



Policy Briefer

# Insights on Sustaining NGO Participation in Post Conflict Space:

seize redefine share name

## Policy Briefer

# Insights on Sustaining NGO Participation in Post Conflict Space:

seize redefine share name

The role of sustained human rights violations in the perpetuation of conflict is well acknowledged by policy makers and scholars alike. In parallel, conflict negotiation and endings processes have been defined over recent decades by a focus on ending the drivers of conflict, including persistent human rights violations and the structures that accompany them. Human Rights NGOs have been central to human rights documentation, advocacy and defence both during and after conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has recognized the essential role played by civil society generally and NGOs specifically in conflict resolution.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite the recognition of their added value and importance, NGOs come under significant strain because they guard the frontline of accountability during conflict and are often seen as the guardians of backsliding in the post-conflict phase.

Scholars have monitored and reported on the unique strains that human rights NGOs face in post-conflict settings.<sup>2</sup> Despite the appearance of 'mainstreaming' human rights into post-conflict settlements post-Cold War, human rights implementation often lags sorely behind in terms of resources, capacity, and institutionalization. Human rights actors suffer from acute conflict fatigue, and many individual leaders are co-opted into 'new' human rights and accountability institutions in the transitioning jurisdiction, leaving an unexpected brain 'drain' on civil society capacity. Unexpected difficulties can include the mutation of advocacy space, the repositioning of mandates, problems of recruitment, as well as the recalibration of relationships with other stakeholders. Opportunities also abound for NGOs with the emergence of new institutional openings, affirmation of 'rights-based' approaches, unfastened entry points to government and the security sector and broader rights consciousness as conflict ends and transition begins. The engagement of civil society actors within these new institutions creates opportunities for renewal and transformation.

<sup>1</sup> OHCHR, A Practical Guide for Civil Society, Civil Society Space and the United Nations Human Rights System (2014): [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/CS\\_space\\_UNHRSystem\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/CS_space_UNHRSystem_Guide.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Christine Bell & Johanna Keenan, Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations and the Problems of Transition, (2004) 26(2) Human Rights Quarterly 330-374.



The conclusions presented here are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with key civil society stakeholders, trade union members, women’s organizations, children’s rights organizations, NGOs, human rights activists and organizations, community workers in Northern Ireland undertaken between 2020-2021. The work was carried out by the cross university socio-economic rights and transition research team<sup>3</sup> from Ulster University and the Queen’s University Belfast focused on the potential for transformative social and economic change using the mechanisms envisaged in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement 1998. The project was funded by the UKRI GCRF Research Hub on Gender, Justice and Security.

This brief highlights key aspects of transitional space for non-governmental organizations, emphasizing the elements enabling NGOs to thrive and redefine human rights challenges and opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dr Lina Malagón, Professor Rory O’Connell

## Box 1:

# seizing the space

1. NGOs with strong and diverse leadership have the capacity to navigate the challenges of funding, leadership migration, and changed priorities in post-conflict settings.
2. NGOs that can move with changing governmental priorities, have a nimble outlook and the capacity to reorient their work can survive and continue to be relevant in post-conflict settings.
3. NGOs that remain connected to grassroots needs, are well-embedded in their communities and avoid 'elite' capture can survive and thrive in post-conflict settings.

*“You need a kind of long history to understand what the issues are on the ground. So, the first thing is it needs a long time”.*

*Human Rights Activist*

*“Second, we were able to get in at the last minute to check about certain clauses, for example, in the Good Friday Agreement under the right safeguards ...”*

*Human Rights Activist*

## Box 2:

# redefining the space

1. NGOs embracing the full diversity of human rights claims, focusing on the indivisibility of rights, specifically civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, are better placed to be relevant to the emerging diversity of post-conflict rights claims.
2. Making peace agreements 'stick' requires NGOs to make the case for the relevance of conflict negotiated human rights provisions to the lived-reality of people's lives post-conflict. This involves continuous translation and regular explication.

*“We thought we had in the peace agreement and what we publicly campaigned to our own membership on was the idea that this agreement had the tools within it to try and heal the society and then move it forward”.*

*Trade Union Leader*

3. NGOs that relationship-build with 'new' or 'reformed' post-conflict institutions are well placed to play an 'insider-outsider' role in transitioning societies.

*“From our perspective, public services were critical to that. If you want to develop an equality and rights-based agenda, then it was essential that you build and invest in the public services...”*

*Trade Union Leader*

*“If the policy doesn’t change, the policy is not developed to deliver; if it’s not evidence-based policymaking where you are dealing with grassroots issues, then it’s pointless. (...) They [policymakers] are not as across as you might expect, and that they still a bit of education to be done there and keep an eye out front and centre where it should be.”*

*Women’s Rights Defender*

4. NGOs that leverage international and regional connections to maintain their status and independence may weather the post-conflict rights fatigue better than others.

*“... in a deeply divided society the space to speak out, the space to raise your hand and ask questions is constantly under threat.” [To address this] “... the international can work effectively with the local, however often international organizations are accused of coming in and taking over or pursuing their own agenda. This [working on the implementation of the Peace Agreement] has been a really genuine and rich collaboration and partnership to make a change.”*

*Human Rights Activist*

5. NGOs that can name the real and pressing needs of people living in post conflict sites such as Northern Ireland today rather than simply framing human rights in terms of historic grievance enable the absence of rights to be a living, breathing reality for ordinary people.

