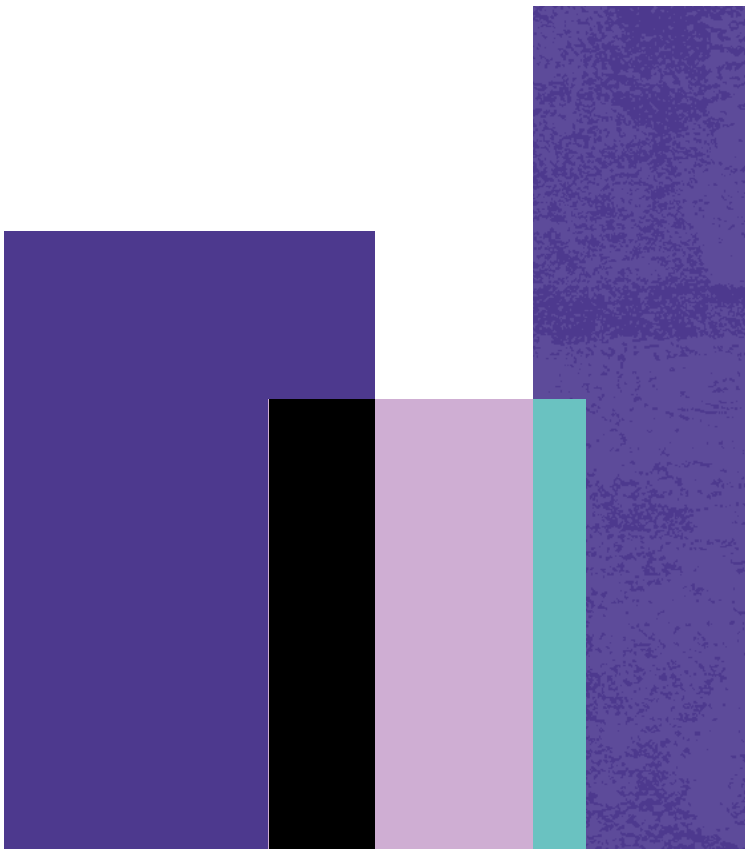
BRITISH COUNCIL

Art as Peace Building

Annex 5
Country Overviews: Baltic States, Colombia, and Northern Ireland



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This report was commissioned by the British Council.

Research company: edgeandstory (in collaboration with Lanka.pro)

Authors: Lina Kirjazovaite, Jordi Baltà, Kateryna Kravchuk, Anna Karnaukh, Kai Brennert

The interpretations offered in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the British Council, its officers, or those individuals who contributed to the research.

Suggested Citation for the Full Report

edgeandstory, & Lanka.pro Collective (2026). *Art as Peace Building: An exploration of practices and impact scenarios of how arts and culture address fragility and conflict.* British Council. https://doi.org/10.57884/30WN-CQ12

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Regional Overview

Baltic States

Countries' Context and Framing of Conflict

Post-Soviet states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) with significant Russian-speaking minorities (25-30% in Estonia/ Latvia). Historical tensions around integration, language, and identity. Geopolitical pressures intensified by the Ukraine war. Social cohesion challenges in border regions, particularly Northeast Estonia (Narva) and Eastern Latvia. Generational divides and rural-urban disparities affecting community resilience.

Core dynamics center on ethnic integration versus assimilation debates, with Russian-speaking communities navigating identity preservation while adapting to national frameworks. Key turning points include EU accession (2004), citizenship reforms, and dramatically the 2022 Ukraine invasion which shifted discourse from multiculturalism to security-focused integration. Present status shows heightened sensitivity around Russian cultural expressions while maintaining commitment to inclusive approaches. Arts and culture occupy a strategic position as "soft" integration tools, offering non-threatening spaces for cross-community dialogue. The P2P program positioned cultural practices as bridges rather than barriers, working through community-level interventions rather than top-down policy. Post-2022, the ecosystem became more complex with increased scrutiny of Russian cultural content while recognizing the need to engage rather than alienate Russian-speaking populations.

Arts and Peacebuilding Landscape

Who: Applied theater practitioners, community cultural organisations, local museums, neighborhood development NGOs, international artists. Key actors include Initium Foundation (Latvia), Narva Arts Residence (Estonia), local cultural centers. Where: Border regions (Narva, Eastern Latvia), rural communities, urban neighborhoods with mixed populations. Both physical community spaces and increasingly digital platforms.

