



**The Double Minority Problem:  
Identity And The Northern Ireland Conflict**

**Community Dialogue Worksheet Series: Number One**

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**The Community Dialogue Worksheet Series**

Community Dialogue Worksheets are dialogue aids for use by groups and facilitators providing concise accessible summaries of complex issues.

## The Double Minority Problem: Identity And The NI Conflict

### The Double Minority Problem

Nationalists are a minority in NI, Unionists a minority in Ireland. Nationalists suffered marginalisation in NI, Unionists fear marginalisation in Ireland. Both struggled unsuccessfully to reach an accommodation securing their political identities. We will look at some ways of addressing this.

**Political Violence:** Most people now believe violence was failing to bring the result preferred by any side. Some argue that it led to stalemate, others that it was a stage in creating conditions for a negotiated settlement.

*Question: What do you think violence achieved? At what cost? Was it worth it?*

**United Ireland:** Under the Agreement the two governments will not move towards a united Ireland until a referendum shows a majority in favour in NI and the Republic. It remains unclear if/when a majority may emerge but it is unlikely for the foreseeable future. It is also unclear if a majority of the Republic's citizens would vote in favour.

*Question: What are the social, political and economic implications of unification?*

**Joint Sovereignty:** Joint governance by the UK and Republic affords equal status to the constitutional aspirations of both traditions. But it is not clear how decisions would be made when the governments disagree. Drumcree and Executive suspensions are recent examples of their failure to agree.

*Question: What are the pros and cons of joint sovereignty for you?*

**Independence:** Some think that the two traditions share more in common with each other than with anyone else and, therefore, that NI should become an independent state. But this denies the constitutional aspirations of both communities.

*Question: Is this viable? How would we relate to the UK, Republic and Europe?*

**Segregation:** We are largely segregated in housing, faith, sport, education, and work. 50% of people live in areas with less than 10% of the other tradition, 90% live in areas with less than 30% of the other tradition. We could continue with our present level of segregation and develop institutions to support it e.g. different communities/regions control their own services and functions like education or health.

*Question: Will this create mutually hostile ghettos or do good walls make good neighbours?*

**The Agreement:** One view is that the Agreement focuses on building a shared future in NI. It established power sharing to address Nationalist concerns with majority rule and aims to reassure Unionists that Irish unification will not be forced without the consent of a majority North and South. It provides recognition of Nationalist and Unionist identity through North-South and British-Irish Councils. Both traditions are protected from discrimination and promised equal respect. Nationalists, however, had to accept less than full unification and Unionists feel that the constitutional issue remains open. Argument continues over the Agreement's interpretation and implementation and some think it is now dead in the water.

*Question: Is the Agreement the answer? If not, what is your alternative?*

**Designation:** Most NI people vote in their birth tradition. This is reinforced by the Assembly designating MLA's as Unionist, Nationalist or Other. While this reflects people's concern for constitutional aspirations many worry that it maintains sectarian politics at the expense of shared bread and butter issues.

*Question: Would ending designation encourage a shift to bread and butter politics?*

**Education:** Many parents want to pass their identity to their children. State and Catholic maintained schools are important in this. Others want a more inclusive identity for their children and see integrated education as one route for this.

*Question: What role should education play in forming the identity of your children?*

**Political Partnership:** Party political interests are oppositional. In NI this is exaggerated because parties do not just oppose each other on ordinary issues but on constitutional questions and issues like handling the past. If parties worked as partners instead of in opposition a shared commitment to NI might be possible. This can't happen without a greater degree of understanding and trust. Unionists and Nationalists need to know the other side will not undermine them. Feeling secure really matters in politics. Without this parties and their supporters react negatively.

*Question: Could Unionists see the Agreement more favourably if decommissioning were completed? Would Nationalists be less suspicious of Unionist willingness to share power if they refrained from collapsing the institutions?*

**Neutral Institutions:** Many consider a shared political identity necessary to building an agreed future. One way to do this is to develop loyalty towards neutral state institutions (civic nationalism). This would not reflect either identity. Or we could develop institutions reflecting both traditions.

*Question: Would these erode the Britishness of NI or bring Irish unification closer?*

**Building Common Purpose:** A shared future needs a sense of belonging together. We already share a common identity including language, faith, social problems, humour; the list could go on. We could create shared symbols. We already have an agreed Police badge and the Assembly adopted a flax leaf as their logo. Gestures are important too e.g. as Belfast Lord Mayor, Alex Maskey reached out to Unionists by participating in a Remembrance Day ceremony. Political, faith and sporting leaders could make statements stressing commitment to working in partnership for all people. Replacing paramilitary murals with ones celebrating local pride would be more inclusive and welcoming.

*Question: Is building common purpose achievable? How would you do it?*

## **Conclusion**

Opposed identities and aspirations remain obstacles to an agreed future. The Agreement attempted a political accommodation but many people feel unhappy with what is happening and their concerns are mirrored in ongoing political conflict. In addition, tensions around growing numbers of ethnic, religious and other identity groups in NI raise fresh challenges for us to face.

*What do you want?*