Abstract

The conflict in Northern Ireland took a heavy toll on the population. Almost 3700 people died as a result of political violence and a large number of people were either physically injured or psychologically traumatised. In the early 1990s the peace process allowed researchers to assess and reflect on the ‘human cost’ of the conflict while politicians started to recognised that a peace settlement would have to take into account the victims of the conflict. In 1998, both the Bloomfield Report and the Belfast Agreement acknowledged the victims and survivors of political violence and policies and provisions were put in place to assist them. Support was delivered through a combination of statutory bodies and voluntary organisations, the setting up of the latter being encouraged by the generous funding from the successive European Programmes for peace and reconciliation known as PEACE 1, 2 and 3. An increasing number of self-help groups have provided material and psychological assistance to victims, and the British and devolved governments have developed strategies to sustain the ‘victims sector’.

15 years of committed work with victims and survivors has given contrasted and yet encouraging results. While disagreement still exists on the definition of who constitutes a victim, much progress has been achieved on cross-community and partnership work. Many individuals have found adequate support within self-help groups or through statutory institutions and a number of their material and psychological needs have been or are being addressed. However, issues of ‘truth and justice’ have only recently been tackled by official inquiries or by the Historical Enquiry Team and the Police Ombudsman. While the symbolic Saville Inquiry has brought some closure to families of those who died on Bloody Sunday in 1972, a lot of inquests and investigations, which are part of the process of ‘dealing with the past’, prove unsatisfactory to many individuals.

This paper would like to examine to what extent policies and provisions geared at victims and survivors can heal individuals and society, facilitate working through the past and overcome divisions.