Pursuing the Common Good: Shaping the future of Northern Ireland

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Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. [Jeremiah 29:7]

The security of the little man is based on the security of the great man; the security of the great man is based on the security of the little man. The little and the great, the noble and the commoners are dependent on one another, so that all can have their joy. [Lü Buwei, 300-236BC, Chinese Political Philosopher].

Introduction

Peace-building scholarship suggests that in societies transitioning from war to peace there is a need to balance redressing past wrongs with the need to envision a shared future (Lederach, 1998) and construct a shared understanding of the common good (Jaede, 2017). This proved particularly significant during South Africa's political transition (integral to which was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) where a vision of the common good was articulated through the symbolism of the 'Rainbow Nation' which served to unite the nation, provide stability and inspire hope in the future. Unfortunately, persisting poverty, inequality and racism is bringing an end to the hope such a vision inspired. Nonetheless, the purpose of a vision for the future rooted in the common good is to build societies of hope where people can live, develop, thrive, flourish, succeed and prosper together. For people from a Christian faith a theological understanding of society also recognises the need for vision (which is seen as God's word) as the basis for a prosperous and thriving society without which there risks social confusion and disorder which can lead to civil strife and violence (see Prov. 29:18). Furthermore, the importance of vision is a widely recognised principle underpinning good leadership; mission/vision statements and goal setting are seen to help us reach our aims and objectives more successfully. Indeed, having a clear vision of a where is a society is going is one of the most formative factors around which a society is organised and lives. However, the common good is a contested concept despite its historic significance as a principle for organising and shaping socio-political life (Etzioni, 2015). How much more so in deeply divided societies, such as Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland where competing political visions continue to keep communities apart. As Northern Ireland continues to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, and in the interests of building a shared and peaceful future in which all the members of the society can flourish, there is a need to revisit what it means to pursue the common good.

This working paper provides the theoretical background on the concept of the common good as part of a project entitled 'Remembering the past; shaping the future' which contributes to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. The project is built around four inter-related themes namely: pursuing the common good, civil responsibility, mediation and conflict transformation, and shared and ethical remembering. The work is being undertaken because the past continues to impede building a peaceful and reconciled society in Northern Ireland. Unless positive ways are found to engage honestly and critically with the legacy of the Troubles, the society will remain imprisoned by its past. Moreover, recognising a decline in the perceptions and attitudes of young people towards improving community relations, research carried out by Morrow, Robinson and Dowds (2013) points to the need for a continued focus on building the confidence of young people to deal with the legacy of the past and develop their view and hope for the future. This requires promoting young people as valued citizens who can act as agents of positive change which, Wilson (2016) argues, is integral to good youth work. Against this background the paper explores four key principles (human dignity, interconnectedness, solidarity, and civic participation) that shape our understanding of what is meant by the common good. It also explores some of the challenges surrounding the pursuit of the common good including its historical use, values for tolerance and individualism, as well as the challenges posed by diversity. Its significance in Northern Ireland is reflected on throughout the paper.

What is the common good?

The common good is not a term that is often used in current social discourse. However, it has been used throughout history significantly shaping both religious and Western political thought. Nonetheless, it remains an important concept for envisioning a shared society in which all can thrive and in which the benefits of the society are shared by all, and not just by the elite or certain sections of the society. In deeply divided societies, where fractured relations continue to impede building a peaceful society for the good of all who live in it, revitalising an understanding of the common good becomes even more pertinent. Moreover, in an interview with Fergus O'Ferrall (2017) he explains that in a deeply divided society, such as Northern Ireland, the common good provides the framework in which to articulate how far a society must go to reach their vision of a shared and flourishing society and what elements are required to implement that vision.

What, then, is meant by the common good?

