture not only in the peace mediation field, but for Track Two more specifically. The 1990s marked the beginnings of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm that would dominate peace mediation in the 2000s and 2010s. While the workshops in NI were heavily influenced by the 'first generation' problem-solving approach rooted in social psychology and the need to shift mindsets of conflict parties to enable joint problem solving (Palmiano Federer 2021), there were also elements of the emerging liberal paradigm that emphasised the need for peace agreements to transform societies more broadly by engaging populations in the work of conflict resolution (Arthur 1999). In particular the idea that the outcome of Track Two workshops would be 'transfer' between the 'tracks' of a peace process was only emerging at the time (Palmiano Federer 2021), and yet is evident in later contemporaneous thinking on the NI process.

There is relatively little contemporaneous literature on the evolution of these approaches, likely due to the sensitivity of the work and the need for discretion from mediation actors (Ó Dochartaigh 2011). However, one notable exception is the work of Professor Paul Arthur, an academic at Queen's University Belfast, who documented the process of the development of such workshops. Describing Track Two approaches as acting as 'midwives' to formal processes, Arthur highlights the distinctive contribution of these initiatives as both supportive of, yet distinct from either political level negotiations or grass roots facilitation. The aims of problem-solving workshops were primarily procedural. They did not aim to reach agreement on big political issues, but instead

focused on the capacities of politicians to engage in negotiations constructively. This was achieved by discussing issues that were not on the agenda of formal talks, mainly 'transitional' rather than final status issues (Arthur 1999). This type of engagement enabled the building of relationships between moderates that created a 'centring dynamic' that is needed to create the middle ground necessary for negotiations to succeed (Arthur 1999, 484) By adopting this approach the workshops aimed for 'peace promotion' rather than 'problem solving'. The format of the workshops was paramount. Beyond trying to secure any agreement, they aimed to build up a culture of trust between sides, enabling people to develop their listening skills and creating new capacity in political parties through the development of a new tier or generation of leaders who were better equipped to take risks for peace (Arthur 1999).

In the contemporaneous literature, it is generally agreed that one weakness of the NI process was that there was insufficient connection between the different 'tracks' of activity (Arthur 1999; Byrne 2001). By adopting a capacity-building approach, Track Two workshops were designed to operate in the space between the rationalist strategic bargaining approach at Track One on one hand, and the interpersonal and relational approach that was dominant at Track Three on the other. They took as a starting point the behavioural assumptions about the causes of conflict and the impact that learned behaviour has on relationships between parties and used the tools of dialogue – namely building relationships between people in a way that enables joint problem solving – to encourage parties to move beyond these ways of thinking to address structural causes of conflict.

Rather than seeing Track Two activities as simply an extension of either Track One or Track Three activities it is worth considering the particularity of this type of work, and how it fits into the patchwork of peacemaking in context. In the case of NI Track Two dialogue was specifically conceptualised as a means of linking peacemaking efforts. As such this was seen as a political intervention rather than just a social one. As Corry, a key facilitator of dialogue workshops at the time, notes, '[t]he primary purpose of political dialogue is intergroup understanding and relationship building, not interpersonal healing, negotiation, mediation or agreement' (Corry 2012, 55). Specifically, Corry notes how this Track Two mediation work moves beyond the work of interpersonal reconciliation to address the political questions of structural causes of conflict by focusing on intergroup understanding and relationships (Corry 2012). It is therefore explicitly *political* in its orientation. Whereas civil society initiatives could be dismissed as addressing only interpersonal conflict, or of failing to respond to the hard 'political' business of violence, the work at Track Two was more explicitly concerned with moving from interpersonal to intergroup dialogue. This is significant in a conflict where both the causes and potential solutions had been defined almost exclusively through the lens of two competing political blocs (Roulston 1999). While the workshops did not produce significant direct impact on the formal political process, they nevertheless played an important role in developing the leadership capacities of politicians and other actors to engage in the broader work of the peace process. Inclusion in these workshops combined elements of both strategic and relational approaches. Participation was defined not with reference to closed categories, but according to the capacity of the participants to bring about change in thinking in their own spheres of influence (Arthur 1999). This approach can be contrasted with the modern approach that dominates Track Two whereby 'closed' or prescribed categories, rooted in

normative policy frameworks, are identified for inclusion on the basis of specific characteristics such as women or youth (Hirblinger and Landau 2020). The modern concept of Track Two as a formal mechanism for inclusion of 'closed' or prescribed categories of participants was not present at the time of the NI process.