*“The need for the organization and the activism to be relevant meant that whenever we are talking about housing inequality, we’re talking about sewage coming into your bath, we are talking about dampness, we are talking about homelessness, all the kind of manifestations of inequality.”*

*Human Rights Activist*

### Box 3:

## sharing the space

1. Network building and solidarity are essential for civil society in post-conflict settings. This requires moving past silos of singular specific organizational membership, issue and niche advocacy, and recognizing the value of banding together to protect the sector as a whole and raising the efficacy of advocacy on a range of human rights issues.
2. Broad-based advocacy campaigns that straddle the traditional divides of political and economic rights speak forcefully to the intersectionality of rights experiences in post-conflict societies.

*“Human rights abuses are much more in your face, both having arisen from and also contributing to the conflict (...) Still, you have to work hard at trying to make sure that you’re bringing people as much as you can along with you.”*

*Women’s Rights Defender*

3. Gender-mainstreaming across traditional human rights focused NGO’s, from women’s equality to LGBTQI+ affirmation, is an essential aspect of building legitimacy with and relationship to contemporary equality movements.

*“...we work with LGBTQI+ groups, women’s rights groups, women’s reproductive rights and Irish language speakers, all politically contentious issues, all with a high level of solidarity, but with the rule that everything is on the table and that we must deal and not ignore these issues as we have often found.”*

*Women’s Rights Defender*

### Box 3:

4. Holding diverse communities in conversation within a human rights framework, from across the full spectrum of the community (in Northern Ireland from Loyalists to Nationalists), from environmental activists to language advocates, from disability campaigners to victims of violence deepens the reflex of cooperation, coordination and camaraderie. This has immeasurable benefits for the survival of the human rights sector as a whole and affirms the relationship between its molecular parts.

seize  
redefine  
share  
name



## Box 4:

# naming the challenges

1. Human rights implementation remains severely attenuated, and the commitments contained in the peace agreement on human rights have lagged behind and been under-enforced in multiple dimensions.

*“And yet I think it wasn’t the Good Friday Agreement that didn’t work. It was our politicians’ failure to implement and the two co-guarantors to oversee that. The problems that are still causing difficulty would be causing a whole lot less difficulty if they had been dealt with. All the legacy issues or flags and emblems and all of that stuff is all in there. But they have always just put that on hold because they are difficult. Anything that looks difficult or tricky has just been abandoned.”*

*Women’s Rights Defender*

2. Human rights remain heroic, underfunded, voluntary, feminised and inordinately dependent on the leadership of singular individuals whose capacities are continually stretched.
3. Institutional commitment to human rights enforcement is largely a box-ticking exercised, devoid of commitment to a transformative vision of the dignity and equality of the human person.

*“They’re expecting us to speak on behalf of people and we don’t speak on behalf of people without talking to them first. (...) I mean, that’s the only conclusion that I can guarantee that they just don’t see it as a priority to actually get the public’s views on what they’re doing. They’re just checking the box because they have to.”*

*Women’s Rights Defender*

4. Human Rights NGOs continue to experience a range of new and old challenges in advancing the protection of human rights, despite the continued insistence by the State that human rights matter in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

## About us:

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub is a multi-partner research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organizations to advance gender, justice and inclusive peace. [@gcrfgenderhub](#)

**Professor Fionnuala Ní Aoláin** is concurrently Regents Professor at the University of Minnesota Law School and Professor of Law at the Queens University, Belfast. She is the recipient of numerous academic awards including the Leverhulme Fellowship, Fulbright scholarship, ASIL Certificate of Merit for creative scholarship, Alon Prize, Robert Schumann Scholarship and Lawlor fellowship. She has published extensively on issues of gender, conflict regulation, transitional justice, and counter-terrorism. She has held academic positions at Columbia Law School, Harvard Law School, Princeton University, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Ní Aoláin is currently the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism.

[@UN\\_SPExperts](#) [@just\\_security](#)

**Dr Lina Malagón** is a Research Associate at the University of Ulster's Transitional Justice Institute. Her career has balanced academic scholarship, with work as a researcher, litigant and advocacy in conflict-affected and post-conflict countries. Her work is based on interdisciplinary research on transitional justice and peacebuilding in Colombia and other countries. On the GCRF Hub, Lina works in the project socio-economic rights and transitions, developing research on the cases study of Northern Ireland and Colombia.

[@LinaMalagonDiaz](#)

**Professor Rory O'Connell** is Professor of Human Rights and Constitutional Law and Research Director (Law) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. From 2014-2020 he was the Director of the Transitional Justice Institute. He is a member of the Transformation and Empowerment stream, and sits on the Executive of the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). His latest book is Law, Democracy and the European Court of Human Rights (Cambridge 2020). He was a member of the ESRC funded BrexitLawNI project on the constitutional, legal and human rights implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland. [@rjjoconnell](#)



QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST

Gender, Justice and Security Hub [www.thegenderhub.com](http://www.thegenderhub.com)  
Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University [www.ulster.ac.uk/tji](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/tji)  
School of Law, Queen's University of Belfast [www.qub.ac.uk/law](http://www.qub.ac.uk/law)