GARDENING FOR PEACE

WHAT POTENTIAL DO COMMUNITY GARDENS HAVE IN POST CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING WITHIN AREAS OF COMMUNITY TENSION IN NORTHER IRELAND AND THE BORDER AREAS?

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SUMMARY

The title of this research is Gardening for Peace: What potential do community gardens have in post conflict peacebuilding within areas of community tension in Northern Ireland and the Border areas?

This small scale research explored a form of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland on which there has been little academic focus. Following an initial scoping exercise, a qualitative case study approach was used to focus on four community gardens; two in west Belfast, one in Fermanagh with connections to a garden in Kilcarney, Co. Cavan and one in Monaghan town. All of these had received funding from the European Union Programme for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Regions of Ireland.

The research found that community gardens are a vehicle for relationship building but their structure and membership have to be seen as part of a continuum: some gardens working at a single community or culture basis, others with a much wider focus, including different nationalities and asylum seekers. This confirms the contact theory process of relationship building. This difference reflects the way in which the 'peace process' has impacted on different areas and highlights the fact that in some areas the 'peace process' is still very fragile.

Community gardens can provide a relaxed environment in which relationships are built at a natural pace. They engage the whole person in an activity which is not only therapeutic but provides a common language and identity as gardeners. They can also be used as the base for formal programmes of relationship building.

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INTRODUCTION

Gandhi said "To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves" and perhaps in conflicts that is what happens as we become disconnected from the essential humanity and relatedness to the wider natural world around us.

Gardening conjures up many different images and throughout history they have been part of our language; in metaphor and proverb, a place of sanctuary and temptation, a place of sustenance, both physical and spiritual. While gardens belong to the natural world they are also artificial constructions of mankind, both boundaries and containers.

Gardens have been used in post conflict situations and indeed in areas of continuing conflict as a means of bringing people together, providing sanctuary and fulfilling a basic need for food; a form of psychosocial peacebuilding, inclusive of age, gender and ability, both physical and intellectual. In order to provide a basis to explore the issue of community gardening and peacebuilding I will first locate it within the wider sphere of gardens relating to war and peace. Gardens may appear to be just 'gardens' but a closer investigation reveals the many ways in which they have been a part of the human response to death, fear, a longing for a different reality and peace as well as the basic need for survival.

Gardens of remembrance are widespread throughout history, incorporating statues or a cenotaph, commemorating the dead of wars. They are gardens for viewing and contemplation but are usually formal and often connected with the state. Memorial gardens are found in Northern Ireland as a means of marking events or deaths by various organisations and groups. Some gardens are aspirational as is the Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, which although conceived some years ago to nurture peace and forgiveness after the civil war in Lebanon, has yet to be built due to continued bouts of violence and political discord. Gardens of reflection, such as the one currently being constructed in Londonderry, hope to provide a space for activities which draw people from all sides of the community together. Gardens of all shapes and sizes have been created by individuals and groups, whether as prisoners of war, refugees, internees, combatants, in ghettos, prison yards, front lines and trenches. Nelson Mandela, (1994;583) described his small garden on Robbeyn Island, "The sense of being the custodian of this small patch of earth offered a small taste of freedom" and, as metaphor for life, " A leader must also tend his garden, he, too, sows seeds, and then watches, cultivates and harvests the result."   The therapeutic aspect of gardening has been used in such gardens as the Butterfly Garden in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, where children and young people come to be supported through the trauma they

experienced during war, using psychotherapeutic work involving the natural world. The focus of the garden being a 'Garden of imagination' in which anything is possible. The use of therapeutic horticulture has gained in momentum in the treatment of people with a wide range of issues including those with post-traumatic stress disorder. Permaculture gardens based on the principles of earth care, people care and fair shares, can be related to either small gardens or larger agricultural projects and examples have been used both in contested areas and post disaster as in Haiti.

During the First and Second World Wars allotments were set up, providing much needed food at a time when importing food was not possible. In Northern Ireland allotments were a part of this 'Dig for Victory'. There are a number of long established allotments still in Northern Ireland although they had dwindled until a few years ago when there was increased interest in the creation of community gardens and allotments. Different streams of funding, including The European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.
(Peace III) have provided the financial basis for a number of community gardens to be set up across Northern Ireland and the Border areas.

The focus of this research, "Gardening for Peace" explores how being part of a community garden can help to build peace between individuals and communities. It will analyse and explore elements involved in gardening as peacebuilding and investigate how gardens in four different locations; one in Fermanagh, one in Monaghan and two in west Belfast are currently bringing people from different cultural and religious backgrounds together.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I began the research having read about the community gardens in post war Bosnia and their positive input to peacebuilding there; helping those from different sides find a way to work together. I knew that a number of community gardens had been created in Northern Ireland using European Union programme for peace and Reconciliation funding. When I explored further there was little academic research on the aspect of community gardening and peacebuilding. The literature review showed that gardening during times of war is now being explored and there appears to be a basic human need to connect with nature at times of stress. The therapeutic aspect of gardening continues to be explored in depth.

