

# A “Fresh start through sport”? Supporting positive youth development in marginalised communities in Northern Ireland

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Often described as a ‘post-conflict’ society, Northern Ireland remains in a state of transition following a 30 year period of widespread sectarian conflict involving State and non-State armed groups. In 1998, following a series of ceasefires and cross-party talks, the *Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement* (CFA) marked the commencement of a long process of political transition. This has involved fragmented periods of devolved power-sharing between the parties representing the unionist, largely Protestant majority, and those representing the nationalist or republican, predominately Catholic minority. Despite significant progress in the 25 years following the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society, with divisions



16 PEACE, JUSTICE  
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SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
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and fault lines cutting across many aspects of daily existence.

For young people in Northern Ireland, growing up and making a successful transition to adulthood is uniquely complicated, as the legacy of the conflict can continue to affect the day-to-day negotiation of important transitional moments and milestones. This is particularly true for those living in areas of multiple deprivation, as they seek status, opportunity, and stability at the social and economic margins of Northern Irish society. In the context of limited developmental opportunities, issues relating to the legacy of the conflict have more of an opportunity to texture the lives of young people, both in terms of sectarianism and the influence of paramilitary activity.

For the majority of young individuals, the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland may manifest in feelings of marginalisation and exclusion, a mistrust of the police and those in positions of authority, and a lack of knowledge of those in the “other” ethno-political community. These experiences of deprivation and exclusion, while locally textured in the life stories of young people, are shared across communities, cross-cutting politics, ideology and culture. For others it manifests in an acute awareness and often first-hand experi-



ence of paramilitary activity and sectarian violence.

In October 2020, four of the largest sporting organisations in Northern Ireland, the Irish Football Association (IFA), Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Ulster Rugby and the Belfast Giants partnered to deliver a sport-based intervention: "Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS)". Supported by the Department for Communities, Department of Justice, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the programme involves young people, aged 16 to 24, from areas of multiple deprivation who may be at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime. The premise of the FSTS interventions is that sport has a universal appeal and can be used as a hook to motivate young people to develop agency, self-confidence, and self-efficacy through opportunities for physical activity, sports-

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based learning and support for individuals.

The four sporting partners deliver a series of sport-based modules, focusing on disability, bias, tackling racism, resilience, and the mental health benefits of sport. The objectives of these modules are to guide and support participants in identifying and making positive life choices, with the eventual goal of providing a pathway away from paramilitarism, and an active route into community work, coaching, an ambassador role, and/or volunteering through

sport. The programme also provides educational pathways through Ulster University and the completion of Open College Network (OCN) qualification credits at Level 2 in Sport and Volunteering.

The evidence concerning the impact and effectiveness of the FSTS programme - now in its third phase of delivery - is becoming more readily apparent. We have seen some positive examples of the impact that FSTS can have on the lives of young people in marginalised settings, even despite the social, physical and practical limitations wrought upon the programme by government-imposed public health restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Through the ongoing evaluations of each phase of delivery, we have found that bringing young people from different communities together through the conduit of sport has a positive impact on their aspirations and can

serve as a vehicle for developing positive peer influence and building cross-community rapport.

The voices of participants involved in the programme have highlighted a number of important themes. The programme has played a role in helping marginalised young people in Northern Ireland to break down a range of barriers, be they related to personal circumstances, physical and mental health, or cross-community tensions:

*“Definitely through sport it is one of the best ways to break down barriers and especially when it comes to cross-community... being part of a team, having a general purpose or cause and things like that there helps bring people together.”*

*“It makes you more willing to give anything a go, like any sports or like anything in general. You going oh flip, I might not do that, but do you know what, I’ll just do it, what’s the worst that can happen?”*

FSTS provides young people from different community backgrounds with the opportunity to realise that they exist in similar circumstances and are confronted with similar life challenges:

*“Whenever you get talking to other people it brings them tensions down because whenever you are out and about, you are seeing each other as enemies... when you just get to speaking to them you realise everyone’s just dead on.”*

The programme also offers participants viable pathways to learning opportunities, the development of new practical and social skills, and developmental opportunities which may be otherwise limited by context:

*“Well, you can’t get enough qualifications like but definitely everything helps, it leads you to the person you are today. It is good for qualifications but it’s not even about it, it makes you a good person like.”*

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The programme also supports community embeddedness by integrating and promoting local volunteering opportunities for participants:

*"Give everything a go. Never say no. Just try it. I mean it did open a lot of doors like. Obviously, it gave me more confidence to go down and actually volunteer, and go to actually help the community, and do it more often."*

Researchers at Ulster University who evaluated the programme have identified some of the lessons to be learned from the delivery of sport-based interventions in

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communities. Identifying the right partners is essential in promoting and developing programmes. Within FSTS, the partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland is crucial in examining current data relating to paramilitary incidents and activity throughout Northern Ireland. This evidence is used to select areas for programme delivery and identify community partners who are working with the young people most at risk. Engagement with those groups has provided an understanding of the threats of paramilitarism within communities. Without sports-based intervention programmes the risk for young people is higher as they do not have a focus and can be encouraged to take part in paramilitary activity on different levels. Providing pathways upsills young people and also improves their mental health

and well-being. Sports-based interventions work best when delivered in the right locations, to the right young people at the right time.

As an exemplar of cross-sectoral and multi-sport partnered delivery, FSTS represents a creative, and potentially highly impactful, means of engaging with and supporting marginalised young people, providing them

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with opportunities that they may not otherwise have been afforded. Not solely about managing "risks", FSTS has the capacity to identify, develop and enhance the strengths

of the young people involved, which can in turn serve to mitigate some of the factors that may render them vulnerable to the influence of paramili-

tary organisations in their local communities.

A report of the evidence from the FSTS programme is available on request.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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