Progress Reimagined: A Generation Z Perspective on Belfast in Relation to the UNSDGs

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This research explores a contemporary outsider view of Belfast, through the eyes of Generation Z visiting college students, in relation to how three United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are carried out (Good Health and Well-Being, Climate Action, and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). To learn through firsthand accounts, the researchers utilized ethnographic and phenomenological methods, as interacting with locals to gather community inputs, surveying different groups in the city, recording quotes said by citizens and displayed at billboards, and applying personal sensory experiences. It was found that a political deadlock plays a major role in the lack of steadiness. The research shows that Northern Ireland has progressed in many ways but also that it is still being limited by inefficient governmental practices. The rather brief time spent in Belfast barely allowed the researchers to feel and sense its atmosphere but deterred them from making recommendations.

Keywords: *Gen Z, Belfast, UNSDG, phenomenological, ethnographic*

Introduction

History follows patterns of frictions and growth. Conflicts, wars, recessions, and crises, at some point unravel paving the way for a new era of peace and progress. Generally, there is not a clear cut between them, instead a period of uncertainty gives way to the emergence of a new paradigm.

The city of Belfast has trailed this model from the lows of the Great Famine that devastated Ireland in the nineteenth century, to become a well-known industrial and merchant town with a booming economy based in linen production and ship building, before facing the economic collapse of 1929 and having been bombed during the second world war. And then, from the sixties to the nineties, Northern Ireland (NI) underwent a civil war-like period (roadblocks, street fighting, bombings, and killings) known as "the troubles," catalyzed by the acutely polarized standpoints of Protestants/Loyalists and Catholics/Nationalists, as the

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former wanted NI to remain part of the United Kingdom (home rule), while the latter sought NI to join the Republic of Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998, which brought an end to "the troubles," established a power-sharing government in NI, but tensions and mistrust between the two main communities remained. To this day, people are still plagued by generational trauma seeped into their culture. This trauma has led to the ineffectiveness of NI's administration. Governmental shutdowns, political disagreements, and lack of action are often at the core of the NI Assembly, limiting its ability to pass legislation. In the past year, there was a total government shutdown due to a dispute over policy. Almost thirty years since the GFA, Belfast's people are striving for understanding and hoping to find a path for sustainable growth.

As, with the aim to transform our world, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice, and prosperity; Belfast's culture constitutes an amazing case study on how to move forward from a period of conflict.

This academic journal started as a research endeavor in public history. It entails the workings of eight honor students and a professor from Belmont University who were visiting Queen's University on a semester-long trip abroad in the fall of 2022, seeking to appreciate Belfast's ethos from an outsider perspective.

In the belief that research is always needed for ingenuity, this study resulted a worthwhile effort due to the imperative to understand if/how Belfast is progressing towards development and progress. The goal of this research was to provide an unbiased, contemporary, reading on how local people face the SDGs. Although, due to the small cohort size, it was decided to just focus on three SDGs: Good Health and Wellbeing; Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions; and Climate Action.

The class was foreign to the struggles of NI and therefore held no bias. Although lacking contextual knowledge could be seen as an obstacle, it provided an amazing opportunity to objectively study the culture with no prejudices. Since the paper embodied the "Generation Z" perspective, there are nuances to the norm of most academics' scholarly writings. Based almost entirely on primary sources, through formal interviews, casual conversations, firsthand responses, personal accounts, news articles, billboards, graffities, and song's lyrics, students collected information and crafted three research questions and one hypothesis.

> R.Q. 1: "Is the stagnant state of NI's government hindering efforts to reform the healthcare system?"
> R.Q. 2: "What effect does the lack of strong institutions in the NI government have on its current peace process and justice system?"
> R.Q. 3: "In what ways is NI behind the rest of the UK in its climate action plan, and why is that?"
> HYPOTHESIS: "The lack of a stable government, caused by lasting sectarian division, is upholding these problems, and constraining people from cooperation."