Underpinning the pursuit of the common good is the question 'what kind of society do we want'? The concept can be traced back to Aristotle who first used it to conceive of the political conditions required for living well and leading a good life. However, in more modern times, perhaps the most robust thinking on the common good is found within Catholic social teaching. It defines the common good as 'the whole network [or set] of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996: 15). In other words, it is about a vision of society in which all humans can flourish and live up to their full potential (O'Ferrall, 2012; Volf, 2011). Significantly, the common good is not an imposition of a single view of 'the good life' on individuals or a society (which can lead to oppressive systems such as Apartheid in South Africa or even lethal violence as one group seeks to assert their superiority over that of another) but should be inclusive of those with different views to share equally in the good life. Further to this, the common good refers to *public goods* which includes things like clean air and water, which we all depend on, as well as other shared goods such as roads and national health care. It also

includes access to basic human needs such as food, housing, health and education, all of which are integral to one's well-being and ability to lead a meaningful life. Similar concepts to the common good include civic republicanism; a form of government that emphasises freedom from all forms of domination, civic responsibility and participation in public life. It is important to note that civic republicanism is different from the understanding of republicanism that is commonly held in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland which tends to be associated with the political agenda for a united Ireland and the bloody violence of the Troubles. Rather, it is a wider concept that supports a society based on values of freedom, equality and solidarity, and social and economic systems that work to the benefit all (O'Ferrall, 2012). Moreover, it promotes building an inclusive society that supports multiple and plural identities.[1] Today, terms such as 'the general welfare' of a society or 'public interest' tend to be used to talk about the common good.

There are four key principles underpinning the concept of the common good.

1. The first relates to **human dignity** which recognises the equality of all humans and that every human life is worthy of respect. Moreover, some would argue that the idea of the common good should not be limited to human well-being but should also consider the dignity of all living beings including animals and plants. Nonetheless, the common good becomes a recognition of our common humanity.

   Intrinsic to this principle of human dignity is the notion of *equality and justice;* to be treated justly acknowledges a person as a member of the community. This includes social justice as respect for people requires responding to and looking after the social well-being of individuals, especially the most vulnerable in society such as the sick, homeless, unemployed, those suffering with mental health illnesses, and those most impacted by violence. It also includes distributive justice which is concerned with the way in which members of a society share the goods and services that make their lives possible, and in so doing reduce inequality (Hollenbach, 2002: 197). This requires individuals to become active citizens, as outlined in the fourth principle underpinning the common good.

   The principle of human dignity also includes respect for and the promotion of human rights, including the rights of every individual to food, shelter, health, work, access to education defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as they aim to protect the most vulnerable groups. Consequently, safeguarding rights is fundamental to establishing stability in divided societies recovering from the gross abuse of human rights. Significantly, implementing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, as part of the Good Friday Agreement, has yet to materialise. With Brexit underway, and with the Conservative Party seeking to withdraw from the European Convention of Human Rights this is a particularly crucial matter as Smith & McWilliams (2017) argue it risks securing less rights for fewer people in the UK.

2. The second principle underpinning the common good relates to understanding our human **interconnectedness** and interdependence. It recognises that as humans we are dependent on others and the accomplishments of our ancestors for our well-being and can do very little by ourselves (YOUCAT Foundation ,2016). This sense of interconnectedness is well expressed in

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[1] For further discussion relating to civic republicanism see: O'Ferrall, 2012 & Pettit, 1997.

the African philosophy or worldview of *uBuntu* which shaped the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Essentially, the philosophy encapsulates what it means to be human and speaks to an identity that only makes sense in relation to others; it recognises that one's well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of one's community and the broader society. It encourages people not just to look at what their group is getting (or not getting) from social and political institutions, but to look at the needs of the whole society. Consequently, strong emphasis is given to placing communal interests above individual interests and on maintaining positive relationships. This contrasts with individualism (dominant in Western societies) in which the individual is the primary entity and the interests of the individual are placed above the interests of the collective.

