

THE BOTTOM-DOWN APPROACH TO MAKING PEACE WITH THE PAST

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Abstract

The absence of a high-level Truth and Reconciliation Commission modelled on the South African TRC after the Belfast Agreement (1998), followed by the continued political stalemate to implement the Stormont House Agreement (2014), narrowed significantly the options for victim/survivors in Ireland and Britain to recover official truth about the past. Consequently, it was left to civil society agencies to fill the healing vacuum. By adding Track 4 to the bottom layer of the existing multi-track peacemaking pyramid, the sustained contribution of community-based trauma recovery and storytelling initiatives to the healing process are recognised. Because their relational methodologies and tasks are distinctly different to Track 3 and go deeper into making peace with the past, they are designated as a crucial 'bottom-down' approach that work below the 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' interventions. Such initiatives ensure that the unprocessed hurt and trauma, as well as an unresolved sense of injustice, do not get passed on to second and subsequent generations only to undermine efforts to resolve and transform the conflict.

KEY WORDS: *Post-violence phase, multi-track peacebuilding, Track 4, healing of hurt, trauma recovery, humanising process*

***'The past continues to torment because it is not past: it is not "over", "finished", "completed"'.
– Michael Ignatieff (1996:119)***

***The Past lives on in the Present.
– Graham Dawson (2007)***

Introduction

The question that this paper attempts to address is: Where does the post-violence unofficial healing of hurt, arising out of the political violence of the Troubles (1968–1998), fit in to existing frameworks for post-conflict peacebuilding? By 'unofficial', we mean the need to recognise the community-based initiatives and 'bottom down' healing process that happened in places like the Glenree Centre and the WAVE counselling groups, and initiatives and processes that played a significant role in stabilising the situation immediately after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. These initiatives happened in the absence of any top-down 'official' legacy architecture similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The post-violence phase of a peace process comes after ceasefire and a comprehensive negotiated settlement between the conflicting parties that resolves most underlying issues in the conflict (see Figure 1). The political challenge is to fully implement the accord and achieve the transformation of the conflict, eventually leading in the long term to a sustainable peace. As Northern Ireland is discovering, this phase is likely to take longer than the thirty years of the conflict itself. Yet in world terms, GFA has done well when compared to the collapse within five years of the majority of peace agreements according to the Peace Accords Matrix (Joshi et al. 2015; Darby and McGinty 2003). A resilient and lasting agreement needs considerable high-level political stability and external support to achieve both horizontal and vertical integration between the security, economic and social tasks listed from A to E. Viewing a peace process from a sociology perspective, John Brewer (2010, 200) is emphatic that once violence has been switched off, there must be a social peace space for not only rebuilding social capacity but also the repair and rebuilding of social and communal relationships between former enemies. Normally called 'Dealing with the Past', task E in Figure 1 adopts the term 'Making peace with the Past' (Dawson 2007). It seeks to address the emotional healing of past wounds and the active involvement of former combatants in building the new shared nation. Without it, there is the risk of renewed communal violence and the transfer of the unprocessed pain into the next generation.

The multi-track peacebuilding pyramid

Another perspective is the peacebuilding pyramid devised by John Paul Lederach (1997, 39) to describe the top, middle and bottom layers of a peace process. Lederach shifted