Research Approach and Methodology

The idea of linking the present perspectives and circumstances of Belfast with some SDGs, getting most of the material as firsthand ethnographic and phenomenological information from local sources, challenged the authors. But still more challenging was to induce the students to teaming for work on a flexible and unstructured project with novel format and methods. Till then, most of their assignments in different college classes were individual and clearly specified by a strict rubric with defined goals and expectations, and they were attached to the idea of working alone for a grade.

Attempting to understand without judging, through an unbiased and honest lens, their strategy was encouraged by Smyth (2017) argument that, *In Ireland, all history is applied history.* He stated that, on one hand, due to Ireland's fresh turbulent period: revisionism can be objected as positivistic, historians as subjective and constrained by cultural assumptions, and narrative as plagued by elisions, abridgements, and fictive elements. While on the other hand, post-revisionism unlocked opportunities, particularly for novice researchers, of non-authorized approaches.

Upon landing in Belfast, the students had no prior knowledge of the city, and thus no prejudices that could cloud their judgement. With nothing in hand, and with everything in front of them looking blurry, they gathered information through diverse sources, including visits to museums, conversations with local peers, and first-hand accounts from citizens. Many residents were eager to speak about their experiences, including some secondary or passed on generationally. These accounts offered a personalized voice into the research. In this way, the students nurtured an understanding of the NI's culture by sharing observations and debating their findings with each other.

A first assignment consisted in preparing a PowerPoint presentation about the history of Belfast comprising: early history, merchant and industrial town, partition 1912-1920, conflict 1929-1922, the Great Depression, Second World War, the Troubles, and recent history. The approach for this assignment was to work as in a matrix. First (vertically), students prepared and presented their own individual PowerPoints. Second (horizontally), each student was designated as editor for only one of the topics, with the responsibility to put together a consolidated version of the eight individually presented slides on that matter. Then, an open discussion took place, allowing everyone to debate and to suggest adjustments, until a final group version of the presentation was agreed.

With this basic background about the city, the next challenge was to select which SDGs to pick. Each student was asked to choose two SDGs. When presented to the team, some SDGs were chosen by more than one student, permitting team work on them. That preliminary selection included SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Every class, students were requested to bring at least two pieces of information about a link between their SDGs and the city of Belfast. Those came

in the form of comments heard in the school or on the street, song lyrics, statistics, news, graffiti, billboards, and all sort of ethnographic and phenomenological sources, including sensory experiences, personal feelings, atmosphere, visual images, and fears and hopes perceived in the society. Then, discussions took place trying to make sense of them, finding context within a specific goal, and searching for ways to contrast or verify them. Finally, everything was compiled for permanent ongoing review.

Simultaneously, with the aim of expanding students' vocabulary, and to help them navigate this nonlinear and malleable experience, each one was provided with a set of three types of prompted cards to kickstart creativity (Smith Whitehouse 2021), from where they elaborated about their topics by combination, juxtaposition, and discernment. Connecting the essential ingredients for creative work (action, perspective, and intention) in a way that they might not have done before, considering new thresholds to cross, and positioning themselves on stimulating new pathways. This combinatory play was aimed to link dissimilar dots while taking imaginative leaps forward by being open, determined, and fearless. Each of those cards focused on a specific word that the students needed to include in their writing. For example, if the word was "persevere" they should have written something along the lines as: "NI has had to learn to persevere through its long history of sectarian violence to move forward in the peace process."

Along the way the role of the professor was limited to guide the research process, recording findings, moderate discussions, time management, methodology, and vocabulary adjustment. What fell completely off limit for him was to do his own research or to bring to the table any kind of information. That was reserved exclusively to the students.

By the second half of that semester abroad, it was self-evident that the handling of six SDGs resulted beyond their possibilities, as research questions and hypotheses overwhelmed the team. Then, they decided to shorten the scope to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

At the end of the semester all the available information was compiled, the research questions and the hypothesis were enunciated, and the bibliography was finished. Afterward, during the following semester, they addressed the managing of that information as well as the formatting and writing of the paper. During this process, students individually wrote each section of the paper with the professor acting as editor after a round of team debate.