3. The principle of human interconnectedness leads to the third principle: **solidarity**. Sandel (2009) argues that the conditions for pursuing a good life cannot be achieved through justice and equal rights alone but can only be achieved if people see themselves as members of an interconnected community. Recognising that our lives are deeply intertwined with the lives and well-being of the 'other' (whether it's another person, group or nation) the pursuit of the common good should act to inform moral conduct and what is seen to be acceptable forms of behaviour. This commits us to show compassion and empathy, and to be responsible and for work for the good of all individuals (and, for example, not just those with whom we perceive to share similar ideologies). It also requires that social structures (such as those that promote classism, poverty, sexism, racism, sectarianism and other form discrimination and inequality) are reformed in such a way as to respect the human dignity of all. Moreover, it obliges us to consider the impact of our actions and decisions (socially, economically, and politically) both in the present and on future generations (YOUCAT Foundation, 2016). Consequently, implicit in pursuing the common good is the imperative to live sustainably; and to be aware of, for example, where our coffee comes from, where our clothes are made, the conditions under which they are made, and ecological impact of the long supply chains associated with the food we eat.

4. Giving expression to the principle of solidarity and human dignity is the fourth principle underpinning the common good, that of **civic participation** and taking an active role in society. Hollenbach (2002: 196) argues that the common good requires citizens to act justly and in ways that help meet the basic needs of other members of the society by, for example, creating employment opportunities and overcoming discrimination and exclusion. Actively participating in civil society through both formal and informal political processes can contribute to this and influence the way in which a society's institutions, such as health care, are made available to all the members of the society. Furthermore, it requires the need to create the opportunities for people to think critically, question the status quo, and challenge the injustices that exist in society. Illustrating the importance of this, in an interview with Councillor John Barry (Green Party politician) he laments the lack of moral outrage at the way in which the State bailed out the banks at the expense of the welfare of the people.

Through civic participation the common good seeks to empower communities and promote local and community-based approaches to addressing social problems (thereby shifting the balance of power from the political elite to include the broader society). Consequently, the

common good is not something that exists remotely but that starts in the home and extends to showing good neighbourliness within one's community. This could be expressed by mowing the lawn for one's neighbour or community centre or simply teaching our children how to share.

From these principles it is notable that the common good is an extremely relational concept which seeks to place human dignity and the well-being of every individual at the centre of the social and political sphere. Furthermore, it reflects the fundamental principles of good youth work including equity, diversity, and interdependence (Wilson, 2016) and Northern Ireland's Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy (Department of Education, 2011). Consequently, implied in the common good is the building of an inclusive society that does not attempt to exclude or marginalise any group within the society. Exclusion from participating in the life of a society, be it on ethnic, religious, or cultural lines, disregards the humanity of the people being excluded and conveys the message that they do not count as members of that community. Thus, the common good goes beyond simply thinking about the good for the greatest number of people. It requires us to ask about the impact that public policy has on the most vulnerable groups and on how we live and relate to each other.

Challenges to the common good

Having outlined four key principles surrounding the common good there are several debates and challenges to pursuing the common good that need to be explored.

Firstly, the common good is often shrouded in **suspicion.** This stems from the way it has historically been (ab)used both religiously and politically. For example, from a religious perspective, the Reformation led to competing visions of 'the good life' that resulted in lethal and bloody conflict that continues to keep churches and societies divided. Similarly, competing political traditions and visions of the good life, such as those outlined in the 1916 Easter Proclamation and in the Ulster Covenant, have also often led to oppressive and repressive regimes, and violent bloodshed. Consequently, there is a large amount of scepticism that when appealing to the common good (either from a religious or political perspective) it is being used to promote the interests of one group to the exclusion and impingement on the freedom and human dignity of those with a different political and/or religious vision. In turn, this can create a tension between the pursuing the common good and promoting human rights, which are arguably fundamental to a flourishing society.

This suspicion around the common good has contributed to **diversity** and difference being seen more as a threat rather than something that can enrich society. Indeed, competing visions of a good society makes it difficult to achieve a strong sense of unity, community and social cohesion. Despite the seemingly incompatible goals a diverse society encompasses, Hollenbach (2002: 13) argues it is reasonable and possible to identify aspects of 'the good life' that are common to all human regardless of the different religious and cultural traditions they hold. However, if the hope for a vision of what a shared and united society might look like is lost, Hollenbach further argues that the best that can be hoped for is that differences will simply be tolerated. Given the current lack of political leadership in Northern Ireland, this is a particularly important challenge for this society. Consequently, the challenge for policy makers is to create an environment in which differences enrich society rather than

cause anxiety, and in which diversity can contribute to the common good (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015).

