

Removing Peace Walls and Public Policy (1): the challenge of definition and design

Cathy Gormley-Heenan, Duncan Morrow and Jonny Byrne

Introduction

The policy 'problem' of segregation and separation in Northern Ireland is self evident. The majority of children are still educated in religiously segregated schools and the majority of people still live in segregated housing and communities (Nolan, 2014). Such segregation is at its most visually stark when viewed from the high hills surrounding Belfast, with sections of the city physically separated by high walls, metal barriers and concrete blocks. Communities are also divided and separated in less obvious ways, where motorways, shopping centers, dense foliage and/or vacant and derelict landscapes are used to define the edge of particular communities. Such conflict related architecture serves as a physical reminder that despite the international acclaim of Northern Ireland as a model for conflict resolution, the region remains profoundly divided.

This policy brief critically evaluates the policy formulation, to include the underpinning rationale and definitions, associated with the planned policy objective of the 'removal of all peace walls by 2023' by drawing on research conducted through an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant that looked at peace walls and public policy in Northern Ireland. The yearlong project, which concluded in September 2015, involved academics working in partnership with representatives from the Department of Justice on a range of issues, in leading delivery of the TBUC target of removing all peace walls by 2023. The engagement included a number of discrete quantitative and qualitative research projects and several focused workshops designed to allow key stakeholders inside and beyond the Department to reflect on the requirements for delivery and to bring to light critical issues influencing a successful outcome.

The Social Construction of the Peace Wall Problem

Policy problems are often 'socially constructed' and this means that they reflect either social, ideological or moral values about what is considered right or wrong with a society. As

Peter Dorey points out: 'A change in certain societal values can result in a previously accepted phenomenon, or one whose scale was not fully acknowledged, subsequently being identified or defined as a problem, and this attracting the attention of policy makers' (2005: 8). The building of peace walls from 1969 until the 1990s was regarded as a legitimate response to incidents of violence and disorder within Northern Ireland but by 2013, it had been identified as a problem. The Northern Ireland Executive's *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* (2013) set out a policy objective for the complete removal of all peace walls and barriers by 2023. Their rationale for such a policy priority was that: 'Removing interface barriers and other structures of division will send out an important message that our society is continuing on its journey to peace and reconciliation, but more importantly will bring community benefits. The elimination of these physical reminders is necessary in progressing as a community and facilitating the reconciliation that has been prevented for so long through division'. However, an uncomfortable statistic from the OFMDFM 2012 peace walls survey indicated that 69% of those living closest to the walls believe that the walls must remain (for now) because of the potential for violence (Gormley-Heenan et al, 2013) suggesting that residents believed that walls remained the most viable form of protection from the other community. The removal of the peace walls may, at least in a normative sense, be seen as the ultimate act of reconciliation between two communities who have traditionally prioritized separation over sharing but the current framing of the peace walls policy lags far behind this sentiment and has been unable to convincingly answer the question of exactly why the walls should come down. *This is the first problem policy-makers face: articulating a clearer rationale for why the walls need to come down.*

What Does the Policy Objective Mean - 'Removal of All Peace Walls by 2023'?

The policy objective' seems simple: 'the removal of all peace walls by 2023'. However, upon closer interrogation almost every word is subject to interpretation by all interested stakeholders. **Firstly, what does 'removal mean'? A**

generally assumed interpretation might be ‘to take something away’. It is different from what we understand by words such as replacing, changing, substituting which goes beyond the simple act of taking something away to another act of doing something else beyond this. This begs an important question for policy makers: can any alternations, enhancements, and modifications made to existing peace walls structure constitute a policy ‘success’ or is actual ‘removal’ the only measure of success according to the policy objective?

Secondly, what does ‘all’ mean? In other words, how many peace walls make up the total of ‘all’? **Thirdly, and relatedly, what exactly is a ‘peace wall’?** The TBUC strategy uses the terminology of peace walls, interface barriers and other structures of division interchangeably. Only by addressing this third question, can the second question be answered. *This is the second problem that policy-makers face: the lack of clarity in the phrase ‘removal of all peace walls’.*

What is definition of a peace wall?

In our 2012 public attitudes survey, and in the absence of any agreed definition elsewhere, we used the terms ‘peace walls’ and ‘peace lines’ to cover all kinds of interface barriers that kept communities apart including walls, gates and security fences. Since then it has become clear that conversations need to take place through which an agreed definition of what a ‘peace wall’ is can emerge. The following questions should frame the discussions with policy-makers. Does the understanding of ‘peace walls’ include:

- any physical structure which territorially divides distinct communities?
- any vacant space which territorially divides distinct communities?
- any physical structure, originally created by the state in response to perceived and/or violence and disorder?
- any physical structure, originally created by communities, and then reinforced by the state, established in response to perceived and/or violence and disorder?
- any physical structure originally created by communities, and then reinforced by the state, established in response to a specific and evidenced-based security concern?
- any physical structure originally created communities, and then reinforced by the state, that has since been adapted to address and accommodate cultural exclusivity?
- anything physical or otherwise that has the effect of territorially dividing distinct communities?

These questions are important because, in a sense, they help calculate the ‘total’ number of peace walls that the TBUC strategy seeks to target and create a baseline for the monitoring and evaluation of progress. *This is the third problem that policy-makers face: in the absence of a agreed definition of peace walls which will, by extension, allow the policy objective to have a numeric value placed upon it, it is likely that those tasked with policy implementation will, by*

necessity, work to their own interpretations of how many walls and barriers there are at present and such an approach may not align with the intentions underpinning the TBUC strategy.