This study attempted to ascribe to the Pragmatic paradigm. Nevertheless, traces of the Interpretive/Constructivist and of the Transformative paradigms can easily be spotted, as the theoretical schools embraced were ethnomethodology and phenomenology.

The approaches incorporated were Mixed Methods and Community-based Participatory. The practices were surveys, interviews, and unobtrusive methods. Surveys allowed researchers to obtain unfiltered intimate responses from primary sources. Interviews permitted information to be collected in an easy manner, showing the reality through the eyes of local individuals, instead of relying

exclusively in journals and other academic sources. However, unobtrusive methods such as document analysis and historical comparative were also explored. By means of the community-based participatory approach students were able to observe social actions.

Findings

Related to R.Q. 1: "Is the stagnant state of NI's government hindering efforts to reform the healthcare system?"
On February 23rd, Daily Chatter (2023) published:

Tens of thousands of nurses, ambulance drivers, and other workers in the UK's public National Health Service (NHS) recently staged the biggest strike in the service's 75-year-old history. "The government needs to listen and discuss pay rather than just saying the NHS doesn't have money," nurse Ethna Vaughan told Reuters during a protest in London at St. Thomas' Hospital. "We cannot survive with what we're being paid."

Adding to this nationwide concern, Healthcare in NI is seen by the community as a system of everlasting dereliction. Underfunded, insufficient to meet patient demands, with dubious quality and reliability, and ranking significantly below the rest of the United Kingdom.

As medical needs continued to grow, healthcare services could not cope with the demand. Since 2014, the number of general practitioners has declined by 8% while the number of patients has grown by almost 14% (Department of Health 2021a). Long waiting lists generate delays that lead to worsening conditions for the untreated patients (O'Neill 2022).

People from diverse walks of life who had firsthand experiences with the system expressed "Our hospitals are a nightmare" (Chatten 2022) and "The current system is broken" (Fombu 2022). The former elaborated on personal frustration trying to get an appointment for surgery that was rescheduled more than once due to doctors and nurses quitting. A Queen's University student told a similar story, mentioning that she had a dislocated knee, and that the day when her surgery was scheduled, she received a phone call from her doctor explaining that they needed to push her surgery back 6 weeks. Others shared accounts of being deprived of treatment or ignored when attention was needed. They also mentioned mediocre care and constant strikes of doctors and nurses, claiming to be underpaid and overworked. It seemed like no one in Belfast was near satisfied with their healthcare system.

Patients with severe disabilities, including mental health, are much more likely to have their needs unmet and to face significant barriers including transportation and accessibility. NI has commanding levels of mental health illnesses, when compared to any other region in the UK. Betts and Thompson (2017) pointed out a major issue, "Despite self-harm being a known precursor to suicide, those who presented to emergency departments in NI with self-cutting alone were the most likely to be discharged after treatment or leave without being

seen." Those with critical needs cannot get immediate access to the help that they need and even after waiting multiple months help is not a guarantee. Target goals for improvement to mental health services are often missed in N.I (Department of Health 2021b).

Related to R.Q. 2: "What effect does the lack of strong institutions in the NI government have on its current peace process and justice system?"

The GFA was signed in 1998 to promote peace and stability in NI and to create a power-sharing executive committee. From the outset, there was significant opposition from the Unionist party, with around 45% of the Protestant community voting against the agreement, in the belief that Nationalists benefited more from its provisions. Despite this opposition, the GFA was signed, and Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) became the two main ruling parties in the state. John Hume (The Irish News 2023) stated, "In NI, we should have institutions that respected the differences of the people and that gave no victory to either side." In May 2007, after Sinn Fein agreed to support the NI police force, an Executive was established, and Peter Robinson of the Democratic Unionist Party became the First Minister of NI.

However, the ultimate inability of Sinn Fein and the DUP to work together has led to a legacy of instability in NI, resulting in a deeply divided government unable to address major political issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, education, crime, and that face difficulties in maintaining the goals of the GFA. Government pettiness and political deadlock continue to be a recurrent challenge. Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) leader Colum Eastwood (The Irish Times 2022) was quoted saying that "...after 15 years of crisis and failure and walking in and walking out of government, the two parties that are at the very top have failed this community."