How: Applied theater (verbatim theater), community festivals, intergenerational projects, contemporary art exhibitions, music programs, creative industries development. Constraints: Funding dependency on international donors, limited local government understanding of applied arts value, language barriers, post-2022 political sensitivities around Russian cultural content, capacity limitations in rural areas.

Dominant Approaches and Mechanisms

- **Identity/storytelling:** Verbatim theater sharing personal narratives across ethnic lines; community-curated exhibitions on local traditions
- **Intergenerational healing:** Projects bridging age gaps through cultural heritage preservation and contemporary interpretation
- **Skills/civic engagement:** Applied theater training, creative industries development, community organizing through cultural projects
- **Heritage/continuity:** Honoring local traditions while addressing contemporary issues; multilingual cultural programming
- **Safe spaces:** Arts residencies and cultural centers as neutral ground for cross-community interaction
- **Community empowerment:** Participatory cultural projects giving communities agency in addressing local concerns (school closures, social isolation)

Institutional and Ecosystem Links

- **Government partnerships:** Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture integration departments; variable municipal support depending on local leadership
- **International funding:** FCDO through British Council as primary funder; EU structural funds for cultural projects
- **Local partnerships:** NGOs, cultural organisations, schools as implementation partners and community access points
- **Cross-border collaboration:** Baltic regional networks, particularly around applied theater and community development
- **Academic connections:** Universities providing research support and student engagement

Diaspora and Transnational Dimensions

- **Russian-speaking networks:** Connections to broader Russian-speaking cultural communities while navigating post-2022 political complexities
- **Nordic cultural ties:** Shared approaches with Scandinavian community development models
- **EU cultural mobility:** Artist exchanges and best practice sharing within European cultural networks
- **Ukrainian solidarity:** Post-2022 programming supporting Ukrainian refugees and cultural workers

Shifts Over Time

- **Pre-2022:** Focus on multicultural integration and celebrating diversity within national frameworks
- **Post-Ukraine invasion:** Shift toward security-conscious integration while maintaining inclusive community approaches
- **Methodology evolution:** From traditional cultural programming to applied arts and community engagement techniques
- **Geographic expansion:** From capital cities to rural and border regions where tensions are most acute
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Increased government recognition of cultural approaches' value for social cohesion

Case Spotlights

Narva Venice Project (Estonia): Brought international artists into a closed Russian-speaking community → Practical community building (pizza oven installation) combined with cultural exchange → Transformed arts residence into recognized social cohesion center with sustained community engagement.

Pededze Contemporary Performance (Latvia): Small trilingual border town facing school closure → Applied theater combining local traditions with contemporary issues → Community empowerment and intergenerational dialogue, giving residents voice in local challenges.

Kurzeme Youth Heritage Project (Latvia): Rural village youth curating exhibition on local singing traditions → Intergenerational collaboration and cultural preservation → Bridged generational gaps while engaging community in heritage preservation.

Cross-cutting Insights and Tensions

- **Language complexity:** Balancing Russian language inclusion with Estonian/Latvian integration goals, especially post-2022
- **Rural-urban divide:** Different approaches needed for border communities versus capital city contexts • Generational bridges: Arts particularly effective at connecting older and younger community members
- **Political sensitivity:** Navigating increased scrutiny of Russian cultural content while maintaining inclusive programming
- **Sustainability concerns:** Heavy dependence on international funding with limited local replacement mechanisms
- **Municipal variation:** Success highly dependent on local government understanding and support
- **Community ownership:** Most effective projects gave communities agency rather than imposing external cultural programming

Practical Implications / Recommendations

For policy makers:

- Invest in applied arts training for community workers and local government staff
- Develop flexible funding mechanisms that can adapt to changing political contexts while maintaining community focus
- Create policy frameworks that recognize cultural approaches as legitimate social cohesion tools

For funders:

- Support long-term capacity building rather than short-term project cycles
- Fund local partner development and sustainability planning from program inception
- Maintain flexibility to adapt programming to evolving political contexts

For implementers:

- Prioritize local partnership development and community ownership over external programming
- Use practical community benefits (infrastructure, skills) alongside cultural programming
- Develop language-sensitive approaches that respect community preferences while supporting integration goals
- Build relationships with local government early and invest in stakeholder education about applied arts value

Country Overview

Colombia

Country Context and Conflict Framing

The second most populous country in South America (53m inhabitants, 2024 estimate), Colombia experienced a low-intensity war involving the government, far-right paramilitary groups, crime syndicates and guerrilla groups (including FARC, ELN and others) from the 1960s until the mid-2010s. According to a 2013 report by the National Center for Historical Memory, at least 220,000 people were killed between 1958 and 2012, 81.5% of which correspond to civilians (Centro Nacional de Memoria Històrica, 2013) . Furthermore, still in 2024, UNHCR estimated that 7.3 million people are internally displaced in Colombia, making this the third country in the world with more IDPs, after Sudan and Syria. There have also been several estimations of people missing, which suggest the figure may be around 25,000.