### *Stitching the patches together*

To return to the analogy of patchworked peacemaking, Track Two work in the NI process held a dual function. It was foremost its own 'patch' with its own distinct colour and texture. As with civic mediation, a model of thinking and practice originating in the US was adapted and indigenised to respond to the specific context of NI. However, it was also the clearest attempt at stitching together a bigger picture. The work of political dialogue sought to connect the diverse patches and approaches of Track One and Track Three, while maintaining its own specific logic and rationality.

A historic view of the NI peace process reveals the creativity and diversity of approaches to mediation that were in use at the time. From the well-regarded facilitative style of George Mitchell and others in the political process (Curran and Sebenius 2003), to the development of indigenous models of civic mediation and the use of Track Two dialogues to support the process more broadly, there was a rich and multi-layered field of both civil society activism and civic mediation in NI. This existed despite the absence of any formal multitrack structure. The position of the NI process within the critical juncture between rationalist bargaining and liberal peacebuilding meant that it benefited from new thinking on institutional approaches to embedding peace, while also shaping thinking that would become influential in the field globally. The years immediately following the agreement were marked by a significant investment in mediative capacity in NI. Civic mediation was well resourced and used to support some of the thornier reforms required by the agreement, such as the reform of policing, and the management of parades, moving it from a primarily Track Three activity into the more systemic questions of implementing the agreement discussed at Track Two and at political levels (MNI 2002; 2009). However, as time passed, and the power-sharing structures became embedded, support for mediation declined. Changes to the funding landscape signalled a new era for civil society, and for the ways in which they engaged with the 'post-conflict' political process. This also reflects changes in the global landscape in how the relationship between civil society and political processes are conceptualised.

## Episode 2: The new normative inclusion (2005–present)

### *The critical juncture: The normative turn in peace mediation*

While the 1990s is now regarded as a critical juncture in which formerly state-based approaches to rational bargaining gave way to institutional approaches to embedding peace through the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, another shift in thinking in the peace mediation field has happened more recently, opening up a new critical juncture for the field. In this juncture the established concepts of liberal peacebuilding began to be questioned. Thinking progressed beyond the level of formal governance, towards

conceptualisation of peace processes as an opportunity for rebuilding social contracts that have been fractured by war or violence.

Within this policy context attention turned to how to manage the relationship between peacemaking and peacebuilding in practice. If the strategic goal was inclusion, the tools for delivering this goal emerged as the multi-track process. Whereas previously the different 'Tracks' had operated as relatively autonomous and loosely connected spheres of activity, centred on a 'web' of relationships (Corry 2012; Lederach 1997; Paffenholz 2014), the normative turn initiated a technical and top-down approach to managing, resolving and transforming conflict. Inclusion as a tool in peace mediation has focused on fostering *vertical* connections between different sectors in society and formal (or Track One) peace negotiations (Paffenholz 2014; Palmiano Federer et al. 2019, 9). Whereas previously different approaches had operated at different tracks, the formal multi-track process created a structure within which these different approaches were expected to operate, dominated by the priorities of the political process.

This change in approach is evident in the peace mediation literature in the increased attention paid to the technical design and management of peace processes, generating 'closed' categories of inclusion whereby different groups are identified on the basis of specific characteristics (Hirblinger and Landau 2020; Turner 2020b).