By expanding the focus of the literature review I was able to explore writing on community gardens in America, many of which had been used not only to provide food at a time of economic downturn, but to assist with reducing intercommunity and racial tensions. Links were also made with aspects of peacebuilding being examined locally such as 'shared space' and liminal spaces.

The focus on the four gardens located in different areas of Northern Ireland and the Border counties, both urban and rural, provided interesting comparisons. The gardens visited were all approaching peacebuilding in different ways, at least partly due to the relationship of their communities to the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. In this, the research identified how community peacebuilding is impacted on by wider issues in the 'peace process'.

The methodology used in this small scale research provided direct contact with people using the gardens and those who established them as well as other individuals who have a wider knowledge and understanding of different aspects of peacebuilding and gardening.

The research confirmed the importance of relationships in peacebuilding. As Schirch and Shank (2008:15) state "peacebuilding is about social change, transforming people's perception of the world around them, their identity, and their relationship with others". Gardeners highlighted the social aspect and the friendships being made with people they would not normally have related to. The world of the garden had, for some gardeners, become a world that was different, a place of retreat and time out from the outside world. At the same time, the gardens for some people, and the SEFF group in particular, had become the liminal space which allowed for the exploration of those outer world spaces; visiting a garden across the Border, building trust, making friends and meeting people outside the

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garden. In the case of the refugee from Congo in SAGE, her involvement in the garden and being acknowledged by people, making friends and meeting people outside the safe space. However the gardens are all at different stages on what can be seen as a continuum of relationship building. While community gardens can bring people in from the margins to a space in which tentative steps can be taken towards greater understanding and relationships, they can also be less than positive when the surrounding area is less welcoming. Suffolk garden works at present in its own space and while they had initial contact with the Lenadoon garden group this has not continued. However it is hoped that the development of shared allotments in the future may have a different outcome. Contact theory was particularly useful for analysing the building of relationships within the gardens.

The therapeutic aspect of gardening is demonstrated in the views and experiences of many of the gardeners interviewed. Community gardens offer the possibility of relating to people that engages the whole person within the natural environment. The calm and welcoming atmosphere in all the gardens and the opportunity to work as an individual as well as part of a group allows people to develop relationships at their own pace and perhaps build peace internally first.

Gardens naturally change through periods of growth and dormancy and it may be for some gardens this is reflected in levels of gardener involvement, particularly following the initial concentrated and directed activity of building. Support is needed to maintain interest and momentum into the next stage to ensure sustainability. In this, community gardens reflect what is needed in the wider peace process. While all the gardens studied received Peace III funding and this ensured the initial infrastructure, there is, for me, a query as to whether the method of funding has been a hindrance or a help in the long term. Does it trap gardens in a situation which is difficult to extricate from, a situation in which the focus is on meeting external views on targets and timescales rather than on what would benefit the particular garden? It is interesting that two of the gardens at least have decided on ways forward which empower the gardeners to take ownership without being drawn into the funding round.

While other forms of peacebuilding might create too much emphasis on reaching agreement, gardening is less pressurised and can be undertaken over a longer period. Zelizer (2009:4) comments that interventions are never isolated from other projects or activities in the wider community, so it is difficult to measure success beyond a particular project. This is important in relation to community gardens when in the different communities there are a range of schemes under way.

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This small scale study contributes some preliminary findings which set community gardening as an approach to peacebuilding within the wider framework of academic discussion. It highlights a number of related aspects for further exploration in relation to peacebuilding:

> The use of gardens across interfaces in urban settings as part of 'shared space' development.

> The development of community gardens with children and young people, both within the educational and community setting and using a longitudinal study, how relationships grown through the garden impact on external relationships across communities.

While there are obvious differences between the community gardens in Bosnia and those in Northern Ireland, the similarity is in how people initially identify themselves as different, but are then able to find a common bond and language and a different lens through which to see other people and to connect with them.

In reflecting on this study I am aware that through investigating gardens on a small scale I have also gained a wider understanding of the impact of the 'peace process' on different areas and the fragile nature of peace at this time. Nolan (2014:11) comments, "

> The model on offer from the top is peace without reconciliation. A culture of endless negotiation has become embedded and without a vision of a shared society to sustain it, the peace process has lost the power to inspire"

In meeting the people who are involved in the gardens I believe that at a community level there is much more potential for creating the 'five strands' of reconciliation identified by Hamber and Kelly.(2009:9), but they are hampered by lack of creativity in government.

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