Dealing with difference in conjunction with an increasing commitment to equality has led to a growing value for **tolerance**, a third challenge facing the common good. Tolerance is about the acceptance of difference. While this has been instrumental in preventing wars and building equality across different and divided communities, the difficulty is that tolerance cannot address deeper structural injustices, such as poverty; deprivation that is caused by economic inequality cannot be solved by increasing levels of tolerance (Hollenbach, 2002). Moreover, tolerance is contrary to the principle of interconnectedness to the extent that it promotes the belief that people are safer on their own and, therefore, works against the common good (Azetso, 2016: 109). This can result in a form of coexistence that undermines the flourishing society, and which arguably characterises much of Northern Irish society today. Indeed, if each person only thinks of him or herself or group then coexistence can lead to a heightened sense of competitiveness (and potentially war) against everyone else. This raises the question of how community in Northern Ireland is understood. Nonetheless, the only way to overcome these challenges is to promote a greater sense of solidarity and interconnectedness across divisions. Notwithstanding these challenges, tolerance is important to maintaining peaceful intergroup relations.

This leads to a fourth challenge for pursuing the common good, namely **individualism.** This school of thought sees a person's individual freedoms (which includes one's thoughts and actions), independence and autonomy as some of the most important values within a society. Significantly, it moves away from an understanding of human interdependence and collective responsibility without which the common good cannot be achieved. As Hollenbach (2002: 27) cautions, it can lead to a lack of concern about the quality of life in a society. Individualism can also raise leadership challenges for the implementation of human rights if, indeed, the needs of all who live in the society become less important than the needs of one's own group or even nation (Kellerman, 2004). Kellerman cites the example of Lee Raymond, the president of Exxon Mobil, who, in looking out for his individual well-being, supported oppressive regimes and the abuse of human rights, thereby ignoring the well-being of others and contributing to their victimisation. In a globalised and technologically interconnected world it is no longer possible to justify not knowing about what is happening to other groups. This puts a further imperative on us to be aware of the consequences our actions have on the broader society, both locally and globally.

In a globalised world we cannot escape that humans (and the natural environment) are increasingly deeply interconnected with each other. This is well exemplified by the challenges surrounding Brexit including the rights of EU citizens to remain in the UK; the complexities around the Irish border; and whether to leave or remain in the single market and customs union. It is further evidenced in the global impact of ISIS; climate change and the impact this is having on our weather systems, food security, and migration (which has contributed to the conflict in Sudan and South Sudan, and to the rise of a xenophobic and racist right-wing nationalism in many European countries); and in what has been dubbed the 'refugee crisis' resulting from the Syrian civil war. Posing a challenge to individualism, a globalised world means that achieving a society in which all can flourish is dependent on such human interconnections and relationships (both nationally and internationally). Moreover, globalisation underscores the challenges that tolerance and individualism has on pursuing the common good. As Hollenbach (2002: 57) explains, although tolerance does not go so far as to suggest that people are

better off alone, it is suspicious of intercommunity relations as it assumes people are safer and more secure when no one can interfere with how they understand 'the good life'. Consequently, in a divided society, where there are strong feelings of suspicion and mistrust of the 'other', a commitment to reconciliation and developing a shared vision of the common good can be perceived as too threatening and even seen as a further loss or diminishing of a group's sense of identity.

A further challenge to pursuing the common good, particularly in Northern Ireland, is the **legacy of the past** and how it is commemorated. Northern Ireland is a highly segregated society where very little is shared, including its history, which remains deeply contested. To create a sense of a shared vision for a society, O'Ferrall explains there needs to be a shared narrative of the past. Failing that, he further explains there needs to be an ability to enter empathetically into the 'others' history and trauma of the past with the purpose of discovering how the future can be shared and, in doing so, understanding that everyone would be better off. In keeping with the principle of interconnectedness it is simply inadequate to say I'm ok if the 'other' is not doing well. Further to this, the legacy of the past has also led to referring to different communities within the society in binary terms i.e. Catholic / Protestant; Nationalist / Unionist; Republican / Loyalist; or Green / Orange. As Nicola Brady, General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches, points out, this excludes new communities coming to Northern Ireland from being able to participate in the society. In turn, the language of two communities further contributes to the challenge that diversity presents to pursuing the common good.