A second key shift in this period was the move towards professionalisation of the field, driven by a desire for increased coherence in policy. While professionalisation has occurred right across the landscape of peacebuilding (Mac Ginty 2012), in the context of mediation it has taken the form of a move towards technical expertise – more easily measured using quantitative rather than qualitative methods and, crucially, evaluated for funders (Kelly and Braniff 2016). Whereas previously the patchwork effect of peace was created by the diversity of approach, professionalisation of the field, and the dominance of normative frameworks has sought to impose greater uniformity of approach. Following the patchwork analogy, the patterns are the same, the colours must match. This gives a more controlled but less imaginative overall effect. It leaves much less scope for creativity in the choice of the various patches to be stitched into the whole. This new and technical way of understanding inclusion has profound implications for the possibilities of civic engagement in peace processes.

## *Inclusion in post-agreement Northern Ireland*

As at the global level, in NI structural aspects of the peace process shaped the possibilities for inclusion of civil society. The period since 2005 has seen a number of new 'patches' stitched onto the existing landscape of civic mediation and peacebuilding in NI. Two examples discussed here are the influence of technical and 'measurable' forms of impact embedded in funding schemes, and the increased influence of the WPS agenda. These patches have altered the diversity of the existing patchwork by shaping the ways in which new approaches, or patches, must be designed. There is now a much greater expectation that activities will conform to a pattern that is set at either national or international level. This is in contrast to the very bottom-up approach that characterised civic mediation and peacebuilding during the peace process, and mirrors trends globally whereby civil society participation became characterised as a technical or apolitical activity in pursuit of inclusive process design.

The immediate post-agreement years were characterised by civil society innovation in delivering peacebuilding in support of the agreement. As Stanton notes, '[w]hile the Good Friday Agreement had established a political framework, its practical implementation benefited from civil society-based forethought' (Stanton 2021, 105). However, from the mid 2000s this activity began to retract significantly. This is partly attributable to a reduction in the international funding that had kept the civil society sector afloat since the early 1990s (Braniff and Byrne 2014; Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018; Stanton 2021). Indeed, it is notable that a primary theme of the literature on civil society in NI in this period is the reduction in funding and how it was impacting peacebuilding work. However, this is only part of the story. The changes in the funding landscape themselves reflect broader structural changes in how peace activities were resourced, in particular the professionalisation of the peacebuilding field. Once again contemporaneous literature on the peacebuilding sector in NI demonstrates this concern with professionalisation and the changing nature of the relationship between political and civic approaches to the implementation of the agreement.

A well-funded body of civil society organisations had been forged by the conflict, and 'nourished' by funding in the years immediately following the agreement (Braniff and Byrne 2014). While this sector had been instrumental in navigating the early years of the agreement, from 2007, when the NI Assembly was restored, the perception of the peacebuilding needs in NI changed. As Braniff and Byrne note, the changing context was 'reflected in macro to micro level discourse resulting in a dismissal of the language and methodologies of peacebuilding, which are being compensated by a transition-plus conflict model (with the emphasis on transition)' (2014, 48; See also Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018). This has had a profound impact on civil society and their perception of inclusion.

A detailed study published in 2018 documented the experience of civil society navigating the changes in the funding landscape (Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018). A number of key themes emerge from the literature, based loosely around the loss of emphasis on civil society mediation and peacebuilding in the years following 2007. The first was the gradual erosion of autonomy when it came to civil society work. In line with global trends, peacebuilding work in NI became subordinated to the broader aims of administrative governance (Mac Ginty 2012), with priorities determined by local authorities of the Northern Ireland Executive, in line with politically negotiated positions. Rather than civil society determining what was necessary based on their own relationship with communities, they were being asked to implement programmes to address priorities set at the political level, regardless of how effective these programmes were (Braniff and Byrne 2014; Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018).

A second theme was that underlying these tensions was the sense that the programmes were so technical in nature because at the political level there was neither expertise nor political will to properly address the legacy of violence or build new structures (Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018). As a result, a box ticking approach to programme funding simply perpetuated the binarized structure of power sharing as enshrined in the political agreement rather than empowering civil society to challenge division. Finally, the effect of the funding changes themselves were acting as a barrier to inclusion rather than empowering civil society. Grass roots practitioners reported a feeling that their expertise has been devalued by the concentration of power in the

political sphere. They noted how political actors in some cases regarded civil society as hostile, or as acting with no 'mandate' (Morrow, Faulkner-Byrne, and Pettis 2018). This question of a mandate goes to the very heart of the issue – highlighting the expected link between political and civic actors, representation, and the need to 'earn' one's place in the political peace process.

