



## INTERNATIONAL PEACE EDUCATION RESOURCES (IPER)

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### IPER STRATEGIC PLAN 2024– 2027

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

##### 1.1 Purpose of the Strategic and Operational Plans

The *Strategic Plan* of IPER is intended as a management tool to assist IPER in setting and achieving its objectives for 2024-2027. Given the developmental nature of IPER, it is intended that the plan will be reviewed and advanced annually and that the work programmes and possibly organisational and administrative structures may need to be revised in the light of emerging needs, changing financial realities and effectiveness. IPER's *Operational Plan* will be drawn up on an annual basis and will detail the programmes to be carried out in each particular year to achieve IPER's institutional objectives.

##### 1.2 Vision Statement.

IPER's vision is one where effective partnerships with academics, communities, police, government agencies and voluntary bodies work together with combatants, former combatants and communities affected by paramilitarism to create pathways and overcome obstacles to the ending of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. In doing this, IPER affirms that we will work at all times with mutual respect, cooperation and mutual support, valuing grassroots peacebuilding and violence education. IPER believes that dialogue with all those with a stake in ending paramilitarism is the fundamental method of making progress and that all engagement must be based on firm principles of non-violence, democracy and lawfulness.

##### 1.3. Mission Statement:

To provide education about methods of peacebuilding and about violence and its consequences; to model respectful communication in situations of high tension and contention; to promote non-violence, conflict resolution, restorative practices and peaceful methods of managing conflict and differences; to support positive community leadership in communities and organisations affected by violence; to build and support positive relationships between legal authorities and communities and organisations affected by violence; and to provide opportunities for local and international learning, exchange and dialogue.

## **2. CONTEXT**

### **2.1 EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

In spite of successive peace initiatives, many communities in Northern Ireland are not at peace. Paramilitary groups continue to exist and remain active as proscribed organisations. Across the territory of Northern Ireland, there is a wide variation in the degree of paramilitarism, which is largely confined to working class areas. The Greater Belfast area which accounts for 17.1% of the population of Northern Ireland contains 60% of all paramilitary attacks in Northern Ireland from 1993-2023.

A number of dissident republican groups oppose the Good Friday Agreement and some are militarily active, conducting bombings and shootings, primarily aimed at attacking the Police Service of Northern Ireland. These organisations are fragmented and their total membership, when compared with loyalists, is in scores and hundreds rather than thousands. There is also considerable overlap between these organisations and criminal pursuits such as drug dealing, loan sharking, extortion and racketeering. Dissident republicans are hostile to the main nationalist parties and regard the peace agreement as a betrayal of the struggle for national unity. Whilst some of the groups are effectively on ceasefire, these ceasefires are not recognised and the groups are unwilling to be seen to engage with any of the authorities. The concerns they voice are focussed on the welfare of and access to their incarcerated members on both sides of the border. Significant elements of the dissident population now believe that pursuing a military path is counterproductive to their cause of achieving Irish unity. Transition out of violent paramilitarism for dissident republicans will take a different form to that for loyalists.

Some transition will focus on the individual rather than on the group, whilst other groups may declare ceasefires and devote their energies to non-violent political activism. There are an estimated 12,500 members of Loyalist proscribed loyalist organisations, some of whom are inactive but all commit the offence of belonging to a proscribed organisation. Violence emanating from loyalist organisations surpasses that emanating from republican groupings. Yet loyalist groups are not regarded as a national security threat, so do not attract the attention of intelligence agencies and law enforcement in the same measure as their republican equivalents. Loyalist organisations continue to hold weapons and elements of their membership are motivated by personal gain and are engaged in drug and people trafficking, racketeering and extortion. Again, many loyalist paramilitaries, but not all, are involved in criminality in a number of locations throughout Northern Ireland.

The map of the two main loyalist organisations is complex, with the UVF being the most cohesive, but the UDA structure has six brigades and many more satellites and breakaway groups so no central command and control. There has been a consistent interest on the part of the older, more established leadership, some of whom still exert significant power, to lead their organisation or that part of it that they command, through a transition process where they forswear violence and embrace a demilitarised and civilianised future. In this, they have engaged at a low level with the authorities and to some lesser extent, with the police. Some groups have made efforts in terms of altering mural images, preventing the burning of flags and effigies and making bonfires safe and engaging in advocacy on social issues important to the communities in which they are located.

## 2.2 RESPONSES TO ENVIRONMENT

The Fresh Start Agreement initiated the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme which provides social programmes aimed at building community resilience to paramilitary influence and focused on diverting young people from joining groups, alongside a multiagency law enforcement approach by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force which encompasses the police, the inland revenue and assets recovery dimensions. These efforts have had an impact, yet paramilitary violence and crime persists at a steady rate. Evaluations by the Department of Justice have shown that paramilitarism continues to pose a significant problem for some communities.