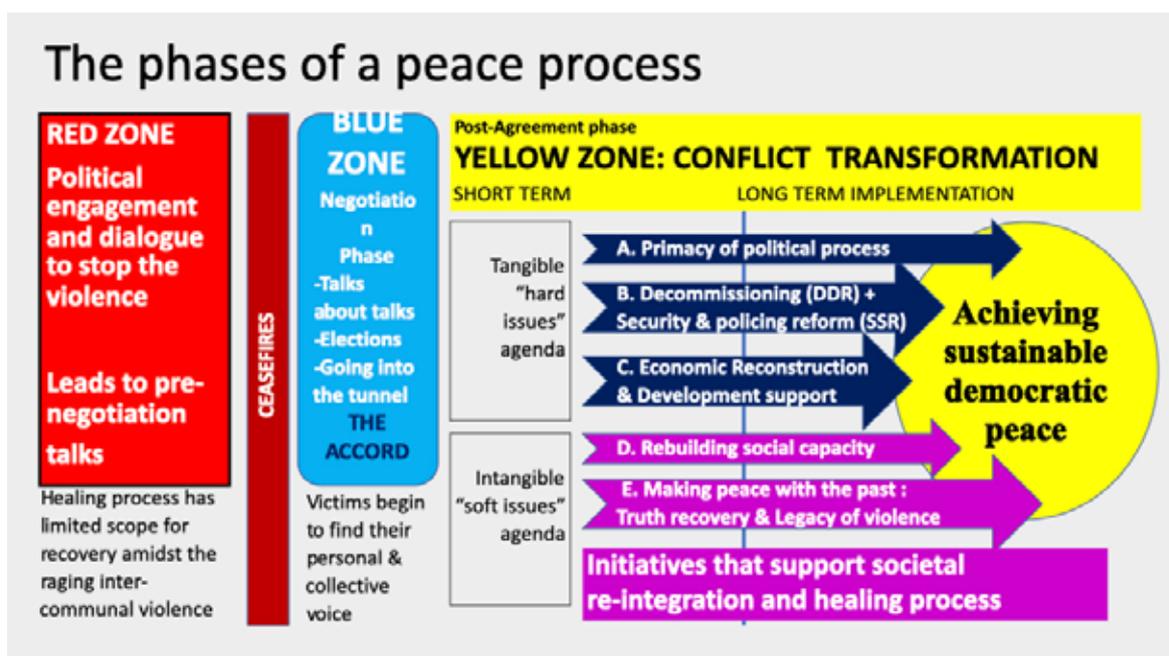


Figure 1: The post-violence phase of a peace process embracing five major tasks to be integrated through political leadership.

the focus away from the top-level elite leadership to acknowledge the significant role that bottom-up interventions play in underpinning a comprehensive and sustainable peace process. Over the last twenty-five years, the pyramid has evolved into a multi-track model and Figure 2 illustrates where the state of conflict transformation theory has now arrived. This paper proposes the inclusion of a new Track Four to capture the special nature of the post-violence healing process.

The origins of the pyramid go back to the term ‘Track One diplomacy’ devised by Joseph Montville (1986), to describe the official inter-state diplomacy in which he was involved himself – sometimes public, most times hidden. But it was in his creation of the term ‘Track Two’, separate and below Track One, that gave status and meaning to the powerful role that unofficial leaders can play in building blocks of peace and mending fractured relationships within and between states. John Burton (1990) and Herbert Kelman (2003) built on this concept and the language changed from diplomacy to peacebuilding. They pioneered Track Two problem-solving workshops to demonstrate how intensive residential conflict analysis sessions with politicians can change perspectives and protracted conflictual relationships.

Track One and a Half peacemaking emerged as a concept fitting somewhere in between the official diplomacy at Track One and the unofficial dialogues at Track Two (Mapendere 2008). They are unofficial officials meeting for discreet secret conversations in the back channels like the Derry businessman Brendan Duddy who acted as a ‘go-between’ connecting the IRA with MI6 (Aveyard 2016).