In June 2016, the government and FARC signed a ceasefire. While the deal was narrowly rejected in a referendum in October that year, parties kept their commitment, and the Colombian Congress approved the agreement later in the year. As a result of those agreements, a Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition ('Truth Commission') were established.

The Truth Commission, which was active between 2017 and 2022, paid significant attention to the cultural dimension of the armed conflict and the role of culture and the arts in reconciliation. This was reflected in

a. the formulation of fundamental questions, ranging from the anthropological to the arts-based, e.g. 'What factors in Colombian society have enabled the conflict to take root and persist', 'How has culture been damaged as a result of a long-term war?', 'What have we learned, and how has our culture been enriched through the experience of the conflict?', 'What has been the role of the arts in the persistence of the armed conflict?' (González, 2025);

b. the use of a wide range of artforms to document and reflect on the conflict (theatre, audiovisual, essay, dance, music, street art)[1] (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022); and

1 Art Documentation Project: https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/activaciones-artisticas-y-culturales.

c. the presentation of the Commission's findings, particularly through *Develaciones*, a performing arts / audiovisual production resulting from a participatory process involving communities around the country, which provided the opportunity to present the Truth Commission's findings to public authorities, through the vehicle of the arts (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022),

Mapping of Approaches and Initiatives

The observation of arts and culture initiatives around the conflict and post-conflict in Colombia serves to identify the following approaches:

a. **Community and participatory activities to foster resilience** ('Identity and voice', 'Storytelling'). The long-term nature of the conflict in Colombia has permeated all areas of life, including artistic practice. The arts have frequently been seen as a space route, a place for catharsis, which the parties in conflict often allowed because they saw it as a space for liberation in complex settings. In a fragmented country, where state power was not consolidated (Glenny, 2009, quoted in McPherson et al., 2018), these processes are visible in rural, peripheral areas affected by the conflict (e.g. tejedoras de Mampuján, a women-led collective using traditional textile techniques to illustrate their experiences during war – in what could be seen as an example of what Garcia (2014, quoted in McPherson et al., 2018) termed moving 'from a position of victimhood to one of agency'), but also in the work of individual artists who have engaged in community arts, in youth dance collectives giving visibility to Afro-Colombian identities and expressions (e.g., Sankofa Danza Afro, Pacific Dance) and in the work of organisations that have contributed to the recognition of peripheral cultural expressions as a form of identity and resilience (e.g. Fundación Batuta, and the British Council's own Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth: Sembrando nuestros saberes[2], which involved a long process of analysis and trust-building with six Indigenous communities, adapting strategies to their specific needs).

b. **Documentation of violence and memory exercises** ('Storytelling', 'Peacebuilding / Conflict resolution'). Culture-based approaches to the conflict in Colombia have actively engaged in the strengthening of memory around the armed conflict and its aftermath. This is visible in the work of the Truth Commission but also, earlier, in how many artists have aimed to leave a trace of the war (e.g., Jesús Abad Colorado, whose work has been used as evidence in trials (Comisión de la Verdad, 2021)) and particularly in the many 'memory museums' and memory institutions

2 Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth: Sembrando nuestros saberes: https://www.britishcouncil.co/artes/cultura-desafios-globales/proyectos-pasados/sembrando- nuestros-saberes

(e.g. Casa de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos de la Mujer[3], Barrancabermeja; Montes de María[4]; Buenaventura; Bogotá; Mampuján), which have documented the war and reflected on it alongside communities and arts groups, contributing to fostering dialogue and rebuilding identities in the post-conflict context. Storytelling for Peacebuilding[5], a British Council project which involved work with vulnerable children and young people to produce cartoons and a touring exhibition, could also be placed here.