Although Lewis (2016) mentioned that 24 years after the GFA, "NI continues to be among the most divided societies in Europe," the sentiments on the streets of Belfast, among Gen Zs in the fall of 2022, displayed progress towards a durable peace. Perhaps, it could be attributed: Firstly, to the EU orchestrated Peace IV initiative for NI and the border counties of Ireland (Belfast City Council 2023). This initiative has four core objectives: shared education initiatives, support for marginalized children and young people, provision of new shared spaces and services, and projects that will build positive relations with people from different communities and backgrounds. And secondly, to the influence of many popular songs, embedded in the minds of the younger generations, that allude to the old sectarian fight while working on the idea that peace cannot be achieved through violence. Calling for peace and tolerance instead. Among them, "The Island," by Brady (1985) states, "up here we sacrifice our children to feed the worn-out dreams of yesterday" and "still trying to reach the future through the past, still trying to carve tomorrow from a tombstone." Also, "Zombie" by The Cranberries (1994), said "But you see, it's not me, it's not my family, It's the same old theme, since 1916, In your head, in your head, they're still fighting, with their tanks and their bombs and their bombs and their guns, in your head, in your head, they are dying."

Related to R.Q. 3: "In what ways is NI behind the rest of the UK in its climate action plan, and why is that?"

Climate change epitomizes an existential crisis to the world, and NI is certainly not immune to its effects. In the past, climate action was not as pressing an issue as it currently is since the world was not in such a distressing state. Even when it has become an indisputable subject of world's attention, NI lacks legislation to properly address it. Meanwhile the Belfast City Council has drafted the "Belfast Resilience Assessment," which includes several problems that the city intends to improve upon. One of them being climate change (Belfast Council City 2020). The goals of the city are aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

As stated by the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (2022), there will be continued flooding and coastal change that will put communities, businesses, and infrastructure in NI at risk due to a lack of new, stronger, or different government policies able to reduce long-term vulnerability to climate change. Being a harbor city, Belfast will potentially face it worse than other areas.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) demanded immediate action in the next twelve years to cap global warming effects at 1.5 degrees Celsius. Belfast intends to move forward with a greener outlook with programs that are set out to make progress towards the city's overarching goal of "transition to an inclusive, net-zero emissions economy in a generation" (Belfast City Council 2020).

A billboard outside of Queen's University portrays "We only have 8 years for the whole world to urgently and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions before we will see irreversible changes to the climate of the Earth."

The farming sector in NI still struggles in areas such as water quality, emissions, and biodiversity. Some pressing issues include grass utilization that is significantly below optimal levels, less than 10% of farmland in NI has an up-to-date soil analysis, 64% of the soil does not have optimum PH levels, and the fact that 63% of NI water bodies are not achieving the "good or better" status required by the European Union directive establishing a framework for community action in the field of water policy (EC Directive 2000). In 2020 agriculture was responsible for 37% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

As "too many farmers associate the environment with regulation and penalties leading to a culture of fear" (Gilliland 2016), changes in how government regulates and advises farmers on the environment are necessary.

Coal and peat were responsible for 11% of all energy-related CO_2 emissions, mostly from electricity generation and in homes. Transport emissions accounts for over 40% of energy related C02 emissions. Chris Conway, stated "Obviously things like the cost-of-living crisis, COVID-19, the Ukraine War - all these things are dominating the news at the minute, but really, this [climate crisis] still is the largest crisis we face in the long-term, and we're very focused on making sure we address sustainable transport" (Cullen 2022).

As "up to 30% of emissions are within the scope and influence of local authorities in the UK" (Guinn 2022), many citizens believe that the government needs to do more to stop further environmental damage. A Climate Change Bill

gained Royal Assent in June 2022. NI's first Climate Action Plan coming from the bill is due to be published at the end of December 2023. It will contain targets for reductions in each of the highest emitting sectors, agriculture, transport, and energy.

Conclusions

R.Q. 1: "Is the stagnant state of NI's government hindering efforts to reform the healthcare system?"