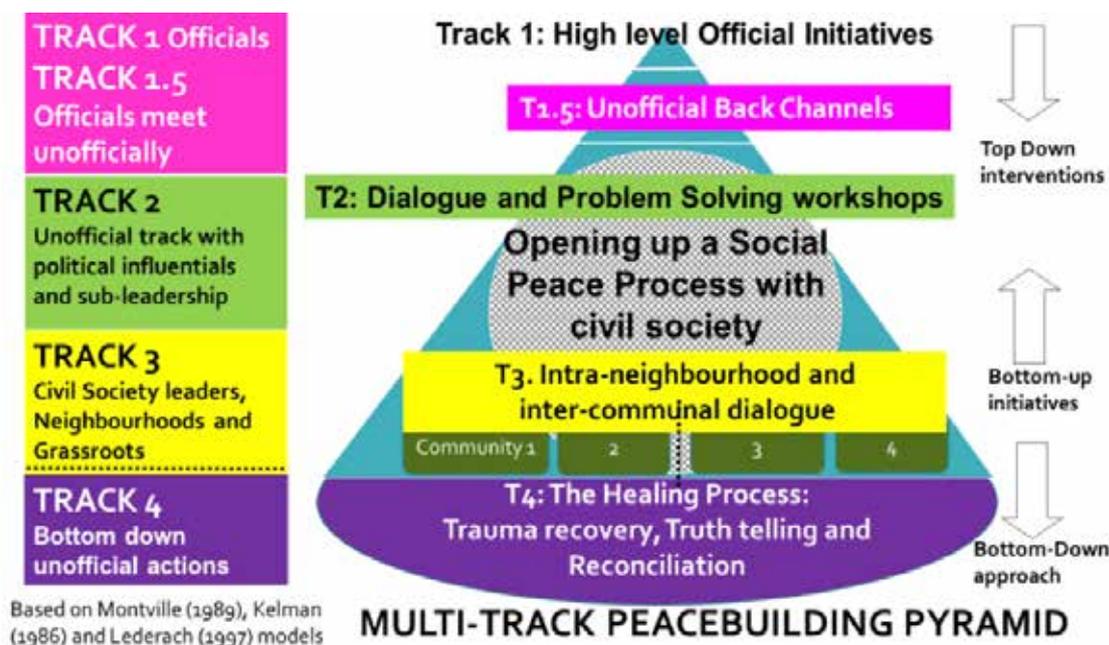


Figure 2: The peacebuilding pyramid shows the multiple peacemaking tracks that have evolved over the past twenty years

Track Three is a more recent term to describe bottom-up initiatives to build social capacity in divided societies and involve 'ordinary people' and local communities directly affected by the conflict. It includes 'a dense array of grass roots groups, enlightened persons, cultural minorities, networks and popular movements' who may only have a 'marginal clout on decision-making power but yet are able to generate momentum and pressure from below to deal with specific local issues (Wasike et al. 2016). Often unpaid volunteers, these groups are best at giving a human face to the 'other' through people-to-people dialogue activities across estranged and hostile neighbourhoods.

At first glance, the bottom-up activities of Track 3 would seem to be where the healing of past wounds fits in. However, my proposition is that it constitutes a qualitatively different kind of peace work requiring special psycho-social skills to work with trauma and to transform the dark episodes of the past. It seeks to prevent the heavy weight of history and toxic narratives of the past from determining the future. By adding on Track Four to capture the undercurrents of the peacebuilding pyramid, it addresses outstanding questions about the complexity and dynamics of the post-violence remembering and healing process:

- How do we remember and process the lived experience of violence and injustice of the past (Lundy and McGovern, 2008)?
- How are truth telling by victims, attempts to obtain official truth and achieving a sense of justice all linked together?
- Or do people simply want to move on and forget about what happened so as to create a new future-oriented social cohesion?

Figure 3 plots the four social responses to the violence of the past on a bell curve. The failure of having any agreed legacy architecture means that victims can find themselves isolated and abandoned on the left-hand side. Track 4 activities have the power to acknowledge past hurts so that people do not feel trapped in the undercurrents of painful memories.

Track One: official efforts to work on the past

There has been much dissatisfaction within the victim/survivor community in Ireland that no explicit legal mechanism for truth recovery was made in the Belfast Good Friday Agreement (GFA 1998). Under pressure from the Women's Coalition, three paragraphs 11–13 were included in the final GFA text: 'to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation.' However, the reality of those last four days (7–10th April) of around-the-clock negotiations at Castle Buildings in Stormont was that victims were not organised sufficiently at the high level to get legacy