c. **Fostering alternatives and peaceful scenarios** ('Institution building', 'Learning skills'). Drawing on elements from the previous types but also contributing to a more peaceful context, some projects foster permanent spaces for bringing communities together (see e.g., the work of local authorities in cities like Bogotá and Medellín), recognise the value in Indigenous practices and local cultural expressions, or emphasise the employment potential of the arts and culture, particularly for young people (the *Backstage to the Future: Caribbean*[6] project implemented by the British Council, which provided training to young people in the Colombian Caribbean islands and provided a pathway to professional careers in festival management, could be illustrative of this). To some extent, initiatives aimed at building community resilience and documenting the conflict and its aftermath, outlined earlier, provide the basis for these developments. They are also in line with the findings of the Truth Commission, and its recommendations aimed at embracing internal diversity, addressing inequalities and building a culture of peace. This is also somehow reflected in the 2023 decision to rename the Ministry of Culture as the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Knowledges, as well as in the National Culture Plan 2024-2038, which emphasises the role of culture in caring for the diversity of life, territories and peace, and addresses diversity and memory, among other issues. In this context, the Arts for Peace initiative[7] provides arts education to over 500,000 children and young people.

3 Casa de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos de la Mujer: https://www.casamuseo.organizacionfemeninapopular.org/

4 Montes de María: https://mimemoria.org/

5 Storytelling for Peacebuilding: https://www.britishcouncil.co/artes/conexiones-culturales/proyectos-pasados/storytelling-for-peace

6 Backstage to the Future: Caribbean: https://www.britishcouncil.co/artes/economia-creativa/proyectos-pasados/backstage-future-caribbean

7 Arts for Peace initiative: https://artesparalapaz.mincultura.gov.co/Paginas/index.aspx

Some Final Reflections (On What Works and What Doesn't)

While the analysis has been relatively short, and has not examined projects in detail, some general observations based on the conversations maintained can be shared:

- The importance of a 'people-led approach', involving respect for individuals and communities, recognition of diversity (which should involve the design of 'situated' approaches, relevant to specific local contexts) and the establishment of balanced, rather than top-down relationships between organisations and participants.
- The strength that can derive from collective artistic processes, which are very frequent in the Colombian context.
- The importance of documenting violence and using memory spaces and processes as opportunities to recognise victims and reflect together.
- How arts organisations in Colombia have, over time, seen the importance of connecting the arts with healing, mutual recognition, recovering memories, etc., and developed skills and capacities to work in these areas.
- The risks resulting from changes in organisations' agendas and priorities, which may threaten the trust of communities with which they have engaged.

Country Overview

Northern Ireland

Country and Conflict Context

The contemporary political and social context of Northern Ireland is profoundly shaped by the period known as the Troubles, a sustained episode of violent sectarian conflict that lasted from approximately 1968 to 1998. The conflict primarily involved two broadly defined communities: predominantly Protestant unionists (also referred to as loyalists), who sought to maintain Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom, and predominantly Roman Catholic nationalists (or republicans), who advocated for Northern Ireland's incorporation into the Republic of Ireland.

Key institutional actors during the conflict included the British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR—renamed the Royal Irish Regiment in 1992). These forces were deployed in a security and peacekeeping capacity, most notably in relation to armed confrontations between the nationalist Irish Republican Army (IRA), which framed the conflict as a guerrilla struggle for national self-determination, and unionist paramilitary organisations, which characterised the IRA's actions as terrorism (Wallenfeldt J., 2026).

Prior to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement) on 10 April 1998, the conflict resulted in the deaths of more than 3,720 individuals and injuries to more than 47,000 others. The Agreement established a framework for devolved, power-sharing governance through the Northern Ireland Assembly and set out principles governing future political, constitutional, and institutional relationships between Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and Ireland. It was endorsed by referendums held in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in May 1998 (though it should be noted that sectarian conflict and deaths continued for many years following the political deal).

As of 2024, Northern Ireland had a population of approximately 1,927,900 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2025). Belfast is the capital city and the largest urban centre, with a population of 348,005 (Belfast City Government, 2025). Despite substantial progress in stabilisation and peace, societal divisions remain pronounced, particularly within housing and education systems. Approximately 90% of social housing continues to be segregated along communal lines, and

only around 7% of pupils attend integrated schools, notwithstanding survey evidence indicating that 71% of the population would prefer integrated education to become the dominant model (Pivotal, 2023).
Northern Ireland also experiences disproportionately high levels of mental ill-health, much of which is linked to the enduring psychological legacy of the Troubles. Research by the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) indicates that the prevalence of mental health conditions in Northern Ireland is approximately 25% higher than in England (Rodríguez-Davis, L., 2025).