However, while the changes in the funding landscape have generally not been received favourably by civil society, they have nevertheless opened up some new opportunities when it comes to inclusion. Because of the significant growth of civic mediation in NI during the conflict and at the time of the agreement, there was already an existing architecture within civil society – both physical and in the imaginations of peace practitioners – that linked peacebuilding work with mediation. Lederach's model of peacebuilding is well accepted as a model of practice, and a framework that is familiar to most peace practitioners in NI (Lederach 1997). As such it emerged as a connecting 'patch' that was introduced to the civil society landscape. The growth of the multitrack framework at the global level, and its standardisation in peace mediation policy and funding was terrain that was already familiar in NI, allowing civil society to adapt relatively easily to speaking this language (Nagle 2011), increasing uniformity of intellectual approach among peace actors.

The WPS agenda has also been a formative new 'patch' that has been stitched onto the existing legacy of women's organisation and peace activism. This relates not only to the promotion of the lessons of the NIWC in global circles, but more broadly to the ways in which women's civil society describe their work. As the WPS agenda has highlighted the value of women's local mediation and peacebuilding work, increasingly women's organisations adopt these vernaculars, describing their work in a more technical way than in the past (Gilmartin 2019). Adopting the language of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda is a way of attracting global legitimacy to the work that was already being done. This in turn opens up access to funding and other forms of material support.

At the policy level, this is reflected in Ireland's Third National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, which expressly commits to support for local women mediators and women peacebuilders (Government of Ireland 2019). This has opened up new funding and engagement opportunities particularly for the women's sector to continue to build capacity in this area (Northern Ireland Executive 2016).

However while these opportunities have opened up as a result of the WPS inclusive agenda, it is notable that as an approach to inclusion it has siloed funding for women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation into specific streams. This is in line with the 'closed' categories approach dominant in global policy (Hirblinger and Landau 2020) and stands in contrast to the more broadly 'relational' approach that dominated both civic mediation (Turner 2020a) and women's activism (Gilmartin 2019; McWilliams 1995) in the previous phase. It is also a profoundly depoliticising impulse, whereby women's organisations are funded to implement policy objectives rather than to engage in political contestation, which remains the purview of established political blocs. While some organisations have embraced this new approach and have adapted their programming to benefit from the streams available, others have, in Stanton's words 'opt[ed] to go their own way in order to remain relevant', to remain innovative and able to take creative risks (Stanton 2021, 111).

## Conclusion: Lessons for the multitrack/inclusion nexus

If civil society in NI was once a colourful patchwork of approaches, the combined factors of professionalisation of the field, and the redefinition of civil society as agencies that implement the political agreement have standardised the pattern. More delicate colours or abstract designs are squeezed out because they cannot be matched with the overall design of the political process. This has resulted in the dominant narrative of inclusion that currently centres the political process and aligns the NI process with modern thinking on peace mediation. Initially this approach was embraced. Civil society benefited from funding and from the opportunity to export the learning of the NI experience abroad. But gradually the landscape is diminished through an approach that narrows the 'story' of inclusion in the NI process into a 'view from the present' that focuses on political inclusion and overlooks the many layers and historical contingencies that made it possible. There is learning in this for the multitrack/inclusion nexus more broadly.

First, an evolving focus on the political aspect of the process undermined the agency of civil society. In the case of NI, while it is now celebrated as an example of political inclusion, there were limits to this approach. Even with the inclusion of the NIWC in the political talks, the agenda, and as such the possibilities for an inclusive outcome, were already framed by the dominant security narrative. If inclusion in Track One processes is the only means of contributing towards peace, the agency of civil society to both define and respond to the nature of the conflict is undermined.