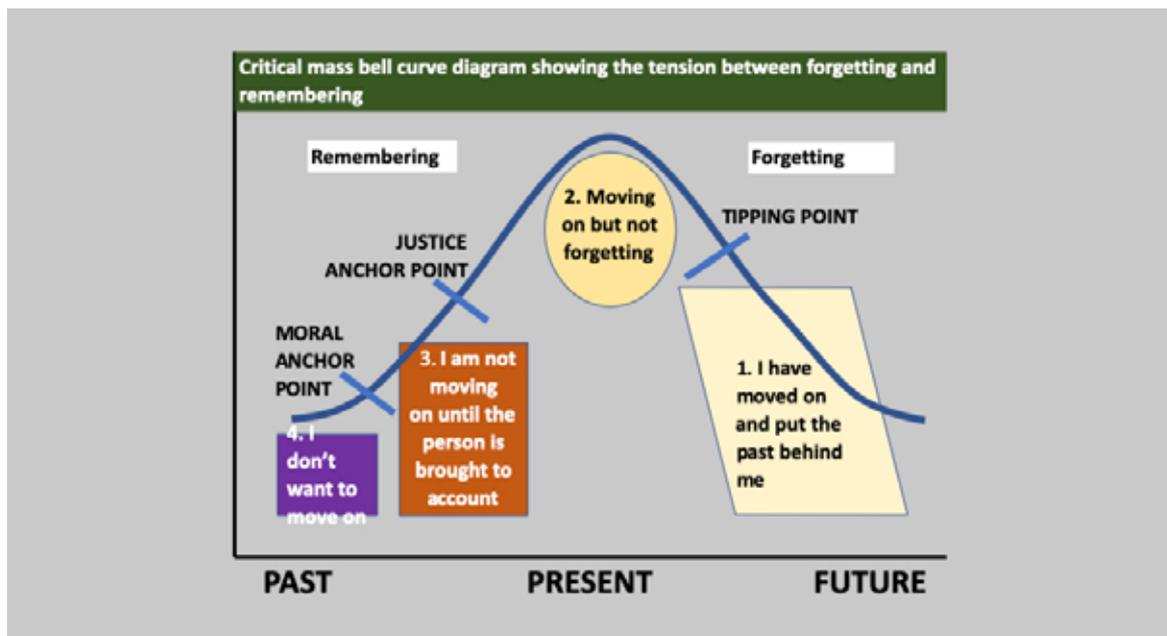


Figure 3: Four responses to past violence plotted on a bell curve

issues onto the GFA agenda. Unfortunately, the report on the needs of victims by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, entitled 'We Will Remember Them', arrived one month later and was too late to be considered. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (2019) recalls floating the idea of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) among parties in the Stormont negotiations but to his surprise found much resistance from the unionist parties, who saw it as a republican Trojan Horse. Having heard about the TRC project from a South African delegation in 1996, he was disappointed it was a no-go area.

It would be wrong to convey the impression that nothing happened in the absence of a TRC at Track One official level. Appendix 1 lists the substantial number of public inquiries, inquests, and investigations. When all these four types of actions are taken into account, they amount to substantial official Track One activity and involve a significant amount of funding from the UK State, probably around £2 billion and close to what a TRC would have cost. It turned out to be a pragmatic approach by the two governments made on the hoof as they went along.

Track Four: unofficial efforts to provide a healing process

Following the 1994 ceasefires, community-based initiatives by victim support groups emerged to find their find their voice, make meaning of the violence and discern the lived connection between past and present. Getting the truth about what happened in past specific incidents of violence also served as a catalyst for their own healing. Snapshots of significant interventions are given in Appendix 2.

Coming in the aftermath of GFA, amidst the excitement and hope of a new era of

peace, the Glenree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation set up four projects in an organic way, one after the other. They offered a confidential, safe weekend residential space at Glenree to victim/survivors and former combatants from NI and Britain. In retrospect, these four projects are effective examples of not just 'peacebuilding from below' carried on quietly in the background, but also a 'bottom-down' approach, the hallmark of Track Four. The process involved peer storytelling, group circles using the 'talking stone', trauma support and nature-based journey trails to enable victims/survivors to recover their own voice, achieve self-awareness and move towards as much 'emotional closure' as possible.

The first project was LIVE (Let's Involve the Victim's Experience) for victim/survivors, which started in late 1998 and ran until 2008. Then came the former combatants project (2002–8) in similar residential weekends following the release of political prisoners in 2000. Arising from these separate weekends, participants from the two projects volunteered to engage each other in informal victim-combatant dialogue encounters. The fourth project was the Sustainable Peace Network (2004–2009), an eco-therapy initiative for both victim/survivors and former combatants who journeyed together in the wilderness mountains of Scotland and South Africa. The four different innovative projects could not have happened without financial support from the American Irish philanthropist Chuck Feeney and the EU peace funds.

What is meant by a bottom-down process? It may seem a bit Freudian, but we have to find ways of working with the trapped emotional memory, both personal and collective, that lies under the surface. Emotional time is different to ordinary time because it feels like the conflict event only happened yesterday. Volkan (2014) calls this a 'time collapse'. Dawson (2007) calls it the 'present past'. No one should underestimate the impact of thirty years of political violence on NI civil society and the extent to which each community has been traumatised by the bitter inter-communal war. Much of that remains buried as an unhealed undercurrent that nobody wants to talk about, yet it continues to drive sectarianism.