How many peace walls are there and who owns them?

Clearly, the answer to this question will depend on the agreed definition. The Belfast Interface Project concluded that there were 99 peace walls and other such structures back in 2011. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, using some other measurement, suggested that there were 48 in his address to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2012. The Community Relations Council’s Peace Monitoring Report (2013) have explained the difference as one whereby ‘the Department of Justice (DoJ) only recognises as a peace wall a structure erected by statutory bodies for the purpose of preventing violent hostilities between antagonistic communities’ while the Belfast Interface Project defines an interface as ‘any boundary line between a predominantly Protestant/unionist area and a Catholic area’ (CRC, 2013: 80). The ownership of the various structures is divided primarily between the Department of Justice (58) and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (17) though a range of other agencies and actors also have ownership of particular structures. There appears to have been no discussion around the creation of a more centralized system to manage the policy objective of the removal of all peace walls by giving authority and ultimate responsibility to one department. Policy makers might need to reflect on the benefit of the current fragmented system and why it has been sustained rather than reformed. *This is the fourth problem that policy-makers face, particularly those policy-makers located within DOJ: are they responsible for the removal of ‘all’ peace walls, or only those erected by statutory bodies? If it is the former and not the latter, how do they propose to deal with those owned by private landlords (7) and those whose ownership is unknown (4)? How do they propose to deal with those by other government departments and do they have the remit to instruct other government departments on issues of removal (e.g. Department of Regional Development (3) and Department of Social Development (1).*

What function do peace walls serve?

A review of the various walls, barrier and other structures identified by the DOJ, NIHE and BIP raises some questions about the function which they serve in 2015. Over time, the function of some peace walls has changed due to demographic changes, planning decisions and urban redevelopment. It is only in understanding their current function that a holistic policy can be designed to address the possibility of their removal. Indeed, it is possible, that despite any accepted definition of a peace wall, they may

have much greater functionality than their original purpose. It is this additional functionality that will complicate any policy design process. The most commonly cited function of a peace wall is to prevent or reduce a risk of inter community violence. However, they might also serve to prevent or reduce anti-social behaviour from elements within the community. Alternatively, they might reflect a social policy objective other than that of security and/or safety – for example, some may serve as an additional traffic calming measure in an area or a boundary wall that is locally accepted. In some instances, listed structures might simply have become part of the urban architecture and are no longer even recognized as a peace wall. If the peace walls serve functions beyond the separation and segregation of the two main communities in Northern Ireland, can these be considered in any hierarchical sense (primary and secondary function)? How would such functionality be ascertained? If its primary function is NOT safety/security related, should responsibility for its removal lie with the current lead department (DOJ)? This may require some rethinking of what constitutes a ‘peace wall’ and then, by extension, who should be responsible for it. A peace walls, barriers and structures typology should be created and all existing structures classified within this typology. *This is the fifth problem that policy-makers face: any attempt at reclassifying walls, structures and barriers to align more clearly to their current function, rather than the purpose for which they were originally designed could be interpreted as a cynical attempt to massage government targets rather than a necessary root and branch reflection on the nature and scale of the policy problem.*

What are the implications for the TBUC Programme Board?

It is clear that the TBUC Strategy, as it relates to the issues of peace walls, needs some policy redesign though not necessarily dramatic change. This is because the roots of policy success or failure can often be traced back to the design phase. In identifying some problems with the design and the articulation of the policy objectives regarding Northern Ireland’s peace walls, there is an opportunity for the TBUC Programme Board to give further clarification to the objectives. Without such clarification, we will have designed this aspect of the TBUC strategy to fail. This can be reduced to three main areas for consideration:

A need for linguistic precision. There is a need for greater clarity in the terminology used to discuss peace walls, particularly as it relates to government strategy. We suggest that the Programme Board may wish to consider the TBUC phrase ‘the removal of all peace walls’ as an example of this - What does ‘removal’ mean? Is an environmental redesign of a wall the same as removal? What does ‘all’ mean – how many are all? Who will determine the list/numbers? What does ‘peace wall’ mean – does it include contested space and vacant/derelict land or does it not?

A recognition of scale. There is a need for greater clarification on the scale of the issue as well as the development of an AGREED list of peace walls which all engaged stakeholders recognise. There remains inconsistency between various sectors and agencies when reporting the scale of the problem which can lead to inaccurate stories promoted by the media (for example, that there have been more peace walls built since the Good Friday Agreement than before). It is recommended that a detailed list of peace walls is circulated between all stakeholder until an agreed and definitive list is developed with lead responsibilities identified;

A decision on ownership. There is a need for a conversation and decisions to be taken around the ownership of these peace walls, once identified and agreed. Should they, for example, be located within and owned by one department rather than spread across a range of different stakeholders? Would this make for a simpler implementation process? If so, how could this be actioned?

Conclusion

Successful policy implementation can only occur when policy-makers have been clear about the nature of the problem. In its simplest form, the government strategy suggests that peace walls are the problem and removal is the solution. However, for 69% of those living closest to the walls, the potential for violence is the problem and the maintenance of peace walls (at least for now) is the solution (Gormley-Heenan et al, 2013). Reconciling these positions needs to begin at the design stage.

References

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