In NI it was assumed that the consociational power-sharing structure agreed in the political process was sufficient to guarantee inclusion. However, these structures produced the opposite effect, empowering divisive political actors at the expense of moderate voices or diversity. The possibilities of relational inclusion of mediation disappeared almost entirely from the policy and funding landscape and the so-called 'middle out' approaches have all but disappeared, leaving dangerous polarisation with little remaining capacity for relational mediation.

Second, the limited ongoing impact of civic mediation on the political process in NI is symptomatic of the fundamentally different logics of activities in these spheres and the difficulties of employing a one-size-fits-all approach to peace. The political process was predominantly a strategic process of conflict management – bringing an end to the use of political violence. Civic mediation, on the other hand, was concerned with conflict transformation through its emphasis on relational approaches to peace and the creation of spaces for interaction. These were two separate spheres of activity, and crucially they operated on completely different temporal scales. While a political agreement can be negotiated, or even leveraged, within a set timeframe, relational peace and the nurturing of mediative capacity is a long-term endeavour. However, if the value of this approach is not recognised then it risks being lost. For Stanton the process of professionalisation not only directed the practice choices of civil society, but also resulted in the loss of the learning of over 50 years of peacebuilding in NI (Stanton 2021, 111) as technical expertise on technical frameworks came to outweigh locally rooted practical wisdom.

Gone is the diversity of the previous patchwork, replaced by a uniform approach determined at the political level. In many ways this mirrors the move towards formal multi track structures as a means of guaranteeing inclusion in peace processes. Rather than enhancing the range of different perspectives of approach, inclusion necessitates a flattening

out of difference to enable the relevant groups to participate in the political agenda which has already been set. In NI this process occurred alongside the broader trend of professionalisation, which determined the nature of the peace being pursued.

A key takeaway from the NI process is the importance of supporting a diversity of approaches. Mediation in NI was influenced by developments abroad, particularly in the US. But it was adapted and indigenised to suit the specific context of NI. This was not a 'toolkit' approach but one rooted in deeply reflective practice. This work enabled progress at local level to operate separately from the progress of the political talks. This dynamic is reversed where local social inclusion becomes dependent on political structures for support. In turn, this type of work was resourced and supported by international funding bodies long before it was supported by governments. Actors such as the EU and the IFI supported the existence of a strong civil society focused on empowerment and relational forms of engagement. This was not at the time tied to any indicators related to the political process but was later regarded as having been an important intervention (Buchanan 2008; Stanton 2021). It is well acknowledged that the success of the NIWC was built on the grass roots networks of women's activism that existed in NI during the conflict. The lesson of the NIWC is not transferable if this aspect is not recognised. It was the deep roots in the community that enabled the mobilisation of a constituency and the development of a shared platform for the purposes of the talks. The WPS agenda, more so than any other, demonstrates the ways in which discursive conditions shape the possibilities for meaningful inclusion in different ways at different times.

The analogy of patchwork allows us to reflect on the existence of these different peacemaking spaces and the ways in which they interact. The beauty in patchwork lies in the stitching together of different colours and patterns to make something diverse. It is not about uniformity, which would undermine the beauty and depth of the overall picture. The 'pattern' of civil society is fundamentally different from that of the political parties, yet there is no reason why they should not combine to produce something holistic. Modern approaches to inclusion risk trying to 'match' civil society to the political pattern, without taking into account the value that lies in difference. The normative argument orients the gaze solely towards Track One, and in so doing risks missing the complexity and value of civil society engagement in peace work. The merging of the normative and instrumentalist goals of inclusion and multi-track processes incentivises instrumental political advocacy rather than quiet peace work for its own sake. It assumes that the role of civil society is to support overarching strategic political goals and as such does not adequately accommodate divisions within civil society, or deviations from the accepted script.

## Notes

1. Personal observation of the author based on social media and personal conversations in Northern Ireland at the time.
2. I am particularly grateful to Mediation Northern Ireland and to Rob Fairmichael for access to their archives.

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