The silent deep-rooted fears of the 'other' also resides in this basement area. For some it remains the underbelly of the conflict and is not allowed psychologically or politically to appear on the radar. Of course, we must accept that many people fear opening the Pandora's Box because of our lack of emotional capacity to work with unprocessed deep hurt and unresolved trauma. Add to that the big political and official security need to deny things that happened in the past and to block attempts to reveal secrets of the dirty war (Cobain 2016, 169–209). Yet it is no longer productive to keep holding it underground below the surface if we want to transform the conflict.

The big breakthrough in working with trauma was the book *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman (1992), based on her work with victims of violence in Boston. She showed that the path out of interior silence was to tell your story to others. Usually, that

does not happen until a person can find a ripe and safe moment. For RUC officers and British soldiers, it can take several years after retirement before that moment arrives, if it comes at all. For victims who have lost loved ones, it was not until after GFA that they could feel safe to talk about things. Figure 4 (Corry 2013) shows Herman’s three stages in the journey. It cannot occur in isolation. Connection with others in stage 2 is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of human dignity and a meaningful world.

Three working principles form the heart of the bottom-down healing process.

A. **Trauma is an emotional injury and not a disorder.** It has not been helpful that psychologists have overused the term PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) to describe trauma as a disorder, a term that should be reserved for prolonged and repeated emotional abuse. This creates the impression that disorder is some kind of clinical disability that can only be managed through drugs. Instead, as an emotional injury, it can be healed through a social process of storytelling and truth recovery based on ‘working through’ the indescribable and the undiscussable (Peter Levine 2010; Daniel Bar-On 1999), as visualised in Figure 4.

B. **Making meaning out of suffering is essential.** Viktor Frankl (1964), the Auschwitz survivor, turned his gloomy predicament and human suffering into a personal growth experience: ‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves’. Nelson Mandela survived a similar ordeal in his Robben Island prison cell to rethink the use of violence. Such journeys affirm the defiant power of the human spirit to re-invent itself.

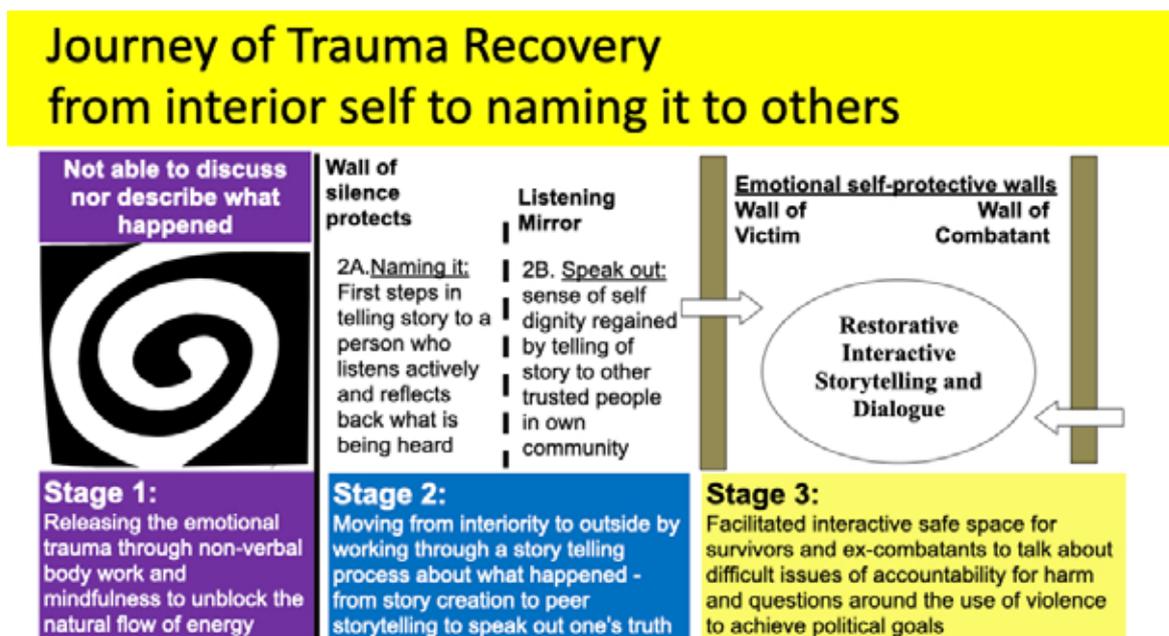


Figure 4: Judith Herman’s three stage journey of trauma recovery from silence, through storytelling to re-connection with others