Throughout this research it was observed firsthand the bigger issues and complications that people face daily. The growth of healthcare needs has surpassed current medical capacity leaving patients dissatisfied. Doctors and nurses are overworked, unfairly remunerated, and offered no incentives or motivation. There are not enough workers, supplies, or infrastructure to give everyone the attention and medical care needed, resulting in appointments and surgeries canceled or rescheduled as neglected patients worsen their conditions over time.

Several factors led to conclude that the unstable government is majorly distressing the healthcare system.

Firstly, the stagnant state of NI's administration is having a significant impact on the ability to reform the healthcare system. It could be argued that this requires the full power of a steady government, as an alternative to one marginally available and sporadic. The state of political stalemate, that has been lasting for several years, has had a knock-on effect on a healthcare system that lacks investments in infrastructure, staffing, and equipment.

Secondly, although it is necessary a new integrated approach, with better coordination between providers and professionals, it seems like no one can step in to look after hospitals, facilities, and the outdated equipment that operates in borderline conditions.

Lastly, the external environment in the UK contributes to exacerbate the problem.

R.Q. 2: "What effect does the lack of strong institutions in the NI government have on its current peace process and justice system?"

Significant polarization has been present since the signing of the GFA, and more recently manifested as disagreements between Sinn Fein and the DUP. While one consequence of the political stalemate was the lack of progress at addressing key issues, such as the cost-of-living, education, crime, and even upholding the statutes of the GFA; another could be prompting unrest. As stated by an anonymous citizen, "Politicians let one subject that they can't agree on to stop them from talking about any of the issues that really matter."

The lack of strong institutions in NI' government had a profound detrimental effect on its peace process and justice system. While some EU initiatives have helped to build positive intercommunity relationships and promoted ideals of

peace in place of violence, it is still an ongoing struggle to unify two sides of a hurting nation and overcome the obstacles of divided leadership.

However, local citizens appear to be optimistic about the prospect of long-lasting peace. When walking around the city, it seems like people wish to live peacefully and to be reconciled with each other. Particularly, Gen-Z has been speaking out concerns about older generations values.

Although divided perspectives and ideals have contributed to weak institutions in the NI government, as people gradually become more tolerant, there is a chance for those institutions to improve and solidify. Nevertheless, external influences as Brexit or Scottish Independence could add stress, affecting the process of convergence.

R.Q. 3: "In what ways is NI behind the rest of the UK in its climate action plan, and why is that?"

Since the issuing of the first UK Climate Change Act (2008), NI stood in a period of political drought and insufficient action. Belfast has drafted, "Belfast's Resilience Assessment" which includes several matters that the city intends to improve upon, one of them being climate change (Belfast Council City 2020). The programs that are set out to make a change are receiving funding from the city's Resilience and Sustainability Board to make progress towards the city's overarching goal of a, "transition to an inclusive, net-zero emissions economy in a generation." To organize this monumental shift, the Belfast City Council has separated their tasks into three categories: Climate Adaptation and Mitigation; Participation of Children and Young People; and Connected, Net-Zero Emissions Economy. In early 2022 a UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (2022) was published, and a new UK Climate Change Act (NI) (2022) aimed to reduce greenhouse gasses, provided a system for carbon budgeting, and give power to public bodies to report information on climate change.

While NI seems to struggle most significantly in the areas of farming techniques, ocean protection, and public transportation, government shutdown and non-cooperation of some members of the community is delaying the process to combat climate change. Farmers fear new regulations carrying penalties and higher business costs. Cullen (2022) stated, "the [NI] committee doesn't believe NI will achieve net zero at the same time as the rest of the UK because of its economic dependence on agriculture."

HYPOTHESIS: "The lack of a stable government, caused by lasting sectarian division, is upholding these problems, and constraining people from cooperation."

As the stagnant state of NI's government is having a significant negative impact on the healthcare system, the peace process and justice system, climate action, and the overall quality of life, the hypothesis is confirmed.

People are suffering due to the government's lack of action and instability due to sectarian conflicts. Nowadays, tensions are no longer high, but many citizens are nervous to test the waters and to cause any riffs between the different parties.

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