The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) publishes annual reports on the state of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. In successive reports, the IRC has recommended that the government appoint an interlocutor to directly engage with the armed groups in order to begin a process of transition.

Law enforcement can capture a quantum only of the weapons and munitions that remain in the hands of the armed groups. Without a formal, negotiated and agreed process of transition there can be no systematic removal of weapons from circulation. Indeed, we are currently reaping the harvest of our failure in the previous decommissioning process to pay sufficient and timely attention to loyalist weapons. Police and intelligence agencies see the benefit of a formal transition process. However, they do not always see the role they can play in creating some of the mechanisms that will support paramilitaries to exit the field. Yet the PSNI are willing to identify and adopt strategies for that purpose. The role of the police is not helped by the (understandable and appropriate) mutual distrust and suspicion that communities affected by paramilitarism and police have of each other. An increase in understanding of their respective roles in transition is key to being able to put a successful transition in place.

Some of the paramilitary groups are gatekeepers for the communities where they are located and in this role some have been instrumental in keeping the worst of the drug trade at bay. Local communities look to certain armed groups to expel or punish drug dealers where they fail to elicit a response from the police, a not infrequent situation. Thus, certain paramilitary groups to exiting the field creates a territorial vacuum where drug cartels and criminal elements see an opportunity for expansion. Hence, groups need channels of communication with the police whereby they can begin to pass complaints to the police and the police must be seen to act swiftly and decisively to combat drug issues at community level thus moving into a role that they appropriately should have occupied all along.

Achieving this choreography requires engagement with both the police and the paramilitaries and a willingness on each of their parts to learn the 'dance steps'. That willingness is now in place amongst substantial numbers of paramilitary members. The UK Government and the Government of Ireland discussed how further progress could be made towards ending paramilitarism and gave consideration to the recommendations made by the Independent Reporting Commission and others including in evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on this issue. Both Governments agreed<sup>1</sup> to take forward work, including through joint support for independent scoping and engagement,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biigc-april-2024-joint-communique>

to assess whether there is merit in and support for a formal process that ensures the transition to disbandment of paramilitary groups given the continuing impact of violence and harm in communities.

Support for the groups in preparing for transition has come from the ICRC the Joseph Rowntree Trust, the Reference Group, the Rathmór Centre and the Irish government. Community work with these groups continues aimed at engaging them in ending violence and using peaceful means to address their concerns.

Given the above context, the work must continue for the foreseeable future as there remains an urgent need for the development of more creative and non-military approaches to the prevention, management and resolution of violent conflicts.

### **3. Strategic Plan 2024-2027. CHALLENGES/GOALS**

IPER has set itself seven strategic areas for development, namely:

- Research and international expertise
- Policy and Strategy Work with Key Agencies
- Building and Supporting Local Community Partnerships with Key Agencies
- Organisational development
- Developing a Financial Base
- Communication.

There are both existing and future challenges which IPER must address if it is to be **successful in achieving its goals.**

#### **4.1 Research and international expertise**

IPER's research programme is currently necessarily limited to what can be done within existing resources, which are entirely composed of volunteer hours and limited to the albeit considerable expertise of its staff and board members. Dedicated consideration needs to be directed at longer term planning for research projects based on the work of IPER and the issue of paramilitarism and the challenges of ending it. This will entail attracting research funding, either as stand-alone IPER projects carried out by existing personnel, or with academic or other partners jointly planned and carried out. There is also a need to establish a base of relevant funders.

#### **4.2 Policy and Practice Work with Key Agencies**

IPER is committed to the production of useful knowledge for policy makers and practitioners, and to the better dissemination and utilisation of such knowledge by IPER and its partners. IPER is increasingly involved in partnership working with local and Northern Ireland-wide voluntary organisations, with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, with governments and their various agencies, with both command and community officers in a number of policing districts and with senior PSNI staff. IPER has had considerable success in building effective partnerships where IPER can gain trust and respect. Trust and respect are essential to IPER's ability to work successfully, but gaining these takes time. Capturing the practice wisdom generated by this work is also essential if the lessons are to be embedded in future strategies and incorporated into practice going forward. Currently such work is underdeveloped and limited by the tension between undertaking the field work, and spending time writing and researching and disseminating. Currently all of this relies entirely on volunteer labour, so going forward, attracting resources to augment the research and documentation capacity of IPER is key to balancing IPER's future achievements.