C. Hearing and acknowledging the hurt of each other in the storytelling process is the door opener to experience the 'humanising moment'. To be respected, heard, understood and acknowledged are all vital steps in the healing process. Carl Rogers (1977) pioneered non-directive storytelling: 'To my mind, empathy is in itself a healing agent...because it brings even the most frightened client into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs.' The humanising moment happens in an interactive experience between victim and ex-combatant when each enters into the other's lived experience. It is instinctively experienced as heart touching and connects to the gut. New understandings emerge about the human cost of violence and the context within which people got drawn into conflict.

For Glenree participants, using the peer storytelling method, it was not some kind of clinical professional workshop but an interactive peer healing and social experience. Victims expressed the painful lived experience of the past in the presence of a listener and then roles were reversed with a fellow victim. It was not for everyone, but those who came back to successive weekends could feel the melting of their inner trauma, releasing them from the grip of the past with renewed dignity and making the breakthrough into new life experiences. They moved out of the shadows of Track Four and surfaced up into Track Three community life, taking on active peacemaking roles.

Deconstructing toxic binary narratives

Many senior ex-combatants attended the Glenree workshops and are testament to the fact that only 2 percent of released prisoners broke their licence and re-offended. Part of their post-violence journey was to come to terms with how loyalist and republican narratives were mobilised and weaponised in their respective campaigns of violence during the Troubles. Rotberg (2006, vii) reminds us that: 'Every conflict is justified by a narrative of grievance, accusation and indignity.' The Irish experience mirrors that. Each narrative holds the unresolved collective hurt and grievance of that nation or community when told and retold from father/mother to son/daughter.

The loyalist historian Philip Orr has spoken about how the loyalist and republican narratives are binary opposites connected side by side. They are parallel, interdependent and equal but interlocked in complex ways because of their shared historical yet contested experience on the island of Ireland. He questioned whether we have to stay in the binary route. Is it possible to see the bigger picture of the two opposing narratives in relationship to each other and not excluding the other? Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan (2006,205) have proposed the metaphor of the double helix because the two narratives are intertwined and yet, 'they are still separate and should be acknowledged as such' They are not touching but live in both constructive and unproductive tension with each other.

A number of former combatants, both in the time they spent in prison and in

subsequent workshops, have bravely faced the issue of the futility of violence and deconstructed the toxicity they were taught through the green and orange narratives. In the profound words of Mahatma Gandhi: 'Violence seems to change things but eventually violence takes you over'. The task of unravelling the virus of political violence surfaced at times in the intense encounters between victims and ex-combatants as they faced each other in reflective mode. It takes time for such re-thinking to happen and particularly to share it in public because it puts ex-combatants in the vulnerable position of questioning 'the cause' for which their fellow comrades gave their lives in combat. They were beholden to 'the cause' taken on by previous martyrs. When Pat Magee (IRA) got to make that point in his face-to-face meeting with victim/survivor Jo Berry (2017, 337), Jo was about to give up; but then 'something happened about halfway through where he stopped talking and said to me: "... When I hear your anger and your grief, and [then he asked the question] what can I do to help?" In that moment, he had taken off his political hat, he had opened up and became vulnerable.' A new journey started for both that has continued for many years.

Indeed, it is not too late for some form of legacy commission at the high level to support further informal Track Four rounds of healing past hurts, trauma recovery and the huge issue of re-thinking how political violence was used in the past by each ethno-political community.

Endnotes

1. The term 'post-conflict' is not used because both positive/productive and negative/unproductive conflict is always with us. The challenge is to achieve the ending of political violence through a ceasefire. The unilateral ceasefires of the IRA (31st August) and the Combined Loyalist Military Command (13th October) opened the post-violence era in the autumn of 1994. However, it did not bring about the ending of sectarian abuse and attacks.
2. Ahern made these remarks at the Royal Irish Academy in an address to mark the retirement of Professor Jennifer Todd from UCD on 23rd November 2018.
3. Address made by Philip Orr at a Glenree seminar at Liberty Hall, 3rd December 2015.