Peace Building

There is no singular, universally accepted definition of the 'Troubles'. While some commentators describe the period as a civil war, the prevailing view—reflected in most official and academic sources—categorises it as an armed conflict or, in certain analyses, a low-intensity conflict.

Similarly, there is no single, agreed understanding of peace in Northern Ireland's post-conflict context. Both desk-based research and stakeholder interviews indicate a gradual shift away from a conception of "negative peace", defined primarily by ceasefire arrangements and the absence of large-scale violence, towards a broader model of "positive peace". This framework, developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), encompasses a wider set of societal indicators, including: well-functioning government; a sound business environment; equitable distribution of resources; acceptance of the rights of others; good relations with neighbouring jurisdictions; free flow of information; high levels of human capital; and low levels of corruption.

This transition towards a positive peace framework is currently under consideration within Northern Ireland and is expected to be adapted to reflect the region's specific historical, political, and social context in the coming years.

Given the diversity of perspectives on both the conflict and peace itself, peacebuilding activity in Northern Ireland is defined in multiple ways and remains an evolving field of practice. Interview findings suggest that peacebuilding is less commonly understood as a process of "establishing" or "sustaining" peace, and more as supporting communities in addressing the legacy of conflict, fostering mutual understanding across divisions, and enabling the articulation of a shared and inclusive vision for the future.

Internationally, Northern Ireland is frequently cited as a contemporary example of relatively successful peacebuilding, and many elements of its peace process over the past two decades are regarded as instructive for other post-conflict societies. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that relationships with the past remain contested, and that the social and economic benefits of peace have not been distributed evenly across all communities.

Within the framework of Northern Ireland's devolved governance, peacebuilding activities are commonly referred to as Good Relations work, reflecting a policy emphasis on improving inter-community relations, promoting equality, and addressing the structural and cultural legacies of division.

Good Relations

The concept of Good Relations is a distinctive feature of Northern Ireland's peacebuilding architecture. In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive adopted the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Strategy, which set out a formal commitment to improving community relations and advancing the development of a more united, shared, and cohesive society. The T:BUC Strategy is structured around four interrelated pillars: children and young people, safe communities, shared communities, and cultural expression (Executive Office of Northern Ireland, 2013).

The Good Relations Programme operates within this overarching strategic framework and represents the central government's principal mechanism for supporting peacebuilding and community cohesion. Delivery is decentralised through local government, with city and district councils hosting dedicated Good Relations Units responsible for implementing year-round programmes of activity across multiple sectors.

By way of illustration, Belfast City Council's Good Relations Unit delivers a minimum of 90–100 projects annually, a significant proportion of which incorporate artistic and cultural components. The Unit also coordinates Good Relations Week, an annual programme comprising approximately 200 public-facing events designed to promote understanding of Good Relations work at community level. Arts and cultural activity constitute a core element of this initiative.

Taken together, these structures demonstrate that arts and culture are embedded within both governmental and municipal approaches to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, and are recognised as integral tools for fostering dialogue, inclusion, and reconciliation.

Arts and Peacebuilding

Northern Ireland possesses a dynamic and well-developed arts and cultural sector, comprising over 70 arts festivals and more than 60 museums. In addition, the region benefits from an extensive community arts infrastructure, much of which emerged as a direct legacy of the conflict and subsequent reconciliation processes. These cultural spaces serve as important platforms for facilitating mutual understanding, sharing diverse narratives, and creating opportunities for difficult conversations that may otherwise lack a suitable public forum.

Interview findings indicate that practitioners within the arts sector perceive a strong sense of responsibility to respond meaningfully to the legacy of conflict. Cultural peace work in Northern

Ireland is multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of artistic practices, community-based initiatives, and educational interventions aimed at promoting understanding, healing, and reconciliation (Leonard, A., 2025).

A notable resource in this field is the Database of Arts-Based Peacebuilding, an online platform designed to document and share knowledge on practices operating at the intersection of arts and peacebuilding. The initiative was established in response to a significant lack of accessible data capturing the development, production, and lived experience of artistic peacebuilding practices.