Conclusion:

As previously noted, envisioning a future to which all can aspire is integral to building a peaceful and thriving society. With the current political impasse and lack of a Northern Ireland Executive, as well as with the current Brexit negotiations taking place, the society is standing at a cross-road of an uncertain future. Indeed, practitioners within the community relations sector recently published a report entitled 'Galvanising the Peace' which calls for local politicians to show effective leadership 'not simply for a sustainable and just peace in Northern Ireland but also for a vision of Northern Ireland and its place in the wider world' (2017:24). Significantly, the current lack of political leadership also has the potential to negatively impact on building the confidence of young people to deal with the legacy of the past and build their view and hope for the future.

Bearing in mind the challenges surrounding the common good, an understanding of the concept can be instrumental to envisioning the future and shaping the kind of society we want. Do we want a society that remains segregated and separated from one another or do we want a society that is integrated, inclusive and welcoming of people with different nationalities, political persuasions, race and ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations, to name a few? Such a vision raises important questions for Northern Ireland around inclusion and how we work and live together, even with people with whom we hold deep disagreements and radical differences. It also raises concerns around how to build a future that goes beyond being 'equal but divided' but that is interconnected so that everyone can reach their full potential together and not at the expense of one community over another. Moreover, the common good encourages us to hold a sufficiently plural vision of Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland that rejects violence and does not forget the real needs of people around

joblessness, mental illnesses, and homelessness. Indeed, a society can only flourish when the needs of all in the society are met.

Furthermore, the concept of the common good provides an ethical framework for decision-making in our personal lives and in the political decisions shaping the society. In a diverse society, where there is no single vision of the good life, such a framework becomes particularly important. It helps us to think through the kind of policies we support, the leaders we vote for, and the way we treat and interact with those around us. It can help to guide our thinking and actions around immigration and how we treat ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, refugees and others coming to Northern Ireland; around education and the extent to which education in Northern Ireland should be shared and/or integrated; and the extent to which our policies and actions are endangering the environment or promoting sustainable living. In this decade of anniversaries, it can help guide our thinking around how to remember the past in a shared and ethical way that does not contribute to further entrenching sectarian attitudes and beliefs. Consideration should also be given to how it can be used to take forward a strategy relating to issues surrounding flags, identity, culture and tradition, and to develop a response that will bring an end to paramilitary shootings and beatings.

As individuals and groups are the ones who make the flourishing society it is imperative they embrace a vision of the common good (O'Ferrall, 2012). In supporting the principle of good youth work practice and the CRED policy, youth workers, teachers and others involved formal and informal education have a role and responsibility in promoting such a vision. To do this we need to create spaces for meaningful conversations and opportunities for learning and reflection. These spaces need to encourage critical thinking around the principles of the common good, what we understand about community, and how we look after our environment and each other. Although the Constitutional question (whether to remain in the UK or be united with the Republic of Ireland) has been forced into the open through Brexit, it remains at the heart of Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland's contestedness. Being only three years away from the 100th anniversary of Ireland's partition Johnston McMaster reminds us of the urgency for Nationalists and Unionists to talk together about their fears, anxieties, hopes and aspirations, and about political and civic frameworks for the future that may or may not be within the DUP or Sinn Fein's narratives. The common good can provide the framework through which to do that. Consequently, these spaces need to be secure enough for people to feel free to explore their fears, concerns and aspiration and other questions raised by the common good without feeling compelled to jettison their tradition. Moreover, these spaces need to equip people with skills that promote non-violent communication and conflict transformation. Crucially, as Brady underscores, they need to go beyond the basic requirement of respecting others; they need to extend a generosity towards the 'other' that shows that their future is equally important and connected to yours. Finally, those of us within the youth and education sector need to reflect and examine the extent to which the spaces we work in are promoting hope and bringing people into new relationships. While this is an imperative for those within the faith sector, we all have a responsibility towards creating a shared and reconciled society (as set out in the Good Friday Agreement).

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