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Appendix 1

TRACK ONE OFFICIAL INITIATIVES

- Lord Saville’s exhaustive and expensive inquiry (1997-2010) on the Bloody Sunday killings of January 1972 believed to have cost £400 million, even though the official amount is stated as £200 million. in his own words, prime minister Tony Blair said (2010:165): “It had been worth it: an exhaustive and fair account of what happened.”
- A number of police inquiries led by Sir John Stevens (2003) concerning collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and the state security forces.
- The review by the Canadian judge Peter Cory (2005) on six disputed killings, set up at Weston Park (2001).
- The Irish government commissioned Judge Peter Smithwick Inquiry (2005-11) to carry out a public inquiry on the deaths of two RUC chiefs Breen and Buchanan at the border in 1989.
- Sir Desmond de Silva’s review (2012) of the case papers on Pat Finucane’s killing in 1985;
- Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, Commission appointed by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State (2009), www.cgpmi.org
- Richard Haass and Megan O’Sullivan, Proposed agreement among the parties of the Northern Ireland Executive on Parades, Select Commemorations and Related Protests; Flags and Emblems; and Contending with the Past. 31 December 2013
- The investigations into unsolved murders between the years 1969-98 in chronological order was carried out by the Historical Enquiries Team (2006-2014) or the HET by which it became known, established by Sir Hugh Orde when he was Chief Commissioner with the PSNI. It was unable to complete its task before the project was suspended in 2014.
- The investigations carried out by the Police Ombudsman office (PONI), the most notable being the reports on killings in North Belfast and at the Height’s Bar in Loughinisland, Co Down.
- Operation Kenova, an investigation by former Chief Constable John Boucher into the activities of the double agent Stakeknife, ongoing at present.

Appendix 2

TRACK FOUR UNOFFICIAL INITIATIVES

- Widows who had lost their husbands/partners in the Troubles found their voice in WAVE (1991) counselling groups. Their logo of a lighthouse became a beacon of light for those able to process their trauma and bereavement. The group went from strength to strength setting up a network of counselling centres around the province with sustained support backed by the Victim Unit funds.
- An Crann/The Tree (1994-2004) provided a space for people to tell their story through different art forms as part of a healing process. Separately, in Derry, victim/survivors set up the Theatre of Witness to tell their individual story as a 'story drama'.
- When the Ballymurphy victims called a meeting in late 1998, they suddenly found their individual voices - silent for so many years when grief was suspended – and were surprised of their collective need to get answers to many unresolved questions over what happened in their community in the days after the introduction of internment in August 1971. This started a long journey for them to request an official inquiry into the killings of civilians by the Parachute Regiment. By trawling through the national archives, they uncovered a lot of facts which prepared them for eventually the year-long inquest 2018-19.
- In England, the Warrington Peace Centre was formed by Colin and Wendy Parry following the death of their little boy, Tim (12), in the bomb placed in a litter bin by the IRA on Bridge Street in Warrington in 1973. In response, Susan McHugh led a 'pop up' protest through the streets of Dublin with the simple message: End the Violence.
- When Don Mullin (1997) published his book containing one hundred eyewitness accounts of the shootings on Bloody Sunday back in January 1972, it revived the deep contrast with the findings of the Widgery Report (1972) that victims had experienced at that time. Following the publication, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern raised the matter with prime minister Tony Blair in London to acknowledge the continued hurt. To his credit, Blair ordered a public inquiry to build a positive political atmosphere for the Stormont talks.
- Healing through Remembering was a project established in 2000 by leading civil society 'influentials' with the support of the Victims Unit to find ways to remember and memorialise people's personal accounts of the conflict rather than the traditional manner of erecting monuments to the past. It continued to support storytelling as a healing mechanism. Healing Through Remembering, (2002) The Report of the Healing Through Remembering Project, <http://www.healingthroughremembering.org/pdf/htrreport.pdf>

- The Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) was a community-based approach to archiving and publishing testimonies from people in the community who lived through the conflict. The book was the product of four years' discussions, interviewing and editing of the stories of the 99 people from Ardoyne in North Belfast who lost their lives as a result of the political violence between 1969 and 1998.
- In Fermanagh, SEFF was formed to work with 'innocent victims' and mainly Protestant unionist families who suffered over many years from the killing activities of IRA units in the rural borderlands.