Analysis of desk-based research and interviews identified several recurring approaches that characterise arts-based peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Ireland:

- **Cross-community engagement:** Initiatives that bring individuals from different communities together through shared creative practice in order to foster dialogue, understanding, and social cohesion. Example: Future Parade, a creative youth programme supported by Macnas, Belfast International Arts Festival (BIAF), EastSide Arts, and Féile an Phobail.
- **Single-community engagement:** Recognition that certain conversations and forms of reflection are most effectively undertaken within single-identity settings, particularly where issues are sensitive or traumatic. This approach can serve as a precursor to later cross-community engagement. Example: Kabosh Theatre productions.
- **Documentation of events:** Use of museums, film, literature, and visual arts to contextualise historical events and stimulate reflective dialogue. Example: The Troubles and Beyond exhibition in Ulster Museum.
- **Telling people's stories:** Emphasis on personal narratives to highlight shared humanity and enable deeper understanding as a foundation for reconciliation. Example: Silent Testimony exhibition by Colin Davidson.
- **Multiple perspectives on shared history:** Artistic exploration of the same historical events from different viewpoints, enabling more nuanced understanding. Example: graphic storytelling through the Making the Future project.
- **Creating space for difficult conversations:** Arts-led initiatives designed to open dialogue on contested or sensitive issues. Example: Difficult Conversations programme by British Council Northern Ireland.
- **Amplifying underrepresented voices:** Providing platforms for community voices beyond dominant narratives, thereby reducing polarisation. Example: Belfast Mela Festival.
- **Using the language of the arts to build understanding:** Arts as a tool for increasing awareness, challenging stereotypes, and introducing complex social concepts. Example: CultureLAB exhibition in Ulster Museum.
- **International exchange and collaboration:** Engagement with other post-conflict contexts through touring, exchanges, and partnerships

to support comparative reflection and learning. Example: Creative Connections programme by British Council Northern Ireland.

- **Demilitarisation of public space and cultural practices:** Initiatives aimed at reducing paramilitary symbolism in parades, murals, bonfires, and marches while preserving cultural identity. Example: Re-imagining Communities programme.
- **Creative placemaking as a development strategy:** Harnessing community creativity to strengthen social cohesion, support economic development, and improve wellbeing, particularly among young people. Examples: The MAC Arts Centre, Studio Ulster.
- **Cultural heritage as a bridge between communities:** Using shared heritage assets and cultural sites to foster dialogue and shared learning. Example: heritage tours and events delivered by ArtsEkta.
- **Creative education practices:** Empowering children and adults through participatory arts education. Example: Teaching Divided Histories project by British Council and Nerve Centre.
- **Creative therapeutic interventions:** Use of music, writing, theatre, and other art forms to support trauma recovery and contribute to longer-term conflict transformation. Example: Storytelling and collecting memories by Healing Through Remembering initiative.

Creating a Vision for the Future

Beyond addressing historical trauma, arts and culture play a critical role in enabling communities to imagine and articulate shared futures. The capacity to engage with the past while simultaneously envisioning collective progress is widely regarded as essential to sustainable post-conflict resolution. Qualitative interview evidence highlights the role of the arts in framing complex societal challenges — such as segregation in public services — in ways that resonate with younger generations and encourage critical reflection on the type of society they wish to inhabit. Arts-based approaches have proven effective in opening up such conversations in accessible and meaningful ways.

Risks

A key identified risk relates to single-narrative conflict tourism, whereby unregulated or poorly contextualised tourism offerings present partial or biased interpretations of the conflict. This can result in visitors leaving Northern Ireland with a one-dimensional understanding of its history and societal complexity.

Recommendations and Observations

Arts and culture should be understood not only as mechanisms for addressing the legacy of conflict, but also as spaces for collective dialogue about future societal development.

Binary or two-sided narrative frameworks, including those embedded in funding structures, can inhibit forward-looking approaches and should be reconsidered.

Efforts should prioritise meaningful inclusion over tokenistic participation, ensuring that communities are genuinely involved in shaping initiatives.

Sensitivity to format and context is essential; some issues are best explored within single-identity settings, while others benefit from mixed-community approaches.

A foundational principle for community engagement should be “nothing about us without us”, recognising that communities themselves must determine how cultural symbols and spaces evolve (for example, decisions regarding the replacement of murals).

International exchanges — both for arts professionals and wider audiences — offer valuable comparative perspectives and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of conflict and peacebuilding beyond local contexts.

Access the full report here:
https://doi.org/10.57884/30WN-CQ12

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