### **4.3 Building and Supporting Local Community Partnerships with Key Agencies**

**4.3.1 Local communities affected by paramilitarism.** Relationships with two local communities, have been consolidated over the first year of operation. The tension between working across a greater number of locations and working more intensively in fewer is an ongoing matter for constant attention. Intensive working within one community location has benefits in terms of relationship building, trust and capacity building. Deeper involvement is necessary when community capacity is compromised for some reason such as illness of a leader or a political crisis, or by the stage of development of a group. However, IPER's work has a much wider application beyond the first two communities and the others where work has begun. IPER's aim is not to roll out this work into all communities where it is needed, but rather to pilot the work, document it and present it as a model for work supporting paramilitary transition in other areas. Whilst it is important to develop the model in a number of settings to ensure that the model developed has broad application, less and intensive work with an emphasis on documentation should be the focus.

**4.3.2 Key agencies** Building trust between local communities and key statutory agencies requires IPER to consolidate its own relationship with those statutory agencies. In the first year of operation, policing was a priority area for work and a solid working relationship between IPER and the PSNI both at district and regional level has been built. The PSNI is a complex organization with various divisions of responsibility and function, and IPER's ability to understand and work with these elements is key to ensuring effective relationships with local communities. This has given rise to the identification of a need for improving local community understanding of how police in particular and the wider criminal justice system functions and its roles, purpose and limitations. A second priority is to build a similarly functional relationship with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive given their deep local involvement in movements of people in and out of communities and managing the relationships within that space. This work is off to a promising start and has been met with a warm welcome from the housing agency.

**4.3.3 Interested parties** IPER offers briefings to interested parties, including other community organisations, government departments, academic institutions, regional voluntary organisations and governments. The ability to do this in person is limited by time and will be improved by an investment in the website, by development of a range of written outputs and events and by continued involvement of board members in undertaking briefings about the work.

**4.3.4 Other partnerships** While IPER has considerably increased the number of its collaborators it has not targeted such partnerships in a particularly strategic manner. It has understandably wished to concentrate on developing context specific partnerships to support its local work with such underway it should probably adopt a more focused approach to partnerships.

### **4.4 Organisational Development**

While IPER has successfully continued to operate on very limited resources, this has placed many and sometimes conflicting demands on specific people and is not sustainable in the longer term. The work of administration as well as that of fieldwork, supervision of an intern, documentation, research and analysis, some fund-raising and dissemination has all

fallen to the coordinator. Other fund-raising and administrative tasks have fallen to the chairperson, the intern has absorbed some meetings administration with a limited role for other directors. We also rely on in-kind support from Quaker Services who provide us with premises in which to conduct both organizational and work meetings.

Key to any future success in organizational development will be successful fund-raising of more substantial amounts than we have raised heretofore. Effective administrative support will permit a more successful distribution of workload and relieve the chairperson and coordinator of tasks associated with financial management, convention and documentation of meetings and meeting the legal requirements for IPER. The ability to employ additional research assistance will ensure a better output in terms of documentation and analysis and can also augment IPER's ability to disseminate its work. In order to make best use of resources, investment in personnel rather than premises is key to IPER's organizational development. Since the pandemic, remote working from home has opened up the possibility of a leaner organizational model which fits well with IPER's current requirements. As IPER further develops, should we succeed in developing, we may need to further clarify some administrative and field roles to ensure clarity about respective responsibilities.

#### **4.5 Developing a Financial Base**

IPER is operating in a very challenging funding climate. A good deal of money previously available in the voluntary sector has been withdrawn and funding for work on this aspect of peace building suffers from the assumption that the need no longer exists in Northern Ireland which, goes the argument, has largely achieved peace and ended armed violence. The relatively small amounts of money obtained whilst very welcome and sufficient to support IPER at its current method of functioning for another year. In order to achieve any level of organisational development, which crucial to long term sustainability, more substantial amounts of funding must be obtained. Whilst an application to Peace Plus offers the possibility of a larger amount of funding, success would double the current level of administrative work.

IPER has sought professional advice on funding sources to no avail. We are told that the work we do is 'hard to fund.' Thus, in the coming period we must:

- Make sustained efforts at tailoring applications to funders' requirements,
- Frame the work we do in ways that are attractive and acceptable to funders
- Seek funding for smaller break-off projects out of our core work, and
- Identify more sources of more substantial amounts of funding over longer periods.

#### **4.6 Communication.**

Now that IPER has a credible record in the field, it needs to develop an appropriate communications strategy, bearing in mind the sensitivity of the work and the importance of discretion. Yet hiding IPER's light under a bushel leaves the public discourse about ending paramilitarism at the mercy of those who see no need for additional work on the issue beyond a hard line in criminal justice. Yet IPER does not wish to be drawn into a public rehearsal of these issues which have become meat and drink to controversial social media pundits.

IPER must carefully targeting any outputs at those with an analytical and considered approach. Alongside this a refusal to participate in arenas where controversy is nurtured

offers the best chance of maximizing influence without being drawn into the conflagration that debate about paramilitarism has become. The board have taken the view that communication should be low key, whilst meeting the requirements of accountability.